

D'var Torah for Shabbat Shuva

This Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is entitled Shabbat Shuva, or the Sabbath of Return. It is interesting to note parenthetically that in centuries gone by Rabbis only gave two sermons a year, one on Sabbath HaGadol, the Sabbath before Passover and Shabbat Shuva, the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Therefore, it is with great humility that I accept this wonderful opportunity to address you.

Shabbat Shuva is named after the first word of the Haftorah from Hosea Chapter 14, verse 2. which was so beautifully sung by Harvey Horowitz. The word “Shuva” literally means to return. Therefore, it is an active verb, which means that the person involved is actively returning to God spiritually or to a life consistent with moral and ethical behavior as in mitzvot. This return requires energy, action, movement toward a life as free from sin as possible.

Last year, I had the honor of addressing you and talked specifically about the Parsha Ha-Azinu, which was Moses’ warning to the children of Israel that if they do not follow the commandments, they will be severely punished. These are indeed the words that concern the last 4 parshiot of Deuteronomy as Moses finishes his narration to the people about the severity of punishment that will follow if they do not follow the commandments of God just before he dies.

The parsha Vayelech is also filled with warnings, but I have chosen to use as the theme of this Dvar Torah the concept of returning to God and the extreme difficulty that is imposed upon us as human beings to do this, both spiritually and to act Godly in the physical world. The verse that I wish to discuss, specifically, comes from the Haftorah that is chanted in the morning service of Yom Kippur. And in that Haftorah I wish to focus on just four Hebrew words that are found in Isaiah, Chapter 57: verse 19. Please on verse 19 on page 1241.

Just as Rabbi Netter very frequently will select a phrase, perhaps a paragraph or a group of words and deliver an uplifting and inspirational sermon, I have chosen this verse because it has tremendous significance for this time of year as interpreted by our rabbinic sages. The four words “Shalom, Shalom, Larachok, Vlakarov” and the sentence concludes with “Amar Adonai Oorphativ”. The translation in our Chumash is not exactly as it is written in our original Machtzor for the High Holidays, and more appropriately translated as “Peace, Peace to those who are far and to those who are near, says the Lord, and I will heal them.” What do these words far and near mean? And why is the adverb far written first?

These four words have been interpreted in the Talmud in Berachot 34b by the student Rabbi Abahu and his teacher, Rabbi Yochanon. They take these 4 words well beyond the dimension of geography. In a brief, but significant exchange in the Talmud, the verse becomes the venue for a fundamental disagreement over what constitutes the path toward religious perfection. It is a discussion so important as we observe the days of Aseret Yimei Teshuvah (the ten days of repentance), a time of serious introspection and repentance. Scripture, sacred and accessible, is the core of Jewish consciousness. Large issues often spring from small verses and so Rabbi Abahu, a 3rd century Palestinian sage, ponders the deeper meaning of the adverbs “far” and “near” in our verse. Prophets are not prosaic, they do not speak in unimaginative terms, and so Isaiah must have meant more than a geographic distinction. Dramatically, Rabbi Abahu shifts the verse into a moral discourse. Isaiah is talking of the spirit and not of space.

Accordingly, Rabbi Abahu unveils a surprising religious belief. A person who has sinned and stopped is of a higher religious order than one who has never sinned or who has never known of sin, or in his provocative words, “in the spot where penitents stand, there is no room for the perfectly righteous.” His proof text, without which it would be quickly dismissed, is our very verse, the four

words that come from Isaiah 57:19. He speaks of the religiously distant and alienated first. Their return is especially pleasing to God. Only then, does the prophet welcome the near, those who have never departed from God.

But the Talmud is a culture of conflict of divergent views clashing in the twilight zone of human existence for religious insight as Rabbi Ismar Schorsch exquisitely expresses. Its editors remind us at this point that Rabbi Abahu's declaration is a radical departure from the more conventional position of his teacher, Rabbi Yochanon, who read the verse in Isaiah differently. Yes, we are in the realm of morality and piety, but the word "far" is to be understood as someone who has lived an unblemished life, far removed from any sin. The word "near" comes second because it refers to someone long in the shadow of wickedness, that is near to sin, who has chosen to come back.

This is an amazing dispute. Not only does it validate the right of a mature student to reject the view of his teacher, but in this case, the more daring and compassionate stance of Rabbi Abahu became the normative posture of Judaism. Maimonides in the 12th century reiterated it in his all-embracing Code of Jewish Law adding the underlying reason:

"The merit of the penitents is higher than that of the perfectly righteous, because the former have struggled harder to subdue their passions."

I know of no more appropriate or uplifting message for the start of the New Year. We all fall repeatedly short of our ideals and aspirations. It is crucial to our psychic welfare to remember that what Judaism values supremely is our struggle to overcome adversity. At the top of the spiritual hierarchy are not those naturally endowed with all the right instincts which are hermetically sealed off from all temptation as Rabbi Ismar Schorsch puts it, but those who have strayed and stumbled and fought their way back. Judaism puts a moral premium on the agony it takes to achieve a life of virtue and piety.

Nor is that goal quantifiable. In a profound piece of religious counsel, the Rabbis at Yavne to revive and restructure Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple repudiated the impulse to correlate piety with a fixed number of commandments. They said, "whether we succeed in observing a lot or a little, what counts is that our heart be solely directed toward God." Another example of Shuva Adonai. It is the purity of intention in each and every single religious act which makes the difference in our lives and the world around us and not the mechanical or obsessive proliferation of such acts.

Repentance is a process. It requires being honest about the mistakes we have made, and admitting the wrong we have done, apologizing to those we have hurt and promising not to repeat our misdeeds. In this way we are moving past our wrongdoings and hopefully we are wiser and more careful in the future. So great is the act of Teshuvah that tradition sees one who repents as being greater than the one who is wholly righteous. This is the plea of Rabbi Abahu and is the story of the greatest Baal Teshuvah in Torah, Judah in Parsha Vayigash.

Finally, I would like to change gears a little because there are 3 verses in Tanach which are so fascinating that I have to share them with you. The concluding message that I wish to share with you is something we can think of on Yom Kippur and the rest of the year as we reflect on our faults and our human frailties. Jeremiah 18:6, Isaiah 64:7, and Job: 10:9 form the background for a poem-song that is recited in the Maariv service on Yom Kippur, Ki hinei Kachomer. What does this prayer mean? The 2 prophets and Job are exclaiming to God that just as a potter molds clay into a beautiful vessel, if he is not happy with it, he can destroy it and refashion it. Is this not what God did to the generation of Noah and then he recreated his covenant first with Noah and then with Abraham. In Isaiah 64:7 the prophet has the chutzpah to say to God, look you made us what we are, now it is your responsibility to fix us. Let me read one verse of this poem, which is thought to have been written by a medieval French writer, and then I will conclude.

Ki hinei Kachomer beyad hayotzeir,] birtzoto marchiv uvirtzoto meykatzetzer,] kein anachnu beyadcha] chesed notzeir,] labrit habeit, vial teifen, Layeitzer.]

“INDEED, AS THE CLAY IN THE HAND OF THE POTTER,] WHO, WHEN HE WISHES EXPANDS IT AND WHEN HE WISHES CONTRACTS IT;] SO ARE WE IN YOUR HAND,] O YOU WHO REMEMBERS DEEDS OF LOVING KINDNESS] ; LABRIT HABEIT VIAL TEIFEN LAYEITZER” LOOK TO THE COVENANT AND DO NOT REGARD OUR EVIL INCLINATION. The covenant is the covenant with Noach. Notice how the word for potter, Hayotzer is almost identical with Layeitzer, meaning evil inclination. And so Isaiah reminds God that He, God, gave us our yetzer hara. Isaiah is asking God to be willing to forgive us for human faults because He created our evil inclination.

I pray that in the serenity of the High Holy Day services, we will discover this aspect of Judaism in which God will accept those, who most willingly labor to return to a life where we accept remorse for our shortcomings, ask God for forgiveness and when faced with a similar sin, we abstain from it. These are the three aspects of Teshuvah.

May it be that God will inscribe us and our loved ones, both far and near, in the Book of Life. Shabbat Shalom and Shona Tova