

DIMENSIONS OF TESHUVAH

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

Dedicated in honor of Yaakov Moshe Penn, whose Bar-Mitzvah will be celebrated with great joy and festivity this coming Shabbat. May Yaakov continue to be a source of nahat ruach to his parents, his friends, our entire community, all of K'lal Yisrael and haKadosh Barukh Hu.

I

PARASHAT HAT'SHUVAH

The second half of Parashat Nitzavim (small as it is) focuses on national introspection and the consequent movement of religious renaissance - all of which will take place, the Torah (promises? - see Rambam, MT T'shuvah 7:5) (commands? - see Ramban on v. 11) us, as a result of our having experienced all of God's blessings AND curses:

1) When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where Hashem your God has driven you, 2) and you shall/will return to Hashem your God and hearken to His voice, just as I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and all of your soul 3) then Hashem your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom Hashem your God has scattered you. 4) Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there Hashem your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. 5) Hashem your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. 6) Moreover, Hashem your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

7) Hashem your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you.

8) *v'Atah Tashuv v'Shama'ta b'Kol Hashem* (Then you shall again hearken to the voice of Hashem), observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today,

9) and Hashem your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit

of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For Hashem will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors,

10) when you obey Hashem your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

11) Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away.

12) It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

13) Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

14) For the matter is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (D'varim 30:1-14)

[Note: In this shiur, we will examine the problem raised by the "sequence of events" in this parashah. I hope to send out a special shiur for Yom haKippurim which will reexamine this parashah, focusing on a different set of issues.]

II

THE "SECOND TESHUVAH"

There are, of course, many deep and profound concepts embedded in this parashah. There is, however, a problem of "sequence" in this section the resolution of which will, hopefully, provide us with a greater understanding of the phenomenon of Teshuvah.

Following the order of events as outlined in the parashah:

- 1) We will reflect on the fulfillment of the blessing and curse - at that point, we will be spread out and (we assume) under foreign rule among the nations. (v. 1)
- 2) We will return "until" (Heb. "Ad") God, listening to His voice (v. 2) - we assume that this refers to the process of "Teshuvah" - return/repentance, including a recommitment to observing Torah and Mitzvot.
- 3) God will restore our fortunes, returning us back to our Land from all corners of the diaspora (vv. 3-5)
- 4) God will purify our hearts to worship Him completely (v. 6)

5) God will curse our enemies (v. 7)

6) We will commit to observance (???) (v. 8)

7) God will make us prosper and take delight in us (v. 9)

The obvious problem with this sequence is Step #6 - the "repetition" of the promise/command that we will return to God. Since the "return" (which is the premise of the whole parashah) is presented in v. 2 as the result of our introspection while in exile - and is the cause of our return to former glory and God's favor, what is the meaning of this second "return"?

III

S'FORNO'S ANSWER

As we have done before, we turn to Rabbenu Ovadiah S'forno for help. In his commentary to Sefer D'varim, S'forno suggests that the phrase *v'Atah Tashuv* in v. 8 is not to be understood as "you will return", following the general theme of the parashah (open the original and note how many times that root is used in this parashah).

Rather, he explains that this occurrence of the word means "you will be at peace", as in the verse: *b'Shuvah vaNahat Tivash'un* - (you shall triumph by stillness and quiet) (Yeshaya 30:15).

In other words, the promise of the "second Teshuvah" is not about commitment born of reflection - which is the Teshuvah in v. 2. Rather, it is a promise that after we recommit to God, and God restores us and our fortunes, defeating our enemies - at that point, we will be able to hearken to God's voice and fulfill His Mitzvot in a calm and secure manner.

This works well within the sequence, since we are promised that God will "circumcise our hearts" just before this "second Teshuvah". As Ramban explains (in his comments on v. 6), this "circumcision of the hearts" means that we will no longer be tempted to abandon our commitment to God or our intimate relationship with Him.

At that point, following S'forno's explanation, we will move from the stirring, revolutionary movement of Teshuvah (upending our lives, in feeling, action and, ultimately, in geographic location and political reality) into a calm stasis of Mitzvah-observance.

This comment is most enlightening - but, as might be expected, there is room to challenge. There are two "technical" problems with this explanation of "Tashuv".

a) The verb root *Sh*W*B, as mentioned earlier, shows up so often (7 times) in these 14 verses that it might almost be called anthemic of this parashah. To suggest that in this one instance it means something different - almost diametrically opposite - of the meaning ascribed in the other

occurrences is not an easy theory to accept.

b) Although the noun "shuva", meaning "calm" does show up in Tanakh, we have no instance of this root used as a verb to mean anything but "return". S'forno's prooftext is, therefore, an incomplete proof (to say the least).

IV

A NEW RESOLUTION: TWO STEPS IN THE TESHUVAH PROCESS

If we could find a way to maintain the meaning "return" in our verse, yet explain this "second Teshuvah" in a way that makes sense sequentially, we would both solve our problem and avoid the linguistic challenge to S'forno's comment.

In order to explain this, we have to look back to the first instance of Teshuvah mentioned in the parashah - v. 2. Let's compare the two verses:

FIRST TESHUVAH (v. 2) *v'Shav'ta 'ad Hashem Elohekha v'Shama'ta b'Kolo* (you shall/will return to Hashem your God and hearken to His voice), just as I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and all of your soul.

SECOND TESHUVAH (v. 8) *v'Atah Tashuv v'Shama'ta b'Kol Hashem* (Then you shall *Tashuv* and hearken to the voice of Hashem), observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today...

If we look carefully at the first instance of Teshuvah, we note that there is no direct commitment to Mitzvot mentioned - just a readiness to "hearken to the Voice of God". What does this phrase mean?

There is a wide range of circumstances that could conceivably cause someone - or a nation - to want to return to God. As outlined in the premise of our parashah (v. 1), the cause outlined here is the fulfillment of God's blessings and curses. The nation will look at the events which have transpired and will understand that it is their distance from God which has led them realize the awful curses - just as their intimacy with God was the source of those blessings they had previously enjoyed. Indeed, the Torah tells us that the people will say: "Surely it is because our God is not in our midst these evils have befallen us" (D'varim 31:17). The awareness of that "distance" (known as "Hester Panim" - the "hiding of the Divine countenance"), coupled with a realization of the terrible circumstances in which the nation is enveloped, will lead to a resolve to return "until God".

Note that this odd phrase - *Shuva 'Ad Hashem* - to "return UNTIL God" shows up in several passages, including ours (v. 2), earlier in D'varim (4:30) and in the famous passage from Hoshea (14:2). What does this mean?

Again - when the sense of desparation and hopelessness is coupled with the realization of how far from God we have moved - the immediate and (hopefully) instinctive reaction is to try to "come back" - to restore some type of relationship with God and to return to Him. It is the Divine embrace, the security of God's Presence, which is the immediate and urgent goal of this type of "Ba'al Teshuvah".

This is, indeed, the type of Teshuvah mentioned in the first instance - "you shall return UNTIL God and hearken to His voice"; there is no mention here of specific actions or even of commitments.

It seems that this theory cannot even withstand the rest of the verse: The end of the phrase implies a commitment to Mitzvot: "just as I command you today". This phrase, however, should not be confused with the commitment to Mitzvot mentioned later. Here, the phrase implies that the Ba'al Teshuvah (in this case, the entire nation), will return and seek our a relationship with God, just as he [Mosheh - remember, this is Sefer D'varim] commanded them to do. In other words, the return to God is itself part of Mosheh's charge to the people.

When we look ahead to v. 8 - what we have dubbed "The Second Teshuvah" - we note that the tenor of commitment has changed. No longer are we returning "UNTIL" (*Ad*) God - we are now returning to hear His voice - meaning "to observe all of His commandments...".

In other words, whereas the first step in Teshuvah (we now realize that there aren't two different types of Teshuvah - rather, there are two steps in the process) is exclusively the desire to return to God - to "reach Him" - the next step involves a full commitment to learning (hearkening to His voice - which here, by context, implies study of His laws) and observance.

We can now reexamine the sequence in our Parashah and find a remarkable statement about the power of Teshuvah (this is an edited cut-and-paste job from above; compare the two carefully):

- 1) We will reflect on the fulfillment of the blessing and curse - at that point, we will be spread out and (we assume) under foreign rule among the nations. (v. 1)
- 2) We will return "until" (Heb. *Ad*) God, listening to His voice (v. 2) - i.e. the nation will experience a desire to come close to God.
- 3) God will restore our fortunes, returning us back to our Land from all corners of the diaspora (vv. 3-5)
- 4) God will purify our hearts to worship Him completely (v. 6)
- 5) God will curse our enemies (v. 7)
- 6) We will return "fully" to God, studying His Torah and committing to complete observance of His commands (v. 8)
- 7) God will make us prosper and take delight in us (v. 9)

What an amazing statement: In order for God to restore us, to purify our hearts and to achieve peace and security in our Land, all we need is to desire to return to God - to seek out His voice. Once He has fulfilled the "intermediary" promises, then we are fully expected to step up the commitment to complete Teshuvah, as indicated in v. 8. Only then will God fully take delight in us and grant us prosperity.

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