

HAFTORAH COMMENTARY - VAYEILECH

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

Hoshea 14: 2 - 10; Yoel 2: 11-27; Micha 7: 18-20

This week's haftorah quite appropriately focuses on teshuvah - repentance. In the previous verses, the prophet Hoshea strongly rebukes the Jewish people for straying after practices of idolatry. He predicts terrible tragedies for the Jewish nation because of their atrocious behavior towards Hashem. Hoshea concludes his harsh words by saying, "Shomron will be put to shame because she rebelled against Hashem; they will fall by the sword with her sucklings and pregnant women split open." (14:1) But, Hashem invites the Jewish people to return and promises them in return all the blessings of Hashem.

Hoshea quotes Hashem saying, "I will heal them from their rebelliousness and love them through My generosity because My anger has turned away from them." (14:6) Metzudos Dovid sees in this passage the revelation of one of Hashem's unbelievable merciful attributes. Although the Jewish nation had been heavily involved in sin, one act of repentance would undo all wrong. The prophet describes the process of repentance in the following words, "Take along words and return to Hashem, say to Him 'Remove all sin and grab hold of goodness and we will replace bullocks with our lips of confession.'" (14:3) Hoshea says that Hashem requires one act of them, confession. Repentance for them means a sincere statement of recognition that they have strayed and will not continue doing so. One statement which reflects a sincere desire for Hashem to remove sinful practices from them will fulfill all requirements.

But, Hashem adds an unbelievable dimension to this and concludes, "I will love them out of generosity." 'This', says Metzudos, indicates Hashem's commitment to completely erase their wrong from His mind. Once they repent with sincerity, their past is non-existent. Furthermore, Hashem will increase His love for them in proportions that were never seen before. Although they have no new good track record to show, Hashem accepts their pledge and responds with perfect faith, showering them with love.

This mirrors the beautiful words of Rambam regarding one's relationship with Hashem after repenting. Rambam says, "How great is the merit of repentance! Yesterday one was separated from Hashem and today, after repenting, one merits to cleave to the Divine Presence. Today, one does Mitzvos which are pleasantly and happily accepted and Hashem even craves for them!" (Hilchos Teshuva 7:7)

However, Rambam adds a significant requirement to the Teshuva process. In addition to one's regret over sin and his conviction never to repeat such acts, one must bring Hashem to testify to the sincerity of this conviction. (Hilchos Teshuva 2:2) Apparently, even the Teshuva process can have different degrees of commitment but we are required to make our statement with perfect sincerity. During our confession we must feel - from the bottom of our heart - that we will not return to our shameful, sinful ways. The extent of this is reflected through our willingness to look Hashem "straight in the face" and declare to Him our sincere commitment. The source of Rambam's words is our haftorah wherein it states, "Take with you words of repentance and say to Hashem.. we will never again declare a status of deity to our hands' craftwork." (14:4) Yes, true repentance includes an affirmative statement directly to Hashem that we will never return to our sinful ways. (see commentary to Kesef Mishna to Rambam ibid.) The Jewish people had been involved in serious levels of idolatry and their repentance included an affirmation said directly to Hashem that they would never repeat that sin.

Meirei in his masterful work on repentance sensitizes us to the realistic demand this places upon us. Using the analogy of a beautiful garden now covered by weeds, Meirei warns us of a potential shortcoming in the Teshuva process. In order to clear the garden of the weeds, the uneducated gardener removed every one of them by mowing them down to ground level. For a few weeks his fields were cured of its problem. However, shortly thereafter, the weeds began reappearing. Upon consultation he discovered that weed removal required uprooting the weeds from their source and not merely cutting away their exposed section. In this same manner one must search deeply into his heart to determine the source of his wrongdoing. Then, and only then, can he say with some degree of sincerity that he will do his utmost to secure that his wrongful actions will never be repeated.

This idea is alluded to by the commentary of Nachmanides in this week's parsha (Devarim 31:21) In upcoming Parshas Ha'azeinu, the Torah foretells that the Jewish people will engage themselves in very sinful practices and Hashem will respond in very serious measures. Eventually Hashem will redeem His people and bring the world to its perfect state. Nachmanides questions the nature of such prophecy. Generally, the Torah predicts that misfortune will follow if the Jewish people act in sinful ways and blessing if they act in a proper way. We never find the Torah stating as a fact that the Jewish people will definitely follow a sinful course. How then can the Torah make this prediction here?

Nachmanides responds with an insightful comment to this week's parsha. Hashem says, "Because I know what your evil inclination does today before I bring you into the promised land." (ad loc.) Nachmanides sees in this passage the answer to his puzzling question. He explains that the exposure of the Jewish people's imperfect conduct thus far is a clear indication of their future actions. The inception of the Jewish people is happening now and all imperfections in their character will inevitably expose themselves in the future. Although no specific generation will necessarily fall into

sin, sinfulness will inevitably occur at some point. In essence, an imperfect seed cannot produce a perfect tree.

These ten days of repentance are the incubating period for all our actions during the year. The basic nature we possess now will inevitably expose itself throughout the year. Viewing character traits as the root of all our actions it is imperative that we address these traits and direct them towards perfection. (see Vilna Gaon on Mishle) If we attack the problem at its root, we stand a fighting chance to rectify it in the future. Only with this approach can we readily bring Hashem to testify to our sincerity of rectifying our sinful ways. When He gazes into our souls He will now see the purity of intent in them with a sincere commitment to follow a perfect path.

Such repentance is readily accepted by our merciful Creator and, in response to this sincere pledge, Hashem erases the past and pleasantly accepts our service and even craves for it! May we merit to attain this level of sincerity which ultimately yielding Hashem's desire and interest in all of our service.