

TESHUVA

Chaim Seidler-Feller

Teshuva – technically understood to signify repentance, derives from a root meaning to return, suggesting a process that is less sacramental and more psychological. The return on a personal level requires self-assessment, an appraisal of one's character and a commitment to address and correct one's flaws. And on a national level the return implies a need for a collective *cheshbon hanefesh*, a deep soul-searching.

In this spirit I propose that during the *Teshuva* season (and beyond) we ought to reflect on the following difficult questions: how can a people that struggled throughout its history against one oppressive regime after another have been transformed into an oppressor of another people? how can we who have institutionalized the memory of slavery and redemption – *zeker l'yitziat mitzrayim* – suppress the freedom of those we rule? and how can we who claim to be committed to *tikkun olam*, ignore the obligation of *tikkun he-chatzer* – repairing our own courtyard? Even more fundamentally we ought to be asking ourselves, what happened to our vaunted Jewish morality? Does our encounter with and necessary embrace of power mean that our pursuit of justice must inevitably fail? Or is it possible that having tasted the elixir of success and power that, in our mature awareness that we are no longer the world's victim, we can utilize our principles to function as a limitation on the excesses that invariably flow from the exercise of unrestrained power?

Almost forty years ago my mentor and teacher, David Hartman, ob"m, taught me that the most serious religious question confronting the Jewish people today was, how to govern as a dominant majority? Hanging in the balance was and still is whether or not the principles of Judaism are merely theoretical ideas or are living and guiding directives. As Nachum Goldman said long ago,

“For two-thousand years we Jews have lived without power. And without power we formed the noblest visions and highest ideals. Now we have power. In Israel we have a flag, an army, an air force, and an intelligence apparatus, the envy of every nation in the region. And in America we have wealth, status and political influence. Yes, we have power, but we have not yet learned to use that power in the service of our ideals. So it is that the Jewish people has never been more threatened than it is today. For what is threatened is the ethical core of our being, the ethos of the Jewish people.”

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