

The Purpose, Privilege and Paradox of Teshuva

Mrs. Shoshana Schechter

Director of Mechina and Assistant Professor of Bible, Stern College for Women

In the beginning, G-d created. . . teshuva. The *Medrash Rabba* tells us that teshuva is among the list of seven things that were created before the creation of the world.¹ *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* states further that not only did teshuva precede creation of the world, it was built into its blueprint, since without it the world is not viable.² The reason for this prerequisite of teshuva is reflected in Rashi's third comment in his *Commentary on the Torah*:

[In the beginning] Elokim created—It does not say Hashem created because in the beginning, G-d thought to create the world with the attribute of justice. He saw that the world would not last and He promoted the attribute of mercy and made it a partner with the attribute of justice.

Rashi, Breishit 1:1

ברא אלהים - ולא אמר ברא ה',
שבתחלה עלה במחשבה לבראתו
במדת הדין, ראה שאין העולם
מתקיים, הקדים מדת רחמים ושתפה
למדת הדין.
רש"י, בראשית א:א

Rashi explains that while the Torah begins with the term Elokim for G-d, the name “Hashem” is introduced in the second perek only once man and women are created. Rashi explains that G-d's initial thought was to create the world with only *din*, judgment, which is what the term elokim represents. He realized that with the introduction of man, however, that the world could not exist on judgment alone, and therefore introduced the term Hashem, representing His merciful attribute. The term Hashem (mercy) then merges with the term Elokim (judgment), which is what enables man to be forgiven for his sins and thus allowing the world and man to continue to exist.³

The theme of teshuva as a crossroad in the history of man appears throughout Sefer Breishit. It represents a pivotal point for the individual who will choose to either take advantage of doing teshuva or not. Both Adam and Kayin, who together with Chava are the very first sinners in the

¹ *Breishit Rabbah* 1:4.

² *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 3.

³ Rashi on Breishit 1:1.

history of man, are given the opportunity by G-d to do teshuva immediately following their sin before they are punished. G-d asks Adam rhetorically, “*ayeka*”—“where are you?” and similarly asks Kayin, “*ay hevel achicha*”—“where is Hevel your brother.” In both instances Rashi points out the obvious question. Of course G-d knows where Adam is and of course He knows what happened to Hevel. Why is He even asking? Rashi answers that G-d is opening the dialogue and giving them both an opportunity to take responsibility, confess their sins and do teshuva.⁴ In these two cases, neither Adam nor Kayin takes the bait. While Adam does hesitantly admit he sinned, he makes excuses and does not take personal responsibility. He points a finger at his wife who in turn blames the snake. Kayin not only does not admit accountability, he goes one step further and blames G-d for what happened. In both of these instances, the opportunity offered by G-d to do teshuva and the decision of man to take advantage of it completely affects the outcome of not just the individual but of mankind as well. Throughout Tanach there are many examples of this teshuva crossroad for both individuals and entire nations.

Teshuva plays a pivotal role in Sefer Yona as well. Read at mincha on Yom Kippur, and one of the highlights of the tefilla service over the course of the day, the story demonstrates the transformative power of teshuva. A key statement of Chazal to help shed light on this enigmatic process of teshuva is a passage found in the Talmud Yerushalmi:

They asked wisdom, what is the punishment of one who sins? Wisdom responded, “evil will pursue the sinners.” (Mishlei 13:21). Prophecy was asked what is the punishment of one who sins? Prophecy responded, “the soul that sins must die.” (Yechezkel 18:4). They asked Hashem what is the punishment of one who sins? Hashem responded, he should do teshuva and will be forgiven.

Talmud Yerushalmi, Makkot 2:6

שאלו לחכמה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרו להם [משלי יג כא] חטאים תרדף רעה שאלו לנבואה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרה להן [יחזקאל יח ד] הנפש החוטאת היא תמות שאלו לקודשא בריך הוא חוטא מהו עונשו אמר להן יעשו תשובה ויתכפר לו.
תלמוד ירושלמי, מכות פרק ב:ו

According to this passage in the Yerushalmi, without Hashem’s magnanimous offer of teshuva, there is no opportunity to change one’s fate and be forgiven. These various approaches to *cheit*, sin and failure, as described in the medrash, frame the entire sefer.

Sefer Yona presents the story of the navi Yona who is commanded to warn the people of Ninveh of their upcoming destruction. Popular belief dictates that this story is read on Yom Kippur because it depicts a story of evil people (the people of Ninveh) who ultimately do teshuva and are, as a result, forgiven and escape punishment. Some add that Yona himself, after attempting to run away from following G-d’s instructions, finally does teshuva and fulfills his G-d given job after his encounter with a large fish. The problem with that understanding is that according to this perspective, the sefer should end after the third perek. In the first perek, Yona is commanded by G-d to go to Ninveh, and he runs away. In the second perek he is swallowed by a fish, prays to G-d from inside, and is then spit out to safety. In the third perek Yona goes to Ninveh and delivers the message as he was commanded. If this book was just about various people doing

⁴ Breishit 3:9 and 4:9 and Rashi there.

teshuva, this would be the ending. However, the story continues with the fourth perek which presents a somewhat strange series of events that lead to a very abrupt ending to the story.

The fourth and final perek begins with Yona feeling extremely angry. He prays to G-d stating the reason he ran away in the first place, explaining that he was compelled to do so because he knew that G-d is, "קל חנון ורחום ארך אפים ורב חסד ונחם על הרעה" that G-d is a gracious and compassionate G-d, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and relenting of punishment. He will turn away from his burning wrath so we will not perish.⁵ This hardly seems like a reason to run away from his mission to bring the people of Ninveh to do teshuva. It is precisely, though, because he is afraid that they will be granted clemency and allowed to do teshuva, which he believes is a falsification of G-d's judgment. He describes G-d here using some of G-d's thirteen attributes, clearly omitting the attribute of *emet*, truth, which usually follows *rav chesed*, abundant in kindness. This is not an inadvertent omission on Yona's part. Yona's anger here is rooted in his belief that G-d is not "*emesdik*," or truthful. The people of Ninveh sinned and deserved punishment. Actions have consequences. It is not truthful or fair that they can do teshuva and then have their sins magically disappear. If one drinks poison (physical or spiritual), one will die. One cannot "undrink" that poison, or make it simply disappear, which is exactly what teshuva does to sin. Yona is a man of truth. When the boat on which he has escaped from G-d is overcome by a storm and about to sink, the sailors ask him with genuine concern what to do to escape from the storm.⁶ Yona, as a man of truth, calmly tells the sailors to throw him overboard. He knows very well that he is at fault and, therefore, must pay the consequences of his sin.⁷ He cannot comprehend the concept of G-d's *midat hadin*, attribute of judgment, being overtaken by teshuva, the situation in which consequences disappear. He believes that his placating G-d's *midat hadin* and accepting the consequences of his actions is G-d's will, and indeed this calms the sea. When he survives, because G-d chooses to save him, and prays to G-d from within the fish in the second perek, he is not adding anything more to his having taken responsibility by being thrown overboard. He remains a man of rigid truth, stating his personal predicament and despair⁸ and expressing belief that G-d will save him, but only because he will now fulfill his obligation:

And I, with a voice of thanksgiving, will offer a sacrifice to You. That which I promised, I will fulfill for salvation which is of Hashem.

Yona 2:10

ואני בקול תודה אזבחה לך אשר
גדרתי אשלמה ישועתה לה'.
יונה ב:י

To Yona, this is all about truth and fulfilling obligation, not the deep irrational love G-d has for His creations that can erase sin and override punishment and natural consequence. Yona's entire essence, his *raison d'être*, is truth, which is even evident in his name, יונה בן אמתי. He is so distraught in the fourth perek at the lack of truth of G-d that he wishes to die. The rest of the perek demonstrates to Yona, and to us, the purpose of teshuva and G-d's reasoning behind the concept and allowance of teshuva. Yona needs to learn that G-d's gift of teshuva to mankind, and

⁵ Sefer Yona 4:1-3.

⁶ Sefer Yona 1:11.

⁷ Sefer Yona 1:12.

⁸ Sefer Yona 2:4-7.

to all of His creations, does not contradict truth, but transcends truth, and is rooted in His abundance of love for His creations. This is in fact the greatest example of G-d's true *emet* in the world.

While Sefer Yona ends pretty abruptly with G-d asking Yona a rhetorical question, most meforshim explain this as *sh'tikah k'hoda'ah*, meaning, Yona's silence at the end of the story proves his acceptance and comprehension of G-d's message. The *Otzar Midrashim*, Medrash Yona, offers a deeper glimpse into Yona's epiphany by describing Yona's emotional reaction to G-d's message in its epilogue to the sefer. The medrash describes Yona, with tears streaming down his face, bursting forth with his newfound awesome revelation of G-d's אמת and רחמים, both stemming from His deep love for His creations:⁹

At that time, Yona fell on his face before G-d and said before Him, Master of the Universe, do you not consider that attribute of justice? You run Your world with the attribute of mercy and You should be praised for it . . . I did not know the strength of Your great mercy and I did not mention Your great kindness. There is nobody who matches Your actions and Your might. Your actions were splendid, Your performance was splendid, Your mercy was splendid, Your kindness was splendid, Your forgiveness was splendid, Your tearing of their document of debt was splendid and Your forgiving of their evil was splendid.

באותה שעה נפל יונה על פניו לפני הקב"ה ואמר לפניו רבש"ע כלום היא לפניך מדת הדין? במדת רחמים תנהיג את עולמך ונאה לך תהלה ... גבורות רחמיך הרבים לא הייתי יודע וחסדיך הרבים לא הייתי מגיד, שאין מי יעשה כמעשיך וכגבורותיך, יפה עשית יפה פעלת יפה רחמת, יפה חננת יפה סלחת, יפה קרעת להם שטר חובתם יפה נחמת על רעתם.

The story of Yona is specifically read at mincha on Yom Kippur perhaps because mincha, which was established by Yitzchak who was a man of *din*, is the time of day when judgment is strongest. We are beseeching G-d to follow His *rachamim*, as opposed to His *din*, which allows opportunity for teshuva. At this pivotal point in the day, immediately preceding the final prayer of Neila, we are reminding G-d of His mercy and His purpose in giving us the gift of teshuva.

In typical conservation of a personality pattern often demonstrated in Tanach, Chazal explain Yona's identity as the son of the Shunamit woman who Elisha haNavi resurrected from the dead.¹⁰ Ironically, Yona's entire existence is based on G-d's mercy and allowance for teshuva, since in his understanding of *emet*, resurrection of the dead would not be possible. Perhaps this theory is a metaphor for our own resurrection on Yom Kippur. G-d's gift of teshuva allows us to be reborn and start anew with a clean slate. By recognizing the source of this gift of teshuva and understanding the place of deep love from whence it comes, we will hopefully be more inspired take full advantage of this tremendous gift that G-d offers us year after year.

⁹ Thanks to Dr. Shneur Leiman who pointed out this medrash in a shiur on Sefer Yona he gave in his home.

¹⁰ Melachim 2, (4:18-37).