

Parashat Vayelech – Shabbat Shuvah 5780, 2019:

The Greatness of Teshuvah

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Teshuvah, the process of returning to the path of Torah observance, is discussed throughout Rabbinic literature. In particular, *Talmud Bavli*, *Yoma* 86a-b presents a number of salient aspects of the power of *teshuvah* and its unique contribution to Jewish spiritual life, three of which I would like to examine.

Rabbi Chama b'Rebbe Chanina said: “Great is *teshuvah* for it brings *refuot* (healing) to the world. As the text [*Sefer Hoshea* 14:5] states: ‘I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely, for My wrath has turned away from him.’” (This and the following *Talmud Bavli* translations my own, all Bible translations, with my emendations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*.) In a very real way, Rabbi Chama b'Rebbe Chanina is teaching us that heart-felt *teshuvah* has the power to completely transform the relationship between the Almighty and the Jewish people from one of great anger to one of *ahavah rabbah* — overwhelming love. *Teshuvah*, therefore, has the ability to bring about a reconciliation between the Master of the Universe and our people. Surely, one cannot imagine a more far-reaching *refuah* than this. In addition, I believe this idea significantly expands the

Shemoneh Esrai's Birkat Refuah to include both physical and spiritual ailments:

Heal us (re'fa'anu), O L-rd, and we will be healed; help us and we will be saved; for You are our praise. Grant complete cure and healing to all our wounds; for You, Almighty King, are a faithful and merciful healer. Blessed are You L-rd, who heals (*rofe*) the sick of His people Israel.

(This and all *Shemoneh Esrai* translations, <https://www.chabad.org>)

The next *ma'amar* (statement) transitions from *teshuvah* as spiritual *refuah* to *teshuvah* as the causal factor in bringing forth the *Geulah* (Ultimate Redemption):

Rabbi Yonatan said: "Great is *teshuvah* for it brings the *Geulah* to the world. As the verse states: 'And a redeemer shall come to Zion, and to those who repent of transgression (u'l'shavei feshah, that is, do teshuvah) in Jacob, says the L-rd.'" (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 59:20)

In my estimation, Rabbi Yonatan's insight inspires great hope. After all, we have been waiting for over 2,000 years for the *Mashiach* (Messiah) to arrive and rebuild the *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple). During this time, we have suffered, and continue to suffer, the trials and tribulations of a world often gone mad with anti-Semitism and the desire to exterminate the Jewish people. Beyond a doubt, it is truly comforting to know that *teshuvah* has the power to finally bring the Redeemer to Zion and end the bitter years of *Galut* (Exile). This deep-seated desire is given voice in the *Shemoneh Esrai's Birkat Geulah*: "O [Hashem] behold our affliction and wage our battle; redeem us speedily for the sake of Your Name, for You G-d are the mighty redeemer. Blessed are You L-rd, Redeemer of Israel."

Our third *ma'amar* introduces the concept that an individual's *teshuvah* can literally change the world:

Rabbi Meir was known for saying: “Great is *teshuvah*, for even as a result of one person undergoing this process [in heartfelt authenticity], the entire world can be forgiven. As the text [*Sefer Hoshea* 14:5] states: ‘I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely, for My wrath has turned away from him (*mimenu*).’ It does not say “*mai’hem*” — from them, but rather, *mimenu* — from him.

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) echoes Rabbi Meir’s line of reasoning when he writes:

If one performs one *mitzvah*, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit, and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others. As the text states: “A righteous man is the foundation of the world,” (*Sefer Mishle* 10:25) i.e., he who acted righteously, tipped the balance of the entire world to the side of merit and saved it. (*Sefer Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* III:4, translation with my emendations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

In my view, Rabbi Meir’s *ma’amar*, coupled with the Rambam’s formulation, enables us to comprehend the true greatness of *teshuvah*, as these sources teach us that even one person who undertakes the *teshuvah* process has the ability to tip “his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and bring[s] deliverance and salvation to himself and others.” This must surely be one of the reasons why *Chazal* (our Sages may they be remembered for a blessing) composed *Birkat Teshuvah* as found in the *Shemoneh Esrai*:

Cause us to return, our Father, to Your Torah; draw us near, our King, to Your service; and bring us back to You in whole-hearted *teshuvah*. Blessed are You L-rd, who desires *teshuvah*.

May the time come soon and in our days, when the entire Jewish people will stand shoulder to shoulder as one, and recite Yirmiyahu’s stirring verse: “*Hashiveinu Hashem alecha v’nashuvah, chadash yameinu k’kedem*” — “Help us to return to You, Hashem, in *teshuvah* and we will return and renew our days as of old.” (*Megillat Eichah* V:21) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.