

The Meaning of Teshuvah
Nitzavim 5781
Rosh Hashanah, 5782
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This week our daf yomi group was fortunate enough to complete tractate Sukkah. Towards the very end of the tractate we came across the following story. It is a story that I will be thinking about on Rosh Hashanah this year, as it is a story of life and death, and our fate. These are all themes of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy.

The story goes as follows:

The Gemara relates with regard to these two Cushites who would stand before Solomon: “Elihoreph and Ahijah, the sons of Shisha” (I Kings 4:3), and they were scribes of Solomon. One day Solomon saw that the Angel of Death was sad. He said to him: Why are you sad? He said to him: They are asking me to take the lives of these two Cushites who are sitting here. Solomon handed them to the demons in his service, and sent them to the district of Luz, where the Angel of Death has no dominion. When they arrived at the district of Luz, they died. The following day, Solomon saw that the Angel of Death was happy. He said to him: Why are you happy? He replied: In the place that they asked me to take them, there you sent them. The Angel of Death was instructed to take their lives in the district of Luz. Since they resided in Solomon’s palace and never went to Luz, he was unable to complete his mission. That saddened him. Ultimately, Solomon dispatched them to Luz, enabling the angel to accomplish his mission. That pleased him. Immediately, Solomon began to speak and said: The feet of a person are responsible for him; to the place where he is in demand, there they lead him.

The upshot of this Talmudic story is that we are not always able to escape our fate. Even King Solomon, the wisest of all humans, was unable to escape fate. On the contrary, by trying to outsmart fate, all he did was directly help engineer the occurrence of the fate.

However, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught us that while we might not always be able to escape our fate, what we can always do is turn our fate into our destiny. No matter what situation we are in we can use the moment as an opportunity to come closer to Hashem and to serve our Creator.

This past week would have been the 94th birthday of my friend and teacher, Rabbi Ben Mintz. Rabbi Mintz was an expert on many things including on the history of the Titanic. Therefore, to commemorate his birthday, in his memory, I read a book about the Titanic. In this book I read the story of 8 musicians who did not know each other prior to their being hired to play music on the Titanic. When the Titanic struck an iceberg and the ship was sinking, the women and children were placed on lifeboats to save them. The remaining men, including these eight musicians, were left on the ship to die. Knowing they would certainly these musicians began to play music. Eye witnesses later testified that as the ship was sinking the musicians played a Christian hymn, “Nearer My God Unto Thee.”

The courageous act of those musicians, playing music on a sinking ship, is an example of what it means to turn our fate into destiny. It means that no matter the situation there is always an opportunity and a responsibility to make our world a better place.

This concept of making the world a better place is also a way to understand one of the main --- perhaps the main—theme of the *yamim noraim*--the concept of *teshuva*.

One way to understand the concept of *teshuvah* is to adopt the approach of Maimonides from chapter one of his Laws of Repentance. It is to deeply regret one's sinful behavior and to confess one's deeds from a place of shame and embarrassment: "How is the verbal confession made? The sinner says thus: "I beseech Thee, O Great Name! I have sinned; I have been obstinate; I have committed profanity against Thee, particularly in doing thus and such. Now, behold! I have repented and am ashamed of my actions; forever will I not relapse into this thing again." This is the elementary form of confession; but whosoever elaborates in confessing and extends this subject is, indeed, praise-worthy" (1:1).

However, this is not the only concept of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* does not need to be built upon a foundation of shame and regret.

Many, including Maimonides himself, interpret some verses in Nitzavim as a commandment to do *teshuvah* (Laws of Repentance, 7:5; see also, e.g. Netziv).

These verses do not speak of a *teshuvah* from shame, but rather a *teshuva* of love—a *teshuvah* built upon a desire to come close to Hashem.

When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which the LORD your God has banished you, **and you return** (*veshavta*) to the LORD your God, and you and your children heed His command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.

The word used in this passage is *veshavta*, which is the same word as *teshuva*. *Teshuva* literally means to return. But it doesn't necessarily mean to return from sin, it can also mean to strive to return to our Creator, to our Source, to a place of pure holiness.

Even if we had not sinned (an impossible thing to imagine), we would still be required to do *teshuvah*; we would be required to spend time every day thinking about how we can come closer to Hashem. *Teshuvah* is less about regretting our sins and more about returning to our Source.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook discusses this concept of *teshuvah* in his work on *teshuvah, Orot Hateshuvah*. He writes in *Orot Hateshuvah* about the process of *teshuvah* and about the experience of the one undergoing *teshuvah*:

“Teshuvah is the idea that one feels one is coming closer to the Source of all life, to the living God. Who just a short time ago was so far away.”

“A light of acceptance begins to shine. He is filled with courageous strength. His eyes are filled with a holy fire, his heart is entirely immersed in streams of delight, holiness and purity hover above him, infinite love fills all his being.

His souls is thirsting for Hashem, and like succulent delicacies sates him with this thirst. And everything is singing. The joy of Hashem fills everything.”

Unlike the classic Maimonidean concept of *teshuvah* as regret of sin and coming from a deep place of shame and embarrassment, Rav Kook here is emphasizing *teshuvah* as a joyful activity—an opportunity to commune with Hashem.

Indeed, these are the words of Jeremiah, which we chant as the Haftorah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah:

“*Mei-rachok Hashem nirah li*, From a distant place, God appeared to me and said I have always loved you with everlasting kindness, therefore I will lead you with loving-kindness” (31:2).

These words are in line with Rav Kook’s concept of *teshuvah*—a loving Gd embraces us with love. Even though we are distant, Rosh Hashanah gives us the opportunity to come close and embrace Hashem.

Indeed, in the Haftorah, Hashem explicitly tells us to stop our crying; to stop our feelings of shame and embarrassment, because Hashem will help us return:

“Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your deed, declares Hashem. There is hope for your future, declares Hashem, the children will return (*veshavu*) to their border” (31:15-16).

Finally, the prophet speaks of *teshuvah* (and the rabbis include this verse in the liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) as an embrace from Hashem, like a parent embraces a child:

Ha-ven yakir li Efraim im yeled shaashuim ki midei dabri bo zachor ezkerenu od, Isn’t Efraim my beloved son? Isn’t he a precious child, that whenever I speak of him, I recall him even more? Therefore, My inner parts stir for him. I will surely have compassion on him, declares God” (31:19).

This approach to *teshuvah* as a concept of love rather than shame, has the ability to heal the world in a much more profound way than simply apologizing for our errors. Rather than *teshuvah* being solely about fixing our sins, *teshuvah* is now about bringing positive energy to the world.

Indeed, this is consistent with what the Talmud itself says about *teshuvah*:

“How great is *teshuvah*, which brings healing to the world. Even if only a single individual has done *teshuvah*, both he and the entire world are forgiven (Yoma, 86a).

If we adopt the classic approach to *teshuvah* of a transactional fixing of a mistake, then this statement is difficult to understand. After all, how is a personal, individual repentance able to bring a healing to the world? But if we adopt the more positive and expansive approach championed by Rav Kook, then we can imagine how indeed *teshuvah* will bring a healing to the world.

Teshuvah is a mindset that declares we will approach our world with positivity. We will turn every situation, no matter how bleak into an opportunity to serve our Creator. We will make it our life mission to transform the world for the better by encouraging a return to our Source and in this manner elevating our everyday relationships. We will not see the negative and we will not be cynical. We will recognize that in the same way Hashem extends unlimited love to us, we will in turn extend it to others.

There is a story told about Reb Zusha that reflects this concept of *teshuvah*:

Reb Zusha was among the favorite students of the Maggid of Mezritch.

There is a story about a man who arrived at the court of the Maggid of Mezritch asking that the tzaddik receive him and give him a blessing. Reb Zusha, who was there at the time, looked at the guest and recognized him as a serious sinner who had no thoughts of teshuva (repentance). Reb Zusha was not able to avoid the storm of feelings in his heart towards the man, whose words did not match the feelings in his heart, so he said to him in an angry tone: “Sinner that you are! How are you not ashamed to stand face to face with our holy rabbi?”

The guest was taken aback by Reb Zusha’s harsh words, and with a bowed head he left the home of the Maggid and disappeared. Reb Zusha followed the man with his eyes as he left the house of the Maggid without saying a word and he felt remorse for the insulting words that he had just said to him.

When he told this to his rabbi, the great Maggid said to him: “Every morning we begin our daily prayers with the verse, ‘How fair are your tents, Yaakov!’ so that we will merit seeing only good qualities in the tents of Yaakov. And this is the blessing which I bestow on you this day: May it be God’s will that you always see only the positive attributes found in every Jew—even if his sins are as numerous as the seeds of the pomegranate. And our ancient sages already taught us: ‘Even though Jews sin, the blessed Holy One deals with them as sheep’ (treats them leniently and forgives their sins).

Hasidim say that the words of rebuke which the Maggid of Mezrich pronounced at that time to his faithful student penetrated deeply into his heart. And from then on Reb Zusha no longer

reprimanded sinners but delivered to every Jew an abundance of love. And when a sinner came to him and shook his hand, a new spirit engulfed him and he immediately had thoughts of repentance” (The Holy Brothers, 135-136).

You can now watch a YouTube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld’s D’var Torah at:

<https://youtu.be/6F3YoztcXJA>