

For on this day he shall provide atonement for you; to cleanse you from all your sins. (16:30)

While the following well-known story takes place on *Yom Kippur*, it is not a *Yom Kippur* story – but, rather, a story of *teshuvah*, repentance and redemption. Hashem's mercy is infinite. Regardless of how far one has distanced himself from Hashem; regardless of the gravity of his transgressions, the *shaarei teshuvah*, gates of repentance, are never locked. Indeed, even the most sinful individual can ascend to great heights following sincere repentance. A single moment of sincere *teshuvah* can transform a life of egregious error. *Chazal* (*Avodah Zarah* 17a) relate the story of Elazar ben Dordaya, who lived a life of debauchery and sin; yet, in his final moments, he achieved *teshuvah sheleimah*, complete repentance. His repentance was so pure that a Heavenly voice declared his entrance into *Olam Habba*, the World to Come. Even a fleeting moment of genuine remorse can redefine a person's entire existence. *Teshuvah* is not only about regret, but also about resolve and commitment to change and reconnect with Hashem. We should never forget that the opportunity for spiritual transformation is always within our grasp. The decision to avail ourselves of this opportunity may at first appear daunting, but, once we take the baby steps, our footing becomes stronger and more concrete.

Now for the story. It was *erev Yom Kippur*, and *Horav Leib Sarah's* was still a distance from his destination. The *Chassidic* master was a disciple of the holy *Baal Shem Tov*. He lived a solitary life of wandering in which he devoted himself to redeeming Jewish captives. In this story, he redeemed a Jew who had been taken captive by his *yetzer hora*, evil inclination. Torrents of rain beat down on him, and he had several hours left until *Yom Kippur*. He decided to stop at a small village which he discovered had an exact *minyan* of ten men. The problem, of which he soon became aware, was that only eight lived in the city; two others lived in a nearby forest. These two men would not be joining them, because they had been imprisoned on trumped up charges (which was common fare for the Jews in Russia).

Rav Leib asked if even one other Jew lived in the community – regardless of his religious affiliation. The villagers hesitatingly replied that the local *poritz*, an apostate Jew who had married out of the faith, lived in the community. This man had married for wealth. *Baruch Hashem*, the marriage had not produced children. His wife had died soon after the marriage. The man lived alone in his mansion, wanting nothing to do with the people and faith that he had abandoned.

Rav Leib disregarded the villagers' warnings, and he set about going to this man's mansion. He needed a *minyan* for *Yom Kippur*. He showed up at the man's door donned in his white *kittel* and white *yarmulke*, his face shining like an angel. The man was prepared to call one of his servants to eject the uninvited guest from his home, but something about his luminous countenance told him it would not be a good idea. The holy man had softened the *poritz's* heart.

The *tzaddik* began his plea, "My mother's name was Sarah. As a young woman, the son of the

local gentry set eyes upon her and promised her the world if she would marry him. She immediately married an elderly Jewish pauper who was a *melamed*, teacher. She refused to trade her faith for riches. You, unfortunately, lacked the fortitude to overcome your desire for wealth and prestige. Veritably, you have lived a wealthy and powerful – but wretched and reclusive – life all these years. Now is your chance to turn your back on your past, repent, return home to your people. Tonight is *Yom Kippur*. Hashem will listen to your soul's sincere cries for redemption.

The poritz broke down in tears and acquiesced to go to *shul*. As the prayers began, the poritz wept uncontrollably, his tears a reflection of decades of regret. The villagers joined him in tearful prayer. At the climax of *Neilah*, the Closing Prayer, service, when the “congregation” was about to chant together “*Shema Yisrael*,” the poritz leaned his head forward into the open *Aron Kodesh* and embraced the *Sifrei Torah*. Then, in a mighty voice that shook everyone in the *shul*, cried out, “*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!*” He then cried out, “*Hashem Hu HaElokim*,” seven times. Finally, on the seventh time, his voice shaking, his *neshamah*, soul, now purified through sincere *teshuvah*, departed his body.

That same night they brought his body to burial in the nearby town. Rav Leib himself took part in the *taharah*, purification and preparation of the body. For the rest of his life, Rav Leib observed the poritz's *yahrzeit*, reciting *Kaddish* for his *neshamah* every *Yom Kippur*.

No soul is beyond redemption, and even a single moment of *teshuvah sheleimah* can transform a lifetime.