**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NITZAVIM**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

In the introductory section of the *Selichot* service we proclaim, “We come before You without any kindness or deeds [to our credit] – we have knocked on Your door like mendicants and beggars.”

The simple explanation of this analogy is that we make no claims of deserving God’s kindness. We do not bring with us anything in exchange for God’s compassion, as our record is blemished and our good deeds are woefully inadequate. We stand before Him like a needy person begging for assistance, fully aware that the person in front of him owes him nothing. We have no delusions of being “owed” anything by God, and we therefore appeal strictly to His boundless mercy and compassion.

Rav Gedaliah Silverstone, in [*Darki Ba-kodesh*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2231&st=&pgnum=7&hilite=), suggests an additional explanation of this passage from the *Selichot* service. He writes that the analogy is to a young, able-bodied person fully capable of securing employment to support himself, but chooses instead to beg for charitable donations. Naturally, those whom he approaches will be reluctant, at best, to offer him the assistance he requests. They would look askance at his preference to beg instead of work, and would see no reason to part with their hard-earned money to support somebody who chooses not to work for a livelihood.

Rav Silverstone suggests that as we begin the *Selichot*, we acknowledge not only that we did nothing to deserve God’s compassion, but that we are fully capable of earning it, but have chosen not to. We know full well that we are given the opportunity to repent, to change course, to grow and improve, and thereby be worthy of God’s kindness. But we have not done so. We have chosen to beg for undeserved compassion rather than work to make ourselves deserving. Like a lazy beggar who made the decision not to seek employment, we shamefully come before God and admit that we are taking the easy way out, asking for handouts instead of putting in the effort to perform genuine *teshuva* and make the changes we ought to be making.

Of course, we trust in God’s unlimited compassion and believe that He welcomes our prayers and supplications regardless of whether or not we are worthy of a favorable response. At the same time, however, the process of Elul and the *Yamim Nora’im* is intended, in part, to remind us that we can and must improve. The call to repentance announces to us that we do not need to remain stuck in the mire of mediocrity, that we are capable of more, and failing to work towards change signifies laziness or indifference. We therefore begin the *Selichot* prayers by declaring, “*Lekha Hashem ha-tzedaka ve-lanu boshet ha-panim*” – God is just and we are shamefaced. We are ashamed by the realization that we ask for “charity” instead of “working,” we plead for undeserved compassion rather than making the effort to deserve it. This shame is the crucial first step we need to take in order to initiate the process of meaningful change and growth that this period is meant to bring about.

Sunday

We read in Sefer Divrei Hayamim II (33) of the wicked king Menashe, the Judean king who ruled towards the end of the First Commonwealth. Menashe embraced idolatry and even placed an idol in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, in response to which God empowered the Assyrian Kingdom, whose army attacked Jerusalem and took Menashe captive, bringing him in chains to Babylonia. Then, we read, “in his distress, he beseeched the Lord his God, and he was greatly humbled before the God of his fathers” (33:12). God accepted Menashe’s prayers, and had him returned to Jerusalem and reinstated as king over Judea.

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Melakhim II 21) fills in the details of Menashe’s prayer and God’s favorable response. Seeing he was on the brink of death, Menashe appealed to every pagan deity. In the Midrash’s words, “There was not an idol in the world that he did not mention.” When his appeals to the pagan gods did not help, Menashe remembered a verse in Sefer Devarim (4:30), “In your distress, when all these things befall you, you will then return to the Lord your God.” Menashe then decided to call out to the one, true God. He said, “If He answers me – fine; and if not, then all divinities all equal!” If God did not answer his prayers, Menashe declared, then this would be proof that He is no more powerful than the pagan deities.

The Midrash continues that in response to Menashe’s prayer, the heavenly angels quickly began “shutting the windows of the firmament,” insistent on blocking Menashe’s prayers from penetrating the heavens and reaching the Almighty. “Master of the world,” they proclaimed, “a person who stationed a graven image in the Sanctuary – does he possibly have [the opportunity of] repentance?”

God replied, “If I do not accept his repentance, then the door will be locked in the face of all those who wish to repent.” The Midrash concludes that God “dug” an opening underneath the Heavenly Throne through which He accepted Menashe’s prayer.

This fascinating account gives rise to several questions. First, how could the verse in Sefer Divrei Hayamim II describe Menashe as “greatly humbled” (“*va-yikana me’od*”), if he turned to God only after his prayers to pagan deities went unanswered, and even then, he remained skeptical – “If He answers me – fine; and if not, then all divinities all equal”? And why did God accept this kind of repentance, which sounds artificial and insincere? Additionally, why was God concerned that His rejection of Menashe’s repentance would result in the “door” being “locked” before all sinners who wish to repent? Why would the rejection of Menashe’s insincere repentance necessitate the rejection of the genuine *teshuva* performed by future sinners? Another question arises from the angels’ petition that God should reject the *teshuva* of “a person who stationed a graven image in the Sanctuary.” Why did they perceive this sin as too grave to allow for the possibility of *teshuva*? Seemingly, the reason why Menashe’s repentance did not deserve a favorable response is because it was insincere. Why, then, did the angels point to the gravity of his placing an idol in the *Mikdash*, rather than to the fundamentally flawed nature of his *teshuva*?

The answer, perhaps, is that the essence of *teshuva* is not the end result, but rather the process. The goal is to advance and take a significant step forward, not to immediately soar to spiritual greatness.

When the angels heard Menashe’s prayers, they concluded that they were worthless. If he was capable of entertaining the possibility that “all divinities are equal,” then this cannot possibly qualify as repentance in any sense of the term. As such, Menashe at that point, as a helpless captive in chains uttering a prayer as he faced execution, was the same Menashe who brought an idol into the Temple. He had not changed at all.

God, however, who understands the human heart, who knows the difficulty of change, and who compassionately values every step forward made by any sinner, viewed Menashe’s prayers differently. While it is true that Menashe “repented” only as a last resort, and the repentance itself left much to be desired, it was still a significant step forward. The man who rebelled against everything his righteous father, Chizkiyahu, represented, was now invoking and applying a religious teaching which he had learned from him. After decades of firm and passionate denunciation of monotheism, Menashe took a step forward and uttered a prayer to the Almighty. God had to accept this repentance, so-to-speak, because if He didn’t, He would be unable to accept any sinner’s repentance. For in truth, Menashe’s repentance was not fundamentally different from that of any other sinner. Repentance is not about transforming into a righteous person overnight, but rather about advancing from one’s current spiritual state and moving forward. And that is precisely what Menashe did.

Thus, surprising as it may sound, Menashe sets a model of repentance for all of us to follow. While we must, quite obviously, aspire to far, far more than the point Menashe reached, he serves for us as an example of progress and change. God looks favorably and lovingly upon every step we take forward – even the steps taken by a wicked sinner like Menashe. The Midrash thus encourages us, and urges us, to set reasonable, modest, but meaningful goals as we embark upon the process of *teshuva*, and trust that every small achievement and every step forward is deemed inestimably valuable by the Almighty.

(Based on Rav Yosef Ben-Amram’s [*Ali Be’er*, pp. 19-20](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=51774&st=&pgnum=37))

Monday

In various contexts throughout the Talmud and Midrashic sources, *Chazal* pointed to numerous different examples of *teshuva* that serve for us as models of different kinds, or aspects, of repentance. One such model is that of Yishmael, Avraham’s older son. In a brief and vague passage in Masekhet Bava Batra (16b), the Gemara notes that when the Torah describes the burial of Avraham, it tells, “His sons, Yitzchak and Yishmael, buried him” (Bereishit 25:9). The Torah mentions Yitzchak before Yishmael, suggesting that Yishmael deferred to Yitzchak and allowed him to walk ahead of him during the procession. This deference which Yishmael showed to Yitzchak, his younger brother, indicated to the Gemara that Yishmael repented. Rashi cites the Gemara’s remark in his Torah commentary (Bereishit 25:9).

How might we explain this “repentance” performed by Yishmael? How exactly did Yishmael’s deference to Yitzchak demonstrate his *teshuva*?

Earlier in Sefer Bereishit (21:9), we read that Sara demanded that Avraham banish Yishmael from their home because of his treatment of Yitzchak. The Torah does not clarify what precisely Yishmael was doing, but Rashi cites one interpretation that Yishmael would tell Yitzchak that as the older brother, he would be receiving a double portion of Avraham’s estate after his passing. According to this explanation, it seems, the tensions between Yishmael and Yitzchak revolved around the question of the birthright, whether this special status belonged to Yishmael, the older brother, despite his being born by Avraham’s maidservant, or to Yitzchak, the son of Avraham’s primary wife.

On this basis, perhaps, we might explain the Gemara’s comment that Yishmael performed *teshuva*. By deferring to Yitzchak, Yishmael demonstrated that he recognized his mistake and acknowledged Yitzchak’s rights. He showed that although he had previously insisted that he deserved the privileges of the birthright, he now realized that he was mistaken, and that these privileges belong to his younger brother. This is an especially rare, and courageous, form of *teshuva* – admitting that one’s long-held beliefs and opinions are mistaken. It is very difficult for us to change the ideas and perceptions we’ve long had about ourselves, about others, or about specific issues. We prefer to settle into a “comfort zone” of ideas and opinions, and stubbornly stick to them without opening our minds to the possibility that we might be mistaken. Yishmael’s *teshuva* is an example of this kind of “repentance” – opening our minds to entertain the possibility that our long-held ideas and opinions might be wrong, that we might not necessarily see everything the right way. Humbly acknowledging the possibility of misconception is a vital part of the lifelong process of growth, and ought to be a vital part of the process of *teshuva* in which we are to engage during this time of year.

Tuesday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe foresees the time when *Benei Yisrael* will be banished from their land into exile on account of their wrongdoing, which will ultimately be followed by repentance: “You will return unto the Lord your God and heed His voice” (30:2). Once this happens, Moshe promises, God will return the nation to their homeland, gathering them from the countries among which they had been dispersed (30:3-4). Moshe then says, “And the Lord will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (30:5). It appears that although the ingathering of exiles will occur after the people repent, they will still require a process of internal cleansing, necessitating that the Almighty “circumcise” their hearts and inspire them “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” *Benei Yisrael* begin the process through the repentance they are capable of performing, and the Almighty then assists them the rest of the way so the process will be completed.

In light of this foreseen sequence of events, we might take note of the phrase “*ad Hashem Elokekha*” – “until the Lord your God” – with which Moshe describes *Benei Yisrael*’s repentance. The Gemara, in a famous passage (Yoma 86a), comments that when the prophet Hoshea (14:2) proclaims, “Return, O Israel, unto the Lord your God” (“*Shuva Yisrael ad Hashem Elokekha*”), he means that repentance literally reaches “unto” God, in the sense that, in the Gemara’s words, it “reaches the Heavenly Throne.” The phrase “*ad Hashem Elokekha*” in the context of *teshuva* speaks of its extraordinary power, the fact that it pierces the heavens and is lovingly accepted by God. Surprisingly, this phrase is used here in Parashat Nitzavim in reference to the first stage of the process, to incomplete repentance that still requires the “circumcising of the heart” and the complete cleansing of the sinner’s soul. It is specifically this kind of *teshuva* which “reaches the Heavenly Throne.”

The explanation, perhaps, is that the exalted *teshuva* which “reaches the Heavenly Throne” is the imperfect *teshuva* which we perform on our own, before God steps in to help us complete the process. Our repentance does not have to be pristine and unblemished for it to soar to the heavens and reach the Throne. It just has to be genuine and real. The repentance that “reaches the Heavenly Throne” is the repentance of sincere struggle, the repentance of inner tension and conflict, the repentance of a flawed human being waging a courageous battle against his negative tendencies and drives, a battle fueled by a genuine desire to improve. This repentance is far from perfect. This repentance is the product of a heart as yet “uncircumcised,” a heart that is still beset by sinful instincts. At this stage, the sinner remains uncleansed and tainted by sin. Nevertheless, his repentance reaches “unto the Lord your God” because it is sincere and genuine, because it is the product of the person’s own efforts and fierce struggle. This *teshuva*, the *teshuva* performed by the individual himself before God lends His assistance, is especially valuable and precious, even with all its flaws and deficiencies.

Wednesday

In the introduction to the *Selichot* prayers, we compare ourselves to paupers knocking on doors: “We come before You without kindness or [good] deeds; we have knocked on Your door like paupers and beggars.” On one level, this analogy expresses our acknowledgment of unworthiness, that we ask for something that we have done nothing to deserve, like a beggar asking for assistance that he has done nothing to earn.

However, the image of knocking on a door might also evoke a deeper emotion – a feeling of estrangement and vast distance. A person knocks on a door if he is unable to enter, or if he does not belong. The need to knock bespeaks a sense of dissociation between the person at the doorstep and the home’s residents. The entrance is blocked, due to either the physical obstacle of a locked door, or because of a lack of belonging and connection. As we prepare to recite the *Selichot* prayers, we acknowledge this distance and disconnect. Reflecting upon our state of spiritual deficiency, we feel the need to “knock”; we sense that we do not belong in God’s presence. We see ourselves as peasants standing at the door to the king’s palace, overwhelmed by the grandeur of royalty and its contrast to the tattered rags which he wears. The very concept of *Selichot*, of coming before God to confess our wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness, makes us feel so distant, out of place, and unwelcome as we approach the Palace.

By the time we arrive at the end of the introductory section of the *Selichot*, however, we change our perspective. This section concludes, “…He in whose Hand is the soul of every living creature, and the spirit of every person of flesh. The soul is Yours and the body is Your handiwork – have compassion on Your creatures. The soul is Yours and the body is Yours – O Lord, act for Your Name’s sake.” At this point, we do not feel distant or disconnected from the Almighty. Instead, we see ourselves as His creatures, His handiwork. No matter how far we have drifted from the path we were to follow, no matter how “impoverished” we may be on account of our faults and mistakes, nevertheless, “The soul is Yours and the body is Your handiwork.” It is only at this point, upon arriving at this realization, that we can proceed to the actual *Selichot* prayers. Once we recognize that despite our unworthiness, even though we have distanced ourselves from God through our wrongdoing, we are nevertheless incapable of drifting too far, as God is always close and always makes Himself accessible, we can then approach Him with broken hearts but uplifted spirits, confident that He welcomes our prayers and eagerly awaits our sincere repentance.

Thursday

In the opening verses of Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe proclaims to *Benei Yisrael*, “You – all of you – stand before the Lord today: the leaders of your tribes, your elders, your guards, all men of Israel, [as well as] your children, your wives…in order for you to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God…”

*Chazal*, in Masekhet Soferim (18:6), tell that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya discussed these verses on the day he was appointed head of the yeshiva in Yavneh in place of Rabban Gamliel. He raised the question of why the young children were present at this covenantal ceremony, and explained, “in order to bring reward to those who bring them.” The Mishna then concludes that for this reason young children are brought to the synagogue – “in order to bring reward to those who bring them.”

An additional, or likely alternative, account of this story is told in Masekhet Chagiga (3a). There we read of two *Tanna’im* who visited Rabbi Yehoshua, and reported that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya addressed a later verse, in Parashat Vayelekh (31:12), which requires that children be included in the septennial *hakhel* ceremony. Rabbi Elazar explained that the children were brought “to bring reward to those who bring them.” In their account, these *Tanna’im* mentioned that it was “Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya’s week” in the yeshiva, referring to the rotation system that was established after it was decided to reinstate Rabban Gamliel, as the Gemara famously relates in Masekhet Berakhot (28a). The account in Masekhet Soferim, by contrast, tells of a lecture Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya delivered on the day he was first appointed, before it was decided that he and Rabban Gamliel would alternate weeks. It thus seems that these passages refer to two different lectures, or represent two different versions of the same lecture. (The question as to the relationship between these two accounts was raised by the Chida, in his *Kisei Rachamim* commentary to Masekhet Soferim, and he leaves this question unresolved.)

In regard to the account that appears in Masekhet Soferim, it has been suggested that there is great significance to the fact that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya addressed this topic on the day of his appointment. The Gemara in Berakhot tells that Rabban Gamliel had implemented very strict admission standards, allowing only outstanding students into the yeshiva, and Rabbi Elazar abolished these restrictions immediately upon being appointed as head of the academy. He ordered the removal of the guard by the entrance, and the Gemara tells that numerous benches had to be added to the yeshiva that day to accommodate the influx of students. It has been suggested that Rabbi Elazar’s discussion of the subject of children’s attendance in the ceremony of Parashat Nitzavim related to this drastic change of policy. While the phrase “in order to bring reward to those who bring them” is not entirely clear, Rabbi Elazar was pointing to the fact that the Torah sees value in bringing children to religious events despite their inability to fully understand. The experience of attending the nationwide ceremony entering into a covenant with the Almighty was deemed significant, even for those who could not understand or appreciate what was happening. Rabbi Elazar drew upon this point to explain his decision to open the doors to the yeshiva and welcome all students. Even if they cannot fully understand the material being taught, the experience will be significant and impactful, and thus makes their participation worthwhile and valuable. The Torah’s description of the covenantal ceremony of Parashat Nitzavim formed, in Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya’s eyes, a model to be followed in all contexts in Torah education, instructing that experiencing rigorous Torah learning is valuable and impactful even for those who do not fully understand what is being taught.

Friday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe foresees the time when *Benei Yisrael* will repent in exile, whereupon God will return them to their homeland: “The Lord shall return your captivity and have mercy upon you…” (30:3).

Rashi observes that the verb “*ve-shav*” used in this verse actually denotes one’s own return, as opposed to returning others. Returning somebody or something to his or its place is generally expressed with the causative form “*heishiv*,” whereas “*shav*” usually refers to one’s actions with respect to himself. It thus appears that the Torah speaks here not of God returning *Benei Yisrael* to their land, but to God’s own return, as it were.

Rashi offers two explanations for the use of the word “*ve-shav*” in this verse, the second of which is, “The day of the gathering of exiles is great, and will entail difficulty, as though He Himself must actually grab hold of each person’s hand [and bring him] from his place.” God will Himself “return” from exile in the sense that He will have to go and take each person by hand to bring him back to the Land of Israel.

How might we explain this image of God “grabbing hold” of every Jew’s hand to bring him out of exile?

Rav Yissachar Teichtal *Hy”d*, in his [*Eim Ha-banim Semeicha* (p. 66)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=38319&st=&pgnum=77&hilite=), suggests that Rashi refers here specifically to the nation’s sinners, who see themselves at home in exile, living among the gentile nations and leading a gentile lifestyle. These Jews will not be instinctively motivated to leave the exile once the opportunity arises to return to their homeland, and thus God will have to come and take them by their hand, so-to-speak, back to *Eretz Yisrael*. (Rav Teichtal applied this reading to the assimilated European Jews who had lost their Jewish identity, but were deemed Jewish by the Nazis and thus fled to *Eretz Yisrael*.)

A different explanation of Rashi’s comments was advanced by the Lubavitcher Rebbe (in a discourse transcribed and printed in [*Ha-ma’or*, Shevat, 5754](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=28070&st=&pgnum=8&hilite=)). He explained that the final redemption will unfold on two levels – the national, and the personal. Rashi here expresses the point that alongside our national redemption, the return of the Jewish exiles and the restoration of our national sovereignty, we will also experience individual redemption. God will take each of us by the hand, as it were, in the sense of tending to each person’s individual needs, like a person cares for and helps his friend.

This two-tiered model of redemption perhaps serves as a reminder of our responsibility to care for each other on these two levels – the communal, and the individual. On the one hand, we are to involve ourselves in national and communal needs, to see where we can contribute towards meeting the needs of *Am Yisrael* as a whole, or of populations and communities within *Am Yisrael*. However, these ambitious undertakings must not diminish from our personal sensitivity, from our commitment towards each other as individuals. We are to take one another by the hand, when necessary, offering personal and individual attention and assistance, just as we anticipate the time when God will come and take us each by the hand and bring us all our personal “redemption” that we each need.

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