

Parshat Nitzavim

Teshuva

Teshuva - How do you translate that word? We usually translate it simply as “repentance” with the connotation of an eradication of sinful activity. But is that the true meaning of the term ‘Teshuva’? Our study will demonstrate that the concept is far wider than we generally think.

Our parsha (quite topically) deals with the theme of Teshuva. Last week in “Ki Tavo” we witnessed the threat and prediction of national destruction, the result of not following the Torah. This week in Parshat Nitzavim we see the light at the other end of the tunnel. We are promised an end to exile and a restoration to our land and our God. This is known as the Parsha of Teshuva.

We will study this text and ask some basic questions about the nature of Teshuva, nationally and individually. What is involved in the process of Teshuva? Is Teshuva mere repentance or is it much more? To what exactly, or to whom, are we returning?

Chavruta:

1. Please look at : The ‘PARSHAT HATESHUVA’ : DEVARIM 30:1-10

(It is best to read from the beginning of Nitzavim (29:9) as ‘background reading’ but in this shiur we will focus on these ten pesukim and study them in depth)

2. This parsha describes a process of National Teshuva and God’s response to it.

* See if you can break down the process described here into separate stages.

* Are the stages ordered in a smooth progression?

* Are there any ‘stages’ of this process which seem strangely out of place?

3. The verb ‘shuv’: This verb is used seven times in the parsha.

* How do you translate the word each time it comes up? See if you can translate the word ‘shuv’, each time using a word other than ‘repent’. How many different meanings are contained in the parsha?

* Does it always refer to the same action?

* Does it always refer to the same ‘actor’?

In the light of this analysis, see RASHI on 30:3.

* What is the problem that Rashi addresses? How does he answer his question?

* What is being said by Rashi about God? Is God really dependent on Am Yisrael in this way? How might we understand this?

4. Verse 6 : The circumcision of the heart:

This is a phrase that is repeated daily in our Selichot and also in Yom Kippur prayers.

* What is the meaning of this phrase?

* Why does God need to do this to us? Have we not already done Teshuva? (v.1&2)

See the RAMBAN on this verse. He sees this verse as a description of the changes that will take place in human beings in the messianic age. His philosophy here is rather powerful and a little startling. (The Ramban is rather long ...the first half alone is enough to get the gist!!)

Shiur:

Our Parsha describes a journey. It is a journey of national and religious revival. It is a movement of return, from a broken fragmented existence to national perfection, from exile to redemption. This is a process that is described by the repeated mention of the word “Shuv”. The process is Teshuva.

ANI LEDODI VEDODI LI

When we examine this description of ‘teshuvah’, we are confronted by a number of difficulties. To begin with, we have the problem of repetition within the parsha. We find repeated mention of Am Yisrael’s return to God, first in verse 1 and 2 and then again in verse 8. How many times do Am Yisrael need to return to God? A second problem relates to the style of the passage. It shifts from Israel to God to Israel to God. Why?

Sometimes the way a text is written is just as important as its content. Our narrative style oscillating as it does between the Am Yisrael and God raises a central question. Who is returning to who?

At first it is Am Yisrael who appear to return to God but then God Himself turns to his people and moves in their direction bringing them back from Galut. God appears to continue this process of reconciliation and return by “circumcising” the hearts of his people; an apparent act of refinement and catharsis. The people then respond, following God and His Torah in a more intense manner. God reciprocates showering us with material wealth. And the end of the story is described with phrases of joy and delight (*yashuv Hashem lasus alecha* - v.9). Yishayahu uses these very words to describe the love of bride and groom - the words “*yasis alayich elokayich*” that we sing at a wedding.

The words Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li, which spell out the word ELUL are traditionally seen as the heading for the month of Teshuva. These words tell a story of reciprocal love and commitment between God and Israel. In the Parsha of Teshuva, it is the renewal of this relationship and its realisation that we see evolving and unfolding before our very eyes. The oscillation between God and Israel mirrors a human love relationship in which each partner will respond to the positive energy offered by their loved one. If each party to the relationship always feeds the relationship positively, then the relationship blossoms and grows, climbing higher and higher. In our case, the mutual energy is the movement of God towards His people, and the movement of Am Yisrael to God. The result is a union - a sense of togetherness between Am Yisrael and their God.

REPENTANCE AND RETURN

This love story is described by the usage of the word “shuv”. Usually the word can mean to turn or to return. In our context it seems to have developed additional connotations. We begin with “shuv” as an understanding of the meaning of our historical situation: “taking it to heart” (v.1). That sense of self-realisation leads to a “return” to God(v.2). God in turn “regathers” his lost children, bringing back the exiles (v.3-4). We “respond” (v.8) to God by listening to Him . The word “shuv”, “teshuvah”, describes the totality of this process.

In our parsha it has so many meanings. Teshuva can be an act of self-realisation and understanding, and also an act of change. It can be a response to God’s actions or a return to Him. It can be a physical return to Eretz Yisrael. The process of “Teshuva” is much more than deleting a few sins from the records. It is not just repentance. It is a total and comprehensive movement towards God, coming closer to

Him, unifying our desires and our lifestyle with His vision. The word “*shuv*” can be used to describe every stage in that process.

Rashi, (quoting the Gemara in Megilla 29a) goes a stage further. He applies this action of teshuva to God Himself! It is as if God undertakes an act of teshuva.

Rashi builds this based on a textual difficulty. In verse 3, if it wishes to say that “God...will return home the exiles” it should say VEHEISHIV, but the verse actually says VESHAV. Rashi explains that God Himself is returning WITH the exiles. If Am Yisrael are displaced, God too is displaced. The Shechina is in Galut together with Am Yisrael. In a relationship, the absence of one partner does not leave the other partner unaffected. The process of return is for God as much as for Am Yisrael. It is as if we are BOTH returning to a state of togetherness. This too is a reflection of the “relationship” model. If one side of the relationship is in exile, then automatically the other partner is displaced. Israel’s exile is God’s exile. Israel return is also God’s return. The relationship is healed.

THE TESHUVA OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The national process described here has a clear correlation. Here we find the first stage of teshuva being one of self recognition followed by a second stage putting the realization into action in the practical sphere. In our personal teshuva this is equally true. We begin with Hakarat Hachet, a certain self admission that we have sinned followed by a Kabbala Le’atid, a commitment to future change.

In the national model, God responds by returning exiles and furthering the extent of the national teshuva. In the case of our personal teshuva however, God’s positive response is less immediately visible. But we are assured “*Habba letaher messayin otto*” (Shabbat 104a) - that God’s helping hand is there to assist those who approach Him with pure intention.

A further reflection of our personal experience can be found in the way that the Teshuva progresses in waves. The pesukim shift from God to man to God to man. Apparently, we are not expected to take quantum leaps in the world of teshuva. We move forward very naturally, stage by stage, and God notes our desire for betterment and gives us a helping hand. We then move on to a higher stage. (See the excerpt from R. Yitzchak Arama in the article by N. Leibowitz.) Personal teshuva often requires grueling self control and it doesn’t happen overnight. It is a gradual process.

THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

This cryptic phrase begs definition. What is it that God means by this phrase? The Ramban says that it indicates a change in our human existence: the removal of the Yetzer Hara. This is the vision of the era of mashiach, the days of the final redemption, when we will have no inclination for rebellion or vice and we will live in harmony with ourselves and with God. No inner struggle will divert our energies from the true goal of the spiritual life. Apparently the reward for our desire to return to God is the removal of the factors which might take us away from Him.

The Ramban however goes further. He sees this change as a return to an era long gone. He views this change as a return to the pristine world of Gan Eden. In Gan Eden man lives in harmony with God. It reflects the perfect togetherness of man and his maker. Teshuva takes us back to the exact point of departure. It is ‘return’ in the literal sense of the word.

It is interesting that this verse from Nitzavim (“*umal Hashem elokecha Et Levavcha Ve’et Levav zarecha*”) is also seen as the acronym of the word ELUL (see Mishna Beruura O”CH #581). Elul is seen as the time of removal of the yetzer hara. Only that we have to make the change in ourselves. God

cannot do it for us. Ellul offers a road that leads us back to Gan Eden. It is a time of return. Return to God, but also a return to ourselves, to the purity of soul represented by man on his first day of creation when his soul was in its original purity. In Ellul we aim to take ourselves back to a pre-sin world.

IS REDEMPTION DEPENDENT ON TESHUVA?

We have spoken of the interactive nature of teshuva. God and man together. But does man always have to make the first move? Can God not draw us towards him, helping us to realise his will without inner struggle? It would certainly make our teshuva less painful. Why can’t God do ‘teshuva’? Why can’t God come to us?

This is the topic of a famous discussion between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua in Gemara Sanhedrin (97b). Rabbi Eliezer brings verse after verse to prove that “there is no redemption without teshuva” whereas Rabbi Yehoshua insists that “even if Am Yisrael do not do teshuva they will be redeemed.” For Rabbi Eliezer, there cannot be redemption without Am Yisrael making some change for the better. What is redemption if not the result of a cathartic process of betterment? Rabbi Yehoshua strongly disagrees. The king can decide to invite us into His chamber at any time. If redemption depends on us, then who is to say that it will ever happen?

In truth, this discussion between the scholars of the mishna is an argument between the books of Vayikra and Devarim. As we have seen, here in Devarim, teshuva is the key to redemption. It depends on us making the first move. But in Vayikra, there is a different mechanism to the national return.

“ And I will remember my covenant with Jacob..Isaac...and Abraham and I will remember the land... and even in the lands of their enemies, I have not despised them nor have I found them repulsive intending to destroy them, to break my covenant with them...for I will remember the covenant.” Vayikra 26:42-45

Here, the central criterion is the ‘Brit’, the covenant made with the forefathers of the nation. The redemption is not dependant on our behaviour, on our *teshuva*. Rather, God is committed despite our conduct. God is ‘forced’ to redeem us, to return us to him. Indeed in our Selichot we ‘remind’ God of this, as if to say “you owe it to us however bad we are”.

A HIGHER LEVEL OF REDEMPTION

So maybe God makes the first move. He is committed to a covenant, a deal. And maybe we will make the first move and we will return to God in Teshuva.

But on closer examination, the two models are incomparable. This can be clearly demonstrated when we examine the nature and quality of the subsequent redemption.

Redemption through ‘contract’ does not lead to a relationship of closeness and togetherness that we have described above. It is redemption but it is not full return. That was the redemption of Bayit Sheni. We returned not because we were better but rather because 70 years were up. Technically we had a Temple but in reality, the closeness, the love, between God and His people was lacking. There was no process of return and thus the second Temple never reached the heights of the first. A redemption because of a covenant means that God is bringing us back. But if we have not changed, has the relationship been truly repaired?

Redemption through teshuva is complete return. A return of restoration and repair. Where we walk a path which takes effort, but the result of the journey is that we reach our destination different from the way we began. We have

undergone a metamorphosis and the result is that the redemption creates a more perfected reality.

Our hope and prayer, as individuals and as a nation is "Avinu malkeinu, Hachazireinu bi-TESHUVA SHELEMA lefanecha". That we use this Elul to return. To return to God, to the path that we truly desire for ourselves as individuals, to the path of our national destiny and to a relationship of love and togetherness with God. And then we will experience a return to a world of restored values, a world of life and peace.

Shanna Tova.