

Rosh Hashanah

- Jonathan Schwartz.

Teshuva, Saul's and David's. Teshuva is a return to G-d. Teshuva meahava versus Teshuva miyira.

[This drasha was contributed by Rabbi Jonathan Schwartz, Assistant Rabbi of Fifth Avenue Synagogue. I submit it as an addition to the Yamim Noraim material mailed last week and particularly apt for Shabbat Shuva.(Ed)]

Hashiveinu Venashuvah. Such a nice tune, so powerful a message. Indeed, the prophet Jeremiah wanted us to recognize the power of Teshuva-repentance and thus, after chronicling the description of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in the book of Eicha, he adds the hope: Hashiveinu, return us G-d, and we shall return.

But at the same time, the hope of the prophet raises a conflict as well. Who makes the first move? Is G-d to return to us or we first to him? From the verse in Eicha, it seems as if G-d is to move first - Hashiveinu, first G-d is to return us, V'nashuvah and then we shall return. However, an examination of the Torah's description of Teshuva might suggest otherwise. After telling the people about the blessings and the curses that might befall the people, G-d informs the Jewish people that after they experience the reward and the punishment, they will engage in Teshuva -- in a restorative, repentance process. That Teshuva, says G-d will be Ad Hashem, it will reach G-d. Then and only then, V'shav Hashem et shevuteicha, will G-d return unto you.

So which one is it? Do we move first to G-d or wait for him to knock on our door? What is the direction of Teshuva and who comes first? G-d or We?

Perhaps we must ask a more fundamental question. Teshuva, the repentance process, is mine. I commit a sin and become obligated to repent. Where is G-d's piece in Teshuva anyway? I sinned and thus, the need to perform an action that is restorative in nature is my responsibility. I must right that which I wronged. How does Teshuva have a component that depends on G-d?

In order to answer both questions, that of G-d's role in Teshuva and who comes first, we need to understand the Teshuva process in general. The Talmud in Yoma tells us that Teshuva is great for he who engages in it allows transgressions that he committed intentionally to be considered as if they were merely accidental sins. Zedonot naasat lo keshegagot and as a result their severity is lessened. Reish Lakish argued. He felt that Teshuva was so powerful that he who engaged in it would benefit so greatly that zedonot, those sins that one committed intentionally, could even be considered future merits for the individual. How is that possible? How can sins change their nature from intentional to unintentional by a post facto, confessional, Teshuva? And if one can change the nature of sin through Teshuva, how can debits of sin become merits through Teshuva?

This, the Talmud answers, is a function of the style of the repentant individual. If he repents meiyirah, out of fear, then his sins are commuted from intentional to unintentional. However, when he repents out of love, Teshuva meiahava, then his sins are fully commuted and actually change into merits. But how does this strange metamorphosis take place?

The answer, explains the author of the Tomer Devorah, is in a misconception about the Teshuva process. We tend to assume that it is a personal process. I transgress Torah law and become soiled in sin. It then becomes incumbent upon me to clean myself of the filth of sin. That cleansing process is assumed to be Teshuva. In that manner Teshuva is rehabilitative as the individual is restored to his previous debt-free state. But that is not the whole of Teshuva. G-d does not want an individual return to previous pre-sin state. He desires our growth and improvement. And thus, Teshuva is meant to be a return, as the word Teshuva implies, but instead of the individual's return referring to his personal return to a pre-sin state, Teshuva refers to a return to G-d and a strengthening of our relationship with him. When we sin, we distance ourselves from Hashem. When we try to restore that error, we cannot merely go back to where we were previously. We must reconnect and strengthen ourselves in the process.

Thus, G-d's role in the Teshuva process is not that of Judge and arbiter, evaluating the quality of Man's Teshuva. He is a partner in the process. He works with us in our attempt to reconnect to him and is willing to meet us partway. But where that part begins depends upon each man's motivation. Man can be motivated to repair his relationship with G-d out of fear of G-d's awesome power and the punishment that He can inflict. That fear of punishment, yirah, convinces man of the error of his ways. It might even get him to withhold himself from committing the same transgressions in the future. However, as Maran HaRav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht Ztl. used to note, fear is never a constructive motivator. It does not foster forward development. One cannot develop a closer relationship as a result of fear. A person might be pushed to reconsider past opinions but the impetus for change is not internal. It is imposed. Thus, in context of Teshuva meiyirah, a Teshuva process that originates from without, G-d must take the first step. In that context we are told Hashiveinu venashuva. G-d you lead this dance. You showed us your awesome power in order to punish, now show us that you can re-accept us and then we will follow you.

This type of Teshuva might remove man's demerits in the great ledger of G-d, where he gets an exemption for accountability for the severity of sin (zedonot keshegagot). But he did not yet move to fix and improve the sin-damaged relationship he ruined with the Almighty. Hence, Teshuva meiyirah is limited in scope. Self motivated Teshuva is much more powerful. Man looks inside himself and recognizes a gap in his relationship with his creator. Out of pain of the loss of connectedness or perhaps more so, out of love for the closeness, man pushes himself to reconcile and further enhance his relationship with his G-d. In these moments, man motivates himself, not only to get past sin, but also to learn from the experience sin created. In the process man achieves new heights in his relationship with G-d, and G-d joins him as well. When that new level is achieved, man realizes that if not for the sin, he would not have moved forward in his relationship with G-d. In that manner, explains the Ran (Derashot), the sin too, becomes part of the merit, an impetus for a change, and a closer relationship with the Almighty, (zedonot kezachuyot), through Teshuva the sin becomes part of the future benefit that created a better understanding of the parties involved. It is like the newlywed couple that experiences their first

marital disagreement. The initial bliss of marriage need not be shattered. The innocence of their relationship is perhaps gone, but if their love truly conquers all, then both spouses learn from the experience reconcile and grow to understand, appreciate and love one another better and treasuring that bond that will be strengthened as a result.

Both Shaul and Dovid engaged in Teshuva processes. Shaul failed G-d. Ordered to destroy Amalek and their property, Shaul did not do so. When Shmuel came to him and chastised him for the event, he denied wrongdoing. Only after Shmuel informed him that G-d was rejecting him did Shaul attempt a Teshuva. Alas, Shaul's Teshuva was only meiyirah. It was motivated by his impending doom. It was void of any reparative gesture on his part toward G-d. Indeed, he attempted Teshuva. But he pleaded that Shmuel return with him – "v'shuv imi" – but such Teshuva, which was part of the pattern of fear of the consequences, was not enough.

Dovid was different. After sinning with Batsheva, he too, was visited by G-d's prophet. This time Natan HaNovi told Dovid of G-d's displeasure with him. And David admitted his sin. but unlike Shaul who merely stated chatasi, "I have sinned", Dovid recognized the effect his act had on his relation with G-d and sought to repair it too. And so Dovid declared the truth "chatasi leHashem" I have sinned before G-d and hurt the relationship I have with him. And so, explains the Malbim, Dovid, unlike his predecessor Shaul, was to be spared. He had begun the true, complete Teshuva process. He took the first step and was on the road to repairing his bond with G-d. Hence he was promised "Gam Hashem heevir chataseicha lo tamut". G-d is meeting you part way; He will re-accept you; you shall not die.

The direction of the Teshuva relationship is directly related to the motivation of man. If the motivation toward change is outside of man as in the case of Teshuva meiyirah, G-d takes the lead and the ultimate goal of reconnection to him is limited. However, when we are self-actuated, G-d joins us, guaranteeing that our efforts do not go unrewarded. This is true Teshuva meiahava. For love only exists reciprocally, and takes both man and G-d working together if it is to be successful.

Gemar Chatima Tova