

## **NISAVIM 2 - FASTING TO ELEVATE SIN**

We can elucidate a verse in our Parasha - Veshavta Ad YHVH Elohekha -1 which describes a spiritual consequence of repentance. You will thereby effectuate the return of your souls back upwards towards the Divine Presence. This will bring the Shekhina back into a state of unity with Qudsha Berikh Hu - The Holy One - the source of blessing. Sin acts as a spiritual impediment causing disharmony between the root of our souls - at the Kise HaKavod -which is the spiritual seat of the Shekhina and the light of HaQadosh Barukh Hu. The Zohar describes Teshuva - repentance - in a literal manner as the Tashuv or the return to the Heh. 2 Namely, the return of our soul to the Divine reservoir or the final Heh of the YHVH where all blessings from above are deposited. This will in turn evoke the Shekhina or Divine reservoir to return to a state of harmony and peace with Qudsha Berikh Hu - the Vav of the YHVH. This is the mystical interpretation of the Talmudic teaching of R. Levi that Teshuva relates to the return of the soul to its root at the Kise HaKavod. 3 It is not to be taken for granted that in order to accomplish this task one must at a minimum regret - confess and abandon his blemish. 4 The Talmud teaches in the name of R. Yishmael that for severe sins suffering might be necessary as well. 5 We need to focus on exactly what happens as a result of Teshuva to these spiritual impediments called severe sins? Do they just spiritually disappear after repentance? Our Sages teach that what happens depends upon the Avodah of the penitent. Sins can become spiritually concealed - deadening their effect and causing them to gradually to disappear, or sins can be spiritually elevated towards holiness and converted into merits. 6 The diverse views on how one must approach an addendum to penance such as fasting or self induced suffering is solely dependent upon the preference to either conceal or to lift the sin from its place to effectuate the divine unity.

## **THE ISSUE IS DEBATED IN THE TALMUD**

The Navi Mikha provides a Prophetic expanse of the thirteen divine Middot in contrast to those taught biblically in Parashat Ki Tisa. 7 The former are recited numerous times in the ceremony of Tashlikh. In the verses that begin Mi El Kamokha - the prophet details the two different methods that we beseech God to assist us with the impediment of a severe sin. The first is called Nose' Avon - or the raising of sin - the second is known as Yikhbosh Avonotenu - The concealment of the sin. While it is true that the Navi is referencing Divine attributes - they are somewhat dependent upon a corresponding activation by the penitent. The Talmud cites a disagreement between R. Elazar and R. Yose Ben R. Hanina as to the method God uses to draw forth his abundant kindness upon humanity. 8 In Tractate Arakhin, the Talmud details these views as to how the scales of judgement are tipped in favor of man. R. Elazar claims that God raises the sin so that it no longer serves as an impediment - as it is written Nose' Avon. R. Yose asserts that God hides the sin so it no longer serves as an impediment as it is written Yikhbosh Avonotenu. 9 The Sefer Duda'im BaSadeh elucidates these two approaches in terms of our Avodah as self induced suffering such as fasting versus actively adding to one's Misvot and learning Torah to complete the penitance. Throughout the Tanakh we find that our leaders often declared or at least took upon themselves extensive fasting to at least avoid calamity. Fasting in the Torah clearly emerges in response to a spiritual need. The root word for fasting in Hebrew is Som - it is a sub category of the general one of Inui Nefesh - or affliction of the body. The spiritual need for this approach writes the Duda'im BaSadeh is the necessity of raising sin or Nose' Avon - from its impending state. 10 This we will see below was generally the favored approach of the Torah and the Sages - assuming it doesn't overly weaken the body or ones ability to properly function physically and spiritually. Another approach advocated is for one to accept upon himself - additional times for study of Torah - prayer and good deeds. These will generate such intense spiritual light that they will Kovesh or conceal sin from its habitat that was impeding the spiritual unity above. It was this approach favored by even the likes of the Amora Shemuel - who taught - He who fasts is a sinner. 11 Let us attempt to elaborate upon these approaches through a historical perspective.

## **FASTING AND AFFLICTION**

Moshe opted to fast twice for a period of forty days to Nose' Avon - to raise the severe sins or impediments of Israel. 12 This was also the approach of the prophets Eliyahu, Yoel, Daniel and Ezra HaSofer. 13 Kings such as Sha'ul, David and Ah'av accepted upon themselves voluntary fasts. 14 In order to bring about divine unity in the face of a threat of calamity to Israel - public fasts were often proclaimed. They fasted in preparation for wars against Binyamin, the Pelishtim and the nations of Transjordan. 15 They were instructed to do so - averting

annihilation by Babel and later Persia as recorded in Megilat Ester. 16 The root of these is obviously the fast of Yom Kippour when it is sine qua non that we must evoke the Mida of Nose' Avon and bring about Divine favor and unity. For how can wars be won; calamities be avoided without evoking the Mida of Nose' Avon to enhance a previously ruptured state of divine unity. Evidently repentance is not enough to erase the impediment caused by severe sins. It must be followed up by the penitent to either lift or conceal the negative force that was created thru the infraction. Zekharya mentions the four fixed fasts associated with and leading up to the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash. 17 It is important to admit that sin causes the exile or descent of the Shekhina which results in her spiritual dis-unity with Qudsha Berikh Hu. Surely then these fasts were established to restore the divine unity that was associated with those days and was lost. It might have been obvious to Zekharya that fasting might have been no longer necessary during the second temple era when spiritual peace was restored - as indicated by the close of the verse VeHaEmet VeHaShalom Ahevo. 18 A sympathetic attitude to appreciate the spiritual need of the ascetic who fasts - continued through the post second temple era. 19 It is only during the period of the Amoraim where we begin to first find a particular resistance to at least non communal voluntary fasts.

### **CHANGING TRENDS TO LIMIT FASTING**

We find a few Amoraic teachings which reflect a changing trend for involuntary fasting at least for torah scholars. While R. Elazar considers one who fasts Holy - Shemuel considers him a sinner. The Gemara actually qualifies the view of R. Elazar and reasons that one who fasts is praiseworthy concerns exclusively one who is able to afflict himself and endure the suffering. However he would agree to prohibit one who cannot afflict himself and endure suffering. 20 This view appears again in the teachings of Rish Lakish who considers one who voluntarily fasts a Hasid. However in a teaching in his name - stated by R. Yirmiya Bar Abba we find him prohibiting a Torah scholar from fasting - since he thereby diminishes the work of heaven. 21 R. Yose - an earlier Tanna taught that this restriction can even apply to a non scholar - If he afflicts himself to such an extent and becomes a burden on the community. 22 The Halakhic authority - the Magen Avraham cites an opinion that a scholar who has committed transgressions should fast as an atonement - but concludes with an opinion that increased learning and personal introspection are substitutes for fasting. 23 According to our approach -it appears that this halakhic view - is that since there is the option of Kovesh - to conceal the sin via overwhelming it with holiness - especially via additional Torah learning, this is preferred in certain situations. This is especially true for a scholar - who is weak and would limit his Torah via his asceticism. Concerning him R. Sheshat teaches - that regarding a Yeshiva student who fasts - a dog should eat his meal. 24

### **WHICH APPROACH IS PREFERRED**

It is apparent that the preferred approach of R. HaAri is to Nose' Avon or attempt to raise sin via fasting. His teachings include in extensive detail the required amount of fasts for some of the most severe sins. 25 In addition we know that the rabbinic authorities advocate fasting during the ten days of repentance, monday's and thursday's after Pesah and Sukkot, days of Shovavim, the three weeks between the seventeenth of Tammuz and the ninth of Av, Yom Kippour Qatan, Erev Pesah, the anniversary of a parent or teacher's death. as well as in rectifying m the effects of nightmares. 26 This arouses the Mida of Nose' Avon or the lifting of the sin impediments. These fasts release the sins above to the level of Qedusha -or holiness. However - the method of Kovesh are preferred by others. By actively learning and doing good deeds one can generate such holiness to cleanse and whiten the stains of sin. They reason, that if involuntary fasting weakens one spiritually - or even for that fact physically in that it thrusts one to be a burden on the community then why not opt for the approach of concealment instead of lifting? Accordingly, it would be preferred to increase one's Torah study and good deeds sending forth from above - an abundance of lights upon his soul. In this matter he would be able to outweigh his sins - clearing the impediments of divine unity. Both of these options imply that sin is not an ineradicable impediment. This is only on condition that in addition to the normal requirements associated with repentance - one selects a path of Nose' - elevating sin to a level of holiness via fasting or that of Kovesh - concealing sin by bombarding it with the holiness of Torah and good deeds.

**Shabbat Shalom**  
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