Torah Learning and Tikunim

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Question:

I think your emphasis on the importance of “Shovavim” (6 straight weeks beginning with the Torah reading of Shmot - mid-January) with its fasts and tikunim [rectifications] is off the mark. Regarding a person who has an accidental emission of semen (keri) on the night of Yom Kippur, the Mishna Berurah states that the rectification is to increase Torah study and good deeds, that if the person was accustomed to learning a page of Gemara a day, he should now learn two. Why do you make such a big deal over Kabbalistic prayers that the Mishna Berurah doesn’t even mention?

Answer:

The elder Kabbalist, Rabbi Eliahu Leon Levi, often answers this question with the following parable. A Torah scholar, who had learned all of the Talmud over and over ten times, passed away and went up to Heaven. Arriving at the gateway to Gan Eden, he expected an orchestra of angels to meet him, singing out the verse of Psalms “Lift up your heads, O you gates, and be lifted up you everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in (Tehillim, 24:7). Instead, the gatekeeper met him with a somber expression.

“What’s the matter?” the Torah scholar asked. “Where is the band and the music to greet me. I learned all of the Talmud ten times.”

The gatekeeper nods his head.

“We know,” he responds. “But let me show you something. You really deserve a pair of binoculars that can see for 100 miles. But I’ll let you off with a pair that only has a range of 50 miles. Gaze behind you,” he says.

The Torah scholar takes the binoculars, raises them to his eyes and looks. Behind him is an endless line of millions of tortured souls, yelling at him in anger.

“Who are they?” the Torah scholar asks.

“They are your spiritual children,” the gatekeeper answers, “that you gave birth to when you spilled semen in vain. Since you never bothered to rectify the damage you caused, they have followed you here to accuse you and block your way inside.”

The point is that Torah learning alone is not enough to rectify the damage caused by spilling semen in vain. Some think otherwise and rely on the saying of our sages, "Torah study atones for sin."

But, the holy treatise Reshit Chochmah by the Torah sage Rabbi Eliahu Vidash, of blessed memory, explains this concept and explains the limitations of the atonement that Torah study affords:

“A person who has sinned in the matter of the Brit, how much he must suffer with self-flagellations and fasting all of his life, as exemplified by the example of King David. And if you say that Torah study alone atones for sin, behold, King David busied himself with Torah study far more than we do today, as our Sages have taught, and he possessed Divine Inspiration, so why did he expose himself to self-flagellations for no reason when he could have rested on the theory that his study of Torah day and night would atone for his sin?

"Rather, the answer is surely this – what is meant by the saying, 'study of Torah is an atonement' is that, as the saintly Rabbi Yonah has explained in his book, ‘Shaarei T’shuva,’ that a sinner’s punishment is postponed all the time he learns Torah, until he returns in repentance, as is true with the doing of good deeds as well – but certainly he must also purify himself from his transgression with self-flagellations and fasting so that his Torah learning with be acceptable, as I have explained in length in my chapter on T’shuva. And this is especially true regarding someone who has transgressed in the matter of the Brit, which causes damage equal in weight to the violation of all of the Torah. For to the extent that our Sages have emphasized the importance of guarding the Brit, we can correlate the severity of the punishment that results from its blemishing, which, in turn, will help us to appreciate its exalted level” (“Reshit Chochmah,” Ch. 17).

So we see from here that that Torah study serves to hold off punishment for sins to the Brit (until one repents through intense prayer, chanting of psalms in tears, and tikunim), but not uproot them.

For this reason, before a person learns Torah, or prays, or undertakes to perform a commandment, he should follow the advice of the Tzaddikim and first have in his mind to repent over the sins of his youth (transgressions to the Brit,) and then his learning, his prayers, and his mitzvoth will be pleasing and acceptable to Hashem (See also Taharat HaKodesh, Introduction to Tikun HaYesod prayer, By Rabbi Aharon Rota).