

# The Pendulum of Teshuvah



Thoughts on לדוד ה' אורי וישעי

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When Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson first published "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" in 1886, his work clearly touched a nerve and became an international best-seller. Stevenson's novella resonates even today, and its title character, the poster child for inner duality appears repeatedly in different forms in modern culture. From Billy Joel's "The Stranger" to "The Incredible Hulk", the struggle of inner duality tugs at each of us. We identify with Dr. Jekyll because he is us. Even without taking a magic potion, we sometimes feel like different people at different times.

This normal and natural phenomenon takes on special significance during periods of self-analysis and introspection. At the opening of the month of Elul, when we consider the monumental task of Teshuvah, we find ourselves forced to confront the different aspects of our nature. We quickly realize that all too often, we feel pulled in two very different directions.

Life requires a strong degree of confidence. I arise each morning with confidence in my ability to handle the trials and tribulations of the day. The author of the שולחן ערוך said it best when he opened the code of Jewish law by teaching us, יתגבר כארי לעשות רצון אבינו – שבשמים – "a person should be strong like a lion to perform the will of God." Lions are not known for their meekness. As kings of the jungle, they exude confidence and capability. So too, writes Rav Yosef Caro, must we approach our days both spiritually and practically. I jump out of bed ready to attack a new day brimming with opportunity. At work I tackle my vigor. I approach my family, my spouse and my children with the sense that I can capably and ably deal with the inevitable challenges with serenity. I am a person of confidence.

And yet, while my confidence propels me forward, if left unchecked it can also lead me astray. An overdeveloped sense of confidence might compel me to overreach, with catastrophic consequences. It can instill a sense of self-importance far beyond my actual abilities.

So then, counteracting my confidence, I also live with doubt. *What if I don't succeed? What if my efforts and energies fail? What if I cannot accomplish the tasks that I undertake?* Underlying my cool exterior of confidence lays a gnawing fear of failure. In a way, this doubt is good. I can grow from my doubt if it pushes me beyond my normal boundaries. My doubt and fear force me to question myself and ensure that I'm working my hardest. But that doubt can be dangerous. If I allow it to grow, it can overtake me and paralyze me with fear.

Confidence and Doubt. These two very human attitudes pervade the way we live our lives, engage in our work, and approach new challenges. These two emotional foils play a powerful role both in practical, daily life, as well as our spiritual lives. What is my relationship with God? How will I approach the ימים נוראים and prepare myself for judgment? Do I enter the Days of Awe directed first and foremost by my sense of confidence, building on my past success but hopeful for a better year? Or, does Teshuvah require that I allow my doubt to dominate, as I question each and every detail of my behavior?

Several times during the year, Rav Professor Neria Guttel delivers a shiur to the staff of the Orot Israel College of Education. (It's great to have a job where your boss delivers a shiur every so often!) During Tishrei of last year, Rav Guttel spoke about the custom to recite לדוד ה' אורי וישעי beginning on Rosh Chodesh Elul and continuing through Shemini Atzeret. He offered a powerful analysis of this enigmatic chapter of Tehillim.

When we take a careful look at this chapter of Tehillim (27) that we recite each morning and night, at first glance it seems to be written by two very different people – not one author, but two. We can divide the chapter itself into two distinct sections. The first section, verses 1-6, articulates the character of confidence:

A song to David God is my light and my savior From who should I fear? God is the strength of my life From who should I tremble? When my enemies approach to consume my flesh, those who attack and are enemies to me They will stumble and fall. If you encamp a camp against me I will not fear. If you arise against me in war, in this I place my faith. I ask one thing from God – it is what I request That I sit in the house of God all the days of my life, to gaze at the glory of God and to frequent his sanctuary For he will cover me in his dwelling on the terrible day, He will hide me in the depths of his tent I will be exalted in the Rock And now, I will lift my head above my enemies who surround me And I present offering of Teruah in His tent I will sing and play melodies to God	לדוד ה' אורי וישעי ממי אירא ה' מעוז חיי ממי אפחד בקרוב עלי מרעים לאכול את בשרי צרי ואויבי לי המה כשלו ונפלו אם תחנה עלי מחנה לא יירא לי אם תקום עלי מלחמה בבאת אני בושח אחת שאלתי מאת ה' אותה אבקש שבתי בבית ה' כל ימי חיי לחזות נעם ה' ולבקר בהיכלו כי יצפני בסכה ביום רעה יסתרי בסתר אהלו בצור ירומני ועתה ירום ראשי על אויבי סביבותי ואזבחה באהלו זבחי תרועה אשירה ואזמרה לה'
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The narrator of these verses, written in third person, does not sound like a doubtful man lacking self-worth. He exudes capability and confidence. He has nothing to fear, and tells us so, "Who should I fear? I've got God on my side." With God behind him, enemies don't frighten him. They should be afraid. They're the ones who will fail and stumble. His faith in God guides him, leads him and protects him, even in times of difficulty and distress. During difficult days God will shield him; even uplift him – to the point where he can literally stand taller than those who surround him, his head held high assured of success. Even his prayer exudes confidence, resonating with the blasts of Teruah; songs of praise, sung with power, vigor and praise.

In short, the author of לדוד ה' אורי – or at least the first six verses – can only be the character of confidence, armed with his faith in God. Backed by His protective shield, our author projects an aura of capability and strength, ready to overcome any obstacle, whether physical or spiritual in his quest to serve God.

And then we read on. Suddenly, our character of courage is gone. Now our chapter seems to be written by someone else entirely, a writer whose faith is infiltrated by fear and doubt.

Hear God my voice will call And have mercy on me and answer me To you my heart said, my face sought you	שמע ה' קולי אקרא וחנני וענני לך אמר לבי בקשו פני
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It is Your face that I will seek  
 Do not hide Your face from me.  
 Do not put away in anger your servant  
 You were my help  
 Do not uproot me and do not  
 abandon me, my God of salvation  
 For my father and mother have  
 abandoned me  
 And God will gather me in.  
 Teach me your way, and guide me  
 in the path of righteousness  
 Because of they that lie in wait for  
 me  
 Do not place me in the soul of my  
 pain  
 For false witnesses and [ ] of  
 destruction have arisen against me  
 If I only believed to see the good of  
 God in the land of the living.

את פניך ה' אבקש  
 אל תסתיר פניך ממני  
 אל תט באף עבדך  
 עזרתי היית  
 אל תטשני ואל תעזבני אלקי ישעי  
 כי אבי ואמי עזבוני  
 וה' יאספי  
 הורני ה' דרכיך ונחני באורך מישור  
 למען שוררי  
 אל תתניני בנפש צרי  
 כי קמו בי עדי שקר ויפח חמס  
 לולא האמנתי לראות בטוב ה'  
 בארץ חיים

As our author directs his pleas to God, we find this section written in the second person, not as an intimate of God, but as a stranger. Feeling distant and estranged, he beseeches God for protection and assistance he cannot be sure will come. While he asks God for mercy, even more fearful and threatening is his plea for any response at all (“Answer me!”). He seems unable to find God at all, unsure of God’s protection or even His presence. He fears הסתר פנים – the hidden face of God; a total lack of divine intervention in his life. He is surrounded by trouble and strife, by attacks on all sides, and abandonment from his closest relatives. He calls out to God, yet he cannot even be sure that God hears him, or is willing to answer.

Who is this if not the man of doubt – doubtful not only in himself and his relationship with God, but in the presence of God in his life at all! What happened to the man of confidence, sure of God’s grace? Where did the transformation occur from the fountain of faith to the well of doubt? What forced such a sudden and dramatic shift?

In truth, nothing happened. David is us, and we are him, and his powerful words simply and beautifully articulate the pendulum of emotions that swing us wildly not only in life, but as we approach God. At times we feel confident and capable, close and intimate with God. And then the next moment He seems so distant and distinct, His face hidden from our trivial troubles and tribulations.

Who hasn’t felt these terrific spiritual gyrations, near and far from God – sometimes at different times, and sometimes even all at once? At times in life we can feel God’s guiding hand resting firmly on our shoulders, confident of the clear path laid before us; happy in our lives and full of energy and promise. At other times we feel a sense of absence and despair, as we search for the hand that was just recently there, only to feel...nothing. Where has that closeness gone?

David’s emotional swings resonate powerfully with me as I recite לדוד אורי each morning and night this year in particular, as I continue to experience these tremendous emotional waves as I enter my second year of aliyah. At times, I brim with confidence. I feel a sense of internal energy that I have the ability to overcome all obstacles. Ideas rush into my mind; projects to tackle, programs to create, initiatives to build. Nothing seems too daunting, every hurdle a minor inconvenience that I can handle.

The feelings of doubt and darkness creep into my consciousness. *What was I thinking? How did I not see the problems? Did I really think that such silly idea would ever meet with success?* I abandon the ideas – at least for a time. I wonder about my path and how all the alternatives seem too difficult, all the challenges so daunting. Until, for whatever reason, the pendulum swings yet again, and I can begin to allow the positive feelings to reenergize my thoughts and feelings and faith once again.

This is the pendulum of life; of our lives as Jews, as employers or employees, as parents and children, as students and teachers. Some

days I can do no wrong, while other days nothing seems right. As we bounce through these waves of life, so too swings our personal pendulum in the process of Teshuvah.

Repentance requires both confidence and doubt, certainty and fear. How can we begin to evaluate ourselves and improve if we don’t allow the possibility for self-doubt? Unless I feel the distance of God, in what way can I possibly bring Him closer? Unless I allow that I made mistakes, that I sinned and erred – how can I possibly change? In what way can I improve?

On the other hand, of what value is Teshuvah if I don’t have the confidence that I truly can change? What’s the point of calling out to God unless I believe that He truly does listen to me, cares about my problems and struggles, and that He really will give me the strength to persevere and overcome?

This is precisely David’s point. Standing before God requires a simultaneous sense of smallness and insignificance, and greatness and self-confidence. Achievement in life demands the humility to know my limitations, but also the hubris to overcome them. I must fear failure enough to proceed with caution, but not so much that I never proceed at all. Teshuvah demand balance; that we find the precise point where fear and confidence meet and work together in harmony.

This explains the unusual, seemingly repetitive ending of the chapter.

קוה אל ה' חזק ויאמץ לבך וקוה אל ה'  
 Hope for Hashem. Be strong and let your heart take courage and hope for Hashem.

At first glance, the chapter ends by saying the same thing twice: *Hope for Hashem. Pray for God’s mercy and grace and hope that He offers deliverance.* But it’s much more than simple repetition. What is hope if not an emotion that swings wildly between our confidence and our doubt? Sometimes we hope and yearn despite all odds. We hope the faint hope of the doubtful, wondering whether our yearning will somehow achieve reality.

And then, at other times, our hopes represent not our dreams but our expectations. Yitzchak, in his final message to his sons tells them, “לישועתך קויתי ה' – for your salvation I hoped, Hashem.” (Bereishit 49:18) But he did not just hope. He believed with full confidence. In the words of יהונתן תרגום יגאלותך צפיתי – I envisioned and I expected your redemption.” Sometimes hope is much more than the wish of the weak. Hope is a vision and an expectation that has only to come to fruition.

This is David’s final message to us for the month of Elul. The pendulum between confidence and doubt swings especially wildly as we contemplate the past. But rather than fighting this phenomenon we must use it for introspection and improvement. As a person of doubt, we must turn to God from the depths, and hope for His salvation. We must acknowledge our failures, and commit not to repeat them. Our doubts and weakness can and must propel us to grow. קוה אל ה' – “Hope to God,” first and foremost through doubt and despair, wondering whether we’ll measure up to God’s exacting standard.

But then, חזק ויאמץ לבך – “Be strong and let your heart take courage.” Focus on the positive. Transform your outlook of fear to the hope of the courageous. Look at your tremendous achievements during the past year. See your strengths and the beauty and holiness you brought into the world. Use those accomplishments as a springboard to propel you to even greater heights in the future. Then, once again, קוה אל ה'. Hope for God.

Only this time, it’s not hope. It’s a vision and an expectation that this coming year we will build on our strengths. We will do even better. God will bless us with a year of hope, strength, confidence and achievement as individuals, communities, and His chosen people.

