

PREPARING FOR ROSH HASHANAH: PREPARING FOR THE POWER OF 'BEGINNING'

We are approaching Rosh HaShanah, which is a new beginning of a new year. We are given 30 days of Elul to prepare for Rosh HaShanah; we can see from this how important the power of beginnings are, for we are given a full month to prepare just for this beginning.

We do not find so much preparation when it comes to other matters. Preparing to receive the Torah took three days, and we do not find a concept of preparation when it comes to Sukkos, Chanukah, Purim, Pesach, or Pesach. When we are used to devoting our beginning of our mitzvos to Hashem from throughout the rest of the year, we are then even more prepared for Rosh HaShanah, which is the beginning of the entire year; and then we will be able to give this beginning too for Hashem.

THE DEPTH OF "MALCHIYOS" ON ROSH HASHANAH

Rosh HaShanah contains two aspects – it is the Yom HaDin (*day of judgment*), and it is also the day of "malchiyos": declaring Hashem as King. Now we can have a greater understanding of malchiyos on Rosh HaShanah: it is to declare Him as the Beginning of all beginnings.

This aspect of Rosh HaShanah is unique only to the Jewish people, who declare Hashem as King on Rosh HaShanah. The nations of the world have a status of servants, who are forced to serve the King (*as the Vilna Gaon writes*), whereas the Jewish people willingly accept upon themselves Hashem as King. This is the power of "raishis" that is only in the Jewish people: on the very first day of the year, which is the beginning of beginnings, we declare Who the real Beginning of all beginnings is: Hashem. To prepare for this, we need 30 days of Elul. We prepare in Elul to declare Who the very "Raishis" of the world is, and this is essentially the "malchiyos" of Rosh HaShanah.

By devoting our raishis throughout the year to Hashem, we can better relate to the malchiyos of Rosh HaShanah. If one is not used to giving of his raishis to Hashem from the rest of the year when he does the mitzvos, his declaration of malchiyos on Rosh HaShanah essentially begins and ends with Rosh HaShanah.

Thus, the depth of the concept of "malchiyos" is to give our "raishis" to Hashem. When we become used to giving our raishis to Hashem during the rest of the year before we approach our mitzvos, our declaration of malchiyos on Rosh HaShanah will be a revelation of the ultimate Raishis to us.

PRACTICALLY APPLYING THIS CONCEPT

To practically apply the concept of "raishis", if one attempts to give away the beginnings of all of his mitzvos at once to Hashem, this is not realistic; instead, one should try devoting the beginning of some of his mitzvos to Hashem as explained here; by starting off the act with a thought about Hashem.

In this way, we enter our mitzvos with some preparation beforehand, as opposed to just falling into it thoughtlessly; and then the quality of our mitzvos will change over totally, for the better.

IN CONCLUSION

May we merit to have true preparation for Rosh HaShanah, which reveals the Beginning of all beginnings, and to declare Hashem as King – For He is the First, and He is the last; and may it be revealed to the world that Hashem is the Beginning of all, when all of the world will willingly accept upon themselves His malchus.

Q&A

QUESTION: How do we train ourselves to put our heart into the mitzvos?

ANSWER: Many times people enter a matter without reflecting into it, and it is done without preparation and without any thought. The inner way to live is to enter all that we do with reflection and thought beforehand.

The Nefesh HaChaim says that before one begins to learn Torah, he should awaken himself to have fear of Hashem and to do teshuvah. This is not talking about only Elul and the ten days of repentance – it is referring to every day of the year. Before a person is about to learn Torah, he needs to gather his thoughts and think about Hashem. It is because one needs to enter a matter after having reflected on it, where his mind is settled, as opposed to throwing ourselves into it when we are frazzled, or from acting mechanically and by rote.

The more a person trains himself to utilize the beginning of his deeds by reflecting into what he is about to and he puts his mind and heart into it, everything will look different. It changes the entire quality of one's life. It is a slow process where we train ourselves to get used to this entirely different way of thinking, and it transforms our entire day.

QUESTION: How do we concentrate when we recite selichos?

ANSWER: Selichos are days, where it is difficult to concentrate throughout all of the Selichos every day.

Usually people do not know what the words mean, and even when we do know what we are saying, it is hard to concentrate so much and put our hearts into the Selichos. The truth is that the prayers of Selichos are above our normal level; it is way above than what most people can handle. So what are we to do? Usually on the first day of Selichos there is a lot of inspiration, and it is easier to concentrate. But for the rest of the days of Selichos, how can we keep concentrating on the words we are saying?

We will need more than inspiration; we need a certain da'as (*a mature perspective*) in order to approach it. We need to remain with our aspiration to concentrate on all of it, even though we aren't actually on the level of concentrating for the entire time. We can make sure to at least utilize the beginning of the Selichos: by trying to concentrate on at least the very beginning of the Selichos. That much, we can all do. In this way, we give away the “beginning” of all our Selichos to Hashem.

This is not an attempt to inspire ourselves – it is rather stemming from inner clarity that all beginnings need to be devoted towards Hashem.

QUESTION: There is a concept of giving away our “beginnings” to Hashem, when it comes to all four kinds of creations: in inanimate objects, in plants, in animals, and in people. Why must we give away of our “beginnings” for Hashem?

ANSWER: The Jewish people are called “bni, bechori” – “My son, my firstborn”; we have the status of a “firstborn child” of Hashem, so to speak. We are also called “children of Hashem”, and Hashem is called “our Father”. This sets us apart from the gentile nations of the world, but even more so, it gives us the status of firstborn, which means that we are the very “beginning” that stems from Hashem, so to speak.

The words of Rashi in the beginning of the Torah are well-known: “The world was created for the sake of the Torah, which is called the “raishis” (*the beginning*); for the sake of Yisrael, who are called “raishis” (*the beginning*).” The Jewish people are, in essence, a raishis – a beginning. Our bond with Hashem is through the Torah, which is called “raishis”.

Hashem is the ultimate Raishis of all beginnings: “I am first, and I am the last.” The depth of why give away our beginnings to Hashem is because since the purpose of Creation is to bond with Hashem, we are meant to reveal the beginning behind each thing and then give it away to Hashem, and this connects us to Hashem, Who is called the “raishis.” The Torah is called “raishis”, Yisrael is called “raishis”, and Hashem is the “raishis” of everything. When we give of our “raishis” to Hashem, it is because this is how we bond with Hashem through the aspect of “raishis”.

On a deeper note, each raishis that we come across in creation is like a form of prophecy, reminding us that Hashem is the true raishis. By giving away all our beginnings to Hashem, we reveal how only Hashem is the true raishis, for all the beginnings must ultimately go to Him. Besides for the tithes of bikkurim, challah, peter chamor, and bechor, the concept of raishis (*beginnings*) expands into deeper ramifications. In everything that a person does, he is meant to give away its raishis to Hashem. The more a person is giving away the raishis of each thing he is involved with, it can connect him closer to Hashem.

Although we need to reach the level of emulating Hashem in all aspects of life (*"In all your ways, know Him"*), that is the "end" of our avodah; we are not yet at that level when we at the beginning. At the beginning of our avodah, we need to give away the beginning of each thing for Hashem.

Let us give a few examples of this concept, so that this matter can be made clearer.

1 – THE BEGINNING OF THE DAY

Every day when we wake up in the morning, we begin our day. What does our very first moment of waking up look like?

After we arise, we wash our hands, but at the very moment we awake, the halacha is that one should not jump out of bed quickly, because this is dangerous to the spine; one is supposed to wait a little bit and then arise. What does one do during those few seconds where he must wait before arising? He says Modeh Ani. But there is also a point that we can start with even before Modeh Ani: one can make sure to give away his very first thought of the day to Hashem, by thinking of Hashem.

Understandably, there is a difficulty with this. As soon as one wakes up, he is still sleepy, and his mind is not all there yet. But the more a person has purified his being more and he is becoming aware of his inner state, he can try to give away his first thoughts to Hashem. As soon as one wakes up and he feels even minimally aware that he has awoken, he can devote his first thoughts (*or at least the very first thought after he feels totally awake and conscious*) to Hashem.

This is how we can give away the beginning of our day to Hashem. If we make sure to fill our very first through of the day with a thought of emunah peshutah (*simple, unquestioning belief*) towards Hashem, and from this state of emunah peshutah we recite Modeh Ani, we have made our first thought of the day into a thought of emunah peshutah.

This is not referring to an intellectual kind of thought about emunah, but to a sense and palpable feeling of emunah. Of course, this is not the time to work on acquiring emunah; you have other times of the day to work on this. But the very first thought of your day can still be a thought about simple, palpable emunah; each person on his own level.

This is how we give away a beginning to Hashem. When we begin our day like this, there is a rule that "the body is dragged after the head" – the rest of the day will mimic this lofty beginning that the day has started out with. When you start the day off right like this, the rest of the day will resemble this good and holy beginning. (*The same is true for the opposite situation – if a person begins the day with an evil thought, chas v'shalom, the rest of the day will also be negatively affected by this*).

The more a person has dedicated the "raishis" of his day for Hashem, by beginning each day with a thought about emunah peshutah, naturally the rest of the day will follow this beginning, and he will be more easily led to Hashem and to His Torah.

Thus, a simple way to reveal the power of "raishis" in our daily schedule, is that as soon as we become aware upon waking up in the morning and we become aware of our thoughts, we can slowly train ourselves (*and not through pressure*) to steer our thoughts in a direction of emunah peshutah. This begins our day with emunah peshutah, and the rest of the day will follow suit; we have given away the beginning of the day for Hashem.

2 – THE BEGINNING OF OUR DAVENING

We also have another opportunity to reveal the power of raishis in our day and give it away for Hashem.

When it comes to davening, we know that it is very difficult to have concentration for the entire davening. Almost nobody can concentrate for the entire davening; if someone can, this is a gift from Heaven, which is also reached through much exertion to get there. Which area of davening should we mainly work on in improving our concentration?

The two parts of davening which mainly require concentration are Shema (*especially the first part of Shema*) and the first blessing of Shemoneh Esrei. When our heart feels open, we can concentrate on other parts of davening besides for Shema and Shemoneh Esrei, but when we try to concentrate on parts of davening that our heart isn't that open towards, or when we try to concentrate on the rest of davening when our heart generally feels closed, it is a very difficult avodah to concentrate; it can done of course, but it is very hard to do.

There is a much simpler kind of concentration which is closer to home, especially in our current generation where people feel bombarded and it is hard to concentrate on davening: take the parts of davening where your heart already feels open towards,

and try concentrating on those parts. That is one piece of advice to improve concentration. But there is another method to work on concentration: try concentrating on just the beginning of the davening. Many times a person arrives to davening and he is frazzled and anxious, and he is rushing through davening to keep up with the congregation, as well as other factors that deter his concentration during davening. When the beginning of davening is rushed, the rest of the davening will also be rushed. The advice for this is to make sure that start off the beginning of davening correctly, with concentration.

Begin davening with the awareness that you stand before Hashem and that you are talking to Hashem. When you begin davening with this concentration, there is also a good chance that the rest of davening will also be with concentration.

3 – BEGINNING OUR TORAH LEARNING

The same is true for our Torah learning. When one opens his Gemara at the beginning of his learning session, he can also devote this beginning to Hashem, by thinking that his about to learn the Torah of Hashem and that he is becoming connected to Hashem, as the Nefesh HaChaim says to do. Besides for making sure to refrain from chatting with others and to only speak words of Torah, even more so, this beginning should be about putting our heart into our Torah learning.

When one gives away the first 15, 20, or 25 minutes of his Torah learning to Hashem like this, not only does he avoid idle speech while he is learning Torah and he fulfills the mitzvah of speaking in Torah, but he gives his entire mind and heart to the Torah, which will help him in understanding in his learning. Even more so, this practice enables a person to begin his Torah learning with a spark of lishmah; to learn Torah for the sake of Torah, to learn Torah because it is the will of Hashem, to learn Torah in order to be bound with Hashem – as the Nefesh HaChaim says.

We cannot always be on this level for the entire day, but we can at least make the beginning of our Torah learning lishmah. This will be a purer kind of Torah learning, and it will be a whole different kind of learning after that.

Without a doubt, a person who tries this practice each day before he learns will see a different kind of learning, because the rest of the day will follow the way it has begun. If the beginning is done right and it has been devoted to Hashem, the light of the Torah will begin to be shined upon the person during this “lishmah” time, and he will be affected by this for the rest of the day, even when he is not consciously thinking of Hashem.

When a person gets used to beginning his learning each day like this, it will surely transform his learning.

IN SUMMARY: BEGINNING FROM A PURER PLACE IN OURSELVES

All that we have said here are not merely superficial resolutions to take on. It is not about accepting upon yourself that each day when you wake up you will think about Hashem; it is not about accepting upon yourself that each day you will concentrate on the beginning of Shema and Shemoneh Esrei; it is not about accepting upon yourself to begin your learning each day with an intention of learning Torah lishmah. Rather, these are practices which slowly help us go deeper and deeper into our soul, training us to begin from a purer place in ourselves.

We have given three examples of how we can begin from a purer place in ourselves: How we begin the day when we wake up, how we begin our davening, and how we begin our Torah learning (*which is the main avodah we have throughout the day*). By getting used to these three practices, we slowly train ourselves to start to do each thing from a purer, truer place in our soul.

It will slowly spread into the rest of the day as well; we will find that we are reciting Bircas HaMazon from a truer place in ourselves, because we will have acquired an importance for each beginning.

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