

Shoftim: "Returning"
with Rav Yechezkel Sarna, zt'l

Rabbi Judah Mischel

Toward the end of the life of the Chevroner Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yechezkel Sarna, zt'l, when he was physically frail and suffering from illness, he nonetheless made an extraordinary effort to join the Yeshiva for Maariv on Motzei Shabbos. As the Rosh Yeshiva mounted the stairs heading to the Beis Medrash, he heard that the Bochorim had already finished davening. To the surprise of those who saw him, Rav Yechezkel continued climbing the stairs, struggling mightily with each step.

Some wondered aloud why he was burdening himself in this way when davening was already over. The Rosh Yeshiva smiled and explained: "You're right in reasoning that Tefilah b'Tzibur, davening with a Minyan, is d'Rabbanan, a Rabbinic Mitzvah, not a Mitzvah explicitly specified in the Torah. And even more so, you could argue that Ma'ariv was originally considered in the category of Reshus, optional observance. However, wishing the Talmidim a Gutta Voch is a fulfillment of V'Ahavtah l'Rey'achah Kamochah, 'Love others as yourself,' and that is a Mitzvah d'Oraita, a Mitzvah from the Torah!" (Sefer Marbitzei Torah u'Mussar)

Rav Yechezkel's message, shared over 50 years ago, is as relevant as ever. Central to his Elul Shmuessen and Sichos Mussar (talks published in Sefer Dalios Yechezkel) is the task of improving our observance of Mitzvos and behaviors Bein Adam l'Chaveiro, in

our relationships with others. Indeed, this is essential to Teshuvah.

A close student of the Rosh Yeshiva and one of the generation's most respected Ba'alei Eitza in his own right, Rav Shlomo Hoffman zt'l, shared a message of encouragement he heard from Rav Yechezkel regarding Teshuva and growth for these days of Elul:

"The Rosh Yeshiva would constantly encourage us to be persistent and patient in our Avodas Hashem. Improving a character trait even slightly can take 80 years of consistent effort. But the main thing is the effort! Young people want everything 'instantly'. But it takes a lifetime to get to know our Yeitzer, to become aware of our internal systems, motivators, fears and drives. The main thing is to be in the category of what Chazal refer to as Shavim, those who are "returning" (Yoma, 85b).

"Yom haKipurim Mechapeir laShavim b'Teshuvah, 'Yom Kippur atones for those who are returning in Teshuvah.' Shavim is in the present tense; it is not Shavu, 'returned', in the past tense. This teaches us that one must always see oneself in a state of 'returning'. And even if it takes a lifetime, as long as we are trying, Chazal assure us that we will reach atonement."

This Shabbos marks the Yahrtzeit of Rav Yechezkel zt'l (d. 1969), a Talmid Muvhak of the Alter of Slabodka, and a contemporary Ba'al Mussar. The approach of Slabodka emphasizes Mentchlichkeit, human dignity and respect for others. A genius in Torah and builder of people, Rav Yechezkel

was the embodiment of this approach and of recognizing and drawing out Gadlus ha'Adam, the great potential of mankind created in the Divine Image.

May we live with Rav Yechezkel's message, and continue to prepare for the New Year by increasing our care and concern for others. May we know that with our efforts in Teshuvah we are counted among the Shavim, and b'Ezer Hashem we will certainly achieve our goals.

Zechuso Yagen Aleinu.