

Haftarot Unrolled: Shabbat Shuva

The Illogic of Teshuva

The Shabbat between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur is called Shabbat Shuva, based on the Haftarah that is read that begins with the words "Shuva Yisrael."

שובה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֵל-לִהְיוֹךְ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בַעֲוֹנֶךָ : קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֶל ה' ... אֲרָפָא מְשׁוּבָתָם
אֶהְיֶה כְּדָבָרָה כִּי שָׁב אָפִי מִמֶּנּוּ : אֶהְיֶה כְּטָל לְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִפְרַח כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה

Return, Israel, to Hashem your G-d! For you have stumbled in your sin.

Take with you words, and turn back to Hashem. ...

I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for My anger has turned from him. I will be like dew to Israel, he will blossom like the lily (Hoshea 14:2-6)

In this Haftarah, G-d urges the Jewish People to return, and promises to accept and love them. The prophet Hoshea uses the metaphor of dew; unlike rain, which is withheld if we don't deserve it, dew appears year-round no matter what. By comparing Himself to dew, G-d states that His relationship with us is eternal and constant, and His love for us is unconditional.

In contrast, Parshat VaYelech, which is usually read on Shabbat Shuva, tells us of one of the very last things that G-d says to Moshe:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה שָׁכַב עִם אֲבֹתֶיךָ וְקָם הָעָם הַזֶּה וְזָנָה אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהֵי נֹכַר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הוּא בָא
שָׁמָּה בְּקִרְבּוֹ וַעֲזַבְנִי וְהִפָּר אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אִתּוֹ ...
וְאֲנֹכִי הִסְתֵּר אֶסְתִּיר פָּנַי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כָּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כִּי פָנָה אֶל אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים ...

Hashem said to Moshe: you are about to rest with your forefathers, and this nation will get up and whore after the foreign gods of the land that it is going to, and leave Me, and break My covenant that I made with it....

And I will definitely conceal My face on that day, because of all the evil that it does, for it turned to other gods... (Devarim 31:17-18)

G-d says to the Jewish People: I know you are going to fail. I know that you are not capable of doing what you have committed to do. And I want you to know that I know.

This is entirely irrational. Why does G-d even bother choosing the Jewish People if He knows that failure is inevitable? If there is no hope of the Jewish People actually keeping their commitment to G-d, what is the purpose of the entire enterprise? Even given that G-d is omniscient and knows everything that will happen, what is the purpose of telling us this? "Bye, Moshe, it's been great, but you should know, the moment you die, these people will turn their backs on everything you've taught them. Just saying."

This is the Parsha that we read between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, the days of repentance and introspection? Is it not utterly fatalistic and defeating, the opposite of the Haftarah of Shuva with its unconditional love?

Perhaps not. Perhaps the only way for us to understand the power of Teshuva, of the ability to return, is by understanding the message of Parshat VaYelech.

G-d does not have to be rational. He chooses to bind Himself to the Jewish People even though He knows that we will fail. He tells us that we will fail so that we do not for a moment consider that our disappointing Him can nullify our relationship. He tells us that He will "conceal His face" from us, so that we do not for a moment think that He has left us.

Teshuva is not rational, either. Using the verses of the Haftarah, the Midrash analyzes all the different ways that Teshuva breaks the rules of logic:

אמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה, שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות, שנאמר +הושע יד+ שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך כי כשלת בעונך. הא עון מזיד הוא, וקא קרי ליה מכשול.

Reish Lakish said: great is Teshuva, for it turns deliberate sins into accidental misdeeds, as it says, "Return, Israel, to Hashem your G-d! For you have stumbled in your sin". Sin is deliberate, and it calls it stumbling.

בא וראה שלא כמדת הקדוש ברוך הוא מדת בשר ודם. מדת בשר ודם, מקניט את חבירו בדברים - ספק מתפייס הימנו ספק אין מתפייס הימנו, ואם תאמר מתפייס הימנו - ספק מתפייס בדברים ספק אין מתפייס בדברים. אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא, אדם עובר עבירה בסתר - מתפייס ממנו בדברים, שנאמר +הושע יד+ קחו עמכם דברים ושובו אל ה', ולא עוד אלא שמחזיק לו טובה, שנאמר וקח טוב

Look how different the ways of G-d are from the ways of a human being. A human being, if his friend humiliates him, maybe he would make up with him, maybe he wouldn't make up with him. And even if he would make up with him, maybe he would be swayed by words, or maybe he wouldn't be swayed by words. But G-d, if a person sins in secret, makes up with him and is swayed by words, as it says, "take with you words, and turn back to Hashem" (Hoshea 14). Not only that, but He even considers it goodness, as it says, "and take only the goodness." (Talmud Yoma 86b)

G-d is not human. He can turn back the clock and He can reverse cause and effect. He can allow us to retroactively turn our actions from malicious crimes into accidental mistakes. He can allow us to "take words to turn back to Him" - to change our narrative and then turn that new narrative into reality. He can know that we will fail, and still keep us as His People, forever, unconditionally. He can conceal His face from us, and still be with us. There is nothing that we can do to make Him leave us. Even when we fail, even when it feels that we are far from Him, He is with us anyway. The path back to Him is much shorter than the path away. It may not be rational or logical, but that is how G-d has chosen to run His world, and that is what He has communicated to us through His prophets, Moshe and Hoshea.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, ז"ל
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל