

## Selichot 5781 - Who is the Real Me?

### 1. Dr. Joshua Knobe, "In Search of the True Self," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2011

So it seems that we are faced with a difficult philosophical question. How is one to know which aspect of a person counts as that person's true self?... The true self, they suggest, lies precisely in our suppressed urges and unacknowledged emotions, while our ability to reflect is just a hindrance that gets in the way of this true self's expression. To find a moment when a person's true self comes out, they think, one needs to look at the times when people are so drunk or overcome by passion that they are unable to suppress what is deep within them.

### 2. Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 15a

יצתה בת קול ואמרה "שובו בנים שובבים - חוץ מאכר." אמר: "הואיל ואיטריד ההוא גברא מההוא עלמא, ליפוק ליתהני בהאי עלמא." נפק אחר לתרבות רעה. נפק, אשפח זונה, מבעה. אמרה ליה: "ולאו אלישע בן אבויה את?" עקר פוגלא ממישרא בשבת ויהב לה. אמרה "אכר הוא." A Heavenly Voice went forth saying: "Return, rebellious children" (Jeremiah 3:22) - except for Acher ("the other"). [Upon hearing this, Elisha ben Avuya] said: Since that man [meaning himself] has been banished from that world, let him go out and enjoy this world. *Acher* strayed to the ways of bad society. He went and found a prostitute and solicited her. She said to him: And are you not Elisha ben Avuya? He uprooted a radish from a patch [of radishes] on Shabbat and gave it to her. [The prostitute] said: this must be *Acher* [someone else].

### 3. Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 15a

מעשה באכר שהיה רוכב על הסוס בשבת והיה רבי מאיר מהלך אחריו ללמוד תורה מפיו. אמר לו: "מאיר, תזור לאחריה, שפכר שיערתי בעקבי סוסי עד כאן תחום שבת." אמר לו: "אף אתה תזור בה." אמר לו: "ולא פכר אמרתי לה פכר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד שובו בנים שובבים - חוץ מאכר?"

There was once an incident involving *Acher*, who was riding on a horse on Shabbat, and Rabbi Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah from him. [After a while,] *Acher* said to him: Meir, turn back, for I have already estimated [and measured] according to the steps of my horse that the Shabbat boundary ends here [and you may therefore venture no further. Rabbi Meir] said to him: You, too, return [to the correct path]. He said to him: But have I not already told you that I have already heard behind the Partition: "Return, rebellious children," - except for *Acher*?

### 4. Talmud Yerushalmi, Chagigah 2:1

"שפעם אחת הייתי עובר לפני בית קודש הקדשים רכוב על סוסי ביום הכיפורים שחל להיות בשבת, ושמעתי בת קול יצאה מבית קודש הקדשים ואומרת 'שובו בנים - חוץ מאלישע בן אבויה. ידע כחי ומרד בי'."

[Elisha ben Avuya said] "I once was riding on my horse past the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur that fell out on Shabbat, and I heard a Heavenly Voice coming from the Holy of Holies declare, 'return, rebellious children - except for Elisha ben Avuya. He knew My power, but rebelled against Me'"

### 5. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *The Rav on Shabbos Yom Kippur and Acher*

I believe that we can find the true intent of the heavenly voice by examining the differing versions of this story as found in the Bavli and the Yerushalmi. And so we can ask: how in fact did the heavenly voice address this sinner? Did it call out to him using his real name, Elisha ben Avuya, or did it use his pseudonym *Acher*? The answer is very simple. The endearing words "return O backsliding children" were surely addressed to Elisha ben Avuya himself; it was he whom the heavenly voice pleaded with, and sought to draw near, like a mother who always finds something positive in her child. However the concluding phrase, "except for *Acher*," was addressed to *Acher*. In this, the Talmud Bavli records the correct version of the words of the heavenly voice, by which the Shechinah sought to bring Elisha closer to herself while repulsing *Acher*. Why? Because the real Tanna, who was a Sage of Israel whom Rebbe (R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi) even quotes in Pirkei Avos (Avos 4:24), never sinned, never betrayed Knesset Yisrael, never identified with the Romans, and never sought to tear Jewish children away from Torah and the fear of Heaven. It was another person, *Acher*, who was the traitor...

Suddenly, the hidden soul, captive daughter of the King, demanded that she be heard, saying, "Elisha, you are not *Acher*! The dark soul who has enthralled you is not your friend, but your worst enemy! Elisha, identify rather with me, with your past, with your teachers and your colleagues! Come to me, push *Acher* away, he is not you, he is the very devil! Do you not see that you are drawn to the Holy of Holies like a magnet? It is Yom Kippur today, and G-d is waiting for all of us to come back to him. Elisha, do you not hear the heavenly voice that calls out to you to repent? As you pass by the Holy of Holies, do you not remember how the rebbe would speak of the avodah (Temple service) of the Kohen Gadol on this day? Elisha, assert yourself, listen to the heavenly voice, return O backsliding children!"

Do you know why Elisha rebelled against the Creator, in spite of his greatness in Torah? Because he did not appreciate his own strength, and thus betrayed G-d. It is as if to say, Elisha knew G-d's power, but he did not know his own power to overcome his outer *Acher*, and thus he turned away from G-d. His own weak self-awareness and his failure to "know himself" were the real cause of his tragic sin.

### **6. Rabbi Yehudah Loew (Maharal), *Netivot Olam, Netiv haTeshuvah*, ch. 1**

וכאשר ישובו החוטאים אל הש"י מקבלם בתשובה. ואף אם היו חוטאים במזיד היה מתחייב מן התורה שיש להם תשובה, כי התורה שהיא שכלית לגמרי והאדם אינו שכלי רק הוא בעל גוף, ואילו היה האדם בעל שכל לגמרי וחטא אין התשובה מועילה לו... אבל מפני שהאדם אינו שכלי גמור תשובה וחרטה שייך בו, ולכך התורה השכלית קורא לחוטאים שישוּבו...

When sinners return to Hashem, He accepts them in *teshuvah*. Even if they sinned intentionally, He pledged to them from the Torah the opportunity to do *teshuvah*. This is because the Torah is entirely related to the intellect, and a person doesn't function solely with his intellect, but rather, is the owner of a [physical] body. If a person behaved entirely based on intellect, and sinned, *teshuvah* would be ineffective... However, since a person does not function solely with his intellect, *teshuvah* and regret are possible for him, and therefore, the Torah - which is entirely from the intellect - calls to sinners to do *teshuvah*.

### **7. Talmud Bavli, Sotah 3a**

ריש לקיש אמר: אין אדם עובר עבירה אלא אם כן נכנס בו רוח שטות.

Reish Lakish says: A person commits a transgression only if a spirit of folly [שטות] enters him.

### **8. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Orot haTeshuvah* 15:10**

והתשובה הראשית... היא שישוּב האדם אל עצמו, אל שרש נשמתו.

The primary role of *teshuvah*... is for the person to return to himself, to the root of his soul.

### **9. Dr. Joshua Knobe, "In Search of the True Self," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2011**

...what is most distinctive and essential to a human being is the capacity for rational reflection. A person might find herself having various urges, whims or fleeting emotions, but these are not who she most fundamentally is. If you want to know who she truly is, you would have to look to the moments when she stops to reflect and think about her deepest values. Take the person fighting an addiction to heroin. She might have a continual craving for another fix, but if she just gives in to this craving, it would be absurd to say that she is thereby "being true to herself" or "expressing the person she really is." On the contrary, she is betraying herself and giving up what she values most.