

Shame On Me!

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It's that time of year again: National Teshuvah Month, aka Chodesh Elul. In "honor" of this special time of year, Breslover Chassidim customarily study Lesson #6 of Rebbe Nachman's *Likutey Moharan*. I highly recommend it, as it provides the necessary framework to achieve a real and productive *teshuvah*.

My own recollection of this time period while at yeshivah was of a frightful period in which we were under immense pressure to cram in the perfect month of religious achievement in order to "stand" a chance while standing before God on Rosh HaShanah, the Day of Judgment. The mere mention of the word "Elul" would send a shiver down my spine. Now, Rosh HaShanah is certainly no joking matter and the judgment is very real. But in order to properly understand this day, let's look at what *teshuvah* is really all about.

People usually translate *teshuvah* as "repentance." I think that definition works very well with the unsophisticated version that I witnessed as a youth. I remember seeing people with an expanded edition of the *Al Chets* that are recited on Yom Kippur. This looked something like a phone book. Yeshivah boys would stand for hours reciting every single entry, making sure they technically covered all points of any possible transgression. I think they felt like they had truly repented. While I appreciate their sincerity and can't say that I had their stamina, Rebbe Nachman describes something very different.

Have you ever seen an animal wear a medal, the latest hairstyle, or Air Jordans? Humans do, because we have the desire to feel important; we crave honor. This stems from our

very makeup: our souls were taken from beneath God's Throne of Honor and want to be elevated back to their source. But Godly honor is not easy to achieve. First we must utterly humble and nullify ourselves before God. Since this is hard to do, it's easier to seek out base forms of honor like ego, pride and selfishness.

Teshuvah literally means "return" and is the process of approaching God. The laws of *teshuvah* require a person to feel shame about his or her misdeeds. Rebbe Nachman expands on this concept, explaining that we have this experience any time we hear our shame, yet remain silent. This could be our boss yelling at us, our spouse accusing us, or our friend insulting us. All these are Heaven-sent opportunities that provide us with the means to negate our ego and allow God in, initiating the process of ultimately returning to Him. By remaining silent, we acknowledge that we were insulted because of our inflated ego, and welcome the opportunity to nurture a healthy self-worth based on our spiritual greatness rather than something that others think of us.

Even more relevant is when we insult ourselves. Often we make spiritual goals and plans, and guess what? Things don't go the way we expected. We feel down and beaten, ready to throw in the towel. *Teshuvah* is about accepting failure and still believing in change. I can be happy with my efforts and take joy in knowing they are meaningful to God, no matter whether I reached my goal yet or not. This demonstrates that my *teshuvah* was not an act of spiritual egotism, but was truly for the sake of Heaven. Only this is real growth and change. Only this allows us to serve God in every situation that life throws at us.

Shame is a beautiful device, but unfortunately is becoming endangered. It is difficult to swallow only if we have an inflated ego and can't accept that we all make mistakes and look forward to becoming better people. But shame is the hallmark of a Jew. If we truly desire closeness to God, we

should lovingly and “shamelessly” embrace it.

Based on Likutey Moharan I, 6