

Parshat Nitzavim 5776

Parshat Nitzavim records Moshe's words to all the people from the most important to the lowliest, on the last day of his life. Amongst other things, he tells Bnei Yisrael that the mitzvah of teshuva (repentance) **לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא** is not in heaven or across the sea, far away and unreachable, but rather it is within our grasp and our ability to accomplish (Devarim 30:12). In theory it sounds so easy but as we realise especially at this time of the year, we could do with some practical inspiration. To this end let's examine some examples of teshuva in Tanach.

In Sefer Bereishit (chap 38) we read the story of Yehuda's daughter – in – law Tamar. She had been married in turn to Yehuda's two elder sons but when they both die, Yehuda refused to fulfill his promise to allow her to marry Shelah, his youngest son. This left Tamar in an untenable position where she could not marry anyone else because she was still tied to Shelah. She disguises herself as a prostitute to tempt Yehuda who does not recognise her. Once her pregnancy becomes obvious, Yehuda demands that she is put to death but as she is about to be killed she sends Yehuda the collateral that he had given her (his staff, cloak and ring) with a message – "haker na" – please recognise these! These words resound in Yehuda's ears because they echo his message to his father when he sent him Yosef's multi-coloured coat dripping with blood and asked "haker na" please recognise this – your son is dead.

Yehuda has a choice. He can keep quiet, no one else knows what has happened between them, and allow Tamar to die. Or he can publicly humiliate himself and admit he is the father of the unborn child. Yehuda has the courage to admit he is responsible and in so doing redeems himself and merits the position as leader of his brothers. His willingness to admit he was wrong and to take responsibility for the situation inspires his teshuva which Hashem accepts.

Another example of teshuva occurs further on in Sefer Bereishit, as the story of Yosef's relationship with his brothers unfolds when he is Viceroy of Egypt. Yosef accuses his brothers of being spies. They do not reject this accusation out of hand. Instead they admit they are guilty, not of being spies but because they did not listen to Yosef's cries. (Genesis 42:21) The brothers only do teshuva now; years after the event, despite having seen their father suffer with grief all that time. It is only now when they themselves are afraid and suffering that they examine their previous actions and feel remorse. We can learn from their example that although we can

never understand why bad things happen, if someone is suffering, he should take the opportunity to do teshuva.

In Sefer Shmuel, there is the famous example of the teshuva of King David after the episode with Batsheva. According to some views, whilst her husband Uriah is away fighting, David sees her and desires her but when he finds out that she is pregnant he, tries to avoid responsibility by calling Uriah home from the war. When this does not work, he orchestrates Uriah's death on the battlefield and marries Batsheva. Unlike Yehuda, and according to this view, David actually causes the death of someone.

David does not realise that he has sinned until Natan the prophet tells him the parable of the rich man with many sheep, who steals a poor man's only sheep to feed his guests. David rules that the man should be killed but Natan points out that David is that man and declares that Hashem will punish him for his sin. The sword will never leave his family and another man will take his wives.

On hearing this David immediately admits his sin "hatati leHashem" I have sinned to G-d. He does not try to evade his responsibility or his guilt and because of this G-d accepts his teshuva and although the other punishments will stand, David does not die then.

So Yehuda illustrates ideal teshuva. He doesn't suffer but he has the courage to admit his guilt. The brothers do suffer but because of that, they search their consciences and how they can change their ways. David only admits his sin after he hears his punishment but it is a meaningful teshuva and so it is accepted.

Rav Sloveichik explains in his book Halakhic Man that "Repentance, according to the *halakhic* view, is an act of creation – self-creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous "I," and the creation of a new "I," possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals – this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future."

As we approach Rosh Hashana and the Aseret Yemai Teshuva may we all do sincere teshuva comprising regret over the past and resolve for the future which will transform our very selves.

