

Parashat Nitzavim

Returning to the Root of Our Existence

Returning to the Divine Spark of Our Soul

We definitely feel the teshuvah (repentance) in the air as the full moon rises in the Elul sky, and we awake to the call of the neighbors' shofars. It strikes me that for most of us, teshuvah is about getting rid of the smuts of our negative emotions and habits such as selfishness, jealousy, anger, judgment, lashon hara, disrespect, lack of modesty etc. Thinking about the meaning of the word תְּשׁוּבָה/teshuvah – return, it seems that rather than being preoccupied with what to return from, the focus needs to be on to where and what we are returning. I would like to return to who I really am, to the person Hashem created me to be – to become aligned with the Divine spark of my soul. Teshuvah is about searching for our essence by visualizing our higher selves and reconnecting with the part of ourselves that may be hiding behind layers of errors caused by fear, pain, anger etc. In the process of searching, we usually remove everything that's in the way in order to find our lost jewel. However, if we get stuck in clearing away the garbage but forget about the jewel what have we accomplished? Throughout the sin-confessing process of teshuvah, let us not forget that each of us is a precious Jewel, which just needs a bit of polishing to adorn the crown of the King.

Returning to Our Place Within the Community of Israel

Parashat Nitzavim designates the goal of our teshuvah. We are called upon to return until Hashem our G-d:

ספר דברים פרק ל פסוק ב וּשְׁבַת עַד הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּשְׁמַעַת בְּקוֹלוֹ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם וּבְנִיךָ בְּכֹל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכֹל נַפְשְׁךָ:

“Return to Hashem your G-d, and listen to His voice with all your heart and soul both you and your children, just as I command you this day” (*Devarim 30:2*).

Eight verses later, at the end of the paragraph, the Torah seemingly repeats itself, directing us to once again return to Hashem.

ספר דברים פרק ל פסוק י כִּי תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֵּיהֶם הַכְּתוּבָה בְּסֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה כִּי תָשׁוּב אֶל הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכֹל נַפְשְׁךָ:

“...since you will be heeding the voice of Hashem your G-d, to keep His commandments and statutes that are written in this book of the law; once you return to Hashem your G-d with all your heart and soul” (*Devarim 30:10*).

If we compare the language used to describe each of the returns to Hashem, we discover that the first return is described as עַד הָשֵׁם /ad Hashem, whereas the final return is described as אֶל הָשֵׁם /el Hashem. What is the difference between returning *ad* or *el* Hashem? “Ad Hashem” is returning “towards G-d” – approaching, but not fully attaining. The Torah often uses the preposition עַד /ad, indicating a state of ‘towards, but not included in the category’ (וְלֹא עַד בְּכֹלֵל) (*Berachot 26b and more*). This is genuine yet incomplete repentance, obscured by many veils. Perhaps, this first stage of teshuvah refers to individual teshuvah which every Jew can do even while in exile. However, complete return to our essential selves – אֶל הָשֵׁם /el Hashem cannot be achieved as individuals on foreign soil. On Rosh Hashana we come before Hashem not only as individuals but also as a flock of sheep. Who we are is not defined by our individual virtues alone, but rather, by finding our true place within the greater whole of the nation of Israel. This can be compared to a stitch in an

embroidered challah cover. The stitch by itself may be absolutely perfect, yet it only expresses its fullest beauty when connected with the other stitches, forming an intricate pattern. The struggle to find our true place within the greater group, where we can both contribute and receive is an important part of returning to our highest selves cleaving completely to Hashem. The spiritual progress of any individual Jewish is intrinsically dependent on the spiritual state of the entire Jewish people (*Tal Chaim*, p. 18).

Ultimate Teshuvah on the Holy Land

Although there are Jewish communities in exile, returning to Hashem and ourselves can only be fully accomplished in the place designed for our ultimate purpose. The Jewish people is compared to a grapevine that will only yield an abundance of healthy succulent fruits when planted on suitable soil with optimal conditions (*The Kuzari*, 2:11-12). True teshuvah pertains to both body and soul, and the Land of Israel is the only place where a Jew can become both physically and spiritually aligned to Hashem's will. The soul-root of every Jew is in the land of Israel, where we can thrive to our fullest, on an individual, communal and national level. This concept is supported by the intermediate Torah verses between the two directives to return to Hashem. After describing the initial stage of teshuvah, the Torah goes on to describe how Hashem will gather us from the furthestmost corners of exiles, return us to the Land of Israel, circumcise our hearts, and bless our produce and offspring. Meriting this Divine assistance will enable us to achieve the final culmination in the teshuvah process – a new kind of teshuvah, where we will not only return towards Hashem *עַד הַשֵּׁם/ad Hashem*, but rather a complete all-embracing cleaving *אֶל/el* – to Hashem:

ספר דברים פרק ל (ג) וְשָׁב הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת שְׁבוּתְךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשָׁב וּקְבַצְךָ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפִּיצְךָ הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה: (ד) אִם יְהִי נִדְחָךְ בְּקִצְהָ הַשָּׁמַיִם מִשָּׁם יִקְבַּצְךָ הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּמִשָּׁם יִקְחֶךָ: (ה) וְהִבִּיאֲךָ הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִרְשׁוּ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ וִירְשִׁתָּהּ וְהִיטְבָהּ וְהִרְבֶּה מֵאֲבוֹתֶיךָ: (ו) וּמֵל הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת לִבְבְּךָ וְאֶת לִבֵּב זָרְעֶךָ לְאַהֲבָה אֶת הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ לְמַעַן חַיֶּיךָ: (ז) וְנָתַן הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת כָּל הָאֵלוֹת הָאֵלֹהִים עַל אֲבֹיֶיךָ וְעַל שְׂנְאֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר רָדְפוּךָ: (ח) וְאַתָּה תָשׁוּב וְשִׁמְעַתָּ בְּקוֹל הָשֵׁם וְעָשִׂיתָ אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם: (ט) וְהוֹתִירָךְ הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדְךָ בְּפָרִי בְטָנְךָ וּבְפָרִי בְהִמְתָּךְ וּבְפָרִי אֲדָמְתְךָ לְטֹבָה כִּי יָשׁוּב הָשֵׁם לְשׁוֹשׁ עֲלֶיךָ לְטוֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁשׂ עַל אֲבוֹתֶיךָ:

“Then Hashem your G-d will return your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the peoples, where Hashem, your G-d, has scattered you. Even if your outcasts are dispersed in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there Hashem your G-d will gather you, from there He will fetch you. And Hashem, your G-d, will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will make you more prosperous and more numerous than your fathers. Then Hashem your G-d will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love Hashem your G-d with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live. Hashem your G-d will afflict all these curses upon your enemies, and foes who persecuted you. You, however will return and harken to the voice of Hashem, and obey all His commandments that I command you this day. Then Hashem your G-d will grant you abounding prosperity in all of your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your land, for good. For Hashem will again rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers” (*Devarim* 30:2-10).

Even if we are unable to rise to the challenge of the highest level of teshuvah cleaving completely to Hashem, it is important to recognize and appreciate each little baby-step of teshuvah. Our desire to change and improve in itself has value, leading us on our way to attaining complete spiritual elevation.

Taking us By the Hand through the Teshuvah Process

Rashi asks why the Torah uses the form of the word *shav* when describing how Hashem will return our captivities rather than *heshiv*, which means causing others to return. The form *shav* indicates that Hashem himself returns with us. Since the Shechina dwells among Israel in exile, at the time of our redemption, Hashem Himself is redeemed as well (*Megillah* 29a). In addition, the day of the ingathering of the exiles will be so great and difficult, that Hashem himself will hold the hand of each and every Jew personally escorting us back home, as it states, "You will be gathered up one by one, O Children of Israel" (*Yesha'yahu* 27:1); (Rashi, *Devarim* 30:3). Rav Shmuel Tal explains that 'exile' can also refer to the distance of our soul from its source. Thus, we may learn from Rashi's explanation that Hashem's presence always dwells within the teshuvah process of both the individual Jew and the general community of Israel. In addition, we learn that Hashem himself takes each of us by the hand in order to help lift us up and out of sin and exile. He guides us personally to return to His presence, by removing the blocks of our 'heartwalls' (Based on *Tal Chaim*, pp. 26-28).

Why Bother Doing Teshuvah when We Relapse Year after Year?

When I look through my old confession-journals, I find many repetitions, from year to year. Resolutions I took upon myself were short-lived and each year after the High Holidays passed, it seems like I slid back from the ladder of teshuvah. "So what," I ask myself, "does teshuvah accomplish if it is so ephemeral?" Why go through all the motions of teshuvah only to relapse year after year? This can be compared to a religious Jewish family preparing for Pesach. Everyone is busy cleaning, dusting, scrubbing and polishing. Yet, soon after Pesach, the muck, dust and dirt begin to sneak back in and by next Erev Pesach the home is no cleaner than the previous year. So what is the value of cleaning if everything becomes dirty again? Rav Tal explains that even the short time that the home is sparkling clean adds greatly to the holiday Simcha. In addition, if we never cleaned our house for Pesach, the accumulated dirt would make our home more filthy year by year. This applies to the concept of teshuvah. Even if we only manage to keep our resolves of repentance for a short time, the time we enjoy our newfound connection with the Divine spark of our soul has value in itself and imbues the High Holidays and Sukkot with an added dimension. Moreover, more and more blocking barriers would accumulate around our heart, making it harder and harder to return to the essence of our soul, if we didn't take advantage of this favorable yearly time for teshuvah (*Tal Chaim*, p. 15-17).

Revealing the Light of Hashem Within Us

Sin can be compared to darkness; as soon as we turn on the light, it is dispelled. Likewise, we can dispel the darkness of depravity. Once we infuse our thought, speech and actions with deep Divine connection, our prior faults evaporate. This is because darkness and sin has no true existence. They only comprise lack of light and Divine Presence. As soon as we repent, Hashem shines His light upon us, melting away the stain of sin (*Ibid.*, p. 10-11). Through teshuvah towards ourselves, our people, the world and all the worlds, the entire existence will return to the Light of the Light of life. This is the secret of the light of Mashiach – the soul of the world (Based on Rav Kook, *Orot HaTeshuvah* 15:10). May we merit climbing the ladder of teshuvah, growing closer to complete alignment with the essence of our being! May we all return to the root of our existence, revealing our shiny jewel within which will adorn the crown of the ultimate King! *Shana Tovah Tikateivu V'Tichateumu!* May you be inscribed in the Book of Life!