

Beyond Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah

If you are not satisfied with the results of this avodah by the end of Yom Kippur, I offer you a money-back guarantee

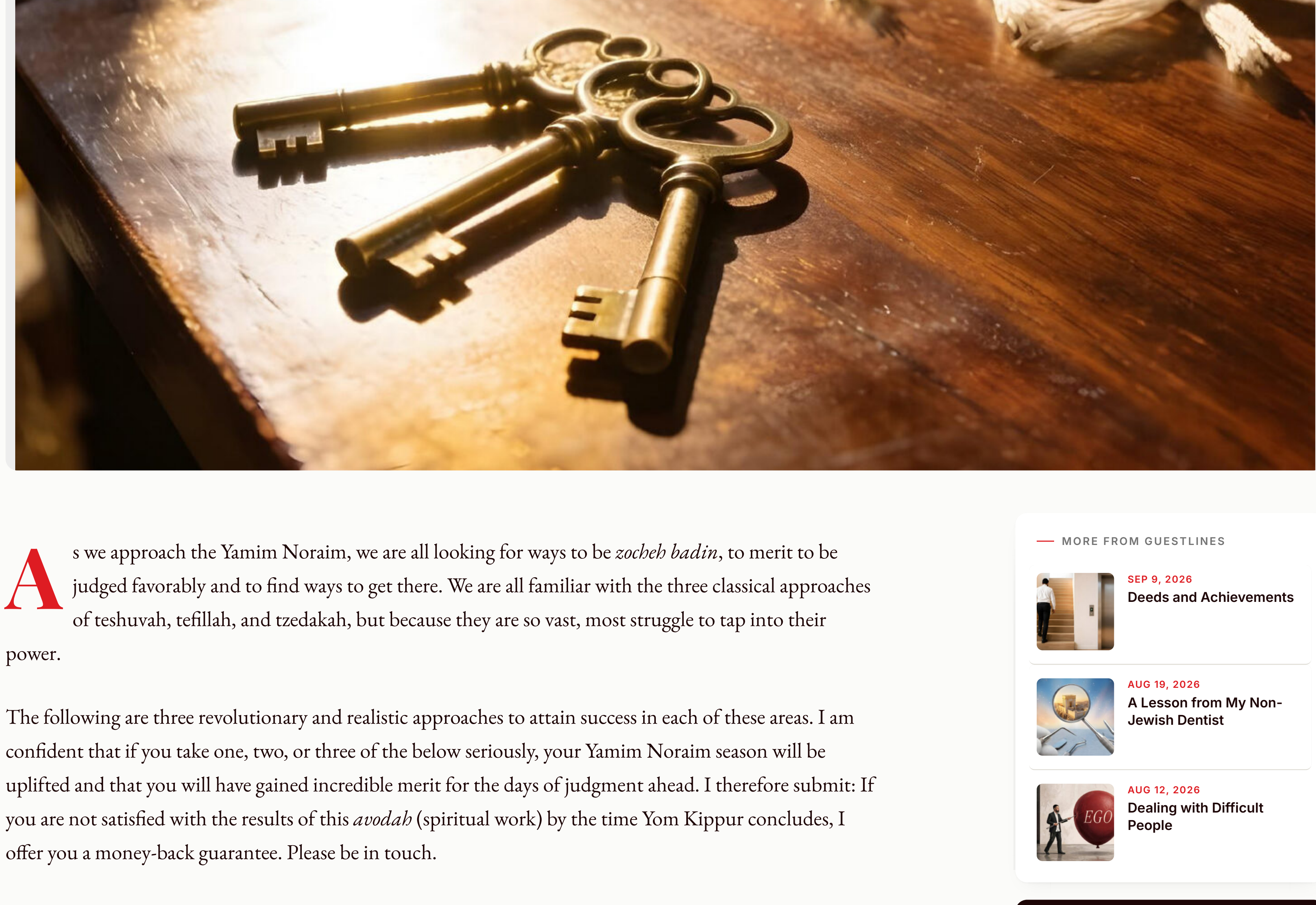
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As we approach the Yamim Noraim, we are all looking for ways to be *zocheb badin*, to merit to be judged favorably and to find ways to get there. We are all familiar with the three classical approaches of teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah, but because they are so vast, most struggle to tap into their power.

The following are three revolutionary and realistic approaches to attain success in each of these areas. I am confident that if you take one, two, or three of the below seriously, your Yamim Noraim season will be uplifted and that you will have gained incredible merit for the days of judgment ahead. I therefore submit: If you are not satisfied with the results of this *avodah* (spiritual work) by the time Yom Kippur concludes, I offer you a money-back guarantee. Please be in touch.

1: Teshuvah — ASK Questions

I have the incredible *zechus* of serving as the rav of session A at Oorah’s incredible camp, the Zone, for kids who do not have the opportunity to be in an immersive frum environment throughout the year. Their summer camp experience is their Jewish lifeline and keeps them going from year to year. For the four weeks I spend in camp, I am literally bombarded with hundreds upon hundreds of questions from the campers, from the time I wake up till the time that nobody goes to bed, about everything under the sun.

From this experience I have learned the power of a question. A question shows interest, eagerness, excitement, fascination, and a growth-oriented mindset. In Elul, we all pine to be *baalei teshuvah*, and one of the most powerful tools in our arsenal is asking ourselves questions like: What do I want to gain out of the coming year? What are my goals? How am I going to get there?

The Ramchal (sefer *Pri Eitz Chaim*) writes that asking oneself questions is the key exercise in attaining spiritual success. He writes that one should ask, “What am I all about? Why did I come into this world? What does G-d seek from me? And what will be at the end of the day?”

If one does this, the Ramchal writes, the payoff will be great: “This is the greatest and most powerful remedy that can be found against the yetzer hara. It is simple, yet its effect is immense and its fruit abundant. A person should set aside at least one hour every day, free from all other thoughts, to reflect solely on this matter.”

The power of seriously asking oneself these penetrating questions elevates one in ways that a mussar shmuess or sefer cannot do. It gets to the core of one’s essence, personality, and existence. If we ask ourselves these types of questions, Hashem, too, will see our eagerness, interest, yearning, and excitement for coming closer to Him.

It is for this reason that one of the key tefillos of the Yamim Noraim, Unesaneh Tokef, is written in a question form as well: “How many shall pass away and how many shall be born? Who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death...? But teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah avert the severity of the decree.” Meaning, if one wants to achieve teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah as stated in the last sentence of the passage, one must first ask oneself some very pointed and serious questions.

In advance of the Yamim Noraim, consider asking yourself introspective and serious questions that will change the way you enter Rosh Hashanah this year.

2: Tefillah — SHOW APPRECIATION

Did you ever enjoy a really good dish and ask for doubles — a second bowl of soup or a second serving of chicken poppers? If you have, I imagine there is one thing you did first. You likely said, “Thank you, that was delicious, may I please have some more?” Imagine asking for doubles before thanking your host for the first serving; that would be rude, inappropriate, and hurtful.

The *Sefer Chareidim* (*Mitzvas Asech min HaTorah Hateluyah B’lev*, 9:23) writes this explicitly regarding our relationship with Hashem: “Every Jew is obligated to remember the kindnesses Hashem has bestowed upon him from the moment He formed him in his mother’s womb. Through this, he will humble himself before G-d, feel ashamed, and return in complete repentance.” Thankfulness is the path to teshuvah.

This is why we can only ask for *chayim tovim*, a good life, in the latter two additions made in the Shemoneh Esreh of the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, as opposed to in the first two additions, where we are limited to only asking for *chayim*. It is only after we have given thanks and shown appreciation to Hashem in the brachah of Modim that we have the license to ask for more — *chayim tovim*! Thankfulness is the path to a good life (*Tiferes Shlomo*, Rav Naftali Kupschitz, page 268).

Allow me to explain this in a very stark way. We are privileged to give many gifts for bar mitzvahs, bas mitzvahs, and weddings. Some respond with thank-you notes, and some do not. I can’t begin to tell what a good feeling it is to open an envelope and receive a warm and sincere thank-you letter. It means that someone took the time to write, address, stamp, and send. It’s most meaningful and appreciated. (Even an email, text, or WhatsApp go a very long way.)

On the other hand, when I don’t receive a thank-you card, I wonder if my efforts were valued and appreciated. I am certain this is a *mashal* for our *bakaras hatov* to Hashem. The appreciation and acknowledgment we express to Hashem is impactful and valued, but if we don’t acknowledge it, why should we be provided with more?

This Elul, stop! Recognize, articulate, and express your appreciation for what you are the beneficiary of. When Hashem sees that, He will happily and joyfully provide you with another serving of health and good fortune. (See *Halichos Shlomo* — *Rosh Hashanah* 1:35.)

3: Tzedakah — Think OF OTHERS

On the last Rosh Hashanah of his life, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel stood in front of the Mir Yeshivah before Tekias Shofar and said the following: “People ask me what *kavanos* they should have during Tekias Shofar. I will tell you what to think about — think about someone else.”

The Rosh Yeshivah’s call to action is the Yamim Noraim wrapped up in four words: “Think about someone else.” Everything else is just commentary.

A predecessor of Rav Nosson Tzvi, Rav Simchah Zissel Ziv, the outstanding student of Rav Yisrael Salanter and Kelmer Rosh Yeshivah, made a similar statement, which he plastered on the door of the Kelm Talmud Torah one Elul in the 1860s (as found in *Kisvei HaSaba mi’Kelm: Pinkas Hakabbalos — Kabbalos l’Yamim Noraim; shaar rishon 4, be’arah nora’ah*):

But if the sin of hating people is on our hands, how can we not be ashamed and disgraced to be speaking lies when we ask G-d to rule over the entire world, in His glory? We must accept upon ourselves the work of loving people and of unity. With this, one’s path will slowly, slowly improve. And if we merit a community that is immersed in this work during the entire year, who can measure the greatness of the merit for us and for the entire world?

Rav Simchah Zissel explains that on Rosh Hashanah, we mention G-d as King hundreds upon hundreds of times in davening; how can we exclaim G-d as King if His subjects are unable to look out for one another and care for one another?

This is exactly the reason why the Yamim Noraim liturgy is articulated in the plural: Write us in the book of life, remember us for life, and nullify harsh decrees from upon us. This forces us to include others in our prayers.

In a month when we are often hyperfocused on ourselves, recognize that is not what it’s all about. Stop thinking about yourself, and think about another person you will aid and assist — a family member, neighbor, colleague, or friend. Whom will you think about during Shofar blowing? Whom will you daven for this Yamim Noraim? Whom will you invite for the Yamim Tovim? Whom will you be there for this coming year? Others are waiting for you to reach out. Don’t let them down!

Take these three ideas to heart, consider them, think about them, and ask yourself how you can implement them in your life this coming month. I have no doubt that this *avodah* will be monumental, uplifting, and life-altering. May we all be *zocheb ba’din*!

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