

Torah Table Talk – *Pirkei Avot*

Teshuvah: The Keys to the World to Come

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelekh, Deuteronomy 29:9 – 31:30

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z'l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

With *Rosh Hashanah* only a week away our thoughts turn to *teshuvah*, repentance, and return to God. It seems most appropriate that our *Torah* portion should focus on this theme as well. Having spoken to the people of the consequences of sin, Moses now emphasizes the possibility of returning to God. *Teshuvah* is literally 'return,' from the Hebrew root *shuv*. In chapter thirty of Deuteronomy this root word is used no less than seven times. Moses tells the people that despite everything, they can always turn their lives around; that if they are willing to turn to God, God will turn to them and restore their good fortune; God will bring them back to their land.

But it is not just to God that we must turn at this time of year; we must turn to one another as well. *Teshuvah* begins with our willingness to acknowledge our faults and wrongdoings and reject them. It must include both remorse as well as a desire to change. The number of statements about the power of *teshuvah* in rabbinic literature, like the quote from *Pirke Avot*, is most significant. There is no end to what we can accomplish through the power of *teshuvah*. But as Rabbi Ya'akov points out, *teshuvah* is not so much about getting human beings into heaven; it has more to do with getting heaven into human beings.

Pirkei Avot 4:21-22

Rabbi Ya'akov taught: This world is a foyer that leads to the world to come. Prepare yourself in the foyer that you may enter the main hall. *Teshuvah*, repentance and good deeds in this world, even for one hour, is better than eternal life in the world to come; nevertheless one hour of bliss in the world to come is more exquisite than all of life in this world.

Sources

Deuteronomy 30:2-3

You shall return to the Lord your God, and you and your children shall heed His command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin you this day, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love.

Bereshit Rabbah 1:4

Six things preceded the creation of the world. Some were actually created, and others came up only in God's mind as what was to be created. Torah and the throne of glory were created. The creation of the fathers, Israel, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah came up only in God's thought. Rabbi Ahavah, son of Rabbi Ze'era said: So, too, repentance.

Moses Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1-2

What exactly is repentance? Repentance involves forsaking sins and removing such thoughts from one's way of thinking and resolving firmly never to do it again, as it is written, "Let the wicked man forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord". One should also be remorseful over what one has done, as it is written, "For after I had turned away, I repented". One also has to testify to God that one will never return to that sin, as it is written, "...nor shall we say any more to the work of our hands". All of these three declarations have to be made out loud.

Repentance is completed when an opportunity to commit one's original transgression again arises but one doesn't do so and repents instead, but not if the reason for repenting was that someone was watching or because of physical weakness. For example, if one copulated in sin with one's wife, and then later one had another opportunity to do it again but didn't do so, then even though one may still love her and she may be in perfect physical health and was even in the same country [when the opportunity arose], one has repented completely. Solomon said, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw near when you shall say, 'I have no pleasure in them'". If one repented only in one's old age, or at a time when one can no longer commit the original sin, then it is not the best type of repentance, but it is to his

advantage and is nevertheless repentance. Even if one sinned throughout one's life but repented on one's dying day and died atoned, then all one's sins are forgiven, as it is written, "...before the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain", which refers to the day of one's death. The general rule is that one is forgiven provided one repented before dying.

Parparaot LaTorah by Rabbi Menachem Becker

The Rabbi Yisrael of Koznitz (1740-1810) use to teach: One who wishes to perform complete *teshuvah*, repentance, should not focus on his failings but rather he should concentrate first on his spiritual strengths to escape from the evil inclination which pursues him. He should use his strengths by serving God with love and reverence. To what may this be compared? One may be compared to the soldier who has been beaten and is being pursued by an enemy. If he lingers in order to heal his wounds, the enemy will catch up to him and might even kill him. Since this is so, let the fighter concentrate his energies in escaping from his pursuers; when he reaches a secure place, then he can turn his attention to healing his wounds. Similarly said Rabbi Yisrael, the true penitent must first flee from the sins which wounded him in the past, and then when he finds himself in a safe place he can turn to the wounds which cling to him from before he performed *teshuvah*, repentance.

Exodus Rabbah 19:4

The Holy One declares no creature unfit - He receives all. The gates of repentance are always open and he who wishes may enter.

Pesikta Rabbati 44:9

Rabbi Judah HaNasi expounded: So great is the power of a return in penitence that, as soon as a man meditates in his heart to vow penitence, it soars up at once straight to God. It soars up to a height not of ten *mil*, nor of twenty, nor of a hundred, but to a height that would require a journey of five hundred years to accomplish--soaring not merely to the first heaven but all the way to the seventh heaven, soaring ever upward beyond the seventh heaven until it stands before the throne of glory itself. Such was Hosea's thought when he said, "Return, O Israel, all the way to the Lord thy God." (Hosea 14:2)

Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86b

Resh Lakish said: Great is penitence, because it reduces one's deliberate sins to mere errors.

But did not Resh Lakish say at another time: Great is penitence, because it transforms one's deliberate sins into merits? The latter statement refers to penitence out of love; the former, to penitence out of fear.

Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: Great is penitence, because it prolongs one's days and years, as it is said, "And when the wicked turns from his wickedness . . . he shall live thereby" (Ezek. 33:19).

Rabbi Isaac said: In the west [the Land of Israel], the sages said in the name of Rabbah bar Mari: Come and see that the conduct of flesh and blood is not at all like the conduct of the Holy One. The conduct of flesh and blood: when a man angers his friend with words, it is questionable whether or not the friend will agree to be pacified by him. And even if you suppose the friend is willing to be pacified, it is questionable whether he will be pacified by mere words or will have to be pacified by compensation. But with the Holy One, there is no question. When a man commits a sin in secret, He is pacified with mere words, as it is said, "Take with you words, and return unto the Lord" (Hosea 14:3). More: He even accounts it to him as a good deed, as it is said, "And accept that which is good" (Hosea 14:3). Still more: Scripture accounts it for him as though he had offered up bullocks, as it is said, "So will we render bullocks with offerings of our lips" (ibid.). Lest you suppose that Scripture refers here to obligatory bullocks, it is said, "I will love the voluntary offerings [of bullocks]" (Hosea 14:5).

Mishnah Yoma 10

One who says, "I will sin and I will repent, I will sin and I will repent," will not be afforded the opportunity to repent. One who says, "I will sin and Yom Kippur will effect atonement," then Yom Kippur will not effect atonement. For transgressions between a person and God does Yom Kippur effect atonement, but for transgressions between a person and one's neighbor, Yom Kippur does not effect atonement until one first appeases one's neighbor.

Commentary

It is no accident that Rabbi Ya'akov Korshai connects three core ideas: *teshuvah*, good deeds and the 'world to come.' *Olam Habah*, the world to come, is as close as we come in Jewish literature to a term for 'heaven.'

However, it does not mean ‘heaven in the western sense of the word. Depending on the context in which it is used, it can refer to the coming of a messianic era, the resurrection and final judgment of humanity, or some type of spiritual immortality. The sages of the rabbinic period were not very specific in distinguishing one from the other. What’s more, they did not separate the three dimensions of Jewish eschatology: the universal, the national and the individual. Rabbi Neil Gilman writes that Jewish eschatologic thinking is “elusive and imaginative. Nevertheless, its centrality to any authentic reading of Jewish thought is beyond dispute.” We see that in the statement from *Pirkei Avot* which connects *teshuvah* with the world to come.

Rabbi Ya’akov, who appears to focus so heavily on some type of other-worldly reward, placed greater emphasis on the opportunities we receive in this world through the performance of good deeds and the possibility of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is the key to *Olam Habah*, literally the “world-that-is-coming.” When translated literally we have a sense of the immediacy of *Olam Habah*. Our actions can be transformative. The world to come may be exquisite but it is eternal and unchanging. The very essence of our humanity is the possibility of changing ourselves and changing the world. One Hasidic master went so far as to suggest that he prefers this world to the world to come because there is no *teshuvah* in the world to come!

So where does *teshuvah* begin? Our sages offer a variety of strategies for bringing about meaningful change in the life of the individual. Moses Maimonides offers a specific approach which begins with self reflection and transformative thinking. Rabbi Yisrael of Koznitz is more of an activist; before you can heal yourself, you must first escape those things which tempt you and cause you to fail. All of our sages would agree that *teshuvah* without a sincere attempt to reject the failings in our lives is meaningless. As we enter the High Holy Days, then, let us spend some time retrieving the keys to the world that is constantly coming!

Questions to Ponder

1. This week’s Torah Table Talk is food for thought for this week’s Torah portion and for Rosh Hashanah. Feel free to bring it to synagogue to read during the Rabbi’s sermon! (Just joking....)
2. How do you understand the term *Olam Habah*, the world to come? Do you believe that there is some type of ultimate reward or punishment for our behavior?
3. Why did the sages include *teshuvah* as one of the things that was created before the universe was created? What would a world without *teshuvah* be like?
4. What are the steps toward sincere *teshuvah* according to Maimonides? How would you apply them to your own life? Do you think his test for true repentance is realistic?
5. Are there limits in our ability to do *teshuvah*? Do you think it is possible for Bernard Madoff to do *teshuvah*? Why or why not?
6. What areas of your life need change? Break your life down into three categories and come up with three different areas of change in each one: Your relationship with God, with your fellow human beings, and how you treat yourself? Come up with a step by step strategy for changing each of these areas.

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