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# Agada

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The distinction we elaborated in the halakhic section of this שעור, between היריהור and פעולת המצוה, finds an interesting echo in Midrash. The author of הלקט שובלי cites 2 midrashim which relate the two most significant instances of teshuvah in תנ"ך to two of the ברכות in שיבנונו אבינו... בא"י הרוצה. The latter two are הרוצה and בתשובה. Each of these is connected by the Midrash to a different instance of sin and repentance in the life of the patriarchal family of Jacob.

The Midrash relates that when Reuven offended his father Jacob by sinning with Bilhah, it was ordained that he be punished by death, but afterwards he did תשובה, whereupon the השרת, מלאכי השרת, the ministering angels, proclaimed, בא"י הרוצה בתשובה, blessing God, Who desires repentance.

When Judah sinned against Tamar, and pronounced the verdict, "Take her out and let her be burnt" (הוציאוה), and then Tamar showed him proof that she had not sinned, he immediately confessed and said, צדקה, she is right and I am wrong, and he was forgiven for that sin. Whereupon, the השרת, מלאכי השרת, proclaimed, בא"י... חנון המרבה לסלוח, blessing God Who graciously forgives greatly.

So the השרת, מלאכי השרת teach us that the blessings of תשובה and סליחה are not identical; they represent two different forms of תשובה, and they are related to the two archetypical dramas of sin and repentance.

What is the difference between these two stories? Let us analyze each and compare them with each other.

The sin of Reuven is described in the Torah as follows: וישכב את בלהה פלגש אביו וישמע ישראל -- "And Reuven lay with Bilah the concubine of his father, and Israel heard about it."



The sin is not as simple as it sounds. All agree that it was not a crime of sexual passion. Some interpret Reuven's actions as an attempt to establish his rights of succession, by seizing the concubine of the chieftain, יעקב or ישראל. But ל"ח were more profound and insightful: They accuse Reuven of בילגל יצועי אביו he rearranged the bed of his father. By this they mean, that Jacob regularly stayed in the tent of Rachel, his most beloved wife, and not in the tent of Leah, who was the mother of Reuven. But after Rachel died, he moved into the tent of Bilhah, the servant of Rachel. Reuven was insulted. He had to keep his peace if his mother was slighted in favor of Rachel, who was a full wife. But he could not suffer his mother's hurt when a mere maidservant was given priority over her. He therefore demanded that Leah become first in the affection and the respect of יעקב. The נצי"ב maintains that Reuven slept in the tent of Bilhah, i.e., he stayed over in her tent the whole night, to make sure that Jacob could not enter. The whole night he stayed there, waiting; and for a long, long night he had constant opportunity to reconsider his forceful intrusion into the life of his father. But he did nothing -- his sin was deliberate: a conscious and fully aware act of disrespect towards and disobedience against his father.

Now let us consider his תשובה. The brothers wanted to kill Joseph. We read: וישמע ראובן, Reuven heard about this, ויצילו מידם ויאמר לא נכנו נפש, and he saved him from their hands, saying, Let us not kill him. Note well: וישמע ראובן -- the exact language appears in the act of Reuven's repentance as it does in the act of Reuven's sin -- וישמע ישראל...

There is further evidence of this correspondence between repentance and sin. The sin was in Reuven's defending his mother against Rachel and what belonged to Rachel. The repentance was -- taking up the cudgels on behalf of the son of Rachel, i.e., Joseph. The sin was in causing unspeakable agony for an old father. The repentance was in trying to prevent even greater anguish to the same old father. Reuven's תשובה was slow, deliberate, long-developing. It was not superficial, it was not an outburst in one heroic act.



Thus, we read that after Joseph was sold by the brothers, וישב ראובן אל הבור, Reuven returned to the pit. But one wonders: If Reuven was so concerned about Joseph's welfare and Jacob's state of mind, where was he during the time that Joseph was sold? Rashi answers that he was not present, because, according to one version, עסוק היה בשקו ותעניתו על שולבל יצועי אביו, he was deeply engrossed in doing תשובה, in his sackcloth and fasting, in his remorse for having intruded and rearranging the bed of his father.

So, his תשובה was a result of a prolonged and probing introspection, of relentless pangs of conscience. Moreover, it bedevilled him: Reuven's attempt at תשובה by saving Joseph was frustrated by his very acting out of תשובה, by his very expression of contrition in "his sackcloth and his fasting!" His תשובה defeats itself; indeed, תשובה is often painful and tragic. (I have often found in my experience, especially in the rabbinate, that an authentic בע"ת or, equally so, genuine גור צדק, seem to have their sincerity tested by difficulties and נסיונות of all kinds, as if הקב"ה is prodding and pushing and testing them, as if to demonstrate to all the rest of us the mettle and the moral strength that such remarkable spiritual transformations require -- a repetition of the נסיון of עקידה אברהם אבינו in the עקידה.)

But in addition to being self-defeating and tragic, it is also noble. This resolute, deliberate, thoughtful Reuven of תשובה -- is the same person as the impulsive, impetuous, spontaneous, Reuven who is described by his father as פחז כמים, as unstable as water! What heroism of character it took to overcome his normal reaction patterns in his quest for genuine תשובה!

No wonder that after the result of this kind of process of תשובה, the מלאכי השרת should offer the blessing to God הרוצה בתשובה, Who desires such repentance!

We now turn to Judah. You recall that Tamar was married first to Er and then to Onan, and both died. By the law of יבום that prevailed in this pre-Sinaitic community, she was entitled to marry any other member of the family, either the remaining brother Shelah or Judah, the father. Judah decided to deny her her



legitimate rights, and told her to wait for Shelah to grow up. Even after he did grow up, Judah remained callous to her fate. After waiting more than she could or should, Tamar disguised herself as a harlot and seduced Judah. She demanded from him, whilst in disguise, his staff and robe and seal as sureties until he should send her the prescribed gift. Judah left and when he sent back his payment, she had disappeared, and could not be found. Judah was not able to reclaim these very personal articles. Later on, Judah heard that Tamar was pregnant, and took this as proof that she was an adulteress, for if the father of the foetus were a stranger, she would indeed be considered an adulteress. So, in his role as chieftain and judge, he presided over the trial of Tamar. His verdict was clear and unambiguous: הוציאה ותישרף, take her out and let her be burnt. Tamar proceeded to the bar of justice, showed Judah the tokens -- the staff and robe and seal -- and asked, sarcastically: למי אלה -- Do tell: to whom do these belong? Whereupon ויכר יהודה, he recognized and acknowledged them, and he said: צדקה ממני -- she is right and I am wrong, and therefore, she goes free.

Think of that scene as Tamar walked up to Judah at the gates of the city where he presided. Our pathetic little heroine slowly makes her way to the bar of justice. Little does Judah notice that little bundle this woman is clutching under her arm so protectively. The crowds do not bother with it, because for them the verdict is a foregone conclusion: death by burning. Up she walks, slowly and deliberately. Judah is impatient with this trollop who has shamed his family; his anger and his righteous indignation build up against this woman who, far from a pathetic heroine, is a despicable villain who had dared to place a stain on the name of the House of Jacob. There is no problem: justice will be done. And at the same time, Judah possibly thinks to himself, even if unconsciously: We will all be rid of her, she will no longer be a burden on Shelah or myself.

But then -- the surprise: Tamar spreads it all out on his table before him -- his robe, his seal, his staff. הכר-נא, behold and acknowledge it, Judah! His judicial composure is shattered. All becomes clear to him, as clear as day, as clear as the searing sun. What a clash of thoughts and plots must have clutched Judah at



that moment. Surely he might have thought: She is embarrassing me. She wants to destroy me! I can get rid of her now, and send her to her death before anyone realizes what is happening. I could rise and call out again הוציאוה ותישרף, "Take her out and let her be burnt!" If anyone asks about these items, I can accuse her of being a thief as well as an adulteress. No one will object, no one will say a word, no one will know what has happened...

But no! יהודה is the leader of שבטי יהודה, and he decides against expediency, against self-interest. The Divine Image stirs within Judah and -- he confesses! There will be no miscarriage of justice. ויכר יהודה ויאמר צדקה. "She is right and I am wrong." At that moment ונסלח לו על אותו עון, he was forgiven for that dreadful sin. Whereupon, the מלאכי השרת proclaimed ברא"י חנוך, "Blessed art Thou O Lord, Who is gracious and forgives."

How different is the contrition of Judah from the repentance of Reuven! Indeed, there are two kinds of תשובה, and they are different psychologically and spiritually, as well as halakhically.

The תשובה of Judah is a result of the sudden outburst of innate goodness, which wells up like a mighty river after a cloudburst, and overflows all dams. Or, perhaps, like lightning, which in its suddenness and brilliance gives him a clear vision of truth and justice. Judah's תשובה is more akin to היראה, and is not truly תשובה שלימה or תשובה גמורה. His תשובה is genuine, it is authentic -- but it is only היראה -- too spontaneous, too quick, lacking the arduous process of introspection and purging and nostalgia and prolonged self-examination -- the פעולת המצוה -- to qualify as full תשובה. He who said "צדקה ממני" may now be a צדיק, as is the case of even a רשע גמור שהיראה. His זדונות have become שגגות -- hence his forgiveness -- but not yet זכויות. Thus, his act is never held up as a paradigm of תשובה. Judah falls short of the ideal.

Now consider the תשובה of Reuven: It is slow and halting, deliberate and painful. It is not like a cloudburst or a mighty river, but like little streams



of conscience and tiny rivulets of renewal which come together ponderously, patiently, and haltingly. It is not lightning, but a gradual enlightenment, like the rise of dawn after a long night, when sometimes one does not know if it is dark or light, day shading into night or night turning into day. But -- it is deeper, it is more enduring, and it effects a more radical change of character. Reuven goes beyond הירור to תשובה -- it has continuity and impacts every facet of his existence. Hence, Reuven becomes the father of תשובה, as it were. Thus: א"ל הקב"ה לראובן, תשובה. מעולם לא חטא אדם לפני ועשה תשובה, ואתה פתחת בתשובה תחילה, חייך שכן בנך עומד ופותח בתשובה תחילה, ואי זה זה? זה הושע (שובה ישראל עד ה' אלקיך) (ב"ר פד-יח)

That is why for Judah there is only סליחה, forgiveness, while for Reuven, there is full תשובה. Judah's תשובה was quick, abrupt, the result of a powerful הירור. Therefore he is forgiven only as a result of God's grace: חנן הרבה לסלוח. But his act is not רצוי, it is not "desireable," it is not something that God, as it were, yearns for and seeks longingly and lovingly. Reuven's תשובה, like his sin, was prolonged, deep, thorough. Therefore Reuven is accepted on his own merits, even without special "grace." For Reuven, his past is not only forgiven; it becomes part of his heroic present: זדונות נעשו לו זכויות. For a תשובה of this kind, God yearns and pines: הרוצה בתשובה.

How brilliantly the הגדולה כנסת אנשי formulates our תפילות; the ברכה of סליחה speaks only of sin and pardon. It is a one-issue ברכה. The ברכה of תשובה reveals a whole process: וקרבנו לתורתך, וקרבתנו לעבודתך, והחזירנו בתשובה שלימה לפניך. Return us to Your Torah; draw us near to Your service; return us in full repentance to You. It is a multifaceted procedure, going from the study of Torah, to prayer and service, to the religious experience of divine closeness itself.

The Talmud (A.Z. 17a) relates that when Rabbi (Judah) heard that a great sinner had repented and was immediately accepted, בכה רבי: יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת, -- "Rabbi wept and said, It is possible for a man to win all eternity in one hour." But if that is so, man is fortunate indeed; why, then, was Rabbi crying?



Because the act of repentance was of the inferior kind, it was only שעה אחת, one hour; it was only היראה, קיום, without פעולת המצוה; because such a man attained הבא only as an act of היראה which lead to סליחה, when he could have risen even higher than eternity, by the long process of תשובה שלימה; because this was the blitz-action of a Judah, when it could have been the more difficult and arduous but more sublime and enduring תשובה of a Reuven.

As we prepare for Yom Kippur, we come before הקב"ה embarrassed, feeling poignantly inadequate and morally defective. But, as fundamentally decent Jews and יראי השם, a thought of change, a היראה תשובה, rises within us. Who can resist such a היראה תשובה on ימים נוראים, when we recite תוקף or ונתנה תוקף or כל נדרי or לא-ל עורך דין or וידוי or נעילה or יראת שמים? Our basic structure of our religious personalities, will not let us rest smug and self-confident in our usual ways. We stand before רבש"ע contrite, aware of our faults. Within, there is a murmur of sorrow and regret, an aching sadness over what we have or have not done with our lives, an outburst of remorse -- but it is היראה, so contained, so constricted! We ask for חנינה, for pardon, for amnesty, for סליחה -- forgiveness.

But we do so knowing that it must not end here. For after forgiveness for היראה must come true תשובה. The קיום must be accompanied by the המצוה.

Judah taught us the power of a holy thought, of היראה. Our next step must be to hear (וישמע ראובן) these intangible, faint, gossamer whispers of היראה, of עשרת ימי התשובה -- and strive, in these חרטה ובושה, to weave them into a powerful web of פעולת המצוה of a whole תשובה.

Such a genuine תשובה must begin with השיבנו אבינו תלמוד תורה, not as mere material to be covered, certainly not as a lifeless and perfunctory mouthing of ritual formulas, but as the most sacred and meaningful activity of which the human intellect is capable. This holds true for us not only as יחידים, but as צבור as well. A generalized nostalgia for religiosity, an abstract appreciation of מסורת, a sincere but passing awareness



of the bankruptcy of the idolatries of our era -- all these are, its is true, authentic feelings of תשובה, but they remain in the category of היראה alone. Real and full תשובה requires that Torah, Jewish education -- on all levels -- become our priority in the State of Israel and in the Diaspora, wherever Jews dwell. And השיבנו אבינו לתורתך means that our Heavenly Father's Torah belongs equally to all His children, and must never be regarded as the exclusive preserve of the דתיים.

The second stage is that of לעבודתך, the transformation all our activities -- no matter how alien or remote they may seem to the world of קדושה -- to a form of עבודת השם; our service of הקב"ה must be coextensive with our lives, and cover every aspect of our existence. And here too, the communal/national dimension is as important as the personal one, and demands of us that we bring all segments of our national and communal Jewish life into the orbit of Judasim's spiritual concern and under its moral judgment. Only then will we be ready for the ultimate atep, that of שלימה לפניך.

May this coming year be for us and for all Israel a year of לחולי עמך שלימה רפואה שלח מלכנו שלח, for health and complete recovery for all that ails us physically and economically; for תשובה שלימה for our grave spiritual and religious problems; and ultimately, as both Prophets and Sages promised us, for the גאולה שלימה, the complete redemption from all our national and communal afflictions and, along with us, the rest of mankind.