

"Three Sign-posts on the Road of Return"

The main theme of this day is expressed in one word, the word נחילה. This word means "repentance", or, literally, "return", for repentance does mean that Man returns to G-d. He leaves behind his weaknesses and frailties and sins and transgressions, and he returns to G-d.

But today our hearts and minds and souls are focused on more than the return of Man to G-d, more than the נחילה of Man. ~~to G-d~~ We also hope and pray and look forward to the return of G-d to Man; we hope and pray that G-d too will do נחילה.

The promise that G-d will do נחילה, that He will return to His people and no longer leave them to the wiles of a capricious fate, this promise is held out to us by our prophets as one of the greatest goals of human history. G-d will indeed some day return from His Divine exile, He will return to Israel along the road of charity and benevolence and loving-kindness and pardon.

The only question is: how are we mortals going to get G-d to do נחילה? How can we bring about this wonderful return of G-d? Listen closely to the Prophet Malachi as he gives the Israelites new hope: אני אשוב ואתם תשובו ואתם תשובו. "Return to Me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts". Do you know what that means? That means that G-d is willing to meet you half way. Certainly G-d is willing to do נחילה, to return to Man - - but Man must have the courtesy to go towards his G-d and greet Him. First Man must attempt to return to G-d, then G-d will surely return to him. אני אשוב ואתם תשובו ואתם תשובו. First Man does נחילה, and then his reward is - - the נחילה of G-d.

So, then, if Man is to take the first step on the road of return, if we are to repent first, the problem of our redemption as individuals, as members of a people and as citizens of humanity, resolves itself into: How can we best repent? How shall we go about this business of נחילה? Once we have learned the techniques of נחילה and applied them, once we have ^{read} followed the sign-posts on the road of return and followed their directions, G-d, Blessed be He, will also return; Man and G-d will meet half way.

There are 3 sign-posts on the road of return to G-d that I want to talk to you about today.

Three Great Facts of Teshuvah

~~וְעַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ~~ . My Soul, O G-d, thirsts for you. This noble expression of religious passion is the central theme of this great and holy day. The heart yearns, the soul thirsts and the eyes turn heavenward in humble prayer to G-d the King. And what is it that is demanded of us on this Judgement Day? ~~וְשׁוּבוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ~~ . Return O Israel, to the Lord ~~thou~~ thy G-d. O man, born of woman and formed of earth, thy days are numbered and thy years limited. Thou standest in judgement before G-d, thy Father and thy King.

Return, O man, repent, do ~~וְשׁוּבוּ~~ . The first sign-post which will tell us if we are on the right path and going in the right direction is our resistance to the same temptation to which we succumbed when we sinned.

The first great fact which gives ~~וְשׁוּבוּ~~ The uniquely Jewish character, of ~~וְשׁוּבוּ~~ is the fact that we are not to dodge temptation; we must not shun provocation. Oh no! On the contrary, it means that we are to dare temptation and defy it to its face. It means that we are to stand up to sin and look it straight in the eye. We are not to run away from life and all its entangled relationships - The highest proof of successful ~~וְשׁוּבוּ~~ is when we can rather, we are to correct ourselves in the midst of living. ~~We are to retrace~~ our steps, enter into the same conditions and the same circumstances under which we sinned - and then exhibit the moral spunk to do good and not evil. It means that the man who drinks his daily orange juice and milk in the Automat, and who once was tempted to include a non-kosher meat sandwich in his menu, is not to avoid the Automat, or avoid breakfasts altogether in the future. It means that he is from now on to go into that Automat, get his juice and milk, stop in front of the box containing the forbidden meat, contemplate it, and pass on without it. It means not retiring to a sheltered monasticism, but striking out and accepting the challenge with your fists up.

When Rabbi Yehudah was asked, the Talmud tells us, ~~וְשׁוּבוּ~~ ~~הַיְיָ~~ ~~יְיָ~~ how would you describe the ^{highest} ~~highest~~ ^{a man} ~~a man~~ who wishes to repent from ^{the} ~~sexual~~ ^{of immorality,} ~~sins~~ ^{he}

answered זאנא פון אים, זאנא פון אים. A man of this sort

has successfully repented if he keeps clean ^{with} upon again meeting ^{object of his} the same ~~woman~~ with ~~immoral degradation~~ ^{when he sinned}, at the same time of the day and year, and in the very same place.

This, my friends, is the authoritative view of Judaism - and it is a far cry from those religions which would prescribe, in such cases, a vow ^{of} celibacy. זאנא פון אים פון אים. Confront the facts of life with your self - and beat ~~it~~ them!

"Well", somebody in this congregation is probably saying to himself right now, "the Rabbi has set the conditions for proper ^{דבר} - but what are the mechanics of repentance, what are the inside workings of this process called ^{דבר} ?". A good question that is. And that brings us to the second ^{great} ~~great~~ fact of ^{דבר} , the second sign-post on the road of return.

If you have ever been ordered by your physician to stop smoking, you will know how difficult that task is. You experience a terrible emptiness in your ~~mouth~~ mouth, you feel shaky and uncomfortable, and the nervousness will express itself in manifold ways. Your doctor will then advise you to chew gum in order to harmlessly release the pressure built up in you by the desire to smoke. He is thus allowing a harmful drive to be released through harmless channels. The ~~physich~~ psychologists have a fancy term for this, and an even fancier explanation. They call it "sublimation". And they explain that every human being is endowed with a certain amount of primal energy which expresses itself in the varied drives, passions, likes and dislikes, loves and hates which characterize the emotional life of man. This energy they call the Id or the Libido, and they have found that it can be expressed in many different ways. It is man who determines how it shall be spent. The water pressure is built up in the sink pipes; man determines which faucet he will turn on. A man can spend the energy with which he was endowed in drives and passions of a sinful and anti-social nature. If he learns to release this energy through better and approved channels, he is said to have "sublimated" his drives and energy.

Here, my friends, we have the mechanics of ה'ז"ל. Don't just rub out part of your natural self, don't deny yourself and completely squelch your drives and passions and desires and strivings. On the contrary, says Judaism, accelerate them - but sublimate them. The same powers which you put into the great striving for uncleanness - translate them into a powerful and vigorous aspiration for cleanliness. Sublimation, the rechanneling of human energy from bad to good, is the second great fact of ה'ז"ל, the second sign-post on the road of return.

Writes Job: ה'ז"ל, "who can bring forth clean out of unclean!" And the Rabbis add, in explanation, ה'ז"ל, ה'ז"ל.

Abraham from his father Terah - here is a shining example of the ה'ז"ל, the sublimation of unclean to clean, of impure to pure. We are mistaken, the Rabbis mean to tell us, if we think that Abraham was original in his passion for principles; ^{be so imbued with an ideal that he would be willing to sacrifice more than himself for it, that he would be ready & willing to} we are wrong if we think that Abraham was the first to sacrifice a son for his religion. Indeed not! It was his father Terah who first taught the world that an ideal was worth all you had; he was the first to cling to an ideal with the tenacity and faith which led him to cast his son Abraham into the ה'ז"ל, the burning ^{furnace} oven. Abraham inherited it from Terah; only he sublimated it. While Terah spent his passions for principles in the service of an idol, Abraham channelled it into an ה'ז"ל, the service of G-d.

ה'ז"ל, the ^{Talmud} Midrash says, is another example of ה'ז"ל, of the channelization from unclean to clean. King Hezekiah was, history tells us, an outstandingly successful educator. ה'ז"ל. In the days of Hezekiah, young boys and girls from Dan to Beersheba were examined and not one could be found who was not thoroughly familiar with the most complicated laws in the Torah. What a colossal educational success resulted from King Hezekiah's efforts. Yet was Hezekiah's passion for education

ה'ז"ל - אברהם (1965)

יחלען יצאן. How many of us have marveled at the terrific

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is the correction of what can be

of sin. We must also be ready to mend our past. For ^{א תל} is more than a pact between Man and G-d. It includes, willy nilly, your injured fellow-man.

Let me give you an example. Joseph's brothers, as you know, threw him into a pit and then sold him as a slave to a band of Midianite merchantmen bound for Egypt. They dipped his ^{א תל} ^{א תל}, his beautiful cloak, in the blood of a goat and carried it back to their father Jacob, trying to persuade him that Joseph was dead. Now suppose they had grown conscience-stricken, remorseful and, unable to stand it any longer, had gone to Jacob, confessing their sin and asking his pardon. Can you not feel what would have been the first question that would have risen in Jacob's heart in a storm of anxious and indignant grief -- "But where is Joseph? - what then became of Joseph? you ask me to forgive you, but your sin is not simply between you and me. Where is Joseph? He may be somewhere in a distant land today, in miserable slavery. How can I forgive you until I know that all is well with him?"

Joseph was the skeleton in the closet of his brothers. Had they done ^{א תל}, their repentance, their attempts at return, would have been vain and futile and ridiculous as long as Joseph was away from his father and in the miserable condition into which they sold him. We too must ~~each~~ search every nook and corner of our memories with the light-beam of our conscience until we find the skeletons in our closets, the skeletons which can yet be resurrected. Each of us has a Joseph in his history, someone whom, perhaps, we figuratively sold down the river. When are we going to bring him back? How, in these Ten Days of Penitence, can we face our Divine Father, when we know that sometime in the course of the past year we insulted a friend so that he cried in secret? How can we ask our Heavenly Father to give us honor, ^{א תל} ^{א תל} if during this past year there was someone whose reputation and honor we maliciously maligned? There are sins which we sinned against for, but our fellow men which can yet be atoned ~~father~~ only by approaching these same fellow men and making amends, doing something concrete to make up for these sins.

My friends, no amount of prayer is going to help us until each and every one of us supplies his "Joseph". Somewhere in the past of each of us there is this "Joseph", this someone who was wronged, a wrong which can still be righted. And while G-d may lovingly sympathize with our beautiful prayers and penitence, he still has his ear open for the cry of that injured person. And G-d tells us, "You ask Me to return to you; you ask Me to forgive you. But your sin is not simply between me and you. WHERE IS JOSEPH?"