# Who’s Afraid Of The Big Bad Wolf?

Contributed by Tzvi Fishman
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For the last several years, come this time of year, I try to invite friends to an uplifting night of "Shovavim" prayers designed to cleanse a person from the stains of sexual transgression. The people who come along always have a great time, but others reject the idea outright, saying, "That's Kabbalah," "That's Hasidut," or "Where is it written in the Shulchan Aruch?"

Others say they will consider it, but never call back. My question is, why are so many people afraid when it comes to facing up to their sexual errors? It is like finding a spring of water in a desert and offering a drink to a friend, who shakes his head and says, "Who says that it's water? There isn't any spring on my map. Maybe it's all an illusion."

On billboards throughout Israel, posters announcing the commencement of "Shovavim" are beginning to appear in an assortment of bright, attractive colors. The word "Shovavim" forms the initial Hebrew letters of the six consecutive Torah portions beginning with this Sabbath's reading of "Shemot." According to the Kabbalistic tradition, this six week period, paralleling the Torah's account of the Exodus from Egypt, is especially conducive to rectifying sexual transgressions, known as transgressions to the Brit (Arizal, Shar HaYichudim, 4:3). Because this year is a leap year, the Shovavim period will include an extra two weeks.

In his book, "Orot HaKodesh," Rabbi Kook writes that the days will come when the world's crass and lust-filled culture will gaze with exalted admiration on the Divine splendor found in Israel's quest for sexual purity, "which is bound up in the Tikun HaYesod, and in all of the fasts and vibrant supplications of the Shovavim, as they are revealed in the moral light of the secrets of Torah" ("Orot HaKodesh," Part 3, Pg. 296).

During the next six weeks, myriads of Jews will gather on Thursdays in synagogues across the country to recite special Kabbalistic prayers, formulated to cleanse a person from the well-known "sin of youth," and the deep, lasting blemishes of sexual transgression. For example, a bright yellow poster pasted up all over Jerusalem announces that the well-known Kabbalist, Rabbi David Batzri, will lead the "Tikun HaYesod" prayers this Thursday afternoon at the HaShalom Yeshiva for Kabbalistic Study. "Tikun HaYesod" means rectifying the spiritual channel (the sefirah of Yesod) that brings Divine blessings to the individual and to the nation. As emphasized in the Zohar, and throughout the entire Kabbalistic tradition, this channel is most severely damaged by sexual transgressions, such as masturbation, sex out of wedlock, or sex with non-Jews.

Rabbi Batzri's ubiquitous street poster states:

"As is known, the verse, ‘There is no righteous person who does good and does not sin' (Kohelet, 7:20) is referring to the area of sexual transgressions, which give birth to destructive spiritual forces which pursue a person to his great harm, both in this world and the next. Nearly all of the tribulations, sufferings, wars, illnesses, plagues, and poverty that come upon a person - all derive from transgression to the covenant of sexual purity (Pagam HaBrit)."

Because the readership over the Internet encompasses all ages, religions, and levels of Torah knowledge, we cannot here explain the secrets involved in this dramatic proclamation. In the simplest of metaphors, someone who has not cleansed himself of the spiritual pollution caused by sexual misconduct is like the character in the comic strip "Peanuts" who walks around with a cloud of dirt surrounding him wherever he goes.

Because the stains left by sexual sins are so penetrating, the usual ways of repentance don't do the whole job. As the Zohar emphasizes, these transgressions can only be rectified by a "great and constant penitence"(Zohar, Shemot, 3b). Without this super t'shuva (penitence), an invisible cloud of spiritual impurity will follow the transgressor everywhere, interfering in his life, whether in matters of health, family, or livelihood. For this reason, the masters of the Kabbalah have formulated the special prayers and rectifications (tikunim) of "Shovavim" to make the task of laundering easier.

The saintly Tzanz-Klausberg Rebbe, leader of the Tzanz Hasidic community, and founder of the Lanyado Medical Center in Netanya, stressed that even married men and Torah scholars must make a concerted effort to repent during the "Shovavim" period ("Halichot Chaim," Holidays and Seasons, Chapter on "Shovavim"). To inspire his community, he would give passionate sermons as the weeks of "Shovavim" approached, exclaiming that it was even more important to put one's whole heart to repenting at this time, then during the High Holy Days! He exhorted his followers to do t'shuva, not out of depression over their errant ways, but rather to let their broken hearts give way to the joy of deliverance. If he sensed that his congregation wasn't feeling genuine remorse, he would cancel the prayers, blaming himself for not being able to inspire them with a true fear of sin.

The "Tikun HaYesod" to be led by Rabbi Batzri, and the day fast which accompanies it, is promised to be an overall redemption, taking the place of the 84 fasts that the Arizal states are needed to repent for each sexual transgression

(See the Tanya, Igeret HaT'shuva, Ch. 3, and Mishnat Chassidim, Tractate T'shuva). Rules for the "Shovavim" fasts are recorded by the Torah giant, Rabbi Yaakov Emden, in his scholarly prayer book, the "Beit Yaakov." There are one day fasts, part-day fasts, week-long fasts from one Sabbath to the next, and a forty day fast for the more robust in nature. Since fasting lowers the production of blood in the body, it is considered like bringing a sacrifice of atonement. For people whose health would be injured through fasting, the "Beit Yaakov" states that charity may be given instead, along with heartfelt repentance and the recital of a Kabbalistic confession ("Siddur Beit Yaakov" Pgs. 370-371).

In addition, during this period, a person should diligently study the Torah. He should be very careful to guard against ordinary, unholy conversation. He should also be very careful to guard against being critical of others, and should avoid anger, even on behalf of the Torah; and he should keep far away from cynicism, frivolity, and from arrogance. He should be very humble, and he should take special care in reciting the blessings over foods with added concentration. And every day a person should learn at least one complete section of Psalms and study chapters of Mishna from the tractate Taharot.

A warning against excessive fasting is stressed by the founder of the Chabad movement, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the "Baal HaTanya," after his classic treatise, the "Tanya." He writes: "Whoever would be affected adversely by many fasts, and might suffer illness or pain, G-d forbid, as in contemporary generations, is forbidden to engage in many fasts.... It goes without saying that a student of Torah who fasts too much is doing a sin, and is doubly punished, for the weakness resulting from his fasts prevents him from studying Torah properly." The generous giving of charity, the Baal HaTanya writes, is the preferable method of atonement (Igeret HaKodesh, Ch.3).

It is known that in his passionate yearning to vanquish and subdue his evil inclinations, the Tzanz-Klausberg Rebbe would engage in bouts of self-mortification. He would fast throughout the week, immerse in freezing ponds, roll himself in the snow, sleep on the ground, go into self-imposed exile without any money in his pocket, and even rub all of his body with a fiery weed that brought on inflammation and boils. But the greatest tikun, he taught, and the most effective way to conquer the evil inclination, was to study Torah day and night, especially during the weeks of "Shovavim" (source cited, Pg. 51).

In addition to advocating increased Torah learning during this period, he would prescribe fasting from speaking, known as a "taanit debor," asserting that anyone who committed transgressions with his speech was certain to also commit sexual transgressions, something explained in the esoteric secrets of Torah (Chida, "Ahavat HaKodesh," Tzipora Shamir, 7:101).

While "Shovavim" and "Tikun HaYesod" posters are ubiquitous today on Israel's streets, just some thirty years ago, the situation was very different. The saintly Tzaddik, Rabbi Eliahu Leon Levi of Bnei Brak, was the first modern Kabbalist to bring "Tikun HaYesod" to the masses. "I would go out to the street with a bucket of glue and posters announcing the upcoming tikun," he relates. "An hour later, the posters would all be torn down. Today, thank G-d, you see 'Tikun HaYesod' posters in every city, and 'Shovavim' prayers are being led by all the big rabbis. With so much immodesty wherever you turn, people are finally realizing that we need the special protection of the 'Tikun HaYesod' prayers to purify us from our mistakes."

The colorful "Tikun HaYesod" posters filling Israel's streets suggest that the fulfillment of Rabbi Kook's vision is not far away. There are different variations of the "Shovavim" gatherings, depending on the Kabbalistic tradition which the presiding Rabbi follows. While he also has taken upon himself long bouts of fasting in the past, Rabbi Leon Levi does not advise it for others. Instead, he recommends saying daily penitential prayers, like his own "Tikun HaYesod Yeshuat Eliahu," and adding a truer fear of Heaven to one's service of G-d, for instance, by saying the blessings over food with extra concentration, and by being more modest in one's marital relations.

While many "Shovavim" ceremonies are conducted on Thursday afternoon, Rabbi Leon Levy holds nightlong sessions in different cities around the country. The standing-room-only gatherings begin with the Rabbi leading everyone in a soul-searching recital of "Tikun Hatzot," [the Midnight Rectification] mourning the destruction of the Temple and our long and bitter exile. The men can't see the ladies in the women's section, but my wife tells me that it is always packed. The spiritual roller coaster ends just before dawn with the trumpeting of shofars and the incomparably joyous recital of the "Tikun HaYesod" of the holy and revered Sephardi Kabbalist, the"Ben Eish Chai." In the course of the night, there are fascinating words of Torah, while trays and trays of exotic food seem to float through the air, passed hand-to-hand throughout the jammed-packed synagogue.

In the middle of the night, while the women recite a special women's "tikun" composed by Rabbi Levi, the men rush to the nearest mikvah to immerse before the pre-dawn finale. When everyone returns, invigorated, chilled, and out of breath, the ark filled with Torah scrolls is opened and shofars blare.  In his youth, Rabbi Leon was the lead Sephardi cantor of the Great Tel Aviv Synagogue, and still today, his incredible, heaven-piercing voice rings out over the ecstatic cries [To hear, click thru to pictures of Tikun Yesod and select slide 4 entitled "Rav Eliahu Leon Levi"] and songs of supplication to open the gates of forgiveness for everyone present. As the thunderous shouting of the tikun crescendos, the crowd is seized with an indescribable joy. The experience is absolutely mind-blowing, a profound spiritual cleansing that one doesn't readily forget.

This year's first tikun is in the city of  Holon in the Hallalei Tzahal Synagogue, 7 Savion Street, on January 7, commencing at 11:00 pm. The final tikun of the Shovavim period will take place at the Kotel, rain or snow, on Thurs eve, Feb. 11. Best to get there early (10:30pm) to reserve a seat. Thousands are expected to attend.