

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Nitzavim

Returnings

וְהָיָה כִּי יָבֹאוּ עֲלֵיךָ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה... וְשָׁבַתָּ עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

It shall be when all of these things befall you, the blessing and the curse... And you shall return to Hashem, your God.¹

BACKGROUND: IS TESHUVAH A MITZVAH?

The Ramban, in his commentary to these verses, states that the word “וְשָׁבַתָּ – you shall return” denotes a positive command to do Teshuvah. In contrast, the Rambam does not appear to construe this word as reflecting a mitzvah, for in Mishneh Torah he writes:²

Israel will only be redeemed through having done Teshuvah, and the Torah has already promised that they will do Teshuvah in the end of their exile and then they will be redeemed, as it says, “And it shall be when all these things befall you... and you shall return (וְשָׁבַתָּ) to Hashem your God.”

We see that the Ramban sees these words, not as a *mitzvah* to do Teshuvah, but as a *promise* that the Jewish people will ultimately do Teshuvah.³ In truth, although the Ramban does understand the verse as commanding us to do Teshuvah, nevertheless, since it is not written in the command form (“שׁוּב – Do Teshuvah”), but rather in the descriptive form (“וְשָׁבַתָּ – You will do Teshuvah”), it thereby also contains the additional connotation of a promise that we will do Teshuvah.

It is noteworthy that the Torah presents the background to teshuvah as “when *all these things* befall you, the blessing and the curse.” If we were to experience only blessing, we might come to believe that we are charmed, losing thereby all sense of accountability. Conversely, if we were to experience only curses, we may come to believe that we are doomed and lose all sense of hope. It is the combination of

¹ Devarim 30:1-2.

² Hilchos Teshuvah 7:5.

³ Interestingly, although the Ramban disputes the Rambam and considers Teshuvah to be a positive mitzvah, he does not mention it in his list of mitzvos at the end of his Commentary to Rambam’s Sefer Hamitzvos where he enumerates those mitzvos that he feels the Rambam should have included. Additionally, although the Ramban does not seem to count Teshuvah mentioned in our verse as a positive mitzvah, he does list the confessing of one’s sins (*vidui*) when one does Teshuvah as a mitzvah, see Sefer Hamitzvos, positive mitzvah 73. See Meshech Chochmah Devarim 31:17-18 for a discussion of the Rambam’s view.

the two which can produce both the impetus to do teshuva and the confidence that it will be of ultimate benefit to us.

Additionally, contemplating the experiences of the Jewish people – both “the blessing and the curse,” the highs and the lows – can help embed within us a sense of our uniqueness as a people, leading us to return to be dedicated to our unique destiny. Moreover, this idea only becomes more impactful as time goes on. For although each generation might not have more spirituality than the one that preceded it, it does have more history, whose voice resounds continually deeper allowing it to reach the ears of the Jewish people at that time, and its message to reach their hearts.

REVERBERATIONS: “FOR THIS MITZVAH THAT I COMMAND YOU TODAY...”

The question of whether the word “וְשִׁבַת” represents a mitzvah to do Teshuvah has implications, not only for our understanding of verse 2 in which it is stated, but also for a number of verses that follow. In verses 11-13 we read:

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא נִפְלְאת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הוּא. לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא...
וְלֹא מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא...

For this commandment that I command you today, it is not concealed from you, nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens... nor is it across the sea...

To which commandment do these verses refer? If we consider Teshuvah – mentioned just prior to this – to be a mitzvah, then presumably that is what “this commandment” refers to. However, if teshuvah is not a mitzvah, then it turns out that the words “this commandment” are stated without any prior context, in which case they would be taken as referring either to mitzvos generally or, alternatively, to the quintessential mitzvah of learning Torah. Not surprisingly, the Ramban and his school, who consider teshuvah to be a mitzvah, take the first approach.⁴ According to this view, what does the verse mean by saying that teshuvah is “not concealed... nor distant”? The Seforno explains:

“It is not concealed from you” – that you should need prophets [to reveal its nature]
“Nor is it distant” – that you should require the wise men of the generation who are far away to explain it to you.

The ensuing verses elaborate on this theme:

“It is not in heaven” – that you should need a prophet to tell it to you.
“Nor is it across the sea” – that you should require sages who are far away.

There is an amazing contrast here, for while teshuvah itself is a radical and profound idea, the path to its implementation is not a mystery nor is it remote. Rather, as the section concludes:

כִּי קְרוֹב אֵלַיךָ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ

For the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.

4 The Rambam, in keeping with his view that teshuvah is not a mitzvah, explains these verses as referring to Torah study, see Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 9:1 (based on Bava Metzia 59b), and Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:8 (based on Eiruvin 55a).

With these words, the Torah outlines the three fundamental elements of teshuvah:

“in your mouth” – to orally confess one’s sins

“and in your heart” – to feel regret over having transgressed

“to do it” – to make a firm resolve to act correctly in the future.

Beautiful words.

TESHUVAH AND REDEMPTION

As mentioned above, both Rambam and Ramban understand that verse 2 contains a promise that at a certain stage, the Jewish people will do teshuva, at which point they will be redeemed and returned to their land. Thus, the verses that follow (3-7) describe Hashem returning the exiles to Eretz Yisrael and granting them prosperity there. What is most intriguing in this description of events is verse 8, which states:

וְאַתָּה תָּשׁוּב וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹל ה' וְעָשִׂיתָ אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתָיו

And you shall return and listen to the voice of Hashem, and perform all His commandments.

What is the role of the teshuvah mentioned in this verse? Have the people not already done teshuvah and thereby brought about their redemption?

The Chasam Sofer explains.⁵ In order to merit complete redemption, the Jewish people need to perform complete teshuvah. However, this presents a problem. In order for teshuvah to be considered complete, the person needs to be in the same situation that led him to sin in the first place, only this time acting correctly. The cause of our exile as that we did not live correctly in Eretz Yisrael, allowing our material success to distract us from what life there is all about. If failing to live as we should in Eretz Yisrael was the root problem which led to our exile, we will appreciate that, by definition, this is a problem that cannot be fully rectified while in exile – we would need to return to Israel and get it right. As such, we seem to be stuck: We cannot be redeemed from exile to Eretz Yisrael until we perform full teshuvah, while at the same time full teshuvah is only possible in Eretz Yisrael!

However, there are times when the person has done all he can to rectify his wrongdoings from within his current situation, at which point Hashem arranges for him to return to his original situation and complete the Teshuvah process. This, says the Chasam Sofer, is what is being described in these verses:

Verse 2 describes the Jewish people doing Teshuvah while in exile. At this point, Hashem will allow them to return to Eretz Yisrael **in order to complete the teshuvah process!** By bringing them back and blessing with prosperity, they are now in the situation which led their ancestors to incur exile in the first place. If they should use their prosperity meaningfully, enlisting it in the cause of Torah living, then their teshuvah will be complete. This is the nature of the teshuvah mentioned in verse 8. With this complete teshuvah will come complete redemption, as described in verses 9 and 10.

It turns out that the full relationship between teshuvah and redemption is ultimately reciprocal. Teshuvah leads to redemption – which then allows for further teshuvah, which in turns brings about further redemption

It is fascinating to consider that if we were to be asked what stage of history we are in, a good answer would be: “Devarim Chapter 30 verses 3-7.” May we merit to soon fulfill the mandate of verse 8, ushering in the glorious era of the verses that follow.

⁵ *Derashos Chasam Sofer.*