

Returning to the World

By Rabbi David Wolpe

The Zaddik (righteous man) of Zanz once told another Zaddik that having grown old and not repented for all his sins ate at his heart. His friend answered, “Oh my friend. You are thinking only of yourself. How about forgetting yourself and thinking of the world?”

Martin Buber retells this story and offers his paraphrase: “Do not keep worrying about what you have done wrong, but apply the soul-power you are now wasting on self-reproach to an active relationship to the world.”

This is the time of year to focus on *teshuva*. Teshuva (repentance) also means return, and is usually interpreted as a return to God or to one’s best self. But perhaps in teshuva is the idea of returning to the world, away from the preoccupation with the self. Beating one’s chest does not feed the hungry or comfort the bereaved. To really do teshuva each person has to recognize that the state of his soul is not the only thing that matters. Self-consciousness is half a step from self absorption.

True teshuva is an act of chesed, of lovingkindness. And love, as the novelist Iris Murdoch wrote, is “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.”