

Parshat Vayelech Shabbat Shuva 5779

This week is Shabbat Shuva – the Shabbat of “return.” It is also known as *Shabbat Teshuvah* because it falls during the Aseret Yemai Teshuva. Its name derives from the opening words of the special haftarah reading from Hoshea’s nevuah which begins with the words “Shuva Israel” – “return Israel...” This is a call to do Teshuva. The Haftarah is made up of pesukim from 3 books of the 12 Prophets – 9 from Hoshea (7th century BCE), 3 from Micha (7th century BCE) & 16 from Yoel (9th Century BCE) and. All these selections are related to the concept of Teshuva.

In summary, the pesukim in Hoshea contain a “call” or “appeal” to do teshuva. He was prophesying just prior to the exile of the 10 tribes of the Kingdom of Israel (referred to as Samaria). He urges the B.Y to engage in sincere verbal confession and to trust in Hashem, which hopefully will result in Hashem’s forgiveness. He then addresses the kingdom of Yehuda with the words “Shuva Yisrael...” with a plea to take the Navi’s words to heart. The passuk continues... - עד ה אֶלְקֵינוּ - “until Hashem...” The Gemara in Yoma 86 deduces from this passuk that Teshuva is great, until it reaches the throne of glory, i.e. we should take the step of repenting for our misdeeds, and be encouraged by the fact that our teshuva will reach all the way up to Hashem’s “throne.” The Gemara then explains that the nature of a person’s teshuva determines whether that teshuva actually reaches Hashem’s throne or just stops short.

Furthermore, there is a discussion in *Berachos* (27a) as to whether the word, *ad*, means “up to but not including – *ad velo, ad b’chlal,*” or including as well, *ad b’chlal*. When it comes to getting close to Hashem and returning to Him through *teshuvah*, the word *ad* in the *haftarah* most certainly means including and not merely up until. We need to get as close to Hashem as possible! On the next few words of the passuk:

"כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֹנֶיךָ – for you have stumbled in your sins..." Raish Lakish remarks: The word כָּשַׁלְתָּ – you have stumbled, refers to sins committed unintentionally, while the word – בְּעֹנֶיךָ, refers to sins committed intentionally. He then continues to teach us: “Great is repentance, for through it, intentional sins are transformed into merits.” If a person does teshuva out of fear, his intentional sins are reduced to the status of unintentional sins, and his repentance reaches up to – but not including – the throne of Hashem. If, however, a person repents out of love for Hashem, then his intentional sins are transformed into actual merits, and his teshuva reaches all the way up to the throne of Hashem.

The 3 pesukim from the book of Micha mention the core of the Selichot tefillot – the Shlosh Esreh Middot Harachamim – the 13 Divine attributes of mercy, including

forgiveness, kindness and sympathy. These are the words that Hashem taught Moshe for the B’nei Yisrael to say whenever they needed to beg for Divine compassion. These pesukim are also recited at Tashlich, as well as at the end of Haftarat Yonah on Yom Kippur. The words in perek zayin, passuk yud chet of Micha state: מִי אֵל כְּמוֹךָ נִשְׂא עוֹן וְעֵבֶר עַל פְּשָׁע “Who is a G-d like you, who forgives sin and overlooks transgression?”

The Chafetz Chayim says that there is a way for a person to “cause” Hashem to overlook his sins. The way this can be done is by a person overlooking the offences others may have committed against him, even those one thinks they may have been carried out intentionally. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz says there is a condition required for this to work – i.e. when a person makes himself like “shirayim”, “leftovers.” In the same way that leftovers aren’t so important, so, too, when a person overlooks the bad done to him, it has to be only because he is humble. He teaches us that we have to work on our trait of humility, and with that, we will hopefully merit a favourable verdict for the year ahead.

The pesukim from Yoel (2:12) open with a reference to returning to Hashem with all our heart and with fasting: שׁוּבוּ עָדַי בְּכֹל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְצוֹם “return to me with all your heart, with fasting...” Followed by 2:15, “תִּקְעוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּצִיּוֹן קְדְשׁוֹ צוֹם קָרָאוּ עֲצָרָה” “Blow a shofar in Zion, decree a fast and call an assembly.”

Yoel describes an entire kehilla – old and young, men and women, coming together to try and get closer to Hashem. This imagery reminds us of the task awaiting us on Yom Kippur when we all daven together.

Finally, the name “*Shabbat Shuvah*” indicates that the *teshuvah* of this *Shabbat* is superior to the *teshuvah* of the other Ten Days of Repentance. We are encouraged to repent on Shabbat because, as the Chida (18th Century) tells us, *teshuvah* must start with Shabbat. During the week, man is involved in mundane affairs, seeking to elevate the physical world to holiness.

What is the connection between *Shabbat* and a superior form of *teshuvah*? On *Shabbat*, since, mundane labour is prohibited, as the sanctity of the day is such that man transcends the physical, his labour on that day involves achieving ever-higher levels of kedusha. Thus the *teshuvah* of *Shabbos* is the known as the higher level of *teshuvah*, because on that day our soul is elevated.

May Hashem grant us all a שְׁנֵה טוֹבָה וּמְתוּקָה & פְּתִיבָה וְחֲתִימָה טוֹבָה, and may our prayers during these significant days of our year, be heard & answered.