

THE MULTI-DIRECTIONALITY OF *TESHUVAH*
Drash for Parasha Veyeilech, Sept. 10, 2021
Erev Shabbat Shuva – Keith Cohen

The following words are uttered during the scene in which God shows Moses a view of Israel from a mountaintop, tells of his imminent death and reveals to him that he will not have the chance of entering the promised land himself. The resonant words from Deuteronomy 30 are among the most memorable of the Five Books of Moses. The command referred to is the mitzvah of “turning back (*teshuvah*) to the Lord your God.”

For this command which I charge you today is not too wondrous for you nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens, to say, ‘Who will go up for us to the heavens and take it for us and let us hear it, that we may do it?’ And it is not beyond the sea, to say, ‘Who will cross over for us beyond the sea and take it for us and let us hear it, that we may do it?’ But the word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

In order to define the nature of *teshuvah*, God introduces a dynamic of distance and proximity: it may seem wondrous (or out of reach), but it’s actually familiar and close at hand. And just as this description yokes two spatial opposites, *teshuvah* brings together two temporal opposites as well: past and future: I commit to act in the future in a way that corrects or modifies the past; in this sense, “return” is two-directional—or multi-directional. This multi-directionality leads us to the true nature of repentance, according to Marc Wolf. It is not simply a future act that will erase a past act or set of events; repentance requires not a replacement but a reorientation. A new attitude must be adopted, and this new attitude could include any time frame between present and future. It is also multi-directional in the spatial sense insofar as *teshuvah* may involve looking outward at people and events around us or may drive us to look inward, deeply inside ourselves.

I find antinomies, or seeming opposites, elsewhere in the parasha. In God’s call to Joshua, the new leader, to “Be strong, be courageous,” Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi discovers what

she calls “adaptive leadership.” We witness, in other words a behavior that is both flexible (i.e., it gives a little) and strong (i.e., it is steadfast). There is also an antinomy in the “coming and going” that Moses is no longer capable of. Though usually translated as “I can no longer be active,” as Cantor Elizabeth Sacks comments, the Hebrew is signifying the end of his leadership by saying the he “can no longer go out and come.”

The other place in the parasha where coming and going appear is when God predicts to Moses that, due to the future misdeeds of the Israelites, God will “hide My countenance” from Israel. God goes, but God doesn’t really depart; God’s countenance will no longer shine on Israel. Here is perhaps the greatest antimony of all: God is at once absent and present: I shall not shine my face upon you when you commit evil deeds, but I am always here when you return to Me.

In the double verb (*haster histir*), moreover—“I will surely hide My face,” there is the suggestion that God will hide God’s face AND, at the same time, hide the fact of the hiding. Rabbi Audrey Korotkin has suggested that this double deprivation results in a worst-case scenario. We may be aware that God’s countenance, or God’s grace, is no longer shining upon us; but not even knowing that the countenance is being hidden means that we have lost some knowledge about ourselves. The double hiding of the countenance is thus a way of saying that we don’t have all the answers, even about our own existence. Another commentator, Professor Arnold Eisen, uses this idea to suggest that the hidden face resonates with an “emotional” truth. In losing God’s countenance, we are bereft not just of something of spiritual value. It is as though we were bereft of someone we love, or of something so close as our very selves.

So, what does the parasha tell us? Through a series of antinomies, it shows us that repentance, *teshuvah*, may seem distant but is actually close at hand. True repentance is not a substitution of one act for another but rather a fundamental change of attitude that goes in multiple directions: here, there, past, present, future. And by means of this enlightened *teshuvah* we can overcome the deprivation of God's countenance. The parasha expresses a cautious optimism about Israel's reliance on God and its confidence that, despite future sinning, through the mitzvah of *teshuvah*, God will ultimately shine God's face upon the people.