

***Tshuva* as the Foundation for the Renewed Israeli-Palestinian Discourse - By DONNIEL HARTMAN**

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Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are not primarily about atonement, about being forgiven for our sins and indiscretions. While originally in the Bible this was the primary intent, the revolution of the rabbinic tradition was to shift the focus from attaining atonement from God to the human responsibility to repent and change our behavior. It is not about God's love and acceptance of the sinner, but rather God's expectation that humankind overcome sin and live up to our tradition's expectation.

The refocus of our High Holidays on the human responsibility to change is founded on a number of essential principles which are of great significance, especially this year. The first is the belief that change is possible. Our tradition is not naive about human beings. It knows that in general perfection is impossible and failure is endemic to the human condition. At the same time the deepest meaning of our belief in free choice is that no particular failure is inevitable, and at the same time that no particular failure is incapable of being overturned.

Placing the focus on repentance is founded on a noble and ennobling vision of humankind as agents who are both responsible and at the same time always capable of self-transformation and that the future is not preset and determined. To be commanded to repent entails the belief in its possibility.

A second foundation is that while atonement could be attained for someone else, a role often played by the priest, repentance is an individual responsibility that requires a focus on one's own behavior and giving an honest account first and foremost to oneself. One must assess to what extent one is living up to one's own expectations. In order to do that, one must free oneself of self aggrandizement and self righteousness. It is for that reason

that the process of repentance must be a humbling experience in which one first and foremost frees oneself from the trappings of self-justification.

A Jewish society is a society which both believes in change and takes responsibility to ensure that the individual and community alike are capable of embarking on a process of self improvement. For this reason Jewish law enacted what is known as "*takanat hashavim*" (BT Gittin 55a), which requires individuals and the community to incur personal loss if the avoidance of such loss would deter sinners from changing their ways. To define the other as incapable of change and self transformation locked into an "Original" sin and inextricable behavior pattern violates the principles and incorporates beliefs which are alien to our tradition.

A Jewish society is one where there is a constant openness to confront one's own failings and which is in regular search for paths of self improvement. To assume one's righteousness and concentrate one's efforts on pointing out the failures of others is again to ignore the principle of *tshuva* and its spirit on which our tradition is founded.

As is the case every year, both as individuals and as a community, we have much to think about and much which needs improvement. We must take responsibility for what we have done and created in the past and for what we must do in order to help shape our future.

I believe it will serve us well to bring this spirit and ideology not only to synagogue but to our national political lives. As we begin what may be our last effort at a political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is essential that we internalize our belief in the possibility of change. The Palestinian people and Authority have much to give account for and much which is in need of significant change if we Israelis are to believe peace and security can coexist. However, it is critical that we not look at past behavior as predetermining future actions. It is time that we free ourselves from the

traumas of the Second Intifada and the response to our unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. To believe that Palestinian society can never change is not only a self-fulfilling and destructive belief; it is also antithetical to the concept of *tshuva*. We must believe that nothing is inevitable, that no future is predetermined and that people of good will can indeed both transform themselves and in so doing, transform our future.

In the classic confession of Yom Kippur we chant with great humility the words "*ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*." We have done wrong; we have been unfaithful; we have taken that which is not ours. *Tshuva* is all about taking responsibility for one's own failures. It is not about giving an account of the others' shortcomings. We do not say *ashamta, bagadeta, gazalta*. **You** have done wrong....

We and the Palestinians alike can fill books with our perception of the others' failures. In the spirit of our High Holidays let's stop wasting our time. In our tradition if there is a "blame game" to be played, it must only be self blame. While in a healthy process each must engage in this game alone, it does not alleviate either side from doing that which it must do and in the spirit of *tshuva*, believing that the other can and hopefully will do the same.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, as you go to Washington, my *bracha* to you and through that to our people and to all people of our region, is that you go as a Jew. I pray that you allow the spirit of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur to define the attitude and spirit of the policies you represent. It is not about being right or about winning this or that political concession in order to sustain a coalition. It is about transforming our future. It is about bringing back the belief in the possibility of a new and better future for us all. It is about recognizing that attaining this future begins with giving an account of what we might have done to impede it and what we can do to help make it a reality. It is about recognizing that greatness is not achieved by attaining

atonement but by earning one's destiny through the difficult and noble path of *tshuva*.

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