

ASERES YEMEI TESHUVAH

TEN DAYS THAT CHANGE US

What a higher standard can teach us about ourselves

By Rabbi Yehuda Zev Klein

“For these ten days, I am going to do better.”

THE HALACHA OF PAS YISRAEL

There is an interesting halacha in the Shulchan Aruch regarding the Aseres Yemei Teshuva:

The Shulchan Aruch says that even if someone eats pas akum, meaning bread or cake made by a non-Jew, throughout the year, during the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah—the ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur—he should be careful to eat only pas Yisrael.

This halacha is somewhat puzzling.

If pas akum is something we should avoid, why then is this emphasized specifically during these ten days?

And furthermore, if a person eats pas akum throughout the year, and he will return to his regular practice immediately after Yom Kippur, what is accomplished by refraining for only ten days?

What is accomplished by refraining for only ten days?

Perhaps the Shulchan Aruch is teaching us two incredibly important principles about the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah.

FIRST PRINCIPLE: DISCOVER WHAT WE ARE CAPABLE OF

First: We need to discover what we are capable of.

During the Aseres Yemei Teshuva, we raise our standards.

We take on something that may be above our normal level and say, For these ten days, I am going to do better.

Why?

Because we need to prove to ourselves, even for a short period of time, that we are capable of restraint, growth, and change.

We now know that we can do it.

ASERES YEMEI TESHUVAH BECOMES EVIDENCE

Maybe during the year, there will be times when we don't live up to our highest aspirations. We will veer off track. We will fall back into old habits.

But when we reach a higher level—even for a short time—we learn something very important about ourselves:

The Aseres Yemei Teshuvah becomes evidence.

I have already shown myself that I am capable of something more.

I have already experienced what it feels like to live on a higher level.

And when I struggle later in the year, I can say:

“I’ve done this before. I know I can get there again.”

SECOND PRINCIPLE: START SMALL

Second principle: kabbalos don't have to begin with something enormous.

The Aseres Yemei Teshuva also teaches us the power of a small, manageable, sustainable kabbalah.

We don't need to change our entire lives overnight.

We can choose one small thing.

One moment of restraint.

One extra act of kindness.

And that small change becomes a constant reminder:

I'm working on myself. I'm trying to become better.

Because sometimes an act that seems incredibly small to us can have consequences that are life changing.

**One small thing.
One moment of restraint.
One extra act of kindness.**

And that brings to mind a remarkable story about the Ponevezher Rav.

The Ponevezher Rav arrived in Eretz Yisrael in 1944. He had lost his wife and nine children in the war. He was already 64 years old.

His life's work—the Ponevezh Yeshivah, with its hundreds of students—was gone.

But the Ponevezher Rav said, If Hashem allowed me to survive the Nazi Gehinnom, it was not so that I could retire. I survived so that I could build Torah.

THE PONEVEZHER RAV DREAMED BIG

He looked around Eretz Yisrael and saw a spiritual wilderness.

But he had a dream, to establish a huge yeshivah in Bnei Brak, that could accommodate 500 students.

People thought he lost his mind.

They told him: "There are only about 200 yeshivah students in the entire country."

"Be realistic. Build a small yeshivah. Start with 50 boys. You'll be lucky to fill it."

People went to the Chazon Ish and asked him to speak to the Ponevezher Rav.

The Chazon Ish said:

"Realistically, you are correct. The Ponevezher Rav is detached from reality. But the Torah is not a natural phenomenon, and the Ponevezher Rav is also not a natural phenomenon. It's a good combination. Leave him alone."

The Ponevezher Rav said:

"I may be dreaming, but I'm not asleep."

And when Rommel was standing at the gates of Eretz Yisrael, the Ponevezher Rav went to acquire the land on which he envisioned his yeshivah.

He signed the contract.

But there was a small problem.

He didn't have the money.

THE SMALL PROBLEM

As he was leaving his lawyer's office in Tel Aviv, he looked downcast. A man approached and said,

"What is troubling the Rav?"

The Ponevezher Rav said, "I just signed a contract to purchase the land on which I planned to build my yeshivah, but I don't have the money."

"Then how did you sign the contract?" the man asked.

"I only have to pay one hundred pounds now. The rest I can pay later."

"So what's the problem?"

THE TELEGRAM

"I don't even have the hundred pounds. I need to send a telegram to a donor in South Africa who promised me the money—but I don't even have enough money to send the telegram."

The man said:

"Rebbe, please come with me to the post office. I'll pay for the telegram."

TWO DOLLARS

Years later, at this man's levayah, the Ponevezher Rav eulogized him.

He said that with those two dollars that he paid for the telegram, he acquired a share in the entire zechus of Ponevezh, one of the greatest Torah institutions in the world.

Two dollars.

One tiny act helped set an enormous vision into motion.

THE LESSON OF ASERES YEMEI TESHUVAH

That's the lesson of the Aseres Yemei Teshuva.

We sometimes look at our lives and think:

"What difference can one small change possibly make?"

One small kabbalah.

One small act.

Ten days of doing something differently.

What's the point if I'm going to go back to my normal routine afterward?

But perhaps that is precisely what the Shulchan Aruch is teaching us.

**The point isn't only what happens during those ten days.
The point is what those ten days do to us.**

The point isn't only what happens during those ten days.

The point is what those ten days do to us.

They show us that we are capable.

They give us a taste of a higher standard.

They plant a small seed.

And that seed can continue growing long after Yom Kippur is over.