

Maamarei Mordechai

הסביר לפי ממש פשט

Parshas Nitzavim - Rosh Hashana 5786

Mordechai Schlachter

There is a custom to say at Tashlich:

ישוב ירחמננו יכבש עונתינו ותשליך במצולות ים כל חטאותם:

"He will return His mercy on us, He suppresses our sins, and He shall cast all of our transgressions into the depths of the sea." (Tashlich Prayer - Micha 7:19).

What is the Tashlich custom, how did it develop, and what is the meaning of this prayer?

The first known source for Tashlich is quoted by Maharshal - Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe (Meolin) of Mainz, Germany, 14th century. It is important to know the early holy masters who came from the Yeshivos and who were the Rabanan in Rhineland, Germany in the early Middle Ages. These Ashkenaz poskim were the forefathers of all of European Orthodox Ashkenaz Judaism.

The great sages of Germany started with many lost writings of the early yeshivos. However, Rabbenu Gershom was the first standout we know about. Then came Rashi (who lived on the western Rhine but learned in the Yeshivos on the eastern Rhine), Rabbi Yehuda HaChasid, and many of the Baalei Tosfos like Rabbi Meir of Rottenberg (Maham). Rabbi Moelin followed and he codified the already established centuries old customs that developed in or traveled to Germany. (At the time Germany was splintered into multiple territorial principalities). It is because of Rabbi Moelin that we know about customs such as Tahslich and kaparos. While kaparos was mentioned as early as by Amram Gaon in the 8th century, it became a controversial custom that was not practiced by many Sfardim. Rabbi Moelin advocated for the chicken not to be white, not to be considered a ritual slaughter, and also not to be given to the poor. He opined that giving it to the poor would embarrass them. The family gives money to tzedaka and uses that chicken for their pre-Yom Kippur seuda. In that way, too, it was meant to be humanely raised and the chicken was not to go to waste. The ritual was meant to focus the family that death is a real possibility and it is better for the chicken to go to death and the family commit to teshuva and good deeds to save themselves from death. This also led to the later German minhag cited by Rema of substituting money to the poor instead of a chicken (when chickens were no longer humanely raised in the backyard, or they would go to waste).

According to Maharshal, the custom of Tashlich is to go to a body of water on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashana, prior to Mincha, and recite three verses from Micha. The tefillos that are found in Nussach Ashkenaz and other siddurim, were added later. Tashlich was already a well-established custom in his time. The minhag was to throw away the sins, meaning, to do teshuva.

There are several reasons for the custom. Maharshal cites a Midrash Tanchuma on Parsha Veyeira that on the way to the Akeida, Satan tried to interfere and made himself

appear as a river. Avraham crossed the river, anyway. Since the tradition is that the Akeida happened on Rosh Hashana, or at least is remembered on Rosh Hashana through the shofar and the tefillos, one should recreate the episode by going to a river and doing teshuva. In that way, Tashlich is a lot like the shofar: a simultaneous recalling of our merit and a call to do teshuva. Yaakov also had a life-altering engagement next to a river. Other cited reasons are that fish are siman brocho of peru urevu (as we symbolically eat the head of a fish and fish itself on the night of Rosh Hashana). Others suggest that a king is coronated at a riverside. Rivers also remind us how life passes by so quickly. Also, water is the sustenance of life. All of this as a reminder to do teshuva and daven for a good life at the outset of the Aseres Yimei Teshuva.

There is another pasuk that hints to this custom. "And the entire people gathered, like one man in total unity, into the square that was before the Water Gate." (Nechemiah 8:1). This took place on the first day of the seventh month. (Ibid 8:2). There, Ezra read from the Torah and taught the people. (Ibid 8:3). This took place on Rosh Hashan and it was before the Water Gate. Torah is compared to water. (Yeshayahu 55:1). This gives further credence to the minhag to gather at the waterside on Rosh Hashana and thirst for Hashem's knowledge and forgiveness.

The minhag is named Tashlich after the pasuk in Micha. This pasuk is part of a parsha where Micha asks Hashem to guide His people. (Micha 7:14). It ends with a prayer for forgiveness. "Returns His mercy upon us." Returns means back to the way it was previously. This is not a new mercy. This is returning the same mercy Hashem had shown us. This reflects what Moshe taught, "And Hashem, your Lord, shall return your captives and will have mercy upon you." (Devarim 30:3). Moshe told Bnei Yisroel that Hashem will return them from galus and have mercy on them. The mercy is indicated previously by, "So that Hashem can return His fierce wrath and place mercy upon you, and the great mercy just like he swore to your forefathers." (Ibid 13:18).

"He will quash our sins and He will cast all of our transgressions into the depths of the sea." This "casting" is in contrast to Hagar. When she ran out of drinking water, she cast her son under one of the bushes. (Bereishis 21:15). She showed no compassion to her son and stood a distance away. (Ibid 21:16). Contrast that to Hashem that is always with Bnei Yisroel, even in exile, and will cast our sins into the water. Hashem casts away the sins not His people.

Tashlich recalls this hope that Hashem can cast away all of our sins to be lost in the sea. They will no longer cling to us and they will be gone. The tefillah of Tashlich is to recite the same prayer that Micha recited, reminding the penitent of Hashem's power not only to forgive but also to quash sins and throw them away. Sins can be discarded like refuse because they are garbage. It's a reminder that sinning is a useless endeavor. Only Hashem can cast off our sins and that is who the penitent has to focus the tefillos towards. The water and fish are reminders of life, the passage of time, and the Torah. That is the real focus and the real goal. This makes Tashlich a meaningful custom on the first afternoon of the Aseres Yimei Teshuva.

Have a Kasiva v'Chasima Tova.