

Parashat Haazinu – Shabbat Shuvah, 5772, 2011:

*Return O' Israel Unto the L-rd Your G-d*

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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.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik (1820-1892) was a consummate Torah luminary and the founder of the greatest Lithuanian Talmudic dynasty. He is best known as the “Beit Halevi,” after the title of his two-part study that analyzes passages in both the five books of the Torah and Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*. In his introduction to the exegetical portion of his work, he presents a midrashic passage that portrays a scenario wherein one is initially embarrassed and, therefore, reticent to do *teshuvah* (repentance):

Anyone who has performed a sin and is embarrassed to repent should exchange his sin with good and proper actions (*ma'aseim tovim*) perform the *teshuvah* process, and it will be accepted. This is similar to the story of someone who has some small and damaged coins – what should he do? He should go to the moneychanger and give him more than the proper exchange value, and thereby acquire proper and fitting coins. So, too, in the instance of doing *teshuvah*: Anyone who has acquired a cache of bad deeds should repent and perform *ma'aseim tovim*. (*Midrash Yalkut Shimoni l'Sefer Hosheah*, translation my own)

The Beit Halevi suggests that the *Yalkut Shimoni*'s narrative is difficult to understand on two levels: It is unclear exactly what it is trying to convey, and the illustrative example (*mashal*) that is brought seems to be conceptually disconnected from the passage proper. In his view, all we definitely know from the Midrash is the order of operations to enable one to properly repent: “The order of *teshuvah* is two-fold: One first repents regarding his past deeds, and then greatly increases his devotion to Torah studies and *ma'aseim tovim*.” He underscores this approach by citing a variety of biblical sources that epitomize this idea, and then summarizes this concept as it is presented in Jewish ethical literature

(*mussar*):

A sinner's righteous actions and mitzvot that he does will not be fully accepted prior to his repudiation of his earlier evil deeds. This is in accord with the verse, "But to the wicked man G-d said [*Sefer Tehillim* 50:16], "Why do you recount My statutes, and bring up My covenant on Your mouth?" (This, and all Beit Halevi translations, my own)

In addition, Rabbi Soloveitchik cites a passage from the *Mishneh Torah* that buttresses this concept:

He [i.e. the sinner] would fulfill mitzvot, only to have them crushed before him as [Isaiah 1:12] states: "Who asked this from you, to trample in My courts," and [Malachi 1:10] states: "O were there one among you who would shut the doors that you might not kindle fire on My altar for no reason! I have no pleasure in you," says the G-d of Hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from your hand." (*Sefer Madda, Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:7, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Based upon these and similar sources, the Beit Halevi suggests that the sinner might readily conclude that as long as he cannot authentically begin the *teshuvah* process he should "sit with folded hands and refrain from performing mitzvot since they will not be accepted." After all, why should his spiritual efforts become one more thing "to aimlessly blow about in the wind?" At this juncture, however, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that our Midrash contains an original and novel idea (*chidush*) - namely, that the sinner should strongly reject such a conclusion and instead, begin an active regimen of mitzvot and *ma'aseim tovim*. Yet, isn't this behavior counter-intuitive, i.e., if such actions will have no efficacy, why should I undertake them? The Beit Halevi answers this question with a remarkable insight:

Even though these meritorious acts will not be accepted now, nonetheless, he will ultimately benefit from them once he does *teshuvah* since, at that time, all of his prior sins will be forgiven. In truth, he will become like one who has never sinned. At that moment, all of his mitzvot and *ma'aseim tovim* will be retroactively accepted. This is what the *Yalkut Shimoni* meant when it discussed the case of one who was initially embarrassed and, therefore, reticent to do *teshuvah*. Such a person needs to exchange his prohibited actions with meritorious ones, repent – and thereby have his good deeds accepted.

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, this was the intention of the Midrash's *mashal*:

One who has flawed coins should go to the moneychanger and give him additional money in order to switch his bad coins for good ones. Yet, one who does not even have imperfect coins – behold, he has nothing to bring to exchange with the moneychanger. This is precisely the point of the meritorious deeds that the sinner undertakes prior to engaging in the *teshuvah* process – for, at that point, they are like defective coins. Yet, they are still coins – and with the extra money he will contribute, i.e. his heartfelt *teshuvah*, these *ma'aseim tovim* will be accepted and he will finally have “perfect coins.” This would not be the case if he were to sit idly now, since afterwards, he would have nothing at all of any value in his possession.

Armed with this beautiful explanation of the Midrash, the Beit Halevi proceeds to explain the famous opening verses of this week's *haftorah*:

This is what the text meant when it stated: “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity. Take words with yourselves and return to the L-rd. Say, “You shall forgive all iniquity and teach us [the] good [way], and let us render [for] bulls [the offering of] our lips.” [*Sefer Hosheah* 14:2-3, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*] This means that after Hashem has accepted our heartfelt *teshuvah* and forgiven us for the sins [we have committed], He will then accept all of the good we have done prior to our having repented.

Indeed, after we have done *teshuvah*, we reunite with Hashem, and once again become his beloved. Maimonides formulated this uplifting and inspiring idea in this fashion:

How exalted is the level of Teshuvah! Previously, the [transgressor] was separate from G-d, the L-rd of Israel, as [Isaiah 59:2] states: “Your sins separate between you and your G-d.” He would call out [to G-d] without being answered as [Isaiah 1:15] states: “Even if you pray many times, I will not hear.” ... Now, he is clinging to the *Schechinah* as [Deuteronomy 4:4] states: “And you who cling to G-d, your L-rd.” He calls out [to G-d] and is answered immediately as [Isaiah 65:24] states: “Before, you will call out, I will answer.” He fulfills mitzvot and they are accepted with pleasure and joy as [Ecclesiastes 9:7] states, “G-d has already accepted your works,” and [Malachi 3:4] states: “Then, shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasing to G-d as in days of old and as in the former years.” (Ibid.)

May this Rosh Hashanah be the time when each of us, in our own unique way, returns to Hashem in deep love and spiritual devotion. May we all be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the fulfillment of Malachi the prophet's stirring words: “Then, shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasing to G-d as in days of old and as in the former years.” *V'chane yihi*

*ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *g'mar chatimah tovah*

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