

Parashat Devarim – Tisha b’Av, 5771, 2011:

Returning to Hashem

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Knesset Israel [the grand trans-historical entity of the Jewish People] spoke before *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) and said: “Master of the Universe, it is up to You to bring us back to You!” He responded to them: “It is up to you! [After all,] it is said: ‘Return unto Me and I will return unto You says Hashem’ (*Sefer Malachi* 3:7).” *Knesset Israel* once again spoke before Him and said: “Master of the Universe, it is up to You [to bring us back to You!] [After all,] it is said: ‘Return us, G-d of our salvation...(*Sefer Tehillim* 55:5)’” Therefore the verse states: “Bring us back to You, Hashem, and we shall return...” (*Midrash Eichah* 5:22, translation my own)

“*Hashiveinu Hashem alechah v’nashuvah chadash yemeinu kekedem*” (“Enable us to return to You Hashem and we will return, renew our days as they were in former times”) is found at the end of *Megilat Eichah* (Lamentations), which we recite on the night of Tisha b’Av. This *pasuk*, written by the 7th century BCE prophet Yermiahu nearly 2700 years ago, contains some of the most memorable words of this *sefer* (book). In my opinion, they define this entire period of the Three Weeks and the Nine Days, and Tisha b’Av proper. If we focus upon this verse and what it is trying to teach us, I believe we can find new meaning during this time of national mourning for the destruction of the *Batai Mikdash* (Holy Temples), and for all of the tragedies that have befallen our people.

Yermiahu is calling upon all of the Jewish people to do *teshuvah* (repentance). This act of *teshuvah*, however, calls upon Hashem to take the lead in the process. Note that we first

beseech Hashem: “*Hashiveinu Hashem alechah*” and only afterwards “*v’nashuvah*.” The theme of Hashem taking the lead in the *teshuvah* process is one that is well known to us all. It is the conceptual and practical basis of one of the 19 *berachot* (blessings) that we recite three times a day in the silent prayer known as the *Shemoneh Esrei*, or the *Amidah*. Therein we read: “Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah, and bring us near, our King, to Your service, and cause us to return in perfect repentance before You. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who desires repentance.” (Translation based upon the Artscroll Siddur) Clearly, the formulators of this prayer, the *Anshei Knesset Hagadolah* (the Men of the Great Assembly), saw Hashem as the motive force in leading us to *teshuvah*. We find this theme, as well, in the Monday and Thursday *Tachanun* (Supplication) portion of the morning *tefilah* (prayers): “You Who opens a hand for repentance, to welcome rebels and sinners: our soul is confounded by the abundance of our depression – forget us not eternally. Arise and save us for we take refuge in You.” (Translation, Artscroll Siddur)

Without a doubt, we need Hashem to facilitate the *teshuvah* process. He helps us begin this spiritual journey and welcomes us in our quest to draw close to Him. Our journey, however, cannot begin unless we recognize that we need to do *teshuvah*. This recognition can only be grasped if we take the time to think about ourselves in relation to others and to Hashem. *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) called this course of action “*cheshbon hanefesh*” (“self-accounting”). In modern terminology we would probably call it “introspection.” Dictionary.com defines this as: “observation or examination of one’s own mental and emotional state, mental processes, etc.; the act of looking within oneself.” This is actually a very difficult act to perform, since it requires great personal integrity and the willingness to recognize, rather than to rationalize away, one’s faults. It

is far too easy to see the failings of others. The challenge, however, is to unabashedly find these shortcomings within ourselves. Only then can the possibility of true *teshuvah* exist. Perhaps, then, when Yermiahu asks of Hashem, “*Hashiveinu Hashem alechah*,” he is asking Him to help us engage in the process of introspection so that we may examine our actions in the light of truth and through the lens of unmitigated honesty. Then, and only then, will we gain the necessary self-insight for the next step, “*v’nashuvah*” (return unto Him) in *teshuvah shlaimah* (complete repentance).

We are now ready to analyze and try to understand the Midrashic narrative that I cited at the beginning of this *drasha*. Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1942, known as the Torah Temimah after the name of his monumental work of Torah exegesis, explains that this passage is teaching us that we need both “*Hashiveinu Hashem alechah*” and “*v’nashuvah*,” one of them alone is necessary but insufficient. In other words, Hashem bringing us back to Him will fail unless we, too, make the effort to do heartfelt *teshuvah* (repentance). Therefore, he writes: “Thus it says ‘*Hashiveinu*’ from Your efforts and ‘*v’nashuvah*’ from our efforts.” This means we are partners with Hashem in the *teshuvah* process. He is ready to help us when we are ready to help ourselves. Man is never alone – no matter how abandoned and existentially lonely we may feel. We need to ever remind ourselves that Hashem is constantly ready to help us, and that no matter how dark and dismal the hour may be, the darkest hour is just before the dawn of salvation. These, indeed, are comforting thoughts during the Three Weeks in general, and worthy of deeply pondering on Tisha b’Av itself.

May *Hakodesh Baruch Hu* enable us to return to Him in true *teshuvah* so that we may

once again renew our relationship with Him as in former times: “*chadash yemeinu kekedem.*” With Hashem’s help, may this Tisha b’Av mark the moment when this will happen. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.