

A Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

## Can We Really Be Forgiven? The Uncounted Mitzvot: Be Strong and Resolute

This week we observe *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of (Return) Repentance, the special Shabbat between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. In Jewish thought, return and repentance are complimentary because we maintain that at the core of every human being is goodness, love and a positive purpose. Life and circumstances, bad decisions and bad breaks can cause us to move far from our nobler qualities and intentions. After a while, we may even be saddled with a shameful reputation with people judging us harshly. We may even come to accept and believe those negative assessments of our character and spiral ever deeper into a hole of woe and ever more distant from that sweet sense with which we were gifted at birth. Our ancestors taught:

*The gates of repentance are always open* (Deuteronomy Rabbah 2.12);  
and: *The Holy One does not reject a single creature. Rather, all are acceptable to God. The gates are open at all times, and all who wish may enter* (Exodus Rabbah 19.4).

And so it is that through acts of repentance we are all urged to return to our better selves. We are reminded that repentance, the paths of contrition and the blessing of forgiveness are always open and available.

Sure, that sounds nice, but as we all know it is not easy. The sad reality is that even if we honestly and sincerely do our best to return, there will be those who are not ready or willing to forgive. Alas, that may be the most painful consequence of breaking another's trust and causing others to suffer: those we hurt may never be willing to forgive us. Therefore, can we really believe that repentance and forgiveness are possible?

A compelling answer is found in this week's Torah portion is *Vayeilekh* (Deuteronomy 31:1-30). In his final address to our ancestors, Moses delivers an important commandment that is not included in the traditional counting of the 613 Mitzvot: "*Be strong and resolute!*" This commandment is given three times in this week's reading and several more times in the Book of Joshua (which is the next book of the Hebrew Bible after the Torah). The importance of the commandment to be strong and resolute is emphasized in Psalm 27 which is recited throughout

the month of Elul and the High Holy Days: “Look to the Eternal; be strong and resolute (*chazak v’ya’ameitz*)! O look to the Eternal! (Psalm 27:14).

We are urged to look to God, to perceive that we do have a blessed place in this Eternal cosmos, a reason and exalted purpose for being. Look to God in order to see that there is always a gate open, a path clear for us to come home. Just as parents call the kids home to be nurtured and fed, scrapes cleaned and bandaged, tears softly dried, and feelings reassured by a warm hug and a gentle embrace, so, too, are we to look to God and realize that the goodness inside of us is our ticket to return home. All we need is to believe in ourselves, and to do that we need strength and courage: *Chazak v’ematz*.

Perhaps, the reason the commandment “Be strong and resolute” did not make the list of 613 mitzvot is that it is a part of every act of goodness. When it comes to forgiveness, I can’t expect others to forgive me if I haven’t forgiven myself. My next steps do not depend on the reactions of others. Yes, I will reach out to them and hope they will accept my sincere apologies and my commitment to be a kinder, more helpful, and more compassionate person. That may take a long time. Maybe they will never be willing to forgive. Still, each person has the ability to return to the inner goodness and values that are bound up with our sacred soul. Our next steps are up to us. Looking to God and having faith in yourself: *chazak v’ematz, be strong and resolute!*

***Gemar Chatimah Tovah,***

*Rick*

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