

Rav Kook Torah

by Rabbi

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'You Know the Mysteries of the Universe'

Before reciting the Yom Kippur vidui (confessional prayer), we offer a special prayer, ATA YODEI'A RAZEI OLAM:

“You know the mysteries of the universe and the hidden secrets of every living soul. You search the innermost chambers of the conscience and the heart. Nothing escapes You; nothing is hidden from Your sight. Therefore, may it be Your Will to forgive all our sins.”

Why do we introduce the Yom Kippur vidui by acknowledging God's infinite knowledge? What does God's knowledge of the hidden mysteries of the universe have to do with our efforts to repent and atone for our deeds?

Three Components of T'shuva

There are three components to the t'shuva process, corresponding to the past, the present, and the future. T'shuva should include:

Regret for improper conduct in the past,

A decision to cease this conduct in the present, and

Resolve not to repeat it in the future.

And yet, as we shall shortly demonstrate, complete performance of all three aspects of t'shuva requires profound knowledge. In fact, t'shuva sh'leima, complete repentance, requires a level of knowledge far beyond our limited capabilities.

Regretting the Past

For example, only if we are fully aware of the seriousness of our actions will we truly feel remorse over our past failings. The Kabbalists taught that our actions can influence the highest spiritual realms. The more we are aware of the damage caused by our wrongdoings, the greater will be our feelings of regret. For this reason the request for forgiveness in the daily Amida prayer only appears after the request for knowledge. Certainly, the one most aware of the significance and impact of our actions is the One Who created the universe and all of the spiritual worlds.

Uprooting the Behavior

The same is true regarding the second component of t'shuva. In order to completely free ourselves

from a particular negative behavior or trait, it is not enough to desist from its outward manifestations. We need to remove all desire for this conduct; we need to dislodge its roots from the inner recesses of the soul. But how well do we know what resides in the depths of our heart? We may think that we have purified ourselves from a particular vice, and yet the disease is still entrenched within, and we will be unable to withstand a future re-awakening of this desire. The only one to truly know the inner chambers of our soul is the One Who created it.

Resolve for the Future

The third component, our resolve to refrain from repeating this behavior in the future, means that we commit ourselves not to repeat our error, no matter what the situation, even under the most trying circumstances. Again, a full acceptance for the future implies knowledge of all future events and their impact upon us – a knowledge that is clearly denied to us. Only God knows the future.

So how can we aspire toward true t'shuva, when the essential components of the t'shuva process require knowledge that is beyond our limited abilities?

Complete T'shuva

God promises us that the mitzva of t'shuva is within our grasp – “it is not too difficult or distant from you... Rather, this matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it” (D'varim 30:11-14). God graciously accepts the little we are able to accomplish as if it were much. We ask that the degree of regret, change, and resolve that we are capable of, even though it is limited by our capabilities, be combined with God's infinite knowledge. For if we were able to fully recognize matters in their true measure, we would feel them with all of their intensity in our efforts to better ourselves.

This then is the meaning of the Yom Kippur prayer:

“You know the mysteries of the universe” – only You know the full impact of our mistakes and how much remorse we should really feel – “and the hidden secrets of every living soul” – for we fail to properly regret our actions.

“You search the innermost chambers of the conscience and the heart” – You see that traces of our failings still lurk deep within us. Only You know to what degree we need to cleanse ourselves of character flaws

that we have not fully succeeded in conquering.

“Nothing escapes You; nothing is hidden from Your sight” – You know all future events, including situations that will tempt us and perhaps cause us to stumble again.

Nonetheless, since we can only perform the various components of t'shuva according to our limited capabilities, we beseech God, “May it be Your Will to forgive all of our sins.” Then we can attain the level of “complete repentance before You” – a t'shuva that is complete when our sincere efforts are complemented by God’s infinite knowledge.

*Silver from the Land of Israel.
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