

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE SLONIMER REBBE

Yom Kippur Evening, 5771

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I lovingly open the gate and enter the garden. Along a path of cobblestone pages, each one numbered as though one day in a life, I seek out my friend and teacher, Rebbe Sholom No'ach Berezovsky. Known from the title of his major work as the **נתיבות שלום** / Paths of Peace, he is the Slonimer Rebbe, of the line of Chassidic rebbes that originate in the Polish town of Slonim. The Slonimer is a remarkable teacher, both bold and gentle, a deeply sensitive soul of expansive heart. Having died in Jerusalem only some ten years ago, he is a rebbe of our time. I have often directed colleagues and friends in need of spiritual succor to him. Once when I was in the Israel Book Shop, its owner, Mr. Dovek, knowing of those I had sent in search of the Slonimer's works, looked at me quizzically and asked, "why is everyone so interested in the Slonimer Rebbe?" "Ah," I said, "for many reasons. He knows our world and its challenges. He speaks to the soul, to the mind, to the heart. He writes in beautiful and poetic modern Hebrew, and he exudes a rare openness." I smiled at Mr. Dovek and said, "you should go buy his books." Through his *d'rashot*, his teachings to his chassidim, his followers, we are drawn in and he becomes our rebbe too.

Yom Kippur can be a challenging day. Though meant to lift us up and encourage us to enter the year filled with hope and possibility, we can also feel small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things. We face mortality and the fragility of life. Beautiful in its closeness, it is also easy to feel alone on this day of swirling memories, of sharp contrasts, of starkness and joy. The prayers become a mirror through which to look at ourselves and our lives, and that is not always something we want to do. It is a good time to turn to the Slonimer, whose signature theme is the unique importance of every person, the unique task and purpose, place and role that each person has in this world. When my soul is tired, when I feel down or discouraged, I often go for a walk with the Slonimer, conversing along paths of peace. I would like to share with you a conversation with the Slonimer Rebbe.

I have come to walk with the rebbe, to ask how one should enter a new year. It seems so hard sometime to make the transition from one year to the next. It's like moving to a new home in an unfamiliar place. What will it be like? What to take and what to leave behind? If it was a good year of accomplishment and health, perhaps of new friends

and new love, of new and helpful insight into oneself, it may be hard to leave. On the other hand, perhaps it was a year of struggle, the death of a loved one, called on to do too much, worn down in body and soul, a job lost, perhaps, or love gone cold, then only too glad to leave the old year behind. I opened the gate, and entered the garden.

Sholom aleichem, Rebbe, how good to be with you again. Please, can you give me some advice, some good words for myself and others to help us enter the new year?

"Aleichem sholom, it is good to see you Reb Avigdor'l, I've missed you. You must be very busy preparing during these Yamim Nora'im. Now in preparing, don't forget the real preparation, the most important work: (from vol. 5, p. 102, 233)

*You see, just as Rosh Hashannah is a time of accounting for the whole world, every person is a small world unto him or her self. So it is a time to consider whether one is fulfilling their own unique purpose and task (יעודו ותפקידו)... Just as you have come through a gate now to see me..., there are many different gates. Every day in a person's life has a gate in relation to that day. The way that we get up and get started in the morning is a gateway into the day. Remember the very first line of the Shulchan Aruch, "one should rise into the day like a lion to serve the Holy One."*

So you are saying, Rebbe, that the way we approach the day shapes the nature of our passing through it?

*Yes, yes, and so for each month, and now there is the great gate of Rosh Hashannah, the gate through which we enter the whole year. Think of a gate as a place of reflection; to where does it lead, and to what purpose? This is our task at the start of the year, to think and give an accounting. But here is the main thing, this is not an accounting for the past, but of the future, how shall I pass through this gate? As an accounting of the future, it is to reclaim one's purpose and one's task (יעודו ותפקידו) and to search out what needs to be done differently in the coming year.*

I had to stop and think. This was a different kind of gate, more like the great stone gates in the walls that surround the old city of Jerusalem. The gates are deep, more like a great hall in which to pause amid the cool of the ancient stones. There from within the gate we can look back at the fading light from where we have come, and out toward the bright light beyond, toward which we go. And how strange and different, an accounting for the future? As I understand it from my conversations with the Slonimer, surely we can't know the nature of our experience and deeds in the coming year. What we can know and shape at the outset, even as we cross this threshold in time, is the nature of our going forward, our *kavannah*, our intention, the spirit that we cultivate through which we will meet what lies ahead. Just as the way we rise into the day shapes the nature of our going through the day, so the way we enter and take the first steps into the new year. Gathered in this time and place, we are all standing together

within the gate, drawing strength from each other as we move forward.

Rebbe, you speak so often of the unique purpose and task of each individual, using the phrase יעודו ותפקידו. It seems that your great love of people flows from your ability to see such importance in everyone. How much better the world would be, if we could look at every person, and every nation and people in that way. How much happier we would each be if we could see and believe in the magnificent existential importance of our own lives. "Yes, Reb Avigdor'l, it is the special task and purpose of every person that is so central in my thinking, because so it is in the plan of the Holy One. I want to be clear that this is not my חידוש, it is not a new teaching that begins with me. The אר"י הקדוש, the Holy Ari, the Holy Lion, taught long before me:" (from vol. 1, p. 142; vol. 5, p. 75)

*From the day on which the first human was created, and ever onward, יש לכל אחד תפקיד ויעוד, מיוחד לתקן בעוה"ז every person has a unique task and purpose for the sake of bringing repair to this world. A unique mission is placed upon each one from Above, and not a single person is able to fulfill the mission of their fellow and to repair that which she or he needs to repair. There is no person who is just like another person. It is for this reason that a person has been brought down from the upper world to this world below.*

It is such a beautiful teaching, Rebbe, so positive and encouraging. Your words underscore why I am so drawn to you. In a world that can be cruelly impersonal, in which individual uniqueness is often devalued in the quest for excellence and conformity, it is just what we need to hear, especially at this introspective time of year. As I hear you, I can't help but think of the human tragedy in our assigning status to people based on profession, or material wealth, or so much else that in the end is but outer garb. In the race to accomplish and acquire, we forget the unique importance of every person for the well-being of the world, however hidden and humble their offering may seem. If we could look at another and see an element needed in the sustaining of the world, each one a part of God's plan, then how much less fearful and judgmental we would be of difference and in the many ways of choosing to serve.

People come home at this time of year, Rebbe, home to family and friends, to the synagogue, to God, to themselves. Sometimes to get there people travel far greater psychic distances than in the realm of space and time. As I look around, I often think that the hardest journey is to come home to oneself. Perhaps to really come home to oneself, to arrive at the inner hearth of one's soul, cannot happen until we know in our hearts the unique task and purpose for which we are in this world. We spend so much time searching for ourselves and the way home. Can you offer some thoughts and advice to guide us on the way? (from vol. 1, p. 152; vol. 2, p. 263)

"Oy, Avigdor'l," אשרי מי שבהיותו בעוה"ז / *happy is the one who in their time in this world, knows what their mission is on earth and fulfills it well.* I too ask, איך יכול למלא את תפקידו, ולהגיע ליעודו / *how is one able to fulfill their task and arrive at their purpose...? The greatest shortcoming is when a person is completely satisfied with the way things are, with the status quo; and is completely habituated to the order of their life and situation so that they have no ambition or aspiration. It is holy work to continually aspire to reach the highest spiritual level that one is able to attain.*

So our lives are not static. If we have ambition and aspiration and see our efforts as sacred striving then we will not remain stuck in one place or stage in our spiritual growth or in the quest to discover purpose and meaning. It seems that you are saying that we can't be afraid to try, to imagine new possibilities and pursue them, to open new paths, new journeys in the journey of our lives, and to take them, perhaps to discover a calling in an unexpected place.

"You have the right word, my friend, it is not about one journey, but about many journeys through which our lives unfold toward their purpose. There will be ups and downs along the way and we need to learn from both, and together they form the journeys of one's life. It is what the Holy Baal Shem Tov taught, comparing the way of each person's life to the forty-two journeys enumerated in the Torah, with all of their highs and lows, that brought Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land..." (from vol. 4, p. 176; vol 2, p. 281)

*"From the day of one's birth and coming forth from their mother's womb..., a person journeys from journey to journey/נוסע מנסע למסע, until they come to the Land of the Living above." And yes, in the passage of each person's life are journeys of ascent and journeys of descent, ומכולם הוא מגיע לתכליתו/and from them all one arrives at their essential purpose.*  
"פארשטייס" / Do you understand?"

"Now I want to tell you something else, Avigdor'l, about finding the way to oneself, something that I know is important to you, and it is for everyone. It is about having confidence, about believing in yourself, without which a person cannot come to know their task and purpose and the way of tikkun that they bring to the world. All along the way of the desert journey, whenever Israel made camp, they arranged themselves according to family and tribe, equally spaced around the central gathering place of the sanctuary, the tent of meeting. Each tribe and each family within it had a place to camp and each had their own banner. Now why do I tell you this in regard to each one having a place and needing the confidence to take their place? It should be clear by now..." (from vol. 4, p. 15)

לכל יהודי יש מחנה ודגל / *Every Jew has a camp and standard, which is their task and purpose in the world. Now the ר"צה/ the evil inclination is most difficult, standing before a person and taking their place, as if he or she has no purpose in the world, as though simply part of an*

*undifferentiated mass of humanity.*

That is such a beautiful image, Rebbe, of the people gathered all together, forming a collective identity that does not swallow up individual identity. Wary of nationalism, I am not a flag waver, but this is different, a banner that calls us to see and celebrate each other's uniqueness. And the Yetzer Horah..., I had teachers as a child who played that role, or emboldened the self-doubting force within myself. I feel in your teaching an encouraging hand on my shoulder, a word of encouragement for all who would doubt their own place and right to take it, giving strength of voice to remind, "don't let anyone tell you that you are not unique, that you don't have your own task and purpose, your own camp and banner."

As you help us along the way, Rebbe, what would you say to those who seem weighed down with life's sorrows and disappointments, for whom it is hard to step lightly into the new year? It is sometimes hard for people to keep striving toward their task and purpose, to bring tikkun to the world when they feel broken within themselves.

"Aaaah, Reb Avigdor, I give you a rebbe's sigh, it is hard. Most of all, the hand of another, to go on together, the embrace of a community. And to know that there are times when the Holy One carries us, on wings of prayer and whispered words, and cries with us in the dark of night to comfort. I think also of the sanctuary in the desert of which we spoke. It was built of material freely given from every willing heart. It is best not to leave sorrows behind, for they are sacred too, but to make of them an offering of the heart from which to fashion a holy place within..." (vol. 2, p. 196)

*Every person has specific matters for which their heart most yearns. One should give over that special matter of their heart's yearning as an offering to HaShem.... Just as each person comes down to this world to repair matters unique to her or him, so in every season of one's life that which a person needs to repair changes. It is the matter of one's greatest yearning in the present moment that one gives over to God, and in this way builds an inner sanctuary.*

So we do our best to create within ourselves a place of refuge from which to draw strength, an inner well that we carry with us on the way to repair, living waters replenished at times with our tears. Rather than trying to leave sorrows behind or making futile effort to ignore, we acknowledge their presence as part of our being; and of our being in relationship, with God, with ourselves, with others, with life itself. That must be the key, to stay in relationship even as we look toward the light. That reminds me, Rebbe, of one of your teachings that is most beloved to me, that helped me to look beyond a difficult time in my own life. It was then, in fact, that I first heard it from you. It begins with the saying from the Holy Zohar, *לית נהורא אלא ההוא דנפיק מגו חשוכא* / *There is no light except that which emerges from darkness.* Please tell it to me again, that I might share it with others, the fresh sweetness of your words renewed like apples

dipped in honey.

"I remember, my friend, when you found it hard to believe that the morning light would ever come. And when it did, how much brighter you saw it shine. That is the essence of the teaching, all contained in the passage from Zohar. In the darkness of night is when hope begins. It is the hope of Creation itself, when light first appeared from out of darkness...." (vol. 2, p. 84, 85)

*The Holy One created all the details of Creation in this way, "and it was evening and it was morning/בוקר ויהי ערב ויהי...," first darkness and then light. So it is in life. And it is the model of exile and redemption in the journeys of Israel, for redemption cannot come to be unless it is preceded by the darkness of exile.... From within the darkness emerges the light.... This is the essence, that from within the exile itself redemption sprouts, and all aspects of exile and evil are turned to good. זיהו ענין /this is the entire matter, darkness -- and afterward light....*

Thank you, Rebbe. That teaching touches me every time I hear it from you, your words of Torah themselves bringing light. As we come home from all the scattered places of our lives at this season, may it be that we come from exile to redemption, walking all together. And of the path and light to guide, where shall we begin, and how shall we find our place?

"Reb Avigdor, Torah is our path and each and every one already has a place that no one else can take away. Torah is an ever-unfolding scroll of life, and its light shines from within, beckoning. Through Torah we engage and wrestle with all matters of life and living, challenged to take what we learn out into the world, each to bring their own way of tikkun. One should not be afraid for lack of knowing. Each one already knows the essence of Torah in her or his heart, their own unique insights and sensitivities to share. Listen carefully...:" (from vol. 2, p. 182-183; vol. 3, p. 133; vol. 5, p. 112-113)

*As there are 600,000 letters in the Torah, corresponding to the 600,000 souls of Israel, so there are 600,000 פירושים/interpretations of the Torah. Every soul has a special interpretation of the Torah that instructs the Jew in all the ways of her or his purpose and task in this world. And from this strength, a person's soul instructs him or her; but how does the soul know? Because she suckles from her interpretation that is rooted in the Torah.*

Such a beautiful teaching for this time of year, a time of homecoming and return. We each have a place that is always there, at times to wait, at times to welcome. Torah is the equal inheritance of every Jew. Most importantly, in your words is a poignant reminder of the uniqueness of every human being, and for each to celebrate and affirm the gifts of the other. That is the essence of your teaching, that each one has their own ייעוד ותפקיד / their own purpose and task toward the bringing of tikkun to this world. Rebbe, it has been so wonderful talking and learning with you. I need to go now. In our world beyond the garden it is Yom Kippur, there are people waiting. Would you give me a ברכה to take back?

"Avigdor'l, it has been my pleasure as well. May it be for you, your family, your community, for the whole world, א זיסע און א געזינטע און א שלומדיקע יאר / a sweet, and a healthy, and a peaceful year. יהי רצון מלפניך / May it be the will of the Holy One that it should be a year in which each one will find the way illumined to know with greater clarity their יעד ותפקיד / their own unique purpose and task in this world; so coming to know the nachas and wholeness of fulfillment, and the way of repair and healing that is their own and for which the world so thirsts. And for you and for those you serve and love, may you walk always on paths of peace / נתיבות שלום."

Amen, amen, Rebbe, thank you. Shalom, shalom.

"Avigdor'l, as you go out please leave the gate open so you'll return sooner. A gut yontev, a gut yohr."

A gut yontev, Rebbe, a gut yohr....