

Parashat Vayelech - Shabbat Shuvah 5776, 2015

*Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d*

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

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]...” (*Sefer Hosheah* 14:2-3, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The opening phrase of this week’s *haftarah*, “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d,” contains some of the most famous words of the *Nevi'im* (Prophets). Little wonder, then, that this Shabbat is named, “*Shuvah*” (Return), after the first word of the *haftarah*. Moreover, on a conceptual level, it is a very appropriate appellation for this Shabbat, since Shabbat Shuvah serves as the nexus between the judgment of Rosh Hashanah and the atonement of Yom Kippur.

In order to obtain a deeper level of understanding of Hosheah’s expression, “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity,” let us turn to two luminaries of the Chasidic tradition, Rabbis Yisrael of Koznitz *zatzal* (1740-1814) and Menachem Mendel of Kotzk *zatzal* (1787-1859). Rav Yisrael of Koznitz was given two popular names, “the Maggid (Preacher) of Koznitz,” and the “Avodat Yisrael,” after the title of his most beloved work. In this *sefer* (book), Rav Yisrael interprets Hosheah’s

words in the following manner: “Return O Israel’ - until [you acknowledge] that Hashem exists and that He is the Creator of the Universe. ‘To the L-rd your G-d,’ – [in order that He will be] your G-d.” (Translation and brackets my own) This analysis focuses upon two fundamental ideas of Judaism, *emunah* (belief) and *bitachon* (trust). According to this understanding, returning to Hashem is first and foremost a cognitive act and experience, wherein we acknowledge that Hashem exists and that He created the world. Once we accept these two theological principles, we are ready to forge a truly personal relationship with the Almighty. In so doing, each of us can emulate our forebears at the Sea of Reeds and wholeheartedly declare: “The Eternal’s strength and His vengeance were my salvation; this is my G-d, and I will make Him a habitation, the G-d of my father, and I will ascribe to Him exaltation.” (*Sefer Shemot* 15:2, underlining my own)

Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk is known as “the Kotzker Rebbe.” He is famous for his deeply incisive Torah exegesis that often revealed deep psychological and spiritual insights into the human condition. He begins his exploration of Hosheah’s prophetic proclamation with a fascinating Midrash that focuses upon Reuven’s behavior when he disheveled his father Yaakov’s bed that had been placed in Bilhah the concubine’s tent:

The Holy One blessed be He said: There has never been an instance when an individual has sinned before me and has done *teshuvah*; [yet,] you [Reuven,] are the first to have enacted the repentance process. As a result, I [Hashem] hereby take an oath that one of your future offspring will arise and will be the first [in his time] to undertake the *teshuvah* process. Who was this? This was Hosheah, as the text states: “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d.” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah*, chapter 84, translation and brackets my own)

The Kotzker Rebbe notes that this Midrash, by stating that no one else had done *teshuvah* until Reuven, seemingly contradicts the widely held opinion that both Adam, and his son,

Cain, had repented for their respective sins. If so, how could the Midrash state that Reuven was the first to have undertaken the *teshuvah* process? Rav Menachem Mendel answers this question by identifying the nature of the sins that Adam, Cain and Reuven had done. In this process, he illustrates the key difference that obtained between Adam and Cain's sins, and that of Reuven:

In reality, [there is a significant dissimilarity between Adam and Cain's sins and that of Reuven's sin]. Adam and Cain knew at the time of their sins that they were violating the commandments of the Omnipresent One, therefore, there is nothing new (*ain rebuta*) in their having done *teshuvah*. Reuven, however, created the brand new concept that even a prohibition that was violated in an effort to serve Hashem (*l'shame shamayim*) needed *teshuvah* [to rebuild one's relationship with Hashem]. This is the case, since Reuven's intention for forcefully disarranging his father's bed [See Rashi's commentary to *Sefer Bereishit* 35:22] was purely *l'shame shamayim*. As the Midrash and Talmud state: "The embarrassment of his mother required a proper response." (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 98:4, *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 54b) Nonetheless, Reuven did *teshuvah*.

At this juncture, the Kotzker Rebbe directly links Reuven's repenting for a sin that was *l'shame shamayim* to Hosheah's future pronouncement:

So, too, did Hosheah, Reuven's future [spiritual] heir, say: "Return, O Israel, to the L-rd your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity." This hints at the notion that even though the Jewish people's sin was on account of a *mikshol* (a stumbling block) [and, therefore, close to unintentional in nature,] nonetheless, [Hosheah] urges them to repent. [This, then, is the meaning of] "to the L-rd your G-d" – even if you have stumbled in a sin that you did *l'shame shamayim* – do *teshuvah*. (All translations and brackets my own)

The Kotzker Rebbe has taught us all a crucial lesson, namely, every *chet* (sin), even ones associated with *mikshol*, require heartfelt *teshuvah* in order to repair our relationship with the Almighty. As such, may it be Hashem's will and our fervent desire that each one of us will return to Him in sincere *teshuvah* so that we may achieve complete reconciliation with Him. Then, once again, we will be, "... children of the L-rd, your G-d" (*Sefer Devarim* 14:1) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, *kativah v'chatimah tovah* and *tizku l'shanim rabot*.

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