

Parashat Nitzavim – Rosh Hashanah, 5773, 2012:

Teshuvah from Our Hearts and Souls

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Judaism is preeminently a religion of action wherein the deed, in the form of the spiritual-halachic gesture (*mitzvah*), is the primary mode of connecting with the Almighty. Little wonder then, that one of Judaism's greatest heroes and spiritual giants was none other than Nachshon ben Aminadav, the first person to enter the *Yam Suf* (Sea of Reeds) in expectation of Hashem's imminent salvation. *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:7 teaches us that Nachshon's very name foreshadowed the literal leap of faith that will remain ever emblazoned in the memory of our people: "Why was he named Nachshon? This was because he was the first to go into the surging waves of the Sea [of Reeds] (Hebrew, *nachshol sheb'yam*). The Holy One blessed be He said to Moshe: 'He who has sanctified my name in the Sea will be he who will bring the first sacrifice [in the dedication of the altar in the dessert].'" Nachshon was a true hero of the spirit who was driven by the noble desire to sanctify Hashem's name. His goal was nothing less than to be an authentic *eved Hashem* (servant of G-d).

Our *parasha* calls upon each of us to symbolically emulate Nachshon, to jump into the *Yam Suf* of our lives, and do *teshuvah* (return to the proper path of serving Hashem):

And it will be, when all these things come upon you the blessing and the curse which I have set before you that you will consider in your heart, among all the nations where the L-rd your G-d has banished you, **and you will return to the L-rd, your G-d, with all**

your heart and with all your soul, and you will listen to His voice according to all that I am commanding you this day you and your children, then, the L-rd, your G-d, will bring back your exiles, and He will have mercy upon you... (*Sefer Devarim* 30:1-5, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, emphasis my own)

“ ... and you will return to the L-rd, your G-d” is the mitzvah of *teshuvah*. Like the famous first paragraph of the *Shema*, true returning to Hashem must be performed “with all your heart and all your soul.” Insincere *teshuvah* is a duplicitous act devoid of purpose and meaning.

In order to do heartfelt and meaningful *teshuvah*, we need to know what its constitutive elements are, and what they mean. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) devoted an entire section of his halachic *magnum opus*, *Mishneh Torah*, to this task. In *Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2, he asks, “What is *teshuvah*?” His answer forms the conceptual basis of this mitzvah until our own historical moment:

What exactly is *teshuvah*? [It is the act that demands] the sinner to reject his sin, remove it from his thoughts, and determine in his mind that he will never do it again... So, too, he must feel badly for what he has done in the past... and he must bear testimony to He who knows all secret matters that he will never repeat this sin again... In addition, he must verbally confess [his sin] and speak aloud of those things he has determined in his mind.

Let us summarize the *teshuvah* process as delineated by Maimonides:

1. Rejection of the sin: takes place in the present (*azivat hacheit*)
2. Feel badly about what has been done: refers to past actions (*charata al ha'avar*)
3. Resolve to change: refers to the future (*kabbalah al he'atid*)
4. Declare and confess (verbally) to Hashem to never be involved in this sin again (*vidui devarim*)

As we can readily see, genuine *teshuvah* is a holistic process. It incorporates a radical mind-shift for the former sinner, so that he will be able to return to the proper path of serving Hashem. It requires unflinching honesty and the strength to conquer the natural

tendency to rationalize one's actions and behaviors. The *baal teshuvah* (master of teshuvah) needs to feel badly about his sin, reject his heinous behavior, and resolve never to repeat this behavior in the future. All of this, however, must be accompanied by a heartfelt oral confession before Hashem of what he has done and that he will never repeat this action again. This, then, is the essence of the act of doing *teshuvah*.

Perhaps the single greatest barrier to sincere *teshuvah* is arrogance (*gaavah*). It blinds us to the ramifications of our actions, and makes us feel as if we are living on a different and higher plane of existence than the rest of mankind. Therefore, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his famous *Iggeret HaRamban (Letter of the Ramban)*, warns us against this negative *middah* (character trait):

And now, my son, understand and observe that whoever feels that he is greater than others is rebelling against the Kingship of Hashem, because he is adorning himself with His garments, as it is written (Tehillim 93:1), "Hashem reigns, He wears clothes of pride." Why should one feel proud? Is it because of wealth? Hashem makes one poor or rich (I Shmuel 2:7). Is it because of honor? It belongs to Hashem, as we read (I Divrei Hayamim 29:12), "Wealth and honor come from You." So how could one adorn himself with Hashem's honor? And one who is proud of his wisdom surely knows that Hashem "takes away the speech of assured men and reasoning from the sages." (Iyov 12:20) So we see that everyone is the same before Hashem, since with His anger He lowers the proud and when He wishes He raises the low. So lower yourself and Hashem will lift you up! (Translation, <http://www.pirchei.co.il/specials/ramban/ramban.htm>)

Herein Nachmanides is teaching us that G-d, and G-d alone, has the right to act with greatness. Human pride born of wealth, honor, and wisdom represents, like man, a mere passing shadow. Arrogance drives a wedge between G-d and ourselves, and blinds us to the vast difference between truth and falsehood, hence impeding the *teshuvah* process. How, then, can we avoid the pitfalls of *gaavah*, so that we can prepare ourselves to engage in the *teshuvah* process? The Ramban continues and addresses this essential question:

In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before Hashem, with His Shechinah [Divine presence] above you, for His glory fills the whole world. Speak with fear and awe, as a slave standing before his master. Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, don't answer loudly, but gently and softly, as one who stands before his master. (Ibid.)

In short, when we truly feel ourselves to be in G-d's presence, we naturally act with humility before Him, and with restraint and dignity toward others.

Rosh Hashanah is fast approaching, and the final days and hours of the year are upon us. It is the time to do *teshuvah*. With G-d's help, may we have the wisdom and discernment to repudiate *gaavah* and embrace *anavah* (humility). May we ever be ready to be spiritual Nachshons, jump fearlessly into the whirlwind of confusion and daily challenges that is our lives, and actively change them for the better. In a word, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to do *teshuvah* from our hearts and souls, so that we will have long and healthy lives filled with Torah, mitzvot, and the service of Hashem. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Kativah v'chatimah tovah and tizku l'shanim rabot

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