

SELIHOT LECTURE: TESHUVAH AND SELIHAH

Our theme is: the relationship of teshuvah (repentance) and selihah (forgiveness, the request for forgiveness). Does not selihah follow automatically upon teshuvah? And if so, why is it that in the Amidah prayer, the two are assigned to two separate blessings, ... השיבנו אבינו
... בא"י חנוך המרבה נסלות and בא"י הרוצה בתשובה
Moreover, if teshuvah is the cause and selihah the effect, why do we gather this evening for selihot prior to the ten days of teshuvah?

I find the answer in two different Midrashim (both quoted by the author of (שבט הלכות)), relating each blessing to a different incident of sin and repentance in the life of the patriarchal family of Jacob.

The Midrash relates that when Reuven sinned against his father Jacob by sleeping with Bilhah, it was ordained that he be punished by death, but afterwards he repented, whereupon the ministering angels proclaimed, בא"י
blessing God Who desires repentance.

When Judah sinned against Tamar, and pronounced the verdict, "Take her out and let her be burnt" ((הוציאה ותשרף)), and then Tamar showed him proof that she had not sinned, he immediately confessed and said עדיקה ממני, she is right and I am wrong, and he was forgiven for that sin. Whereupon, the ministering angels proclaimed, בא"י חנוך המרבה נסלות, blessing God Who graciously forgives greatly.

So the ministering angels teach us that the concepts of teshuvah and selihah are not identical, and they relate them to the two archetypical dramas of sin and repentance.

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

The sin of Reuven is described in the Torah as follows: וישכב את בלהה
פלגש אביו וישמע ישראל. "And Reuven lay with Bilhah 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, Jacob or Israel. The Sages were, I believe, more correct: They accuse Reuven of בגדל יצואי 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 Jacob. The Netziv 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. So 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 teshuvah. The brothers wanted to kill Joseph. We read: וַיִּשְׁמַע רְעוּבֵן, Reuven heard about this, and he saved him from their hands, saying, Let us not kill him. Note well: וַיִּשְׁמַע רְעוּבֵן-- the exact language appears in the act of Reuven's repentance as it does in the act of Reuven's sin: וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ...

There are further evidences 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 teshuvah 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, וַיָּשָׁב רְעוּבֵן אֶל הַבּוֹר, Reuven returned to the pit. Rashi asks: Where was he during the time that Joseph was sold? Rashi answers that he was not present, because, according to one version, עָסִיק הָיָה בַּשָּׂקוֹ וּתְצִנוּתוֹ עַל שִׁבְלָתוֹ יְצוּי אֲבִי, he was deeply engrossed in his sackcloth and fasting, in his remorse for having intruded and rearranged the bed of his father.

So, his teshuvah was a result of a prolonged introspection, from pangs of conscience. Moreover, it bedevilled him: Reuven's attempt at teshuvah by saving Joseph was frustrated by his very feelings of teshuvah, by his very act of contrition in "his sackcloth and his fasting!" His teshuvah defeats itself, it is painful and tragic.

No wonder, that after the result of this kind of process of teshuvah, the ministering angels should offer the blessing to God who is הַרוֹצֶה בַּתְּשׁוּבָה, Who desires such repentance!

Now we turn to Judah. You recall that Tamar was married first to Er and then to Onan, and both died. By the law 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 until he should send her a gift. Judah left and when he came back with his gift, 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: הוֹצִיָּאָהּ וְתָשָׂרָף, 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: הֲכֵן נָא שְׂמִי -- Do tell: to whom do these belong? Whereupon וַיִּכַּר יְהוּדָה, he recognized and acknowledged them, and he said צָדִיקָה אַתָּה, she is right and I am wrong, and therefore she goes free.

I think of that scene as Tamar walked up to Judah at the gates of the city where he presided. Little does Judah know what this woman is clutching under her arm so protectively. The crowds probably do not notice it, because for them the verdict is a foregone conclusion: death by burning. Up she walks, slowly and deliberately. Judah notices her every step, and his righteous indignation

builds up. This woman was a blot on his family, a stain on his record. 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. And then -- the surprise: Tamar spreads it all out on his table before him, the robe and the seal and the staff.

א-ה-ה, 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 plans and thoughts clutch Judah at that moment. No doubt he must 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, "Take her out and let her be burnt!" If anyone notices 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! Judah decides against expediency, against self-interest. The Divine Image stirs within Judah and -- he confesses! He is, after all, the son of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and Isaac. There shall be no miscarriage of justice. "And Judah recognized them and he said, She is right and I am wrong." At that moment ונסכה לו שם אבותיו, he was forgiven for that dreadful sin. Whereupon, the ministering angels proclaimed, "Blessed art Thou O Lord, Who is gracious and forgives greatly."

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

That of Judah is a result of the sudden outburst of innate goodness, which swells up like a mighty river after a cloudburst, and overflows all dams. Or, it is like lightning, which in its suddenness and brilliance gives him the vision of truth and beauty.

The teshuvah of Reuven is slow and halting, deliberate and painful. It is not like a cloudburst or mighty river, but like little streams of conscience and tiny rivulets of renewal which come together, slowly and patiently. It is not lightning, but a gradual enlightenment, like the rise of dawn after a long night, when sometimes he does not know if it is dark or light.

Hence, for Judah, there is only selihah, forgiveness. For Reuven, there is full repentance. Judah's sin was slow and deliberate, his teshuvah was quick and heroic. Therefore he is forgiven only as a result of God's grace: חסדו. But his act is not רצונו, it is not "desireable," it is not something that God, as it were, yearns for. Reuven's teshuvah, like his sin, was prolonged, deep, thorough. Therefore Reuven is accepted on his own merits, even without special "grace." For a return of this kind, God yearns and pines: רצונו בתשובה.

Look at how brilliantly the אנשי כנסת הגדולה formulated the prayers: the blessing of selihah speaks only of sin and pardon. It is a one-issue blessing. The blessing of teshuvah reveals a whole process: return us O Father to Your Torah; draw us near O King 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.

Notice too that the blessing of teshuvah follows the blessing of בינה, understanding. The Tur relates this to the verse in Isaiah: ונגבו יבין (Is.6), and the Tur adds: הרי שהבינה מביאה ליד תשובה, intelligence or understanding leads to repentance. It is only when a full and

thorough and comprehensive teshuvah is not operative that we have to fall back on חנין המרבה זמנים -- which is only a second best.

No wonder that the Talmud relates that when Rabbi (Judah) heard that a great sinner had repented and was immediately accepted, בכה רבי, יש קונה, "Rabbi wept and said, It is possible for a man to win all eternity in one hour." Why, then, was he crying? Because the act of repentance was of the inferior kind, it was only שעה אחת, one hour; because such a man attained eternity only as an act of selihah, when he could have risen even higher than eternity, by the long process of teshuvah; because this was the blitz-action of a Judah, when it could have been the more difficult and arduous but more sublime repentance of a Reuven.

As we prepare for Selihot, we come before God empty-handed. Our teshuvah is inadequate and defective. We stand before Him contrite, aware of our faults, hard of heart. At most, there is a murmur of confession, an outburst of remorse -- but it is so contained, so constricted! We ask for חנינה, for pardon, for amnesty, for forgiveness.

But we do so knowing that it must not end here. For after forgiveness must come true teshuvah.

Unlike Judah, who confessed when the evidence was piled up -- הכר-נא we must hear (וישמע ראובן) even the intangible, faint, gossamer whispers of contrition, of חרטה, of בישה -- and strive, in the period we are now ushering in, for genuine teshuvah, beginning with הטיבנו אבינו למנו, and on to למנו, and ultimately to להחזירנו בתשובה שלימה לפניך.