

Parshiot Nitzavim – Vayelech 5771, 2011:

Teshuvah: The Goal of the Hour

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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.

Judaism is first and foremost a religion of action wherein the deed, in the form of the religious gesture (*mitzvah*), is the primary mode of connecting with the Almighty. Little wonder then, that one of Judaism's greatest heroes and spiritual giants was none other than Nachshon ben Aminadav, the first person to enter the Sea of Reeds in expectation of Hashem's imminent salvation. Indeed, *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:7 teaches us that his name foreshadowed the literal leap of faith that will forever remain emblazoned in the memory of our people: “Why was he named Nachshon? This was because he was the first to go into the surging waves of the Sea (*nachshol sheb'yam*). The Holy One blessed be He said to Moshe: ‘He who has sanctified my name in the Sea will be he who will bring the first sacrifice [in the dedication of the altar in the desert].’” Nachshon was a true hero who was driven by the noble spiritual desire to sanctify Hashem's name; as such, He embraced action – the behavior of an authentic eved *Hashem* (a servant of G-d).

This week's *parshiot* call upon us to symbolically emulate Nachshon, to jump into the *Yam Suf* (Sea of Reeds) of our lives and do *teshuvah* (return to the proper path of serving Hashem):

And it will be, when all these things come upon you the blessing and the curse which I have set before you that you will consider in your heart, among all the nations where the L-rd your G-d has banished you, **and you will return to the L-rd, your G-d, 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. (*Sefer Devarim* 30:1-3, translation, *Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, emphasis my own)

“... and you will return to the L-rd, your G-d” is the mitzvah of *teshuvah*. As is found in the famous first paragraph of the *Shema*, genuine return to Hashem must be performed “with all your heart and all your soul.” Insincere *teshuvah* is a duplicitous act devoid of utility and meaning.

In order to do heartfelt and meaningful *teshuvah*, however, we need to know what its constitutive elements are, and what they mean. Maimonides (1135-1204) devoted an entire section of his halachic *magnum opus*, *Mishneh Torah* to this topic. Thus, in *Sefer Madda, Hilchot Teshuvah* (2:2), he asks, “What is *teshuvah*?” His answer forms the conceptual basis of this mitzvah until our own historical moment:

What exactly is *teshuvah*? [It is the act that demands] the sinner to reject his sin, remove it from his thoughts, and determine in his mind that he will never do it again...So, too, he must feel badly for what he has done in the past...and he must bear testimony to He who knows all secret matters that he will never repeat this sin again...In addition, he must verbally confess [his sin] and speak aloud of those things he has determined in his mind. (Translation my own)

Let us summarize the *teshuvah* process as delineated by Maimonides:

1. Rejection of the sin: takes place in the present (*azivat hacheit*)
2. Feel badly about what has been done: refers to past actions (*charata al ha'avar*)
3. Resolve to change: refers to the future (*kabbalah al he'atid*)
4. Declare and confess (verbally) to Hashem to never be involved in this sin again (*vidui devarim*)

As we can readily see, true *teshuvah* is an all-encompassing process. It incorporates a radical shift in the mind of the former sinner so that he will be able to return to the proper

path of serving Hashem. It requires unflinching honesty and the strength to conquer the natural tendency to rationalize one's actions and behaviors. The *baal teshuvah* (master of teshuvah) needs to feel badly about what he has done, reject his heinous behavior, and resolve never to repeat this action in the future. Moreover, an earnest oral confession before Hashem of what he has done, and a crystal clear statement that he will never repeat this action again, must be part and parcel of this process. This, then, is the essence of *teshuvah*.

Perhaps the single greatest barrier to genuine *teshuvah* is arrogance (*gaavah*). It blinds us to the ramifications of our behavior and makes us feel as if we are living on a higher plane of existence than the rest of mankind. Therefore, Nachmanides (1194-1270), in his famous *Igeret Haramban (Letter of Nachmanides)*, warns us against this dangerous *middah* (character trait):

And now, my son, understand and observe that whoever feels that he is greater than others is rebelling against the Kingship of Hashem, because he is adorning himself with His garments, as it is written (*Sefer Tehillim* 93:1), "Hashem reigns, He wears clothes of pride." Why should one feel proud? Is it because of wealth? Hashem makes one poor or rich (*Sefer Shmuel* I: 2:7). Is it because of honor? It belongs to Hashem, as we read (*Sefer Divrei Hayamim* I: 29:12), "Wealth and honor come from You." So how could one adorn himself with Hashem's honor? And one who is proud of his wisdom surely knows that Hashem "takes away the speech of assured men and reasoning from the sages" (*Sefer Iyov* 12:20)!? So we see that everyone is the same before Hashem, since with His anger He lowers the proud and when He wishes He raises the low. So lower yourself and Hashem will lift you up!

(Translation, <http://www.pirchei.co.il/specials/ramban/ramban.htm>)

Herein Nachmanides is teaching us that G-d, and G-d alone, has the right to act with greatness. The wealth, honor, and wisdom that He bestows are but a passing shadow. Arrogance drives a wedge between G-d and man, and prevents us from apprehending

authentic Torah values. Moreover, it blinds man to reality and thereby prevents him from returning to his Creator.

How, then, can we avoid the pitfalls of *gaavah*, so that we can prepare ourselves to engage in the *teshuvah* process? Here, too, we turn to Nachmanides:

In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before Hashem, with His Schechinah [Divine presence] above you, for His glory fills the whole world. Speak with fear and awe, as a slave standing before his master. Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, don't answer loudly, but gently and softly, as one who stands before his master. (Ibid.)

When we truly feel ourselves to be in G-d's presence, we will naturally act with humility before Him and with restraint and dignity toward others.

Rosh Hashanah is fast approaching, and the last days and hours of the year are upon us. It is the time to do *teshuvah*. With G-d's help, may we have the wisdom and discernment to reject *gaavah* and embrace *anavah* (humility). May we ever be ready to be spiritual Nachshons, to jump fearlessly into the whirlwind of confusion that is our lives and actively change them for the better. With G-d's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to do *teshuvah* from our hearts and souls, so that we will have long and healthy lives filled with Torah and mitzvot, as servants of the Master of us all. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Kativah v'chatimah tovah and tizku l'shanim rabot

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

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