

## SCALE, SPEED AND SELECTIVITY

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To shift gears automatically from everyday life to a penitent mode is well beyond the ability of most of us. Rather, you have to shift the old fashioned way—manually. To do the hard work of *teshuvah*, repentance, I would like to recommend three warm-up ideas. They are: *scale*, *speed* and *selectivity*.

Let's begin with scale. I recently went to a country fair which made me think a lot. From time to time, for example, I have asked a child where you find chickens. Usually the answer is: in the supermarket or the butcher. Or: what is a fleece jacket made of? Polyester, of course.

Following in the footsteps of E.B. White and others, I found myself at the Blue Hill Fair, the site immortalized in his book *Charlotte's Web*. I remember reading *Charlotte's Web* to our children and finding myself in the world of Wilbur, Templeton and, of course, Charlotte, the spider. And here I was at Charlotte's fair, looking for her friends. And her friends I found.

There was a big, rosy colored pig, dirty as could be. Better yet, there were scores of cows, some of them bred for their milk, others for their beef. A boy stood next to a pretty hefty cow with clippers in his hands, sheering the cow's hair. I was amazed. I could understand why you would shear sheep—though even that is far from my everyday experience. But why would you shear a cow?

I asked the boy's mother who was standing nearby why it was that they were giving the cow a haircut. "To make him look nice," was her straightforward reply. And I nearly lost the ability to speak. I never thought that it mattered at all how a cow looks, but then again I am a city boy and I have never presented my cow to judges at a country fair. With a crew cut, cows, too, can be more beautiful.

A little further on there was a baby goat. It must have been about eight inches tall and was still wobbly on its legs. Born three days ago, the woman said, and there must have been twenty people crowding around the poor goat, awed by this wonder of nature and new life. People wanted to be photographed with the goat, to be seen next to something that stood alone and melted them like butter on a stove. So little was the goat and so powerful.

Then came the sheep. I had no idea that sheep were so large. You put your hand on their coats and you learn, if you don't already know it, what the real meaning of fleece is. The whiteness of their coats is startling and the warmth of the wool made me think of sitting next to a fire place on a cold winter's night. Suddenly, one sheep, followed by another, cried out: "Baah!" Again and again, louder each time until a sheep's chorus sang out a song of praise much like the song of Nishmat Kol Chai—"If our mouths were filled with song like the sea"—such is the song of the sheep.

There were chickens and roosters, also singing their songs. There were rabbits making funny movements with their noses. And there was an endless line of people wanting to see more and more.

Scale. On an average day we are the yardstick. The creation comes packaged. Everything outside of us can appear artificial. I think we need to see ourselves in a new scale when considering repentance, as part of something larger, something from which we actually come—the great plan of nature, of God's world as He made it.

A few days before, I looked out on a lake and saw not one but two loons, majestic in their black and white coats, with refined and delicate striping around their necks. A dragonfly flitted by, making his way from leaf to flower in search of a good meal. And then the loons went under water, looking for their lunch, too.

Chickens don't really come from supermarkets. Fleece didn't always come from a polyester fabric. There is a cosmos around us filled with variety, beauty and sometimes frightening power. Lift up your eyes and see—Who created these! So Isaiah said and Bahya ibn Paquda, an eleventh century Spanish rabbi counseled: Look up and around, cultivate a sense of wonder, put your own lives into the scale of God's creation and then begin to think.

That's my suggestion, too. Think of the scale of our lives against the transcendent panorama of nature. Think of yourself as part of that order. It's a humbling thought. It's a context we city people can forget. Penitence benefits from restating a scale that goes beyond us.

The second thing you need in order to shift those gears to repentance is a readjustment of speed. What you really have to do is slow down.

Nearly everything in our lives is designed to speed things up. I remember when, if you weren't home, you would not get a phone call. Somehow people had patience to wait until you were there. The world didn't collapse, the business didn't go under.

Then we improved things. We invented answering machines to make sure that we didn't have to wait that long to get the message. The caller could leave a message and we would get it as soon as we came in. A good idea, no doubt.

And then we did the best thing: we invented and welcomed the cell phone and its variations into our lives. With instant messaging, lest even an email be delayed until we opened our computers. I go out to Central Park and see people reading their messages. In due time, WiFi is coming to the Park. Now there is another creature walking around the park on a leash. But we get the messages fast.

Speed and electronic media no doubt have tremendous benefits and we can readily appreciate them. But to do *teshuvah*, we need to slow down. *Teshuvah* doesn't depend on having more information. If it did, then the information highway and the speedy methods of communication would allow you to *Google* a feeling, or to learn from a website what is happening inside your soul.

My recommendation is to go in the opposite direction. Slow down to do *teshuvah*. Give your mind a chance to work at a speed which is probably strange to it. Think of a few thoughts and mull them over. Meditate on ultimate issues instead of present necessities. If you find yourself flitting from one thought to another, just come back to the first thought and say: Slow down!

The late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan pointed out in his book on *Jewish Meditation* that the daily Amidah has about 500 words. The Talmud tells us that pious people of years ago used to take an hour to recite it. Figure that out: 500 words in 3,600 seconds. That yields about one word every seven seconds. Imagine taking seven seconds to recite each word of the Amidah!

In truth, few of us are as capable, or can train our minds to meditate, as well as the pious rabbis of old. So my suggestion is: Try three seconds instead of seven. One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three—for just the word “*Barukh*.” Another three seconds for “*atah*.” I suspect that the exercise will be extremely difficult, more difficult than answering numerous emails in the same time frame.

While our lives are dedicated to speed, *teshuvah* can only be done slowly. *Teshuvah* is different.

Finally, *selectivity*. Simply put: don't try to repent about everything. Don't try to redecorate every room in your life in ten days. Choose one room and do a good job. If you are lucky, choose another. You probably won't get to do three.

Because our scale is so focused on ourselves, because our highway requires speed, we also tend to think that multi-tasking will get the job done better and more efficiently. After all, isn't that what we are supposed to do at work? And at play?

Not here. Be selective and limit your tasks. Decrease your expectations. Run from multi-tasking and you may be able to locate the one or two areas of your life that are graspable. *Tafasta merubah lo tafasta*, the Talmud says: If you try to hold on to too much, you will hold on to nothing. By scaling back and simplifying, by reducing the number of goals to achieve, a few goals may actually be achievable.

Scale, speed and selectivity may not seem like the most cutting edge ideas. They are not. But I think that it is so hard to really repent that a few old fashioned ideas may hold more promise than the technologically sophisticated ones that work pretty well every day.

Scale, speed and selectivity are the WD-40 that lets those gears move.