

When Letting Go Is So Hard

A Shabbos Shuva Drush

Shabbos Shuva 5787

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What Do We Mean by Forgiveness?

In a few days, we will stand before the Ribbono Shel Olam and ask Him to forgive us.

We will say *Selach lanu*. We will say *Mechal lanu*. We will acknowledge that we have fallen short, and we will ask Hashem to give us another chance.

But there is a statement of Chazal that we need to understand before we make those requests.

Rabbi Chanina says:

כל האומר הקדוש ברוך הוא ותרן הוא — יותרו חייו.

“Whoever says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is a *vatran*—his life shall be forfeited.”

The Gemara derives this from the words:

הצור תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט.

“The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice.” [Bava Kamma 50a](#)

These are severe words. We cannot simply pass over them.

A person says, “Hashem is a *vatran*. He will let it go.” Chazal respond that this is a dangerously mistaken understanding of how Hashem conducts His world.

The Midrash uses an even more startling expression:

מאן דאמר רחמנא ותרן הוא — יתותרן מעוהו.

One who says that the Merciful One simply waives wrongdoing—may his intestines come loose. The Midrash continues that Hashem is patient, but ultimately exacts what is due. [Esther Rabbah 7:25](#)

Why this particular expression? What do a person’s intestines have to do with his understanding of Hashem’s judgment?

And there is a question even before that.

We normally regard being *mevater* as a wonderful quality.

A person who can yield, accommodate someone else, and overlook an insult is someone we admire. Who wants to live with a person who insists on collecting every debt and correcting every slight?

A story is told of a *gadol* who was consulted about a *shidduch*. He heard about the prospective match’s many fine qualities. But after listening, he asked one further question:

“Does she know how to give in?”

It is an essential question. Two people building a home will have different preferences and expectations. There will be moments when each feels justified. Without the ability to yield, an ordinary disagreement can become a struggle over who will prevail.

So why is a quality that we value in people something we must not attribute to Hashem?

“Surely You Can Spare a Metre”

The answer begins with a distinction: **what are we being asked to give up?**

Consider the intestines. They extend for several metres, folded within the body.

Imagine approaching a person and saying:

“You have so much intestine. Surely you can spare a metre!”

The person would look at you in astonishment.

“What do you mean, spare a metre? This is part of what keeps me alive!”

Would we accuse him of being selfish? Would we tell him that he needs to work on becoming more accommodating?

Of course not. Something that sustains life cannot be treated as surplus merely because we do not appreciate the importance of every part.

That gives us a way to understand the Midrash’s unusual language.

We say about Torah and mitzvos:

כי הם חיינו ואורך ימינו.

“They are our life and the length of our days.”

We say those words every evening. But sometimes our attitude toward a mitzvah suggests that we have not fully absorbed them.

“Does it really matter so much?”

“It was only one occasion.”

“It was only a few words.”

“Surely Hashem can overlook that.”

But who told us that it was insignificant?

We would not casually declare part of a life-sustaining organ unnecessary because we did not understand its function. Yet we sometimes assume that a mitzvah must be dispensable because its significance is not apparent to us.

The mashal asks us to recognise the seriousness of our spiritual lives.

A mitzvah matters. An aveirah matters. Words can build a person, and words can wound a person. Our actions shape us and affect the people around us.

That is where teshuvah begins: with the willingness to acknowledge that what we did mattered.

But now our original question becomes sharper.

If it mattered, how can we ask Hashem to forgive it?

Forgiveness does not mean that Hashem says, “It was nothing.” It means that we acknowledge it was something, do teshuvah, and ask Hashem to allow us to begin again.

Mercy Has a Place in Judgment

There is a profound difference between saying, “It did not matter,” and saying, “It mattered, and I am asking for forgiveness.”

On Yom Kippur, we do not dismiss our aveiros. We confess them. We regret them. We undertake to change.

We are asking Hashem to receive our teshuvah and deal with us compassionately.

But a person can still wonder: if כל דרכיו משפט, if everything is governed by judgment, where does rachamim enter?

The *Yam Shel Shlomo* explains that Hashem’s rachamim itself operates within His mishpat. The way a person treats others enters into the way that person is judged. Someone who conducts himself with compassion is himself treated with compassion.

Hashem is not ignoring part of the judgment. He is judging the whole person—and the compassion we show others is itself part of what His justice takes into account.

This gives particular force to a teaching in the Gemara:

כל המעביר על מדותיו מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו.

A person who does not insist on exacting what is due to him from others is himself granted extraordinary forbearance.

The Gemara connects this to the words נושא עון ועובר על פשע, explaining:

למי נושא עון? למי שעובר על פשע.

Whose iniquity does Hashem bear? That of someone who passes over another person’s wrongdoing.

[Rosh Hashanah 17a](#)

We should appreciate what this means.

The offence against us may have been real. The other person may have behaved badly. Being maavir al middosav does not require us to pretend otherwise.

It means that we do not insist on responding with the full measure of what we could demand.

And that willingness has a place in our own judgment.

Our aveiros have not become unimportant. Rather, our compassion toward others is also important. Hashem takes that into account.

Here, then, is the distinction we must hold onto: **Hashem does not dismiss Torah or aveiros as unimportant. We are asked to relinquish our personal claims—our kavod, our preferences, our resentments, and our demand for the last word.**

Before Yom Kippur, therefore, there is a question alongside all our other preparations:

How do I treat someone who has fallen short with me?

Two Great Men, Two Different Responses

The Gemara tells of a time when rain was desperately needed.

Rabbi Eliezer stood before the congregation and recited the twenty-four berachos of the fast-day tefillah. He was not answered.

Rabbi Akiva followed him and pleaded:

אבינו מלכנו, אין לנו מלך אלא אתה. אבינו מלכנו, למענך רחם עלינו.

“Our Father, our King, we have no king but You. Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have compassion on us.”

Rain fell.

The different responses occasioned murmuring among the sages. A bas kol explained that Rabbi Akiva’s being answered did not establish that he was greater: the distinction was that he was maavir al middosav, while Rabbi Eliezer was not. [Taanis 25b](#)

But that explanation raises a question of its own.

If Rabbi Akiva possessed this extraordinary quality and Rabbi Eliezer did not, why did that not itself make Rabbi Akiva greater?

We need to understand the words carefully. The bas kol both rejects a conclusion about their relative greatness and identifies a difference that affected the response to their tefillos.

Two explanations illuminate this account. They are alternative readings, and each reveals a different aspect of the avodah of being mevater.

The Effort Hidden Within an Answer

The first explanation, brought from the *Ein Yaakov*, focuses on the effort required to overcome one’s nature.

According to this approach, Rabbi Eliezer did not need to struggle in the same way. The conduct in question came naturally to him. Rabbi Akiva had laboured to overcome himself.

The distinction lay in the inward avodah.

Two people may give the same gentle answer. To an observer, their conduct looks identical. But what happened inside each person may have been very different.

One person was not especially disturbed. Remaining calm required little effort.

The other person felt the anger rising. He had a response ready. He could already imagine the satisfaction of saying it.

Then he stopped himself and answered differently.

We hear the sentence that was spoken. Hashem knows the sentence that was overcome.

This is something we need to hear on Shabbos Shuva.

A person can become discouraged by how difficult change remains.

“Why am I still working on this? Why do I get irritated so quickly? Why does another person seem naturally patient, while I have to fight for every calm response?”

The fact that it is difficult does not make the effort insignificant.

That struggle may be the very place where our avodah lies.

We are not being told to excuse an unkind response because we have a difficult temperament. We are being taught to recognise the value of overcoming it.

Nobody else may know what a particular moment required. A family member hears an ordinary answer. Hashem sees the restraint, the effort, and the choice.

Rabbi Akiva's example gives dignity to those hidden victories.

When We Believe We Are Right

The second explanation understands the difference between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva in another way.

Rabbi Eliezer's firmness reflected his understanding of how a talmid chacham should conduct himself. Rabbi Akiva understood the appropriate conduct differently.

According to this approach, there was a principled disagreement. Rabbi Eliezer's conduct did not demonstrate inferior character. He believed that Torah required him to act that way.

That explains why the bas kol did not declare Rabbi Akiva greater.

Nevertheless, the heavenly response corresponded to their conduct. Rabbi Akiva's willingness to yield elicited a corresponding response of rachamim.

We are not sitting in judgment on Rabbi Eliezer. Nor are we being told to disregard a Torah obligation in order to secure a favourable outcome.

But the explanation gives us something searching to consider in our own lives.

When someone suggests that we let go of a grievance, our first instinct is often to prove that the grievance is justified.

"You don't understand what happened."

"He really did say that."

"She really should have thanked me."

"I really was entitled to be consulted."

Perhaps we are correct.

But many of these situations concern our personal honour, our preferences, or our expectations. Establishing that we have a claim does not answer every question about how we should respond.

Being maavir al middosav means there is something to relinquish.

If nothing was owed to me, what am I giving up?

The first explanation asks us to overcome the resistance of our temperament.

The second asks us to consider yielding even when we can defend our position.

These are two different obstacles, and most of us recognise both.

Sometimes we think, **"That is just how I am."**

Sometimes we think, **"But I am right."**

Either thought can make it difficult to move.

The Letter the Rebbe Received

A remarkable story is told about the Imrei Emes of Ger.

A man came to visit him, and the Rebbe treated him with extraordinary honour. The Rebbe's children could not understand what accounted for such a reception. The visitor did not appear to be a person of exceptional stature.

Eventually, the circumstances became known.

The man had intended to inform on the Rebbe to the authorities, and he prepared a letter to send them. At the same time, he also wrote a letter to the Rebbe.

But he mistakenly switched the two letters.

The incriminating letter arrived at the Rebbe's door.

When the visitor came, the Imrei Emes knew what he had planned.

His gracious reception did not come from ignorance. He had read the letter.

Nevertheless, he overcame his reaction and accorded the man exceptional honour.

This was an extraordinary response. Most of us are far from that level.

Yet there is a beginning available to us: **we can refuse to allow another person's wrongdoing to determine our own behaviour.**

Someone spoke thoughtlessly. We can choose our words carefully.

Someone failed to give us the recognition we expected. We can decide whether the next encounter must revolve around that omission.

Someone irritated us. We can respond to the present situation without bringing every previous irritation into it.

The story shows how far this avodah can reach. Our own work can begin with the next ordinary encounter.

Doing the Middos We Recite

The Gemara describes Hashem showing Moshe the order of tefillah and saying:

כל זמן שישראל חוטאין יעשו לפני כסדר הזה ואני מוחל להם.

Whenever Israel sins, they should act before Him according to this order, and He will forgive them. [Rosh Hashanah 17b](#)

The explanation brought through the Shelah draws attention to יעשו: we are called to practise these middos.

Reciting the י"ג מדות is itself precious. But their words must also enter our conduct.

When we say רחום וחנון, we are asking for compassion. We can also consider who needs compassion from us.

When we say ארך אפים, we are asking Hashem to be patient with us. We can consider who needs us to be slower to anger.

It is possible to say these words with great feeling and then become impatient with the first person who inconveniences us. **The challenge is to carry something of the tefillah into that encounter.**

And often, the place where this requires the most work is our own home.

We may be accommodating in shul. We smile, make room, and speak pleasantly.

At home, we are tired. We are less guarded. We have expectations about how things ought to be done.

Precisely there, a small act of restraint may represent a great deal of avodah.

The Verdict That Heaven Left to Us

A story told by the Tzemach Tzedek

At the laying of a cornerstone for a new shul, the Tzemach Tzedek asked the assembled Chassidim whether they would rather hear Chassidus or a story. They chose the story.

There was once a wealthy Jew named Reb Yaakov, a Chassid of the holy Ruzhiner Rebbe. He owned an inn that he leased to a desperately poor Jewish family. The tenant was obligated to pay rent, but could not. When Reb Yaakov warned that the family would have to leave, the poor man travelled to the Ruzhiner and poured out his heart.

The Rebbe appealed to Reb Yaakov for mercy. Although the money was legally his, Reb Yaakov cancelled the entire debt and allowed the family to remain, asking only that the rent be paid from then on. Time passed and again no rent was paid. Again the Rebbe intervened; again Reb Yaakov forgave the accumulated debt. But when it happened a third time, Reb Yaakov felt that he could continue no longer. He evicted the tenant and reclaimed his property.

Years later, Reb Yaakov died and stood before the Heavenly Court. The prosecuting angel declared: "This man threw a destitute Jewish family into the street. He must be held accountable." Reb Yaakov protested: "Did I not forgive him once? Did I not forgive him a second time? How many times was I obligated to surrender money that was rightfully mine?" But the Heavenly Court remained severe.

Then Reb Yaakov made an extraordinary argument: "The angels sitting here have never lived in this world. They do not know what it means to earn money, support a family, or watch one's property disappear. I ask to be judged by people who understand life on earth." The souls of the Bach and the Beis Yosef were summoned, but they too ruled against him.

Reb Yaakov objected again: "They left this world generations ago. They have already forgotten what money means. I demand that my case be placed before Jews who are living in this world now."

At that point the Tzemach Tzedek stopped. He looked at the Chassidim and said: "Reb Yaakov's case has now been brought before us. I believe Reb Yaakov was right. What do you say?" Suddenly they understood. Somewhere in the Heavenly Court, a Jewish soul was waiting for their verdict. Together they cried: "He is innocent! He is innocent! He is innocent!" And with their words, the case in Heaven was closed.

The Tzemach Tzedek was teaching something frightening: before Heaven completes its judgment, it may send the case down here disguised as somebody else's story. We listen, form an opinion, and announce what that person deserves - never realizing that Heaven may be waiting to use our words as the verdict in our own case.

This is the Yam Shel Shlomo's principle. Hashem does not abandon mishpat. He permits our rachamim to enter the mishpat. The Chassidim did not deny the facts. They judged the whole person: twice he had gone beyond the law and relinquished what was legally his. They introduced mercy into the judgment, and that became Heaven's judgment.

Before we pronounce sentence upon somebody else, we should remember: perhaps the defendant is not the only person standing trial.

Source: Chassidic tradition related by the Tzemach Tzedek at the laying of a synagogue cornerstone; reproduced in a lesson by Rabbi Shneur Ashkenazi on Chabad.org.

The Moment We Can Choose

Imagine coming home from shul and finding that something is not as we expected.

Perhaps something is not ready. Perhaps someone has forgotten what we asked. Perhaps a remark is made that we do not appreciate.

An answer begins to form.

At that moment, both explanations of Rabbi Akiva's conduct become relevant.

It may be hard to respond gently because of our temperament.

It may be hard because our complaint is justified.

We can recognise both difficulties—and still choose our response.

We began with the strange suggestion that a person should surrender a metre of his intestines. He understands that something which sustains life cannot be dismissed as expendable.

Torah and mitzvos are our life. We approach Yom Kippur acknowledging their importance and the importance of what we have done.

But there are other things we cling to that we may be able to release.

We are not being asked to pretend that another person was right. We are being asked whether we must collect everything that is owed to us.

The last word. The sharp reply. The insistence that somebody acknowledge we were right.

Let us choose one such moment as part of our preparation for Yom Kippur.

One moment in which we give another person more patience than our first reaction would allow.

One moment in which we relinquish a claim instead of collecting it.

One moment in which the middos we ask from Hashem become visible in our own conduct.

Nobody else may know what it took.

The Ribbono Shel Olam will.

Based on Yechi Reuven, Parshas Ha'azinu, pp. זצד–זחא. The two explanations of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva, the intestines mashal, and the Imrei Emes story follow the discussion there.