

EVEN HASHEM REPENTS

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Parshios Netzavim & Vayeilech

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Nitzavim Vayeilech: Even Hashem Repents
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Today's Learning:
Tvul Yom 4:6-7
O.C. 274:4-275:2
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Arachin 31
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Gittin 12

Our parashah promises, "He will return and gather you in from all the peoples to whom Hashem, your G-d, has scattered you." Chazal observe that the Torah does not say, "He will return you." Rather it says, "He will return." It seems that Hashem, Himself, will, so-to- speak, do teshuvah.

R' Yochanan Luria z"l (died 1577) explains: Hashem will repent for exiling us, even though He (obviously) committed no sin. The lesson in this is that we, too, should not be ashamed to repent. Indeed, if He who was not on the wrong path promises to change His ways, then certainly we can and should leave a path which is wrong.

To what may Hashem's promise be compared? asks R'Luria. To a doctor whose patient is afraid to take the medicine which has been prescribed for him. In order to show the patient that the pills are not harmful, the doctor may himself swallow some. So, too, a person may be afraid to change for the better because such a change is an implicit admission that his old ways were misguided. Such an admission can be embarrassing and painful. Hashem therefore says, "I will change My ways first (i.e.,

gather your scattered people), then you can follow Me."

R'Luria adds: I used to disapprove of tzaddikim who constantly fast and afflict their bodies. I reasoned, "Hashem has created the human body in an ideal fashion, and a person who protects that body enhances his ability to obtain knowledge." Later, however, I realized that these tzaddikim, who fast to obtain atonement although they have barely sinned, make it possible for those who really have sinned to repent without standing out or being noticed. Regarding these tzaddikim it is said (Daniel 12:3), "Those who bring merit to the public will shine like the stars forever." (Meshivat Nefesh)

"Rather, the matter is very near to you - in your mouth and in your heart - to do it." (30:14)

Shouldn't the verse say, "in your heart and in your mouth - to do it"? Doesn't the intention to do a mitzvah ("your heart") preceded the action ("your mouth")?

R'Yisrael Alter z"l (the Gerrer Rebbe; died 1977) explains: This pasuk is teaching that even if a person has no chaishek [a word that combines the meanings "energy," "feeling" and "motivation"] to pray or study Torah, he should pray and study nevertheless. If necessary, let it first be "in your mouth," and then "in your heart" will follow later.

(Quoted in Otzrotaihem Shel Tzaddikim)

"The later generation will say - your children and the gentile who will come from a distant land . . . 'For what reason did Hashem do so to His land, this great wrathfulness'?" (29:21-23)

R'Chaim "Brisker" Soloveitchik z"l (1853-1918) observed: This verse contains a terrifying prophecy - that there will be a generation of Jewish children whose knowledge of Judaism and G-d's ways will be no more than that of a gentile from a distant land!

(Quoted in Torat Chaim, p.180)

"Hashem will make you abundant / l'rh,uvu in all your handiwork . . ." (30:9)

R'Yehuda He'chassid z"l (author of Sefer Chassidim) writes: The same blessing appears in last week's parashah, but there it is "lacking," i.e., the word "l'rh,uvu" is missing the letter vav. This is because the earlier blessing refers to the building of the Second Temple, which lacked permanence. The blessing in this week's parashah, however, refers to the final, and complete, redemption.

(Ta'amei Masoret Ha'kra)

"So now, write this song for yourselves . . . so that this song shall be for Me a witness against Bnei Yisrael." (31:19)

What purpose does this witness serve? R'Meir Leibush Malbim z"l explains with the following parable:

There was once a king who appointed a convicted felon to guard his treasury. However, since the king knew this servant's nature, he made a note that the servant was a convicted felon.

Most people assumed that the king did this to serve as a reminder to the guard so that he should not fall into his old ways. In fact, that was not the king's intention. Rather, he wanted to remind himself that he assumed a great deal of risk in trying to rehabilitate this man. If the guard did steal from the king, the king wanted to remember that he had himself to blame.

Similarly, Hashem knows that man is spiritually weak, as we read (31:21), "For I know his inclination." Since Hashem took us to Him nevertheless, if He must punish us, He must be lenient.

(Quoted in Ma'ayanah Shel Torah)

"This song shall speak up before it as a witness. . ." (31:21)

"This song" is the song of "Ha'azinu" in the next parashah. To what does it testify?

R' Chaim of Friedberg z"l (16th century, better known as "R' Chaim brother of Maharal") explains that there are many prophecies in the Torah and in the books of the other prophets which do not have happy endings. Most notably, the horrible curses which were read last week in Parashat Ki Tavo end without any mention of a brighter future.

Not so the song of "Ha'azinu" which ends with the verse, "He will bring retribution upon His foes, and He will appease His land and His people." This is a promise of the long awaited redemption. Thus, says our verse, write the song of "Ha'azinu" as a testimony and reminder to yourselves that the redemption will come.

Why do so many prophecies end without consolation? Why do many chapters of the Prophets leave us with unanswered questions about our faith? Rav Chaim explains that this was done intentionally so that we should not think that the prophets served G-d only because they understood His ways. No, they too had unanswered questions, but this did not diminish their love for Hashem or their service of Him.

(Sefer Geulah Vi'shuah ch.6)

Teshuvah

In conjunction with the month of Elul and the forthcoming Ten Days of Repentance, we offer the following:

An anonymous 17th century sage - some say he was R' Binyamin Halevi z"l of Tzfat - offers the following thought regarding the importance of repenting before Rosh Hashanah:

[For certain offenses, a bet din / rabbinical court imposes a penalty called a "kenas." For example, when a thief is caught, he must pay double the value of what he stole. Half of what he pays is compensation for his theft, while half is a kenas / fine.] The halachah is "Modeh b'kenas patur" / "If one confesses to a sin for which he is liable to pay a kenas, he is exempt from paying the kenas." However, says the Gemara, this is true only if one confesses before witnesses testify against him. Once witnesses testify against him, it is too late to confess and avoid punishment.

The Zohar teaches that innumerable "eyes" of Hashem [perhaps a reference to angels] wander the world all year long observing man's deeds, and, on Rosh Hashanah, they come to testify before the Heavenly Court. Should not a person confess before those witness testify against him and thereby avoid punishment?

(Chemdat Hayamim)

R'Tzaddok Hakohen z"l (1823-1900; rebbe of Lublin) traveled extensively in his youth. In his old age, he related the following story which demonstrated his determination to learn from every experience how to serve Hashem better:

I was once traveling when I saw a father and son walking together. Their appearance bespoke extreme hunger, and they clearly were near the end of their strength. Suddenly, the father saw a glint in the mud of the road. It was a small coin. He asked his son to bend and lift it, but the son thought it was too little to bother with. He did not want to use his last strength to bend over for such an insignificant sum.

Having no alternative, the father bent down. Then, he struggled to clean and polish the coin. He realized that this coin might buy enough food to save their lives. Having cleaned the coin, he bought 13 fruits with it.

Seeing that his son was starving to death, the father commanded his son to eat the fruits. "No," said the son. "You used your last strength to lift the coin and polish it, while I was too lazy. You eat!"

But the father could not bear his son's suffering, and he devised a strategy to get his son to eat. He told his son, "I have to go to such-and-such a place. You stay here and rest and follow me in about an hour." The father then headed down the road and, once he was out of sight, he began dropping his fruits along the road. By the time he had gone some distance, all of the fruits were half-buried in the mud on the road.

An hour later, the son came along. Seeing a fruit along the way, it never occurred to him that it was his father's fruit. Instead, he assumed that another traveler had dropped it. Gathering his strength, he bent down to reach the fruit and he cleaned it of the mud that encased it.

A little farther down the road, he saw another fruit. Again, it did not occur to him that it was his father's fruit. And again, he gathered his strength to bend down and to clean the fruit.

Eleven more times, this scene was repeated. If only the boy had bent down once to pick up the coin, he would have felt entitled to a share of the coin that his father found and he would have shared his father's fruit. Then, he would not have had to bend down 13 times to pick up the fruit. From this I learned, R' Tzaddok concluded, that if one would only overcome his laziness and deal with the challenge that face him initially, he would save a lot of trouble down the road when the challenges are multiplied. This applies as much to serving Hashem as it does to gathering fruit from the road.

(Hakohen p.19)

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