

Two Kinds 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, 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.

Shabbat this week is known by the special name: “*Shabbat Shuva*.” This appellation derives from *Sefer Hoshea* 14:2: “Return (*shuva*) O’ Israel unto (*od*) the L-rd your G-d for you have stumbled in your sin” – and constitutes the first verse (*pasuk*) of today’s *Haftorah* (reading from the Prophets). The theme of returning to Hashem (*teshuvah*) is found, as well, in the very next verse: “Take words with yourselves and return to (*el*) 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.’” (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). A careful reading reveals that our first *pasuk* employs the preposition “*od*,” whereas the second one utilizes “*el*” in reference to returning to the Almighty and the path of mitzvah observance. This leads us to ask two questions: “Why are two different terms employed in reference to *teshuvah*?” and “Why do we need two verses that seem, at least on the surface, to proclaim the same message?” It is to these questions that we now turn.

The great 19th century Russian exegete, Rabbi Meïr Leibush ben Jehiel Michel Weiser, popularly known as the “Malbim,” after the Hebrew initials of his name, addressed both of our questions in his analysis of our *pasukim* (verses). He noted that the word “*od*,” in 14:2 signifies a sense of *richuk* (distance) between two objects or entities, in this instance, between G-d and the Jewish people:

The word ‘*od*’ connotes the idea that Hashem stood far away from them [i.e. the Jewish people], and that they needed to walk toward Him until they came near to Him, unto the place wherein He was to be found. This means that they had to reject their earlier sins, feel remorseful for what they had done in the past, namely, they had erred in multiple ways, both inadvertently and through reasons beyond their control (*ones*), and that they now must seek out the proper path to return unto Hashem. (Underlining my own)

Although the Malbim does not employ the term “*teshuvah min hatzorech*,” (“returning to Hashem based upon absolute obligation”), I believe that it accurately captures the essence of his analysis. In our first *pasuk*, “Return O’ Israel unto (*od*) the L-rd your G-d,” the prophet Hoshea taught us that the Master of the Universe was distant from our ancestors and that we were obligated to make every conceivable effort to cross the gaping chasm that separated us from Him. This, Hoshea opined, could only be realized through heartfelt and authentic *teshuvah* that was the product of minds, hearts, and souls. This, then, was the absolute mandate of that particular historical moment that continues to inspire us until our own time.

While the first *pasuk* discussed the notion of *teshuvah min hatzorech*, the second verse, wherein the idea of returning to Hashem is referenced by the term “*el*,” is an entirely different matter. For the Malbim, “*el*” refers to returning to Hashem out of love and devotion – *teshuvah m’ahavah*, rather than as a result of obligation:

The second reference of “return to (*el*) the L-rd,” encapsulates the notion of *teshuvah* based upon love. In this case, our purposive sins will not only be thought of as being inadvertent in nature rather, they will be thought of as being meritorious acts. Thus, the forgiveness that our forefathers obtained from Hashem was on account of their sins being viewed as acts beyond their control, i.e. accidental acts, or errors – therefore, the forgiveness that they received was a result of their merits and righteousness being added to the divine equation (original Hebrew: *sh’yikachu emahem l’dvar zechut alyehem*)... As a result, Hashem saw that after our ancestors grievously sinned, they returned to His service in order to love Him – with their complete minds and hearts – and no longer from fear of punishment... (Underlining my own)

Thus, according to the Malbim, Hoshea has provided us with a roadmap for returning to

Hashem. This map is comprised of two different possible routes: *teshuvah min hatzorech* and *teshuvah m'ahavah*. Each path mercifully leads to a rapprochement with the Almighty, and each of us can intuit the proper path upon which we personally need to tread. For some the journey may be relatively long, whereas for others it may be short. For each and every one of us, however, it is a journey that we must take so that we can once again be united with the Master of the Universe. May He grant us the wisdom and discernment to do so, soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Kativah v'chatimah tovah and *tizku l'shanim rabot*

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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 rdbe718@gmail.com.

My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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