

HAVEN'T I SEEN YOU SOMEWHERE BEFORE?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Teshuva - Haven't I Seen You Somewhere Before?

This week's Shabbos is one of those special Shabboses which merits having its own name: Shabbos Shuva. Its name is taken from the first two words of this week's Haftora (the special section read from the Prophets after the Torah reading), in which the prophet Hoshea appeals to the Children of Israel (14:2-3):

Shuva Yisrael ad Hashem Elokecha - Return, o Israel, until Hashem your G-d, for you have stumbled in your sin. Take words with you, and return to Hashem. Say to Him, 'May You forgive all iniquity, and accept what is good!'

It is strange that the prophet pleads with us to return, "Ad Hashem - until Hashem," and not, "to Hashem" as we might have expected. And what are the "words" he encourages us to take with us as we perform teshuva?

While every Jew is most grateful for being given the chance to annually be cleansed of all his sins, we are aware that Yom Kippur is not a "carte blanche" through which we can continue to sin and ignore our faults, while at the same time awaiting forgiveness and atonement. To varying degrees, depending on the nature of our transgressions, we are expected to recognize where we have strayed, abandon our "old ways," and accept upon ourselves that we will no longer return to our previous sins.

In pondering this requirement, it is most difficult not to be struck by the following disheartening thought: Haven't I been here before? Didn't I stand in this same place last Yom Kippur, reciting the same words, beating my breast, and perhaps even shedding a few tears? If we could only see a mirror reflection of ourselves: Good morning - how do you do? Haven't we met somewhere before? Yet here we are, back again, essentially unchanged from last year. We begin to question the very nature of our teshuva. If, as it seems, the teshuva process of previous years has had no lasting effect on us, then perhaps it wasn't teshuva at all! Perhaps we are simply deluding ourselves; going through the motions, but lacking any true conviction. I believe almost every thinking person has at some time been struck by the above thoughts, sometimes almost to the point of debilitation.

A brilliant yeshiva bachur, who came from a highly respected family of rabbanim, and who had himself acquired a reputation for his sharp mind and penetrating insight, sadly began to stray from

the path of the Torah. The holy Rizhiner Rebbe zt"l once approached the boy, in an attempt to convince him to return to a life of Torah and mitzvos. Yet he was reluctant.

"Do you think," he said to the rebbe, "that I have never tried to return? Do you think that I am completely void of remorse? That I have never considered coming back? Many times I have, as you say, done 'teshuva,' yet it is to no avail; I always return to my sinful ways. I have strayed, it seems, too far from the path. For me, rebbe, there is no hope."

"Since you were a yeshiva student," the rebbe responded, "I will answer you with a scholarly explanation. We say in the Yom Kippur prayers, 'Ki Ata Salchan le-Yisrael - for You, Hashem, are the Forgiver of Israel.' Why do we refer to Hashem as a Salchan, instead of the more familiar term Soleiach?

"In parshas Mishpatim we find the mitzvah of perikah - helping one's fellow unload his donkey. The Torah states (Shemos 23:5), "If you will see the donkey of [even] your enemy crouching (roveitz) beneath its burden... you shall help him (unload)!" The Talmud (Bava Metzia 33a) comments on this verse, 'Roveitz - ve-lo ravgzan.' One must only assist in unloading if the donkey is roveitz (crouching) beneath its load, but not if it is a ravgzan.

"Rashi explains that roveitz means the animal is presently collapsing beneath its burden. But if the animal is a ravgzan - constantly and habitually overburdened - then there is no obligation to help unload it. From here we see that Hebrew suffix nun after a verb signifies an act which is performed constantly or habitually.

"Now since the holy Sages describe the Almighty as a Salchan, and not as a Soleiach," concluded the Rizhiner, "we have proof that Hashem constantly forgives us; there is no limit to how many times He will forgive your sins. Don't give up - it's never too late!" His words captured the heart of the young man, and he returned wholeheartedly to Torah and mitzvos for the rest of his life.

Kesav Sofer writes that by using the words "[Return, O Israel,] until Hashem," the Navi (Prophet) is intimating that we will never quite achieve the objective. "Return to Hashem," would have implied that one is in fact capable of completing the journey. Returning until Hashem drives home the fact that teshuva is a constant and ongoing process. Don't expect to ever "get there," yet never stop trying...

The Prophet recognizes the frustration a Jew might feel as he approaches Hashem for the umpteenth time, asking once again for forgiveness. He therefore offers us words of encouragement, reminding us that teshuva is something we will spend our whole lives doing. We may never "make it," achieving absolute perfection, yet we will be far better Jews in the process.

Perhaps these words are the "words" we are encouraged to "take with us" as we approach Hashem and ask Him to "forgive all iniquity, and take what is good." As long as we remain convinced that teshuva is an "all-or-nothing" process in which we either succeed or fail, we will continue to be

discouraged by our own imperfection and the roller coaster ride which is part and parcel of being human. In order to succeed in teshuva, it is essential we first recognize its nature.

Teshuva is not an absolute, "winner takes all" process. It is about searching out the bad, "taking what is good," and building on it, thus ensuring that we continue to forge forward in our struggle to become better Jews. May Hashem give us the fortitude and inner strength to keep up the fight!

Have a good Shabbos.

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