

Parashat Nitzavim – Rosh Hashanah 5776, 2016:

The Power and Gift of Teshuvah

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 bat Yeziel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Leah bat Shifra, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains a celebrated narrative passage that focuses upon the concept of *teshuvah* (repentance):

And you will return to the L-rd, your G-d (*v'shavta od Hashem Elokecha*), 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. He will once again gather you from all the nations, where the L-rd, your G-d, had dispersed you. (*Sefer Devarim* 30:2-3, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The proclamation of the prophet Hoshea, that we read on Shabbat Shuvah, “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d (*shuvah Yisrael od Hashem Elokecha*), for you have stumbled in your iniquity,” (*Sefer Hoshea* 14:2), strongly parallels the language of the first verse in our Torah passage, “And you will return to the L-rd, your G-d (*v'shavta od Hashem Elokecha*).” The linguistic similarity of the expressions “*v'shavta od Hashem Elokecha*” and “*shuvah Yisrael od Hashem Elokecha*,” is nothing less than striking. It would seem, therefore, that they should share the same meaning. Yet, as we shall see, the overall context of each verse endows them with subtle, yet substantive, differences.

Talmud Bavli, Yoma 86a, a compendium of inspiring declarations concerning *teshuvah*, contains a statement quoted in the name of Rabbi Levi: “Great is *teshuvah* since it reaches unto the Throne of Honor, as the text states, ‘*shuvah Yisrael od Hashem Elokecha.*’” The second Bobover Rebbe, HaRav Ben-Zion Halberstam *zatzal* (Kedushat Tzion, 1874-1941), cites a question of the Yeshuot Ya’akov (Rabbi Jacob Ornstein, 1775-1839) regarding Rabbi Levi’s choice of “*shuvah Yisrael od Hashem Elokecha,*” as his proof text, rather than our Torah portion’s *pasuk*:

Why did not [Rabbi Levi] bring the Torah’s text, namely, the holy text we have before us [in our *parasha*] that states, “*v’shavta od Hashem Elokecha?*” It is clear from this verse that *teshuvah* reaches unto the very Throne of Honor, just as we find in the verse that he [Rabbi Levi] brings, “*shuvah Yisrael od Hashem Elokecha.*” In short, why did Rabbi Levi bring a verse from the Prophets instead of from the Torah?

The Yeshuot Ya’akov’s question is based upon the principle that a verse from the Torah is always a stronger proof text than a citation from either the Prophets or Writings. As such, his question is quite apropos.

The Kedushat Tzion answers the Yeshuot Ya’akov’s query in a deeply insightful manner that facilitates our understanding of the multi-layered nature of *teshuvah*:

It is possible to answer [the Yeshuot Ya’akov’s question] in the following fashion: In truth, there are two kinds of *teshuvah*, *teshuvah m’ahavah* (*teshuvah* based upon love) and *teshuvah m’yirah* (*teshuvah* based upon awe and fear). The essential distinction that obtains between them is that *teshuvah* based upon awe is set into motion by something that generates the awe itself – such as potential punishment [for a sin] or something else that brings one to awe and visceral fear. *Teshuvah m’ahavah*, however, is different in kind and degree, for it is self-generated and devoid of any external cause. Instead, sparks of love burn in the innermost being of the Jew, and they, themselves, become transformed into flames of love for the Almighty. (*Sefer Kedushat Tzion*, Parashat Nitzavim, s.v. *v’shavta*, translation and textual notations my own)

After explicating these two distinct types of *teshuvah*, Rav Halberstam *zatzal* analyzes their differences in greater depth:

In reality, our Sages taught us (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma 86b*) that *teshuvah m’ahavah* has the unique ability to transform purposeful sins (*zedonot*) into, as it were, meritorious acts (*zechuyot*),

whereas, *teshuvah m'yirah* can only convert *zedonot* into inadvertent sins (*she'gagot*). As such, there is nothing novel in stating that *teshuvah m'ahavah* reaches unto the very Throne of Honor, since any and all sins [addressed by this form of *teshuvah*] have been converted into *zechuyot*, and act as angels that rise [to the Heavens] to speak positively on our behalf before the Throne of Glory – just like all *mitzvot* and *zechuyot* whereby a person is guaranteed to acquire positive advocates [that speak on their behalf]. This does not happen to one who does *teshuvah* based upon awe and fear, since his sins continue to exist and remain as *she'gagot*. Nonetheless, even *teshuvah m'yirah* has the ability to ascend to the Throne of Glory.

Based upon this presentation, the Kedushat Tzion proceeds to answer the Yeshuot Ya'akov's question:

Now we can understand why Rabbi Levi [in our above cited *Gemara*] brings the *pasuk* from *Sefer Hoshea*, instead of the Torah verse from our *parasha*: Our Torah portion's *pasuk* states, “*v'shavta od Hashem Elokecha*,” i.e. without any external motivation, and this is the essence of *teshuvah m'ahavah*. Given its nature, it is manifestly clear that this kind of *teshuvah* reaches unto the Throne of Glory. Yet, our Sages of blessed memory wanted to prove that even *teshuvah m'yirah* has such great power that it, too, can reach the Throne of Glory. Therefore, the *Gemara* brings the *pasuk*, “*shuvah Yisrael*,” which is presented by Hashem's messenger [Hoshea], for it was this prophet who arose and encouraged the Jewish people to undertake the *teshuvah* process. This is, [by definition,] *teshuvah m'yirah*, [rather than *teshuvah m'ahavah*]. Nonetheless, the text testifies that it, too, is powerful enough to reach unto the Almighty, Himself.

The Kedushat Tzion has provided us with a new and deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of *teshuvah*, and its power and scope. Some of us will be fortunate enough to return to the Almighty through *teshuvah m'ahavah*, while others will follow the path of *teshuvah m'yirah*. In either case, we can rest assured that our *teshuvah* will ascend to the highest heights of Heaven – and unto the very Throne of Glory. May each of us recognize the *chane v'chesed v'rachamim* (grace, kindness and mercy) that this represents, so that we may wholeheartedly proclaim, “*ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu u'mah na'im yerushatainu*” (“We are overcome with joy at the goodness of our portion and the pleasantness of our inheritance.”) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *kativah v'chatimah tovah*.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.