

From Coronation to Celebration Navigating the Season of Spirituality

The Yomim Noraim season is complex and multifaceted, yet profoundly powerful. Beginning with the intensity of Elul, the season unfolds through a carefully structured progression: we coronate Hashem on Rosh Hashanah, spend the ensuing days engaged in teshuva, and ultimately culminate with the exalted experience of Yom Kippur. While the progression feels natural to us, its chronological order is not without question.

The Rosh Hashanah–Yom Kippur Paradox

As we enter Rosh Hashanah, we are still carrying the accumulated failures of the previous year, yet, oddly, we do not begin by asking for mechila. Instead, we assume the best by dress in our finest clothing and approach Hashem with confidence, asking for life, health, parnassah, and blessing for the year ahead. How can we expect our tefillos to carry such influence before we have even asked for forgiveness? The explicit process of requesting selicha and mechila comes only on Yom Kippur?

Historically, there is an obvious explanation for the sequence. Tishrei 1 is the anniversary of Creation, while Tishrei 10 was the day on which Bnei Yisrael were forgiven for the Chet HaEigel. But this historical chronology does not fully answer the conceptual question. In fact, we could easily imagine a different structure while maintaining the same dates: Tishrei 1, as the anniversary of Creation, would seem to be the ideal time to evaluate our accomplishments and failures within Hashem's master plan and begin the process of teshuva. Then, after ten days of introspection and repentance, Tishrei 10 could be the day on which Hashem grants us forgiveness, allowing us to begin the new year with a renewed relationship and a proper coronation of Hashem.

Why, then, does Rosh Hashanah come first?

Perhaps the answer is that before we can sincerely regret what we have done, we must first remember against Whom we have sinned.

A Sincere Request for Mechila

The Gemara teaches, מתלמידי יותר מכולם — “From my students I have learned the most.” Sometimes, that includes learning what not to do.

When a student behaves in a way serious enough to warrant an apology, most will reflect, regret, and eventually ask forgiveness. Such an apology is generally accepted. But there is another kind of apology: the student who turns around immediately after the offense and says “I’m sorry” simply because he knows he is that it is expected. The words may be technically correct, but they often feel empty. How can someone experience genuine remorse immediately after causing harm? On some level, such an apology can even feel disrespectful.

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This analogy helps explain why Yom Kippur cannot precede Rosh Hashanah. For more than eleven months, we have struggled with our commitment to Torah and mitzvos, and at times we have forgotten the most fundamental truth of all: Whom we are serving. Can we really move from that reality to profound remorse simply because the calendar has turned to Yom Kippur? Can we assume that we have suddenly internalized the gravity of having sinned against Hashem?

The Torah's strategy of beginning with Rosh Hashanah suggests otherwise. Before asking us to repent, it first compels us to recognize our King.

Rosh Hashanah: Recalibrating Our Relationship with Hashem

Rosh Hashanah focuses on coronation. By recognizing Hashem as the Creator and absolute King, we are forced to step back from our individual failures and rediscover the larger relationship in which those failures occurred. The experience of malchuyos is therefore not merely a declaration of Hashem's sovereignty; it is an awakening of our own consciousness. Before we can sincerely regret what we have done, we must become conscious of whose mandated did we transgress.

This idea becomes even more compelling when we consider the behavior of Bnei Yisrael during their desert sojourn. When we survey the events that led to condemnation or punishment, only two were primarily action-based: the Chet HaEigel and the sin of the Meraglim. The other episodes were rooted in an attitude of complaint, rebellion, and distrust toward Hashem.

That distinction is fundamental. In Judaism, as in any relationship, although the action is often what ultimately produces the consequence, it is the underlying attitude that leads to the action which is the deeper source of the rupture. Repairing a relationship therefore requires more than correcting behavior; it requires changing the attitude that produced the behavior in the first place.

Our relationship with Hashem similarly depends upon the way we understand our fundamental position before Him.

אם כבנים אם כעבדים

The essence of this relationship is captured in the familiar liturgical phrase, אם כבנים אם כעבדים — “whether as children or as servants.” There is obviously a qualitative distinction between a child and a servant, but they share one fundamental characteristic: dependence upon the one who has authority over them, particularly for their daily needs.

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That sense of dependence is woven into the fabric of Jewish life. A Jew spends much of the day “asking.” Every bracha rishona over food is an expression of dependence. The majority of the berachos of the Amidah are devoted to requests—for wisdom, teshuva, forgiveness, health, sustenance, redemption, and countless other needs. Our constant asking reinforces the awareness that we depend upon the One who determines our needs and provides for us.

This explains why the requests embedded within the Rosh Hashanah liturgy are not at odds with its theme of coronation. On the contrary, they are part of it. As we ask Hashem to grant us another year of life and blessing, we are simultaneously declaring our complete dependence upon Him. Rosh Hashanah therefore begins the process of recalibrating our relationship with Hashem; only after that recalibration can genuine remorse emerge.

The Seven Days of Re-Creation

After the two days of Rosh Hashanah, when the intensity of that experience begins to recede, we enter the next phase: implementation.

The seven days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur parallel the seven days of Creation. Hashem created the world over seven days, establishing the fundamental relationship between Creator and creation. We are now given seven days to begin recreating ourselves—not *by* our Creator, but *for* our Creator.

The Shulchan Aruch presents a two-pronged strategy. In siman 602, it instructs us to increase our tefillos and supplications. In the following siman, 603, it recommends adopting the stringency of Pas Akum during these days.

The first recommendation is intuitive. During this spiritually charged period, we increase our connection to Hashem through tefillah. The second is more puzzling. Why undertake a temporary stringency that will soon disappear? Why choose a halachic chumra as a vehicle for spiritual growth? And if the goal is to transform our attitude toward Hashem, why would additional tefillah not be sufficient?

The answer may be that our relationship with Hashem cannot be confined to the walls of the synagogue.

Taking Rosh Hashanah Into Everyday Life

If our spiritual renewal consists only of additional tefillah, our connection to Hashem risks becoming limited to the siddur and the walls of the shul. But Jewish life takes place everywhere else as well. We work, conduct business, eat, socialize, and interact with friends and colleagues, and it is precisely within those ordinary settings that our spiritual inspiration is most vulnerable.

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Food has a particularly important place in halacha, not only because of the extensive laws of kashrus and brachos, but also because food is one of the great vehicles of social interaction. “Let’s meet for coffee” and “Let’s grab lunch” are familiar expressions precisely because eating and drinking create natural opportunities for connection.

The Chachamim therefore established boundaries around certain forms of social interaction with non-Jews, including Bishul Yisrael and Pas Yisrael. Bishul Yisrael has become standard in many Jewish communities, while Pas Yisrael has not.

Against this backdrop, the Shulchan Aruch’s recommendation to adopt Pas Yisrael during the Aseres Yemei Teshuva takes on particular significance. As we leave the spiritual intensity of Rosh Hashanah and return to the working world, our renewed consciousness of Hashem is vulnerable to being left behind on the pages of the machzor. A small, tangible change in our daily routine can serve as a reminder that the relationship we renewed in shul must accompany us into the ordinary rhythms of life.

The goal is not simply to feel different on Rosh Hashanah. It is to allow Rosh Hashanah to change the way we live after, as well.

Yom Kippur and Teshuva: More Than Self-Improvement

We now arrive at Yom Kippur, prepared to complete the process. If asked to define teshuva, we would likely turn to the Rambam’s familiar formulation: confession of wrongdoing, regret, and a commitment not to repeat the behavior. Yet at first glance, there seems to be nothing inherently spiritual about this process. Recognizing wrongdoing, expressing regret, and committing to change could just as easily appear in a marriage counseling manual or a recovery program. What, then, transforms teshuva into a distinctly spiritual experience?

Perhaps the answer lies in understanding what should motivate our repentance.

What Should Motivate Our Teshuva?

Toward the conclusion of Kol Nidrei, the congregation repeatedly declares: ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדברך — “And Hashem said, ‘I have forgiven according to your words.’”

The chazzan repeats the phrase, followed by the familiar and auspicious bracha of Shehechiyanu.

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Yet the choice of this particular verse is striking. סלחתי כדברך was Hashem's response to Moshe's tefillah following the sin of the Meraglim. Historically, however, Yom Kippur emerged from the forgiveness granted after the Chet HaEigel. Why, then, do we conclude Kol Nidrei with the words סלחתי כדברך that are sourced in the sin of the Meraglim?

The contrast between Moshe's response during these two episodes may provide the answer.

When Moshe pleaded for forgiveness following the Chet HaEigel, Rashi understands his argument as, at least in part, an attempt to mitigate the severity of their guilt: had Hashem not given them the gold, they could never have made the Eigel. Moshe was, in effect, presenting a defense and explaining why the people's culpability should be viewed differently.

His approach after the sin of the Meraglim was entirely different.

Moshe did not minimize the people's sin. Nor did he attempt to explain it away. His concern was Kavod Hashem. What would the nations say? They would conclude that Hashem lacked the ability to bring His people into the Land and had therefore destroyed them in the desert. Moshe's argument was not primarily about the people; it was about the honor of Hashem in the world. And to that Hashem responded:

סלחתי כדברך — “I have forgiven according to your words.”

Hashem's response teaches us something profound about the nature of teshuva. True teshuva is not about minimizing the seriousness of our sins so that we can feel better about ourselves. Our remorse should not be motivated solely by fear of punishment or the desire for a better year, rather it should come from recognizing that our actions have compromised the Kavod Hashem that our lives are meant to reflect.

When we cry out סלחתי כדברך on Kol Nidrei night, we are not reminding Hashem that He once forgave the Jewish people. We are reminding ourselves how to approach Yom Kippur.

This idea transforms the Rambam's three-part model of teshuva. Vidui, charatah, and kabbalah al ha'asid are no longer merely tools of self-improvement, instead they become an act of restoring our relationship with Hashem for the purpose of which we were created, to bring out Kavod Shamayim.

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Teshuva Without Mechila?

This perspective may also explain a remarkable omission in the Rambam. When describing teshuva for sins between man and Hashem, the Rambam lists confession, regret, and commitment for the future, yet he does not identify asking Hashem for mechila as a formal component of the process.

That is surprising. After all, we ask for selicha and mechila three times a day, and Yom Kippur is filled with such requests.

The omission becomes even more striking when we compare it with the Rambam's treatment of sins between one person and another. The Rambam writes that neither teshuva nor Yom Kippur atones for interpersonal sins until the offender makes restitution and seeks forgiveness from the person he harmed. Even when the offense consists only of words, the offender must appease the other person and seek forgiveness.

Why the difference? Why must I beg another person for mechila, while the Rambam does not include asking Hashem for forgiveness as a formal requirement of teshuva?

Perhaps the answer lies in the deeper meaning of the word mechila.

The Meaning of Mechila

The word מחילה is related to חול, emptiness or the absence of sanctity. The weekdays are called ימי חול because they lack the sanctity of Shabbos, while one who desecrates Shabbos is called מחלל שבת, one who has profaned its sanctity.

Applied to interpersonal relationships, the idea becomes particularly powerful. When we hurt another person, we can create a chalal, a void, within that person's emotional and spiritual world. A humiliating comment can damage someone's sense of worth; a betrayal can fracture trust; an act of cruelty can leave another person feeling unvalued or vulnerable. A hurtful interaction creates a void in the sanctity of our fellow Jew.

The offender therefore has an obligation to attempt to fill the void he created. That is the deeper meaning of asking for *mechila*.

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However, we can only create such a void in someone whom we have the power to affect. We cannot diminish Hashem. Our actions cannot create a deficiency in Him or produce a void within Him. Hence, in essence there is no place for “mechila.”

If so, the obvious needs to be asked, why do we, nevertheless, ask Hashem for mechila?

Because, although our sins cannot damage Hashem, they can profoundly damage us.

The True Impact of Sin

The commentators offer several understandings of the word חטא: missing the mark, straying from the proper path, or creating a deficiency. The common denominator is failure in our spiritual endeavors.

A deeper exploration of sin reveals that we need to consider two perspectives: the micro and the macro.

The micro perspective focuses on the action. If I slander someone, I know what I have done and what I must do to repair it. The macro perspective asks a deeper question: What has this sin done to me?

The Ramban writes, מפי שכל העוונות יולידו גנאי בנפש, והם מום בה – all sins create a disgrace within the soul; they become a blemish within it.

The true impact of our wrongful actions do not diminish Hashem. They diminish us.

Every time we violate His will, we create a deficiency in our own spiritual identity. Our neshamah is affected because we have acted contrary to the will of the One with whom our entire existence is connected. And because that blemish results from violating the will of Hashem, only He can grant the forgiveness and spiritual restoration we need.

This explains why the Rambam does not need to list asking Hashem for mechila as a separate component of teshuva. We are not trying to fill a void in Hashem. Nonetheless, we ask Hashem for mechila in order to remove the blemish that our sin has created and fill the void in ourselves.

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The Challenge of Teshuva: Making It Last

There is, however, one final challenge. The difficulty with teshuva is rarely understanding the process. We know how to identify our mistakes, regret them, and make commitments. The harder part is making those commitments endure. The experience is painfully familiar: another Yom Kippur arrives, and our list of shortcomings looks remarkably similar to last year's. Perhaps the problem is not our sincerity. Perhaps it is our strategy.

A famous formulation from the recovery world describes insanity as doing the same thing repeatedly while expecting different results. If every year we use the same strategy to change, why should we expect a different outcome?

This is where Sukkos enters the picture.

Sukkos: The Missing Piece

Sukkos is unique among the festivals. Most Yomim Tovim commemorate a specific historical event that occurred at a particular point in time. Sukkos, however, does not commemorate a single event in quite the same way. Bnei Yisrael lived in sukkos throughout their forty-year journey in the desert. In that sense, Sukkos could seemingly have been celebrated at almost any point in the year. Famously it is asked, then why does it come immediately after Yom Kippur?

Because Sukkos teaches us something essential about how to grow.

Success Versus Failure

The Rambam identifies commitment for the future as a central component of teshuva. We typically frame that commitment negatively: "I will not do this again. I will not fail again. I will not repeat my mistake."

That seems logical. If the problem is failure, then success should mean avoiding failure. But there is an inherent weakness in that model: failure is inevitable.

As the pasuk says, יפול צדיק שבע וקם — "The righteous person falls seven times and rises." Hence, if our goal is simply not to fail, then the moment we fall, we have failed. And once we have failed, there is seemingly nothing upon which to build.

But there is another way to define success. Instead of making our goal avoiding failure, we can make our goal building success.

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The distinction is subtle but transformative. When success becomes the goal, every accomplishment becomes a foundation for the next one. When we inevitably stumble, we still have something to return to: I have succeeded before, and therefore I can succeed again.

There is a story about the Beis Aharon of Karlin, Reb Aharon Perlow, zt”l, who once encountered a childhood friend. They had grown up together, attended the same cheder and yeshiva, and shared many of the same opportunities. The friend therefore wondered how Reb Aharon had reached such spiritual heights. The Rebbe explained by recollecting their daily routine of making a cheshbon hanefesh, a personal accounting.

His friend, he explained, focused primarily on what he had done wrong that day. He, however, focused on what he had done well while recognizing what he still needed to improve.

If they was late for seder of learning in the morning, the friend would bemoan his laziness. He, the Rebbe explained, did not spend the day dwelling on what he had failed to accomplish. That would have meant defining the day by failure. Instead, he focused on the fact that he learned most of the seder while encouraging himself that tomorrow he could do a little better.

The distinction is profound. A person who learns to recognize his successes develops an inner reservoir of confidence. When he falls, he does not interpret the fall as proof that he is incapable; he remembers that he has succeeded before, and therefore knows that he can rise again.

Sukkos and the Harvest of Success

This is the message of Sukkos.

In Parshas Emor, the Torah describes the festivals and says regarding Sukkos: *באספכם את תבואת הארץ תחגו חג לה'* “When you gather the produce of the land, then you shall celebrate Hashem’s festival.”

The wording is striking. The pasuk implies that the harvest is not merely the season during which Sukkos happens to occur; rather the harvest itself seems to play a role in the celebration - “*When* you gather the produce of the land, *then* you shall celebrate Hashem’s festival.”

The harvest represents the visible result of a process. The farmer planted, plowed, watered, waited, and worked. Now he gathers the fruits of his labor, looks back with satisfaction, and recognizes what he has accomplished.

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The harvest represents the conscious recognition of success. That is precisely what we need after the Yamim Noraim. The Yamim Noraim can be spiritually and emotionally demanding. Teshuva requires us to examine our flaws honestly and confront the places where we have fallen short. But it is unhealthy to remain indefinitely in the space of failure.

That is why Sukkos follows immediately after Yom Kippur. After spending days examining our shortcomings, we need to look at our victories as well. We need to remember the times we resisted temptation, chose to learn, exercised patience when anger would have been easier, strengthened our relationship with Hashem, or did something difficult simply because we knew it was right. Those moments are the harvest of our souls.

The Yamim Noraim demand that we properly process our failures; Sukkos demands that we properly recognize our successes. And that recognition creates momentum. If I succeeded once, I can succeed again. If I resisted once, I can resist again. If I strengthened my relationship with Hashem once, I can build upon that connection.

This is not merely positive thinking. It is a strategy for spiritual growth.

From Teshuva to Growth

Perhaps this is the larger architecture of the Yamim Noraim. Rosh Hashanah teaches us to look upward—to recognize Hashem as Creator and King and to recalibrate our relationship with Him.

The seven days that follow teach us to translate that awareness into daily life, carrying our spiritual renewal beyond the walls of the shul and into the ordinary choices of life.

Yom Kippur teaches us to look inward—to recognize our failures, regret them, and commit to change, not merely to protect ourselves from their consequences, but because our actions shape our relationship with Hashem and our own spiritual identity.

And then comes Sukkos, teaching us to look back and recognize what we have accomplished.

The Yamim Noraim teach us how to confront failure. Sukkos teaches us how to build upon success.

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Perhaps that is the strategy that allows teshuva to endure. Our question should not be only, “What must I stop doing?” It should also be, “What am I already doing well, and how can I build upon it?”

The goal is not to become a person who never falls. It is to become a person who knows how to rise, because the tzaddik is not defined by never falling; he is defined by falling seven times and rising again.

And perhaps that is the message Hashem gives us by placing Sukkos immediately after Yom Kippur: after we have examined our failures, we must learn to gather our harvest.

May we merit, בעזרת השם, a genuine and transformative teshuva, followed by the true simchas hachag of Sukkos—celebrating the accomplishments of our spiritual harvest and using them as the foundation for greater Torah growth in the year ahead.