



**Shabbat Shuvah:
A Practical Guide to Repentance**

Parshat Vayeilekh

Deuteronomy 31/ Hosea 14:2-10, Joel 2:15-27, Micah
7:18-20

*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

Shabbat Shuvah is one of two special Sabbaths in the Jewish calendar when rabbis traditionally gave a major address to their congregation. On Shabbat HaGadol, just before Pesach, rabbis would discuss the laws of Pesach, and on Shabbat Shuvah, it was customary to give a rousing talk on the importance of repentance. This Sabbath is named after the opening words of the Haftorah which is read on Shabbat morning "Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai," "Return O Israel to the Lord..."

Unlike most Haftorot this one contains a selection of passages taken from three different prophets: Hosea, Joel and Micah. These passages all revolve around the Hebrew term, "Shuvah, the root of the word Teshuvah, repentance or returning to God. In lieu of a discussion of this weeks Torah portion, it seems especially appropriate to spend some time thinking about this season of the year and the call for repentance that is at the heart of the High Holy Days.

Turn, O Israel, to the Lord your God for you have fallen because of your sin. **Hosea 14:2**
I will heal their affliction; generously will I take them back in love; for my anger has turned away from them. **Hosea 14:5**
Blow the horn in Zion; solemnize a fast, proclaim an assembly! Gather the people bid the congregation to purify themselves. **Joel 2:15**
He will turn back to us in love; Jew will cover up our iniquities, He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. **Micah 7:20**

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 153a

When R. Eliezer said, "Repent, even if only one day before your death," his disciples asked him, "Does any man know what day he will die?" R. Eliezer: "Then all the more reason that he repent today. For should he die tomorrow, his entire life will have been spent in repentance. In his wisdom, Solomon also intimated [the need to repent] when he said, "Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment" (Eccles. 9:8).

Moses Maimonides Mishneh Torah Laws of Repentance 1:1

If one transgressed any commandment of the Torah, whether a positive or a negative one, whether deliberately or accidentally, then when one repents one has to confess verbally to God, for it is written, "When a man or a woman commits any sin that people commit...then they shall confess their sin which they have done". This means verbal confession, which is commanded positively to do, and is performed by saying, 'O Lord, I have sinned, transgressed and rebelled before You, and have done such- and-such, and I am ashamed by my actions and will never do it again'. This is the main part of verbal confession, and expanding on it is praiseworthy.

Rosh Hashanah Survival Kit Shimon Apisdorf (some practical steps for Teshuvah)

1. Look at your life in terms of three spheres of relationships. One with yourself, one with God and one with other people.
2. Make a list of five mistakes you have made in each sphere and rank them from most to least serious.
3. Take the list with you to synagogue on Yom Kippur and plan a strategy for the day for thinking about these different mistakes.
4. Create a mental strategy for the coming year...construct a plan of action for when you will deal with them during the year.
5. Keep the list in a private place but make sure you don't lose track of it. You should review this list for 15 minutes once a month.
6. "Remember that Teshuvah is a unique mitzvah. With other Mitzvot if you are lacking part of the Mitzvah you lack the whole thing ...with regard to Teshuvah every little effort you make and every step brings you closer to where you want to be..."

Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 26b

How is one to tell whether a penitent is genuine? R. Judah said: When the penitent has the opportunity to commit the same sin once and once again, and he refrains from committing it.

Moses Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, The Laws of Repentance

Repentance is completed when an opportunity to commit one's original transgression again arises but one doesn't 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, 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 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.

Some Questions to Ponder

1. What is the mood of these verses taken from the special Haftarah which we read on Shabbat Shuvah? How is the Hebrew root "Shuv" or "turn" used in these verses? Is Israel turning to God or is God turning to Israel in these verses? What is the connection between repentance, turning and returning? How do we turn when we perform acts of repentance?
2. If you were a Rabbi what issues would you talk about on Shabbat Shuvah? If you could change one thing about yourself, about your community and about the world what would it be?
3. If repentance involves changing one's behavior in significant ways, what use is repenting one day before one's death? What point is Rabbi Eliezer trying to make about the need for repentance?
4. Rabbi Eliezer says that one who repents is considered as if his whole life was spent in repentance. What does this mean? Do you think a person who repents past deeds should be treated as if his past misdeeds don't count? Are there deeds for which there should be no possibility of repentance?
5. Is the confessional Prayer that Maimonides describes the same as the one in our Machzor which we recite on Yom Kippur? How do you think he would react to the prescribed Vidui, confessional prayers? How would Maimonides have us 'confess'?
6. Look at the Confessional prayer which we recite in synagogue on Yom Kippur. How many of these confessions fall into the three categories that Apisdorf mentions?

7. How many of the confessional statements apply to your life? Why do we confess sins that we have not committed?
8. Do you think it is possible to create a strategy for change in your life? Why or why not? What problems might you face in fulfilling such a strategy, and what might help you fulfill it?
9. According to the Talmud and Maimonides how do we know if a person sincerely repents? Do you think the statement above is practical? What happens if the person never finds himself in the same circumstances? How would you measure sincere repentance in your own life.

Torah Table Talk

is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org. To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org. To see an archive of sermons and TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

See other Torah Table Talks online at
www.oceansidejc.org