

 TESHUVA: IT'S NEVER TOO LATE 

TESHUVAH COULD HAVE SAVED PHARAOH

In the beginning of the Parshah, Hashem is talking to Moshe and tells him to come to Pharaoh:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל פַּרְעֹה כִּי אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת לְבוֹ וְאֶת לֵב עַבְדָּיו לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְתִּי אֵלָה בְּקִרְבּוֹ

“And Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants, in order that I may display My signs among them’” (Shemos 10:1).

My Rebbi, R' Meir HaLevi Soloveichik, zt"l, pointed out that this pasuk says that Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to bring upon him all these miraculous blows. Based on this, it would seem that if Hashem would not have hardened Pharaoh's heart, He would not have been able to bring these miraculous blows on Pharaoh. That's what it seems. My Rebbi said, “What's the p'shat in that?” This question needs explanation. Furthermore, he said, in last week's parsha we also saw how the makkos were a punishment for the Egyptians. The pasuk says:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה רְאֵה נִתְּתִיךָ אֶלְקִים לְפָרְעָה וְאַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ יִהְיֶה גְבִיָּאֲךָ

“See, I place you in the role of judge to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet (Shemos 7:1).

Rashi explains what it means to be appointed as a judge. “This signifies I have made you a judge and castigator - to castigate him with plagues and suffering.”¹

The Brisker Rav explained that without the second pasuk (Shemos 7:1), I would have thought that the purpose of the makkos was to get the Yidden out of Mitzrayim and these makkos were simply to pressure Pharaoh to do Hashem's will. But you see from here that it was an onesh, a punishment, in order to fulfill Hashem's promise to Avraham Avinu, וגם את הגוי אשר עיבודו דן אנכי, “the nation that will subjugate you, I will punish them” (Bereishis 15:14). And the Brisker Rav brought proof from the Mishnah in Eduyos (2:10), which says that משפט המצריים שניים עשר חדש - the Egyptians were destined to be judged for 12 months. Why? Because they had enslaved the Jewish people. And Moshe was therefore appointed to administer these punishments and to fulfill this mishpat of 12 months.

If so, asked my Rebbi, why did Hashem have to harden the hearts of Pharaoh and his servants, to bring upon them these miraculous signs and punishments? They were supposed to receive these punishments because they enslaved the Jews! They weren't getting punished in order to let the Jews out. But if you tell me that the onshim were for the sins and the wickedness that Pharaoh had done to the Jews, then why did Hashem have to harden his heart in order to give them the mishpat which they were already entitled to?! Let Hashem say to Pharaoh, “You are a terrible rasha for what you did, and I am going to strike you!” Why did Hashem have to harden his heart in order to give him the mishpat, which they were already entitled to get for enslaving the Jews?!

The Rebbe learned an eye-opening yesod from here. He said that vos sheit do is a hafladike zach: if Pharaoh would have done teshuvah, it would have protected and shielded him from all the judgment and punishments that he had already deserved for enslaving the Jews in Mitzrayim, as it says in Avos (4:11):

רבי אליעזר בן יעקב אומר, העושה מצוה אחת, קונה לו פרקליט אחד. והעובר עברה אחת, קונה לו קטגור אחד. תשובה ומעשים טובים, כתריס בפני הפרענות.

“Rabbi Eliezer son of Yaakov says: One who does a single good deed acquires a single defender. One who does a single sin acquires a single prosecutor. Repentance and good deeds are a shield against punishments.”

If Pharaoh would have done teshuvah, his teshuvah would have helped him to be mevatel the gezeira of all the onshim that he'd already earned for having enslaved the Jews for decades prior to this! And that's why Hakodosh Boruch Hu had to be machbid his lev, to prevent him from doing teshuvah, for it would have been his key to getting out of the onesh. Do you hear this amazing zach?

Hakodosh Boruch Hu sometimes brings onshim upon us for behavior that we've done. He brings us the onshim which we deserve. The din for these chataim that we committed was already decreed and sealed, and the reason why we didn't do teshuvah for those sins - before the decree was handed down - is because we were obstinate. Yes, we committed the aveiros, and deserved and earned that punishment. Now, if a person did teshuvah - if Hashem didn't harden his heart - then the Teshuvah becomes כתריס, like a shield, in the face of punishment; it protects the person from onshim. The Rebbe pointed out that if we look at the makkah of arbeh (locust), Pharaoh acknowledged that he sinned and that he was a rasha, as it says: וַיֹּאמֶר חֲטָאתִי לָהּ אֶלְקִים וְלִבִּי וְיָדַעְתִּי כִּי אֶלְקִים (Shemos 10:16). And not only that, he recognized that the makkah came from Hashem and that every single thing that Moshe had warned about actually transpired. He even understood that now he had to ask Moshe to daven to Hashem, to beseech Hashem, to remove this makkah, as it says in the next pasuk, וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא חַטָּאתִי אֲךָ הַפַּעַם וְהַעֲתִירוּ לָהּ אֶלְקִים וְיִסַּר מֵעַלֵּי רַק אֶת הַמּוֹת הַזֶּה, “Forgive my offense just this once, and plead with your Hashem, that this death but be removed from me.”

¹ נתתיך אלהים לפרעה. שופט ורודה, לרדותו במכות ויסורין

PARTIAL TESHUVAH DOESN'T HELP

After Moshe davened, Pharaoh saw that Moshe's tefilla helped. Hashem showed Pharaoh the power of teshuvah. But still and all, even after Pharaoh did some kind of teshuvah - after the makkah went away - Hashem hardened his heart, as it says: וַיִּחַזֶק ה' אֶת לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא שָׁלַח אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (v. 20). The Rebbe explained that what happened here is the following. Teshuvah, he said, has three parts: regret for what I did in the past (חרטה), accepting not to repeat it (קבלה על העתיד), and confession (ויודו). Pharaoh said וְהִטָּאתִי לַיהוָה וְלָאֵלֶיךָ, "I sinned to Hashem and to you," and regretted his actions, but he was lacking קבלה על העתיד. Therefore, since he never accepted to change in the future, he didn't merit the total annulment of the gezeirah from himself. The fact is, since he almost did teshuvah, Hashem showed him a partial result, but since he didn't do a complete teshuvah, that teshuvah didn't work, it didn't stick.

EVERY PERSON DOES AVEIROS THAT NEED TESHUVAH

Each one of us, in our lives, is not perfect, as it says in Koheles (7:20), אֵין צַדִּיק בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחַטָּא, "there is not one good man on earth who does what is best and doesn't err." And, certainly, if we are not tzaddikim, we incur great onshim, because there is no such thing as doing an aveirah and not having an onesh for that aveirah. But you have to know that there is the power of teshuvah.

My Rebbe said that we find the same issue with Klal Yisrael as well, when Moshe was concerned that Klal Yisrael wouldn't listen to him when he told them that the time for redemption had come. And the Torah testifies that they didn't listen:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה כֵּן אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵל מֹשֶׁה מִקִּצְרֵי רוּחַ וּמִעֲבֹדֵי קֶשֶׁת

"But when Moshe told this to Bnei Yisrael, they would not listen to Moshe, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage" (Shemos 6:9).

Rashi comments here that they didn't accept Moshe's "words of comfort." My Rebbe asked, what's the p'shat here? How is it possible that they were not mekabel any comfort?! Isn't this a "way of the world," that when a person has been suffering in jail for many years, and worse yet, the suffering has been getting stronger over the last several years, he certainly would want to get out?! So why did Klal Yisrael tell Moshe, "Why are you redeeming us?" When Moshe came to them to announce the coming redemption, they should have rejoiced וְשִׂמְחָה עַל גִּפְשׁ עֲבֵדָה (like water on a very weary soul)! How is it that Klal Yisrael didn't accept Moshe's "words of comfort"? What's the p'shat?! So the Rebbe explained that Hashem promised Klal Yisrael through Moshe that, number one, Hashem is going to save Klal Yisrael by taking them out from avdus to cheirus - they would become free people, no more slavery; and number two, Hashem would take them out from the land of Mitzrayim. Both of these things transpired at different times. The freedom from being slaves happened on the night of the 15th of Nissan, when Pharaoh came and told them: קוּמוּ צֵאוּ מִתּוֹךְ עַמִּי, "Get up, depart from among my people" (Shemos 12:31). The Gemara Yerushalmi (Pesachim 37a) comments that Pharaoh told them: הָיִיתֶם עֲבָדֵי פַרְעֹה מִכֵּן וְהַיְוֵאתֶם עַבְדֵי ה' הַיּוֹם, "In the past, you were servants of Pharaoh, from now on you are servants of Hashem." And that night, Klal Yisrael said: הַלְלוּ עַבְדֵי ה' וְלֹא עַבְדֵי פַרְעֹה. They were no more avdei Pharaoh. But they didn't yet leave Mitzrayim that night. When did they leave? They left the next morning, as it says: וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִן הָאָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם בְּעֶצְמָת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יָצְאוּ כָּל צְבָאוֹת ה' מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם, "and it was in the middle of the day, all the hosts of Hashem departed from the land of Egypt" (Shemos 12:41).

YETZIAS MITZRAIM WAS CONDITIONED

So we see that the full geulah happened the next day. Now, the Rebbe explained a very interesting thing. The freedom from slavery that Klal Yisrael received on the night of the 15th of Nissan was not simply a freedom, a שחרור, from being the slaves of Pharaoh. Rather, it was freedom of going from being slaves of Pharaoh עבדי פרעה to being the slaves of Hashem, עבדי ה', like the Yerushalmi's statement above, הִלְלוּ עַבְדֵי ה' וְלֹא עַבְדֵי פַרְעֹה. So when they said הִלְלוּ עַבְדֵי ה' - they didn't thank Hashem for being freed from being עבדי פרעה, but they thanked Hashem for becoming עבדי ה'.

The Rebbe explained that the Yetzias Mitzraim was conditioned on the following: וְיָדַעְתֶּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם, "And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your G-d. And you shall know that I am Hashem, your G-d, who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians" (Shemos 6:7). The entire yetzia was on the condition that we become עבדי ה'!

As a side note, I was once trying to be mekarev a boy from a Modern Orthodox family whose parents thought their son was getting good chinuch. I asked him, "Do they teach in school about Judaism? I know they teach you about Israel, but do they teach you about Judaism?" "Of course," he said. "Did they teach about Yetzias Mitzrayim?" "Of course." "Did they teach about Pesach?" "Of course!" "What did they tell you we celebrate on Pesach?" He said, "That we got freed from slavery." I said, "Really? Say that again?" "That we got freed from slavery." I started to laugh so hard that I fell off my chair (I actually made myself fall off the chair), and I started rolling on the floor from laughter. The kid was looking at me with these big eyes. I told him, "They duped you. They fooled you. That's not Jewish. That's Mizrachi. My friend, that's the new Torah." He was clearly confused. He asked me, "Rabbi, what do you mean? Don't you celebrate the same Pesach?" I said, "No." "So then what do you celebrate," he asked me. I said, "We celebrate that we became עבדי ה' and we became עבדי ה' forever! וְיָדַעְתֶּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם... וְיָדַעְתֶּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם (Tefillas Ma'ariv)."

But they didn't teach that in his school. And it's a major mistake because the reason Hashem took us out of Egypt was on this condition - that we serve Him. People think that Hashem was concerned with slavery like Avraham Lincoln was concerned (he apparently also went to the Mizrachi school and thought he was emulating Hashem because Hashem didn't like slavery). But that's not the case. Hashem's problem was His people - that we were slaves of Pharaoh and not His slaves! וְלֹא עַבְדֵי ה' - עַבְדֵי ה' לַיהוָה. That's a whole new look. This kid was shocked. And because of that conversation, I convinced him to leave that school. Today, he's a Rav. He went to Brisk, went on to learn in many yeshivos, he and his brother, and the rest of his family changed as well. Hodu l'Hashem ki tov!

Now, listen to how my Rebbe explained why Klal Yisrael didn't listen to the "words of the comfort" of Moshe. He said that if you look at Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael (12:6), it comments on וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵל מֹשֶׁה:

רבי יהודה בן בתירא אומר, הרי הוא אומר ולא שמעו אל משה מקוצר רוח וגו', וכי יש לך אדם שהוא מתבשר בשורה טובה ואינו שמח? שנאמר יולד לך בן זכר שמח שמחה (ירמיה כ). רבו מוציאו לחירות ואינו שמח, אם כן, למה נאמר ולא שמעו אל משה, אלא שהיה קשה בעיניהם לפרוש מע"ז, שנאמר ואומר אליהם איש שקוצי עיניו השליכו ובגלולי מצרים אל תטמאו (יחזקאל כ). (ואומר, וימרו בי בית ישראל במדבר) הדא הוא דכתב, וידבר ה' אל משה ואל אהרן ויצאם אל בני ישראל – צום לפרוש מעבודה זרה

“R’ Yehudah ben Beseira says: It is written (Shemos 6:9) “But they did not listen to Moshe because of shortness of spirit, etc.” Now is there anyone who is given glad tidings and does not rejoice? As it says (Yeremiah 20:14), “A son has been born to you - Rejoice him!” His Master is freeing him from bondage, and he does not rejoice? What, then, is the intent of “And they did not listen to Moshe, etc.”? It was difficult for them to abandon their idolatry, as it says (Yechezkel 20:7), “And I said to them (in Mitzrayim): Let every man cast away the detestations from before his eyes and not defile himself with the idols of Egypt.” This is the intent of (Shemos 6:13) “And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and He commanded them regarding the children of Israel” - He commanded them to abandon idolatry.”

The Rebbe said, “You want to know why the Yidden couldn’t listen to Moshe? They wanted to hear that they were getting freed because Hashem didn’t like slavery, and they wanted to be “proud and free” people.” But that wasn’t what Moshe said. They were told that there was a condition to getting freed. They could get out, but on the condition that each of them would be a proud Eved Hashem. And that’s where their difficulty lay.

Rashi (on Shemos 12:6) cites another Mechilta:

ולפי שהיו שטופין בגלילים אמר להם משכו וקחו לכם משכו ודיכם מגלילים וקחו לכם צאן של מןה.

Since they were sunk in idolatry, He said to them (v. 21) “Draw” - withdraw your hands from idols, and take unto yourselves a lamb” to fulfill a mitzvah of Hashem (Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael). Hashem said that they had to sign up for Hashem’s “program.” They had to get rid of avoda zarah; they had to do Korban Pesach, and bris milah, because their lifestyle was a contradiction. And when Klal Yisrael heard this from Moshe, they couldn’t hear of it. But the Rebbe asked, where do we see this in the pasuk? We see this idea in Chazal, but where is it in the pasuk? If you look at Targum Yonosan on the words of קשה וימעבדה, he says as follows:

ומליל משה קדין עם בני ישראל ולא קבילו מן משה מקפידות רוחא ומפולחנא נוקרא קשיא די בדיהו

“And Moshe spoke as such to Bnei Yisrael; but they couldn’t accept it from Moshe, through anxiety of spirit, and from the foreign and hard service (i.e., avoda zarah) which was upon their hands.”

TRUE TESHUVAH REQUIRES TRUE CHANGE

Rabbosai, this is a tremendously insightful lesson for us. When a person gets a clap from Hashem as a punishment, everybody tries to figure out how they can get out of it. Their wife tells them that they have to do teshuvah, but they say, “But how can I give it up? I am attached to it, it’s my lifestyle already, this is who I am? Can I go back to Yeshiva?! Can they expect me to go back to Yeshiva? I can’t do that.” A person has to realize that he has to do teshuvah! Saying “chatsi” one time is not enough. Going to a Rosh HaYeshiva or some Gadol and asking them, “Please daven for me, entreat Hashem for me, I need a break here,” might work for a little while, but ultimately, Hashem says “You have to change!”

In the Sefer Halkarim (Ma’amar 4:25), Rav Yosef Albo (1380-1444), one of the Rishonim, discusses this subject at length.² He asks how does teshuvah help even when the person is doing teshuvah because Hashem is striking him? He says a very interesting thing: When a master is beating his slave, it’s natural for the slave to say, “Ok, ok, stop, stop, I am sorry,” or when a father gives a yingele a potch, the kid says, “Ta, please stop. Ok, Ok.” That, says Rav Albo, is not called doing teshuvah, that’s called “I am saying things to get the banging or clapping to stop, but I am not choosing to become better.” That’s not teshuvah at all! Even if you understand that the clap is from Hashem, if you are not ready to choose to make a change in your life and turn it around, then it’s not going to help. He says an example of this was none other than Pharaoh. When Pharaoh got “hit,” he said the same thing, “Ok, Ok, I am a rasha, pray to Hashem to take this maves (death) away from me!” And it worked to take away the clap, but as soon as the makkah left, Pharaoh went back to his old ways. He never chose to do teshuvah, and that’s why, even though he said חטתי one time, it wasn’t even teshuvah at all. It was nothing. Rav Albo says that Pharaoh deserved that Hashem was לך פתע. Teshuvah that a person does because he is being struck by Hashem only works when the person is sincerely ready to change; he’s not saying chatsi just to free himself from the blows.

This is what we have to know: when Hashem brings a punishment upon us, ask yourself this question: “Am I willing to change? Do I want to change?” Or is it simply, “I have no choice.” I’ve told many people who’ve called me, “Are you ready to change?” I usually get three types of answers. First, you have people who say, “I am not sure.” You know, it’s amazing for me to hear this. “What do you mean you are not sure?” “Well, how do I know for sure that you are right? How do I know for sure that that’s the reason?” And then there’s a person who says, “Do I have much choice?” This is saying that “I don’t want to do teshuvah. I realize that I’ve chosen a wrong path in my life and I am going to choose to do the right thing because I am desperate.” And the third answer is, “I give up.”

FORCED TESHUVA DOESN’T WORK

I was recently speaking with someone who went through Gehenom; it shouldn’t happen to anybody. This guy suffered blow after blow. His life was torn apart. He is actually a nice fellow. I told him, “You know, Rav Yosef Albo says, how can you tell if a

² כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוה היום לא נפלת היא ממך ולא רחוקה היא לא בשמים היא וגו' ולא מעבר לים היא וגו' כי קרוב אליך וגו', וכל זה בלי ספק מדבר על התשובה, ויורה על זה אמרו בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו, שענין התשובה תלוי בוודוי הפה ובחרטת הלב כמו שנבאר, וכן פירש הרמב"ן ז"ל של שעל התשובה ידבר, והפליג הכתוב לשבח אותה בשאמר לא בשמים היא ולא מעבר לים היא. וזה כאלו אמר שהדבר לגודל ערכו היה ראוי לך להשתדל ולטרוח בעדו כל טורח שבועלם, אפילו לעלות לשמים אם אפשר או לעבור הים כדי להשיגו שהוא דבר יקר הערך מאד, לפי שאין ההקש גוזר שיהיה לחוטא כפרה בשום פנים, כמאמר הנביא במה אקדם ה' וגו', הירצה ה' וגו', אמר כי כל כך היה ראוי לתת שכר גדול להנצל מן העונש על העברות שאינו יודע כמה יתן ומה יספיק לזה, אם אלפי אילים או רבבות נחלי שמן או היתן בכורו שכר פשעו או פרי בטנו בחטאת נפשו, וכל זה ממה שירצה שהשכל גוזר שלא היה ראוי שיספיק כופר אל החוטא בעד חטאו, וכל שכן שאין ראוי שיקובל החוטא בתשובה בדברים, כמו שהנביא אומר קחו עמכם דברים ושובו אל ה', אם לא על צד החסד האלהי, ולזה הזהיר עליה מאד ואמר ראה נתתי לפניך היום וגו', ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה וגו'.

person is willing to do teshuvah? If a person is trying to change, he doesn't blame other people. When someone blames others, what he's really saying is, "It's not really my fault. It's that person's fault. Oh, my wife got a therapist, an anti-semitic who hates men and they put me into this position, etc." One fellow told me, "My father was a mean, evil person, a devil

incarnate." That was his problem. This reason, that reason. It's everybody's fault except mine. Are you going to change or not? So this young man told me that he changed for six months. Then, after six months, he started telling me all the terrible things that "this one did to him and that one did to him." His teshuva didn't work. And he wanted to know why it didn't work. After six months, he decided to stop changing, and started falling back to his old ways. The choke hold got tighter around him. Where did the problem lie? You know what the answer is? Yes, he did change, but not because he wanted to change. I told him, "If you wanted to change, you would have realized that being with Hashem is the only choice you had. You were not happy with the fact that you had to change. Yes, you made changes in your life, but you were not happy to make those changes; you were forced to make those changes. And when you were forced to make them, you never had a happy day. You were just paying the price, you were just waiting for Hashem to take off the choke hold. 'Ok, ok, Hashem. I made these changes. Take away this makkah. Cure me. Let me go back to the way it was.' And the proof is that when it didn't change, you went back to your old ways! Why did you go back to your old ways? Do you have any safeik that this is the right path in life? Don't you understand that your old way was the wrong way?" So the fellow told me, "But I wasn't such a bad guy!" I told him, "I know you weren't such a bad guy. You think that Pharaoh didn't do some good things in his life? Pharaoh was great pals with Yosef, he treated Yakov and the Shevatim nicely in the beginning, until he had a change of heart. וַיִּקַּם מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם - then he changed! He decided that he needed to add to the power of the Egyptian economy by enslaving Jews.

Every one of us is like this. When it says ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה, it doesn't mean that I am going to buy myself time right now by starting to give tzedakah. I need an "out of jail free" card. Rabbosai, you can't buy yourself out of jail! You have to give tzedakah because it's the right thing! It's not your money. And even if nothing happens better in your life, you will still give tzedakah, because it's the right thing to do. And you will constantly tweak your teshuvah, and tell yourself, "I didn't do teshuvah shleimah." Half teshuvah is not enough. That's what a person has to realize. A person who believes in Hashem, writes Rav Yosef Albo, will say to himself, "I know that this is from You, Hashem, and I have to change, and I will accept that change!"

BE HAPPY WITH YOUR CHANGE EVEN IF YOU RETURN OUT OF FEAR

Not long ago, someone who changed his life called me up. Baruch Hashem, I've seen many people change and have helped them walk through the path of change. But you see many people who resent it. There was once a woman I helped change, and Hashem took away a terrible gezeirah ra that was hanging over her head. She called me one time and said that she wanted to see me. She said that she wasn't going to do it anymore. I asked her why. She said, "You have a grip and control over my life, and I am not letting you, Rabbi, control my life!" I told her that I don't control her life. I just gave her directions to get through the maze. "No. You've hexed me. You've got the voodoo on me, and I am not doing it anymore," she said. I told her, "Ok, say that you are taking a pause." But she was adamant that she wasn't stopping, "No, I won't do it anymore." I told her, "Now you are starting up with the Boss." That night - boom! Hashem brought the hammer down! People make changes, but she resented the fact that she had to change.

This man, who had changed his life because of something that Hashem had brought upon him, now told me, "I can't tell you how much I appreciate these changes." But then he added something that was so telling, and I said to Hashem, "Dos is teshuvah." He came and told me, "I did it with such joy, I am so happy that I managed to change." Unbelievable!

There was once a man who "fell off the tracks," and he fell off in a very bad way. He fell to great depths. Then a good friend of his was killed, and as they buried his friend, this person was shaken to the core, and he decided that he was going to change. He contacted me, and I asked him, "Do you really want to change, or you just want to put a bandage on? You want to just keep yourself out of the grave, or do you really want to change?" He said, "I want to change." These were massive changes! The first thing I told him was, "You are going to have to break all contact with people who have negatively influenced you, all the 'roaches,' all the big ones and the little ones. You are going to have to get rid of your phone because you are a very popular and geshmake guy, and you've got to cut out all those contacts because that chevrah is a killer. The next thing you have to do is to change your clothing." (He was really into his clothing. He prided himself on having good taste in clothing.) And he really did it; he made big changes. I was waiting for the push back from him, for him to say, "Oh, Rabbi - that I cannot really do." I can't tell you how many times I asked people, "Are you ready to change? Are you ready to be more tzanua?" "Well, it depends," one lady told me. They always say this: "it depends." I ask them, "Well, what does it depend on? Isn't that what Hashem wants you to do?" But you know what the answer is? They really don't want to do what Hashem wants them to do. They want to do the minimum because they are not doing it by choice. If so, then, it's not teshuvah. It's gorsnisht mit nisht.

But this young man made the choice. He made amazing choices. To me, he's an example of someone who did teshuva and Hashem saved him from all kinds of puraniyos. Hakodosh Boruch Hu saved him from all kinds of things. Unbelievable! And the hatzlachah and the brachah that he saw in his life! Not stam yeshuos! All because he chose to do teshuvah, even though he was שׁב מִירָאָה (he did teshuvah out of fear), he's going to get sechar niflah for it. And if he keeps doing it, then זְדוּנוֹת נַעֲשָׂה לוֹ שְׂגוּגוֹת (his intentional sins will be considered as unintentional ones) - no question about it! I am sure that's how it is by him! And if he does it at the right level, if he gets to the level of teshuvah me'ahavah, it will be even better! But it's definitely כְּשִׁגְוֹת נַעֲשָׂה לוֹ.

We have to apply this lesson to our lives. I don't care what your excuses are, why it's not for you, whether it's this guy's fault or that guy's fault - you are not taking responsibility and you are not changing. Hashem says, "You want to change? Choose to change, and commit to change, and be happy with the change." And even if you were שׁב מִירָאָה, you did it out of fear, that change is going to be wonderful, and your reward from Hashem will be great! ^{2 cont'}

כי אחר שהראה דרך קלותו כשאמר כי קרוב אליך הדבר, אמר ראה נתתי לפניך וגו', כלומר אין לך התנצלות בזה כמו שיש לך על שאר המצות שלרוביים ולגודל טרחם לא תוכל לקיימם, שאין הדבר כן בזה שזו המצוה קלה היא מאד, ואם תעשה אותה תשיג החיים והטוב ואם תתרשל ממנה יגיעך המות והרע, ועל כן הזהר שלא תזלזל בה, וכו'. ועל כן ראוי לך שלא תתרשל בהשגתו שהוא חיים לנפשך, וכמו שלא תתרשל בבקשת החיים כך אין ראוי לך שתתרשל בזה, וזהו שסמך אל זה ובחרת בחיים, ובאר שהחיים הללו שיושגו במצוה הזאת הם בעצמם התכלית המושג מצד התורה, וזהו אומר לאהבה את ה' אלהיך לשמוע בקולו ולדבקה בו כי הוא חייך ואורך ימך לשבת על האדמה וגו', כי הוא חייך, רוצה לומר בעולם הנשמות, ואורך ימך בעולם הזה, שזהו לשבת על האדמה, שעל ידי האהבה הזאת יושג הדבקות בשם יתברך והחיים הנצחיים וההצלחות הגשמיות. וכל זה כשהתשובה היא מאהבה, אבל כשהתשובה היא מיראה אף על פי שיקובל עליה שכן, מכל מקום אינה תשובה גמורה שיקובל עליה השכר הגדול הזה, שכן אמרו רבותינו ז"ל במסכת יומא בפרק יום הכפורים אמר ריש לקיש גדול בעל תשובה שזדונו נעשות לו

כשגגות, שנאמר כי כשלת בעונך, עון מזיד הוא וקרי ליה מכשול, איני והאמר ריש לקיש גדול בעל תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכויות, שנאמר ובשוב רשע מרשעתו ועשה משפט וצדקה עליהם חיה יחיה, לא קשיא כאן מאהבה כאן מיראה. ודבר זה צריך באור, מהיכן יצא לו לריש לקיש שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות לשב מיראה, ששורת הדין השב מיראת עונש אין ראוי שתועיל תשובתו כלל, שהפעל שעליו ישוב האדם או יגונה או שעליו ראוי לקבל שכר או עונש הוא הפעל הבחירי שלא יתערב בו צד אונס כלל, והשב מיראה אין זה פעל בחירי גמור, ולמה יקובל עליו שכר כלל. ותשובת דבר זה הוא שהשב מיראה הוא על שני פנים, יש שב מיראת העונש המוטל עליו, כעבד שהוא מתחנן לפני אדוניו בעוד שמלקה אותו, וכשיקל האדון מעליו שבת אפו ישוב למרוד בו כאשר בתחלה, כמו שהיה הענין בפרעה, שבהיות המכה עליו היה אומר ה' הצדיק וגו', וכשהיתה הרוחה חזר להכביד את לבו כבתחלה, וזה בלי ספק היה מורה שהתשובה הראשונה היתה על צד ההכרח מאימות מות נפלו עליו וגו' ושלא היה פעל בחירי, ועל כן אין ראוי שתחשב לו לתשובה כלל. ויש מי שהוא שב מפני פחד השם וענשיו ואף בשעת הרוחה פחד אלהים לנגד עיניו והוא ירא וחרד מאימת יסוריו, בהיותו מאמין שכל הדברים באים מהשם יתברך על צד הגמול והעונש, ולא ייחס הדברים אל הטבע והמקרה כמו שעשה פרעה שבסור המכה מעליו היה חוזר לקלקולו הראשון, ואף אחר מכת בכורות כשחשב שישראל נבוכים בארץ תלה כל האותות והמופתים שראה במקרה, ועל כן נתחזק לרדוף אחרי בני ישראל, ונתאמת שתשובתו הראשונה היתה באונס ומחמת המכות ולא בחיריית. ועל זה הדרך יתפרש מה שנמצא בכתוב שהשם יתברך מחזק לב הרשעים או מקשה ערפם ומונע מהם דרכי התשובה, וזה שהרשע בבא עליו המכה הוא מתחסד ושב אל השם מיראת עונש המוטל עליו, כמו שאמר פרעה חטאתי הפעם ה' הצדיק וגו', ובעבור שזה הפעל דומה לאונס ואינו בחירי, הנה השם יתברך מחזק את לבו כשנותן לו צד או צדדין לתלות בהן המכה ולומר שבאה במקרה ולא על צד ההשגחה האלהית, וזה כדי שיסור מלבו המורך שקנה מחמת המכה וישאר על טבעו ובחירתו מבלי מכריח, ואז יבחן אם היתה תשובתו בחיריית, ומאשר בחירת פרעה כשסר מעליו עול המכה היתה לרע, אמר השם יתברך אני הכבדתי את לבו, כלומר כשהסירותי מלבו המורך שקנה מחמת המכה, וישאר על טבעו ובחירתו, והוא לרוע בחירתו בקש עלות ותואנות לתלות בהן עיני המכות ולומר שהיו במקרה, וכי.

IN CONCLUSION

Hashem told Moshe and Aharon to perform a miracle in front of Pharaoh which culminated in Aharon's stick swallowing the sticks of Pharaoh's magicians. Aharon's stick was not even affected by swallowing the other sticks. The message to Pharaoh was clear: You are nothing and your power is nothing to boast of either. You are a mere stick under the control of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Hashem's presence in the world and His influence over every creature could no longer be denied. Pharaoh represents the ultimate in denial of *hashgachas Hashem*. We can find redemption from the 'Pharaohs' in our own lives by learning from Hashem's treatment of Pharaoh. In our lives, we encounter people and events that typically scare people or even cause disturbing discomfort. The most effective response to those events is to reinforce our belief that Hashem is the sole influence in the world and He is the Master of all forces in the world. By recalling that Hashem is the real source of all happenings, we deny the power of the things that disturb us and we remind ourselves that they are mere 'sticks' that are subject to Hashem's absolute dominion. This week, when faced with a situation or person that challenges my well-being or peace of mind - even though I am behaving responsibly - I will (*bli neder*) use Rav Chaim Volozhiner's strategy and focus on the fact that *ein od milvado* to remind myself where the real power lies.