

"We Must Return"

The central theme of this entire season and especially of this day is ~~the~~ Teshuvah, Repentance, Return. The idea that man can change and that he is commanded to change for the better lies at the very heart of the religious ~~experience~~, and particularly in Judaism.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, to note the opinion of one of the great Talmudic scholars of the nineteenth century, the author of Minchat Chinukah, who maintains that Teshuvah is not to be considered one of the 613 commandments. Eating Matzoh on Passover is a Mitzvah, praying is a Mitzvah, putting on the Tefellin and Talis is a Mitzvah, making Kiddush is a Mitzvah -- and yet Teshuvah, the most penetrating, personal, and consequential religious act known to Jews, is not regarded as a Mitzvah! Surely there must be some rational explanation for this considered opinion of a profound and comprehensive scholar who knew Jewish law as few others did and whose intuitive grasp of the whole Jewish spirit -- its whole Weltanschauung -- was second to none. May I suggest a solution to this problem which I believe explains the opinion of the Minchat Chinukah and allow us some insight into the act and experience of Teshuvah. The counting of a religious act as a Mitzvah, as the fulfillment of a commandment applies only to some voluntary action which I can choose to do or not to do. But if there is something which is beyond my free will then that act into which I am coerced and forced cannot be considered a Mitzvah. I may choose to pray or not to pray; if I do, it is regarded as a virtue, a Mitzvah. I can choose to observe the Sabbath or I can choose not to observe it; therefore, my observance is regarded as meritorious and my lack of observance as wrong.

A-328

Teshuvah, however, in its deepest and most essential sense, is not a voluntary act. We must ~~return~~ return. The act of return or Teshuvah is a universal phenomenon, an absolute need of the spirit, a necessity of man as much as eating or breathing. Man has no choice but to return. He must, willy-nilly, do Teshuvah.

Perhaps the best analogy can be drawn from the field of psychology. What happens when we sometimes find ourselves in strange situations, fearing the unknown, unhappy and insecure? Do not we feel a desire from the bottom of our hearts to return, to return to the safety of childhood, to the time when we had no responsibilities, to the warmth of a parent's loving care? Is not, to use a more severe example, the phenomenon of senility often accompanied by a return to childhood, what we often call "second childhood?" Psychologists tell us that very often there are psychoses which are expressed in a regression, to even a prenatal or foetal stage, symbolic of ^h the time when the person was completely dependent upon another from whom he received all nourishment, all care and all love. As a matter of fact, Freud maintains that the death instinct, a universal instinct of man towards death which is the counterbalance of an instinct towards life, has its origin in what he calls a "repetition compulsion" -- an instinct for return to the original state of lifelessness; for death, lifelessness, inorganic matter, the Afar of the Bible, is the origin of life and therefore of human beings.

Now just as it is true psychologically that there is a constant urge to return to the origins, so is it true spiritually. Judaism is aware of a truth more comprehensive than that taught by either psychology or biology.

It recognizes that man has more than one origin, more than just dust or the primitive cell. Judaism teaches that man has two origins -- one is Afar Min Ha-Adamah, dust from the earth, and the other is the Breath of God which the Lord breathed in to the first man. Man is composed of the elements of Heaven and the elements of earth, of the Breath of God and the dust of the ground. And therefore for us the fact that man must return is an accepted fact. Teshuvah, return, is an inescapable requirement of human life.

But the great and crucial question that faces each and everyone of us, particularly on this day and during this season, is: What are you going to return to? Which of these origins of man is it to which you most aspire, to which you crave to return?

How interesting that we have two verses that urge return or

Teshuvah upon us. One is the verse that comes from the Book of the Prophet Hosea in which he says

Shuvah Yisrael ad E'lo'ei'ha K'fir
 שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲדֹנָיִךְ כִּפֹּר

"Return, Oh Israel, unto the Lord thy God." The second verse comes from

the Book of Psalms in the Tefillah Le-Mosheh, in which we say

ad d'k'v'ra T'm' Shuv' V'na' ad'ap' 3
 אֲדֹנָיִךְ שׁוּבָה וְנָשׁוּבָה אֲדֹנָיִךְ

Ha shav' unash
 הָאֵל שׁוּבָה וְנָשׁוּבָה

"Thou returnest man to dust, and sayest 'Return, ye children of men.'"

Thus the choice is given to us. It is an either-or choice -- either we return unto the Lord thy God, the source of life and the author of all that is decent and honorable and noble within us, or else we are given the command, "Return ye children of men -- unto dust, unto the lifeless origin of man."

To God or to dust, this is the alternative presented to us on this day of Teshuvah. What this means in terms of individual men and women

clearly and unequivocally. If we will be just Benei adam, ordinary mortals, finite, limited and no different from the beast of the fields then: "Return to dust ye children of men." But if that we will be Israel, the people of God, the champions of the Lord, then "Return Oh Israel unto the Lord thy God."

It is to my mind no mere coincidence that the Book of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur afternoon, the time when the great day of Teshuvah is about to end and the sun has begun almost to dip below the western horizon -- the last chance as it were for the great moving act of Teshuvah. The story of Jonah is essentially a simple one. God informed him that the people of Nineveh have sinned; they are an evil people. Therefore God commands Jonah to go to the people of Nineveh and preach or prophesy unto them, urging them to change their ways and mend their behavior and turn back to God. Jonah refuses to accomplish this mission and makes an attempt to escape from God, as it were. The rest of the story -- his adventure aboard ship and his being swallowed by the whale, and the end of the story -- are well known to you.

It is in the first part, however, that a passage appears which bothered many of the classical commentaries on this Book of the Bible.

We read that God tells to Noah the following words:

And a rain ye Nineveh neglected

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל נֹחַ וְאֶל יֶלְדָיו וְאֶת כָּל הַבְּרִיָּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ וְאֶת הַבְּהֵמָה וְאֶת הָרֶמֶשׂ וְאֶת כָּל הָרֶמֶשׂ הָאֲרֶזְרִי וְאֶת כָּל הָרֶמֶשׂ הָאֲרֶזְרִי וְאֶת כָּל הָרֶמֶשׂ הָאֲרֶזְרִי וְאֶת כָּל הָרֶמֶשׂ הָאֲרֶזְרִי

"In forty more days Nineveh shall be overthrown." At the end of the story, Jonah does finally appear before the people of Nineveh and gives them this message, the message that if they will not repent God will "overthrow" the city of Nineveh, and the people of Nineveh respond wholeheartedly and return to the Lord God, thereby avoiding their destruction.

Now, the question the commentaries ask is this: The words of God were clear and unconditional: In forty more days Nineveh will be destroyed. The fact, however, is that forty days later the city of Nineveh was not destroyed. It was saved -- it so happens, because of their response to the preachment of Jonah. No matter how beautiful the moral of the story, no matter how noble and lofty the emphasis on man's ability to change, there is here the problem of the fact that God's prediction did not come true. He maintained that in forty days Nineveh Nehepekhet, Nineveh would be "overthrown," and this did not come about.

The answer to this problem of the commentaries is a remarkable confirmation of the theme we have been developing. For the Hebrew word for "overthrown," Nehepekhet, literally means "to be turned." Ordinarily, in Hebrew, "to be turned" means to be plowed under, to be utterly destroyed. And yet, those who are careful in their reading of this verse, and those who take the trouble to consult that classical commentator, "Rashi," will understand that the word Nehepekhet also has another meaning in Hebrew. For so does Rashi comment on this word,

In mya atzu Teshuvah an Nehepekhet mayra an li tova
בְּיָמֵי אֶתְנָחַד מִדֶּבֶר לְיָמֵי שָׁלוֹם
If they will be turned from evil to good, by doing Teshuvah.

This then is the crux of the matter: Nineveh has a clear choice -- it must be "turned." However, it must choose: to be turned upside down, to be ground to dust; or, to "turn from the ways of evil to the ways of good, from the ways of destruction to the ways of construction, from the ways of malice and shame to the ways of nobility and loftiness and, ultimately, holiness. God's words came true. For when he said that in forty days Nineveh would be "turned" he left to the people of Nineveh the great choice as to which shade of meaning they will accept. Just as

choice actual
temptation

we are this day given the choice of two origins to which to return, so was Nineveh given the choice of their "turning": to dust or to God.

By a dual broken shomayim or earth

ה' יצאנו ואלוהים יצאנו

"I have called witness to Thee this day, Heaven and earth" -- man is made of both elements, of the elements of Heaven and the elements of earth, the character of angels and the character of beasts, these are his two origins.

Samson la chaim na hamim laot y lo boracha la haolam

ה' יצאנו ואלוהים יצאנו

"Life and death have I given before Thee, the blessing and the curse,"

He did lo borachim lomach a toy la samon

וה' יצאנו ואלוהים יצאנו

"And thou shall choose life in order that thy seeds shall live."

We must return. Let us this day resolve where we and our families shall return to. May it be to return unto the Lord God, to return to the elements of Heaven within us, the return to a higher, finer, lovelier kind of life.

*in the way of Earth + Dust + Beast is - death + curse.
" " " " Heaven + Spirit + Angel is - life + blessing*

There is no doubt that man is fated to return to one of these - & therefore the act of itself as such is not accounted a sin. But the great choice of overwhelming & transcendent significance is: to which origin shall we return?

Here Torah guides us: