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TESHUVAH ME'AHAVAH AND KABBALAT HaTORAH

by Rabbi Daniel Fridman

In a celebrated series of Pesukim in Parashat Nitzavim¹, Moshe Rabbeinu encourages the Jewish people that “this mitzvah” that he is commanding them on that very day, is not beyond their individual or collective spiritual powers. It does not reside in the celestial realm, *Lo BaShamayim Hi*, that one might be required to ascend into those realms so as to possess it, nor is it across the far reaches of the sea, such that one might require an extended maritime voyage to acquire it. On the contrary, Moshe concludes, ‘the thing’ is indeed very close to you, ‘in your mouth and in your heart to perform it.’

With the reference to that singular expression, it is not in the heavens, our minds are instinctively drawn to a series of rabbinic statements concerning the proprietary relationship between the Jewish people and the Torah, on one level, and the process of Torah study on the other. In what is undoubtedly the most famous utilization of the term, R. Yehoshua demands that the Heavenly intercession in support of R. Eliezer’s permissive view concerning the *Tanur Shel Achna’i* be disregarded as halachic discourse is now the sole province of the Jewish people². A parallel passage, demonstrates that R. Yehoshua’s prerogative, while correct, is only one side of the coin, and that ‘it is not in the heavens’ is as much a responsibility as it is a privilege, thus precluding Yehoshua from recovering the Torah lost in the aftermath of Moshe’s demise through the medium of prayer³. Finally, our Sages note the significance of the expression for the process of acquiring Torah, noting that humility is a prerequisite for mastery of Torah, as it is not found in those whose conduct is marked by pretentiousness and intellectual self-certainty⁴.

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And yet, these rabbinic statements, magnificent as they are, seem far from the simple reading of the verse. As noted by Ramban⁵, in the context of the antecedent verses in Parashat Nitzavim, there

can be little doubt whatsoever that the specific Mitzvah which is being referred to in these Pesukim is the obligation to repent. Indeed, the use of the dual mechanism, ‘in your mouth and in your heart to perform it,’ as noted by Ramban, is a reference to the dual character of repentance⁶, which requires confession in the mouth and a profound emotional movement in the heart. Why then do Chazal so insistently and repeatedly interpret these verses as relating to the Torah writ large, and to the process whereby it is acquired?

Perhaps two further questions can help illuminate our first query. As we find ourselves in the midst of the forty day period of repentance which commences with Rosh Chodesh Elul and concludes with Yom Kippur, we know that we are doing so in accordance with a forty day period observed by Moshe at Mount Sinai. And yet, of the three successive forty day periods which Moshe Rabbeinu observed on Sinai, from the day following the giving of the Torah through Yom Kippur, it seems strange that the forty day period we observe does not align with the middle forty days, during which Moshe was pleading with the Almighty for the Jewish people, hoping to spare them from destruction. Indeed, we mark our period of repentance in accordance with the final forty day period of the triad, the one in which Moshe received the entirety of the Torah for a second time. Are we not, if we wish to capture the spirit of Moshe’s paradigmatic moment of repentance, quite simply observing the wrong time of year?

Finally, we know very well, and it is relevant to the invalidation of a shofar from a cow, of the principle of “*Ein Kateigor Na’aseh Saneigor*,” that elements which are reminiscent of the sin of the Golden Calf can play no role in atoning for the Jewish people, at least in the context of the *Kodesh Kodashim*, the sanctum sanctorum⁷. How, then, as our Sages teach us, could the first set of Luchot have been kept in the Ark⁸? Were they not the ultimate reminder of the sin of the Golden Calf, and its aftermath, when Moshe, rightly, smashed the tablets? While it is true that the Talmud limits the scope of this principle, *Ein Kateigor Na’aseh Saneigor*, to elements which are designed to bring atonement⁹ to the Jewish people, Rabbeinu Tam’s¹⁰ inclusion of the silver poles which rested in the Aron as subject to this principle, at minimum, raises the question with respect to the first Luchot, which are indubitably a far more direct link to the Golden Calf than the mere use of gold. At minimum, even if one does not concede that there is a technical violation of *Ein Kateigor Na’aseh Saneigor* at risk, one can still wonder, in a more

¹ Devarim 30:11-14.

² Bava Metziah, 59a.

³ Temurah 16a.

⁴ Eiruvin 55a. There is a slight nuance between Rava’s presentation (ad loc.), “*Lo Timtza BeMi SheMagbiyah Da’ato Aleha KaShamayim*”, connoting arrogance in the process of Torah learning, and R. Yochanan’s, “*Rabi Yochanan Omeir: Lo BaShamayim Hi-Lo Timtza BeGasei Ru’ach*”, connoting an arrogant personality more generally. My presentation reflects Rambam’s ruling (Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:8) in accordance with the latter’s view.

⁵ Commentary to Devarim 30:11

⁶ Of course, this dual character of Teshuvah is more commonly associated with Rambam (see the introduction to Hilchot Teshuvah, Sefer Ha-Mitzvot 73, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1-3, 7-8), and has been the subject of wide ranging discussion regarding the precise role of Vidui and Teshuvah in the general Mitzvah, beyond the scope of this essay.

⁷ Rosh HaShanah 26a.

⁸ Bava Batra 14b, “*Luchot Ve’Shivrei Luchot Munachot Ba’Aron*.”

⁹ Rosh HaShanah, ibid, “*Choteh Bal Yakriy Ka’amrinan*”. Fascinatingly, Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafot Bava Batra 14a) interpreted that line to be referring to elements which are aimed at the Telos of Kapparah, expiation.

¹⁰ See Tosafot to Bava Batra 14a, s.v. *SheBahen Amudim Omdin*.

general sense, what the smashed Luchot were doing there altogether?

It seems to me that the lynchpin in answering this series of questions resides with a seemingly quixotic statement of Reish Lakish¹¹ regarding the capacity for Teshuvah to, astonishingly, transform previous sins of a deliberate nature, into merits, *Zechuyot*. While a prior statement of Reish Lakish, that Teshuvah can dilute, as it were, intentional sins into unintentional ones is surely novel in its own right, the latter statement almost defies any kind of logic. It is one thing to mitigate the past through serious repentance, but to transform it, to revise one's personal history? This seems almost preposterous.

In internally reconciling Reish Lakish's two statements, the Talmud notes that he reserved the *Zedonot* to *Zechuyot* transformation for those who engaged in *Teshuvah Me'Ahavah*, as opposed to those who were engaged in *Teshuvah MiYirah*, repentance rooted in fear of the consequences of one's sins. The latter suffices only to mitigate the sin from intentional to unintentional, and yet the stain very much persists. The former, astonishingly, goes two steps further: it not only removes the sin altogether, but it transforms it into a kind of merit.

Perhaps this model can serve as a paradigm for the distinction between the intermediate period of forty days which Moshe observed at Sinai and the final period of forty days, when he received the Torah anew. As is stated explicitly by Moshe in Sefer Devarim¹², the intermediate period of forty days was marked by profound fear, "*Ki Yagarti MiPenei Ha'af VeHaCheimah Asher Katzaf Hashem Aleichem LeHashmid Etchem.*" In pursuit of this narrow, albeit obviously vital goal, Moshe was successful, "*VaYishma Hashem Elai Gam BaPa'am HaHi,*", the Almighty hearkened to Moshe's entreaty, and there was no destruction of the Jewish people. Yet, the stain persisted. As noted by Moshe in the succeeding verses, the Calf still required obliteration. At this stage, the shattered *Luchot* could indeed only be seen as an object of sin, reminiscent of the cataclysm which had transpired.

The final days, however, represented a new phase, something analogous to what the Talmud describes as *Teshuvah Me'Ahavah*. Love of God is characterized by a desire to be close to Him, to come to understand Him as deeply as is possible¹³, despite the infinite chasm between the Divine and the human. Even the most cursory reading¹⁴ of the final period of forty days, when Moshe ascended Sinai for the third time, reveals that this is precisely what transpired. Moshe had already saved the Jewish people from destruction. The question had shifted to whether or not the Almighty would make his presence felt in the Jewish camp, or whether he would merely send an angel. Moshe Rabbeinu pleads, time and again, for Divine closeness, to know God. It is no accident that in this context that God reveals his thirteen names to Moshe, the ultimate reflection of intimacy and knowledge of the Divine. For Ramban¹⁵, the fact that Moshe

learned God's thirteen 'names' during these final forty days if of particular significance in so far as he understands the entirety of the Torah to be comprised of Divine names, further establishing the connection between the final forty days and an acceptance of the entire Torah.

Moshe Rabbeinu, during this final phase, receives the entirety of the Torah in the context of unprecedented Divine intimacy and love. It is indeed a return unto God, and his Torah out of a love of Him, *Teshuvah Me'Ahavah* par excellence. In accordance with Reish Lakish's view, it is only at this point, following *Teshuvah Me'Ahavah*, that the first set of *Luchot* no longer reflect sin, but, astonishingly, *Zedonot Na'asot Lo KiZechuyot*, they become an embodiment and reflection of the unbreakable bond between the Almighty and His people. Indeed, *Luchot VeShivrei Luchot Munachot Ba'aron*.

In our collective observance of these final forty days, we aspire not to the intermediate days of *Teshuvah MiYirah*, of simply looking to avoid the calamity of death and destruction, but the far more ambitious aspiration of *Teshuvah Me'Ahavah*. We are not satisfied by averting a catastrophe alone, but we strive to re-energize and revitalize our entire relationship with Him, through a full embrace of His Torah¹⁶, and not merely by narrowly repenting on those elements in which we may have been in breach.

Undoubtedly, Chazal also knew what the Ramban pointed out, that the specific mitzvah being referenced in this celebrated passage in Nitzavim was the Mitzvah of Teshuvah. One cannot, in all candor, read the *Pesukim* in any other fashion, without a near complete disregard for *Peshat*.

And yet, in a deeper sense, Chazal could not have been more accurate in their application of these *Pesukim* to the entirety of the Torah, and the specific process of learning Torah at that. After all, Chazal well understood that the paradigmatic *Teshuvah* were the final forty days, when Moshe accepted, on behalf of the Jewish people, the entirety of the Torah anew, with a commitment not merely to never repeating the sin of the Golden Calf¹⁷, but, with far greater ambition, a sense of an overwhelming and intensive love of God, a desire for closeness with him, and an instinctive, reflexive commitment not only to rectifying specific sins which were committed, but to embracing the entire corpus of the revealed Divine will, the Torah itself. As Rambam noted¹⁸, the direct outgrowth of fully developed love for Him is an *immediate* acceptance of *all* of His commands, "*UViZeman SheYe'ehov Adam Et Hashem Ahavah HaRe'uyah MiYad Ya'aseh Kol HaMitzvot Me'Ahavah.*"

Indeed, Ramban¹⁹ himself, if read carefully, seems to have understood precisely this point, as he noted, even in interpreting the Mitzvah in question as Teshuvah, "*VaYashuvu BeLibam El Hashem, VaYekablu Aleihem HaYom HaTorah La'Asotah LeDorot,*" that they will return in their hearts unto Hashem, and accept upon themselves,

decisively, in Ramban's ruling that Birchot Ha-Torah were of Torah origin, Hasagot HaRamban LeSefer HaMitzvot, 17.

¹⁶ *The relationship between Ahavat HaShem and Talmud Torah is established by the Sifri commenting to Devarim 6:5-6, and cited by Rambam in Sefer Ha-Mitzvot 3. It is equally the entire basis of Rambam's discussion in Chapter 10 of Hilchot Teshuvah. In brief, Rambam describes what biologists would term a positive feedback loop, in which study of Torah generates love of God, which in turn, generates the desire to study more Torah, as a means of gaining closer access.*

¹⁷ *It should be noted that repudiation of idolatry is, in a certain sense, tantamount to accepting the entire Torah as well. See Chullin 5a, "Kol HaKofer Ba'Avodah Zarah Modeh BeChol HaTorah Kulah."*

¹⁸ *Hilchot Teshuvah 10:2.*

¹⁹ *Commentary to Devarim, 30:14.*

¹¹ Yoma 86b.

¹² Devarim 9:18-19.

¹³ See Ramban's celebrated formulation, *Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 2:1*.

¹⁴ See *Shemot Chapters 33 and 34*. Repeatedly, throughout this section, the Almighty notes his withdrawal from the Jewish people, expressing itself in Moshe being forced to remove the *Ohel Mo'ed* from the camp as well, so that those who wished to 'seek God', would actually have to leave the camp.

¹⁵ See his introduction to his commentary on the Torah, as well as the Gemara in *Berachot 21a*, which refers to the process of studying Torah as a form of calling in God's name, *Ki Sheim Hashem Ekra*. This passage weighted heavily, and perhaps

on this day, the Torah, to fulfill it in perpetuity." *Teshuvah Me'Ahavah*, a return to Hashem, motivated by a love of Him, is nothing less than a *Kabbalat HaTorah*, an embrace, now and forever, of His revealed word.

COMMITTED CURSES

by Moshe Dergel ('21)

After the horrible curses mentioned in last week's Parashah, the Bnei Yisrael became ostensibly scared. Moshe Rabbeinu calmed us by announcing "Atem Nitzavim HaYom", "You are standing here today" (Devarim 29:9). It is impossible to say that Moshe claimed that since Bnei Yisrael were still alive, the curses were not as terrible as they sounded. After he had just impressed upon the Bnei Yisrael the grievous nature of the curses, such a statement would weaken his original message (Devarim 28:61-63). What message, then, might Moshe Rabbeinu mean to convey?

The Midrash Tanchuma (Devarim 29:1) at the beginning of this week's Parashah writes that "when Hashem punishes the wicked they do not recover, but the righteous always recover." This seems obvious, as the wicked receive harsher punishments than the righteous. However, the Midrash, based on a verse in Malachi (3:5), explains that only one storm of arrows will wipe out the wicked, while the entire batch of arrows will not overcome the resilience of the righteous. The difference in their ability to withstand punishment is not due to the harshness of the blow; on the contrary, the righteous receive harsher punishments. How then, are the righteous able to survive, while the wicked wither?

This strength of the righteous is due to the fulfilling nature of Mitzvot. When a person performs more of G-d's commandments, his will to survive is strengthened. A person with a strong will to survive is more capable of overcoming life's challenges. Transgressions create within a person a hateful attitude for life. The wicked, who lack the courage to live, cannot endure the failures they encounter in life, and subsequently give up in the face of those challenges. The righteous, who are driven and motivated to live, possess the strength to endure all of life's tough moments. The same is true for relationships; a person's ability to overcome the difficulties which arise within a relationship is based upon the extent that he is committed to maintaining that relationship.

We the Bnei Yisrael approached Moshe Rabbeinu, terrified by the huge burden they felt from the curses that were presented in Parashat Ki Tavo. Moshe responded by telling them that they had improperly interpreted the purpose of the curses. Reward and punishment represent the extent to which a relationship exists. A curse reflects Hashem's desire for a relationship to last; the curse is the tool which Hashem uses to urge and persuade Bnei Yisrael into appreciating their relationship with Him. The very existence of curses proves that Hashem will stop at nothing to assure that Bnei Yisrael appreciate their relationship with Him, and that He will not abandon his relationship with us. Thus, the fact that Bnei Yisrael were standing before Moshe, alive and well, indicates that their relationship with Hashem was strong. Even if there will be times when they will be subjected to the curses, the Bnei Yisrael should take comfort in the fact that the curses themselves are symbolic of Hashem's commitment to our relationship with Him.

Why Did YONAH FLEE? - PART I

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter and Binyamin Jachter ('17)

Editors' note: The following article is excerpted from "The Depths of Yonah: Unleashing the Power of Your Yom Kippur", a new book published by Rabbi Chaim Jachter and Binyamin Jachter. To view other excerpts, visit koltorah.org.

It is unprecedented and unparalleled in any other situation in Tanach! Why would Yonah flee from Hashem? Why would a Navi refuse to go to Nineveh and comply with Hashem's command? This is the central question of Sefer Yonah and resolving this problem will lead us to the essence of the message of this great Sefer.

Explanation Number One - Yonah is a Straightforward Sinner

None of the Mefarshim (commentators) (to the best of my knowledge) adopt the approach that Yonah is a simple and straightforward run of the mill sinner. However, the reader/listener to Sefer Yonah, who might not take the time to delve deeply into the meaning of the Sefer, might easily receive this erroneous impression. One might think the story of Yonah is simply the story of a sinner who is punished and performs Teshuvah and repents, serving as a role model for us especially as we read Sefer Yonah on Yom Kippur.

The reasons why none of the Mefarshim adopt such an approach are manifold. To begin, simply to reach the level of a Navi one must be of great spiritual character and stature. The Rambam (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 7:1) writes:

Nevuah (prophecy) rests only upon one with great knowledge and wisdom, heroic in his personal attributes, one whose Yetzer HaRa (evil inclination) never overcomes him and whose thinking is very wide and correct.

Moreover, why would Hashem make a series of extraordinary miracles such as Yonah surviving in the belly of a fish and then later with the Kikayon for a petty sinner? Finally, Yonah describes himself while in the throes of a ferociously intense conversation during a fierce storm as "Ivri Anochi VeEt Hashem Elokei HaShamayim Ani Yarei," "I am a Hebrew and the God of the Heavens I fear" (Yonah 1:9).

Yirat Shamayim, Fear of Heaven [Hashem], fundamentally means respect of God. Yonah defines himself during an intensely existential moment as one who deeply reveres the Ribbono Shel Olam (Master of the Universe). If Yonah fears Hashem there must be something deeper, believe all the Mefarshim, motivating Yonah's singular rebellion.

Explanation Number Two - Rashi (4:1) vs. Ibn Ezra

Rashi, following Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer, raises the idea that Yonah fears to appear as a Navi Sheker (false prophet). Yonah anticipates that Nineveh will be receptive to his message and that they will repent, leading Hashem to forgive them. Thus, his warning that Nineveh will be destroyed in forty days (3:4) would go unfulfilled leading Yonah to fear that he would be regarded as a fraud.

Ibn Ezra (1:1) offers a scathing critique of this approach. He asks the obvious question - how could this concern justify rebellion against Hashem? Moreover, the people of Nineveh live so far away from Yonah's residence in Eretz Yisrael why would he care about how he is regarded in Nineveh? Yonah could have presented his



prophecy, left Nineveh, and never been heard from again in that region.

Finally, the people of Nineveh would not be foolish to the extent of calling Yonah a liar. After all, they readily understood that in order to be saved they needed to do Teshuvah. It was obvious to the people of Nineveh that Yonah issued a warning only because there was an opportunity to overturn the decree with Teshuvah. Accordingly, why would Nineveh regard Yonah as a Navi Sheker if they recognize they were saved because they did Teshuvah?

Therefore the Ibn Ezra utterly rejects the opinion of Rashi following the Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer. Indeed, none of the other Mefarshim adopt the approach of Rashi/Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer.

Understanding Rashi on a Deeper Level

Besides Ibn Ezra's seemingly irrefutable arguments, as my Torah Academy of Bergen County students argued, Rashi's approach, simply put, makes Yonah seem petty. Would Yonah prefer the more than one hundred and twenty thousand residents of Nineveh perish rather than he be accused of being a false prophet? This sort of attitude does not at all seem compatible with the Rambam's aforementioned description of a Navi.

Instead, we suggested that Rashi does not mean that Yonah was merely concerned about preserving his reputation. Rather, he was concerned for Kiddush Hashem (sanctifying Hashem), specifically about avoiding a Chillul Hashem (desecrating Hashem). Yonah was concerned, according to this approach, that the word of Hashem would never be taken seriously in the future if his warning to Nineveh would not materialize soon after he pronounced his prophecy.

Moreover, one may suggest, based on his name, that Yonah was deeply devoted to truth. Shemuel I (25:25) states "Ki Chishmo Kein Hu," "a person's essence is captured by his name." Many have noted that Yonah is described in 1:1 as Yonah ben Amittai. His father's name Amittai derives from the word "Emet", truth, which indicates this trait was a fundamental part of Yonah's name.

Yonah, as stated in Melachim II (14:25), is from the town of Gat Chefeir, which is located in the portion of the tribe of Zevulun (whose borders are delineated in Yehoshua 19:14). This means that Yonah lived in the Northern Kingdom (during the reign of the less than excellent Yoram ben Yoash), which was steeped in Avodah Zarah (idolatry). Indeed, Hashem reports (Melachim I 19:18) that only seven thousand of the residents of the Northern kingdom refrained from idolatry. For Yonah to emerge as a prophet in such an environment, a deep and even fanatic devotion to truth was necessary.

Human nature craves to follow the herd and not to differ from societal norms. It takes an enormous devotion to truth to have the courage to deviate from the societal norm. Moreover, Chazal (cited by Rashi to Melachim I 9:1) report that Yonah was a disciple of the prophet Elisha. It is clear from Melachim II (4:42-43, 5:21-26, and 6:1-7) that the students of Elisha lived in dire poverty. To be a devotee of Elisha required a deep devotion to truth no matter what the cost, a devotion Yonah took too far.

We suggest that Rashi and Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer view Yonah as someone who is single minded in his devotion to truth and that any deviation from truth is deeply disturbing and intolerable to him. For this reason, the mission to Nineveh was absolutely intolerable. Indeed, the Zohar (Shemot 193) writes that "Yonah emerges from the strength of Eliyahu [HaNavi]". Chazal, in fact, believe that Yonah is the child that was revived by Eliyahu HaNavi in Melachim I 17:21-22. Eliyahu HaNavi along with Pinechas are the only characters in

Tanach described as zealots (Bemidbar 25:11 and Melachim I 19:10 and 14). One may speculate that according to this view Yonah spent time with Eliyahu HaNavi after the revival and Yonah thereby adopted Eliyahu's zealous devotion to truth.

Conclusion

According to Rashi and Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer, Yonah was Ben Amittai, a zealot for truth. A major theme of Sefer Yonah according to this approach is Hashem trying to temper and balance Yonah's single minded devotion to truth with other Godly values.

One cannot focus exclusively on only one Torah value. This is the import of the teaching of Shlomo HaMelech in Kohelet (7:16) that one should refrain from being too wise or too pious. Piety and wisdom constitute core Torah values. However, if one focuses exclusively on only one of these values, to the exclusion of all others, one has distorted the teachings and meaning of the Torah.

Yonah mistakenly focused exclusively on the value of truth to the exclusion of all of other values such as Chessed (kind deeds) and Teshuvah. According to Rashi and Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer, through the experiences recorded in Sefer Yonah the prophet learns to balance out his profound devotion to truth with other Torah values as well.

Furthermore, notes Aryeh Krischer '14, Yonah's fanatical devotion to truth and Din not only led him to ignore other Torah values, but also led him to actively disobey Hashem. The Gemara (Sotah 14a) learns proper values from Hashem by the principle of VeHalachta BeDrachav, and you shall walk in [Hashem's] ways. More than simply having views lacking in nuance, Yonah's flawed perception of proper values led to disregarding the ultimate value: to follow the will and ways of Hashem.

On Yom Kippur, we are summoned to take a hard-nosed and objective look at ourselves. We are called upon to discover not only that which we lack but also that to which we devote undue attention. This is the great balancing act that the Rambam teaches in Hilchot De'iot that constitutes the key to life: avoiding any extremes, with specific and very limited exceptions. Yonah's misdirected emphasis on Din, justice, reminds us to remember this theme as the end of our Yom Kippur approaches. We must not only repent for the old, but adjust the new to ensure it too aligns with the will of Hashem.

We continue in our next issue (iyH and b'n) with more fascinating and insightful explanations of why Yonah disobeyed Hashem's command to rebuke Nineveh.

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