

Elul Part II : Finding Objectivity (Edited Transcript)

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Welcome and thank you for listening. I always look forward to this opportunity of sharing some ideas with you.

In life we need clarity, objectivity and honesty. Often we become so consumed with our everyday living that it's difficult to be objective about ourselves. Part of the challenge of becoming a great person is achieving a level of self-transcendence, where we rise above ourselves to view our lives objectively. Often we need other people to help us with this challenge and that's why friends are so important.

The Mishnah of Pirkei Avot tells us in Chapter 1, "Acquire for yourself a friend". Rabbeinu Yonah, a commentator from the Middle Ages, gives three purposes for a friend: Firstly, he says a friend is someone to learn Torah with, and secondly, is someone who can guide you if he sees you making a mistake. Thirdly, a friend offers advice when you have a choice or decision to make and need an objective perspective.

As we are approaching Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, it is an especially important time of year to ask for objective input so we can become clear and focused. The month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah is a time of introspection and analysis to assess in what areas we are doing well and in what areas we are doing badly. During this period of teshuva "repentance", special prayers are recited daily, called selichot, asking for forgiveness. But the true reminder to stop and assess the direction of our lives is the shofar.

The Shofar's Purpose

The shofar is blown throughout the month of Elul, but the main mitzvah is fulfilled on Rosh Hashanah. The Rambam, Maimonides, describes the shofar as the spiritual alarm clock that tells us to wake up from our illusions and reassess whether we are on the right path or not.

Asking a friend, who can offer constructive criticism and objective advice, is a good way of judging our moral compass. The Rambam writes that our rabbis are also important at fulfilling this task. The Mishnah of Pirkei Avot Chapter 1, continues: "Make for yourself a rabbi", someone who can guide you. In Chapter 4 of the Laws of Repentance, the Rambam outlines 24 factors that prevent a person from doing proper repentance. He speaks of people who block criticism, such as somebody who rejects the authority of a rabbi or hates criticism. These kinds of people will battle to repent because they have no direction and no-one guiding them. He includes someone who separates themselves from the community, because during this time when we are all participating in communities and praying together, this participation can be a force for good.

When we cut ourselves off from outside input, we often get sidetracked and head down a negative path. Looking internally for the truth is difficult and even though we have the Torah to guide us, it's difficult to always do the right thing. Humans are highly intellectual, rational beings, but the Maharal says that our emotions are far more powerful. Our emotions are described as *lav hamelech*, the king of a person, that rules over him. As for the intellect, the Maharal says its greatness is its weakness.

Greatness is lofty, transcendent and connected to the world of the soul. It's completely above the physical and therein lies its weakness because human beings are also physical. Intellect cannot always give a person the clarity they need to make a decision; that is why we have the emotional element to drive us to a decision and then the intellect to back it up.

Life's yardstick

The Torah commands the Jewish people to inscribe the words of the Torah clearly onto tablets of stone so it could be read by

everyone. One of the reasons for doing this was nation-building. The Abarvanel, one of our great commentators of the Torah, understood the concept of nation building. He served as minister of finance in the government of King Ferdinand of Spain until the Jews were expelled in 1492. Even though he was given the option by the king to stay, he left with his people because of his loyalty to them. He said that the engravings on those stones were a form of nation-building because they would become a national symbol. Other nations make their national symbols out of statues and monuments, but our national symbol is the Torah ? G-d's Word. The moral principles and values contained in the Torah would create a national culture and infuse the people with their very identity based on G-d's principles.

But the other element was to create an objective measure of laws and principles that would be ?carved in stone? and permanent. They are non-negotiable, so even if we become emotionally torn, these principles are the yardstick that we can objectively test ourselves against. We have to continually measure ourselves in respect to where we are holding and where we should be. But maintaining that objectivity is difficult. We are often so consumed with our own lives that we are not good objective assessors of ourselves. That's why we need friends, rabbis, the input of the Torah, and the sense of the laws ?carved in stone? to measure our lives against.

Various forms of bribe

In this week's parsha we are told, ?Do not take a bribe because the bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and it twists the righteous words?. If a judge who has objectively to rule on a matter takes a bribe from one side, his eyes are blinded and righteous words are twisted because he cannot maintain clarity. The Talmud says the prohibition of taking bribes applies too when a person accepts a gift but insists that he will rule in accordance with the truth. The Torah teaches that this too is forbidden because the judge won't be able to rule correctly, even if he thinks he can, since his emotions will influence him.

The Talmud says that a mere greeting of the judge by one of the litigants disqualifies the judge as it counts as a bribe. A case is given in the Talmud where one of the great Sages of the Talmud was greeted by his litigant as a kind gesture, and the Sage held that he could no longer judge the case as the greeting was a form of bribe. We learn from here that to greet a person is a form of gift as a person is influenced by the warmth of another and a greeting is viewed as if it were money. For example: there is a prohibition to charge interest on a loan. So if you give a loan interest free and then the debtor as a result of receiving the loan starts greeting the creditor, it's regarded as a form of interest because he is paying him with a greeting.

We are so prone to influence and emotional pull one way or the other that even if a person wants to judge entirely honestly they are unable to do so simply because of the warmth of a greeting.

One of our great rabbis of the 20th century, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, who was murdered during the Holocaust, says the prohibition against taking a bribe is the foundation of our view of the world. He asks how the Torah can command us to believe in G-d when this is surely a question of faith. But the answer, he says, is obvious, because any rational person looking at the facts of the world can only come to one conclusion: that G-d exists and He created the world. There are many people who say that the perfection of the world came about randomly. They say this because they fail to examine the evidence objectively and have, in effect, taken a bribe. They are emotionally inclined to say that G-d does not exist because they would like to have a world where there is no G-d, no authority and no accountability. These are not objective scientists who have embarked upon an analysis of the matter with no preconceived notions or individual inclinations. These people have a particular agenda. They begin with the notion that G-d doesn't exist and then find supporting evidence. But the truth is obvious as long as you look at it objectively and don't take a bribe. That is why we can be commanded in the Torah to believe in G-d because what we are really being commanded is not to follow the ?bribe? of our emotions. That's why the verse says, ?Do not go astray after your hearts and after your eyes;? first the heart goes astray and then the mind follows.

Rabbi Wasserman says that if a great judge can be swayed by a mere greeting, certainly scientists who have many biases and inclinations can be swayed if they are not objective.

Therefore, during this time before Rosh Hashanah, we have to strive for objectivity and honesty and realise that we have to

transcend ourselves and adjust our behaviour to meet our moral principles engraved in stone.

Life-giving waters of Torah

One of our great philosophers from the Middle Ages, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, said that our faith in G-d and in the Torah is based on historical fact. He didn't like to prove things based on logic but rather relied on proofs of historical facts because that's more objective. The fact that G-d spoke to the entire people of millions and that they heard G-d's voice is a historical fact because you can't invent a lie of that size. (Obviously, this is an idea which requires an article in its own right to explain and develop properly.) And the way we maintain this objectivity is always to be connected to the study of Torah and to learning because that keeps us objective.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot, Chapter 6, says that a person who studies Torah is "like a spring that overflows". Reb Chaim Volozhin, one of the great students of the great Vilna Gaon, explains that a spring of water can get covered with sand and mud, but the water being pumped out is still fresh and clean from the ground. Similarly in life things can get covered in dirt and can become unclear and murky. But the study of Torah is like fresh spring water being pumped into our systems enabling us to see things with absolute clarity and purity.

One of the most important things we can do to prepare for Rosh Hashanah is to study Torah because it's those life-giving waters that keep us objective and thinking clearly. This can be done through shiurim, lectures, books or tapes. We are not good judges of ourselves, because we are generally inclined to view ourselves favourably, so it's important to get input from rabbis and friends to ensure we are on the right path. As a result we will grow and be able to give an honest account before G-d. He is waiting for us with open arms, but we need to be honest with ourselves and stand accountable and repent. Reaching out to the life-giving waters of Torah learning will inspire us and purify us and move us in the right direction.

Have a great Shabbos, thank you for listening.