



Teshuva:

The Blueprint of Creation and the Path to Redemption

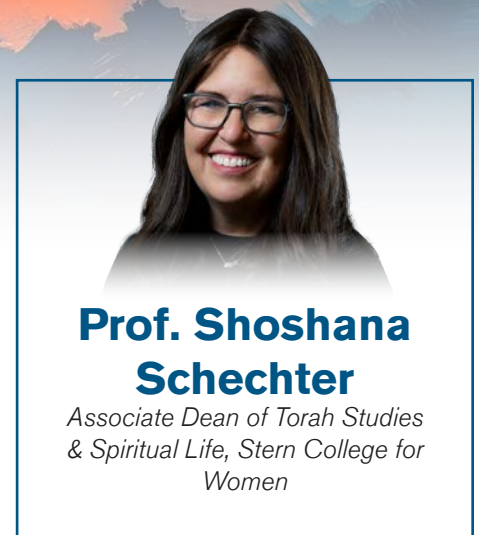
In the beginning, G-d created... teshuva. The *Medrash Rabba* tells us that teshuva is among the list of seven things that were created before the creation of the world.¹ *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* states further that not only did teshuva precede the creation of the world, it was built into its blueprint, 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*:

ברא אלקים - ולא אמר ברא ה', שבתחלה
עלה במחשבה לבראתו במדת הדין, ראה
שאין העולם מתקיים, הקדים מדת רחמים
ושתפה למדת הדין.
[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

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,



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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 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 “*Likanes imo b’devarim*” — “to enter him with words,” Rashi explains in response to G-d’s question to Adam. Interestingly, when Rashi explains the question, “*ay hevel achicha*,” to Kayin, he offers the same explanation but adds the word *nachat*, “*likanes imo b’divrei nachat*,” — “to enter him into pleasant words.” Perhaps the additional adjective “pleasant” is a result of Kayin’s state of mind. While neither Adam nor Kayin fully take responsibility for their actions, Adam shows some sense of guilt, as evidenced from his attempt to hide from G-d after his sin. Although he shifts the blame to Chava, he at least acknowledges that a wrongdoing occurred. In contrast, Kayin neither admits his guilt nor expresses any remorse; instead, he goes so far as to blame G-d for the outcome. G-d is demonstrating His desire for man to do teshuva implying that it should come not from fear but from a place of love. In both of these instances, the opportunity offered by G-d to do teshuva and the decision of man to take advantage of it 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. 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:

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.

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

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 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 travels to Ninveh and delivers the message as he was commanded. Had this book just been about people doing teshuva, it would have ended here. 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, explaining that he was compelled to flee because he knew that G-d is, קל חנון ורחום ארך אפים ורב, “... 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 help the people of Ninveh 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 His thirteen attributes, clearly omitting the attribute of *emet*, truth, which usually follows *rav chesed*, abundant 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, 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 taking responsibility for his actions. 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:

ואני בקול תודה אזבחה לך אשר נדרתי אשלמה ישועתה לה'.

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.

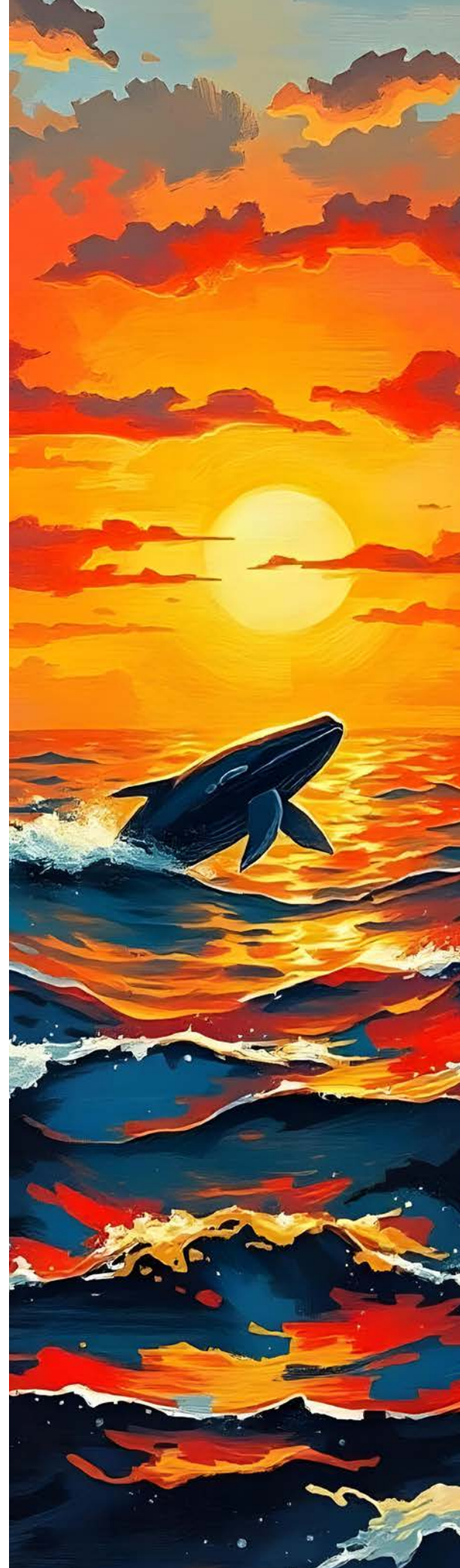
Yona 2:10

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 essence, his *raison d'être*, is truth, which is evident in his name, יונה בן אמתי. He is so distraught in the fourth perek at the lack of G-d's truth that he wishes to die. The rest of the perek demonstrates to Yona, and to us, the purpose of teshuva and G-d's motivation for the allowance of teshuva. Yona needs to learn that G-d's gift of teshuva to mankind, and to all 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 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 *emet* and *rachamim*, both stemming from His deep love for His creations:⁹

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 רחמיה 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.

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.

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 a characteristic pattern of preserving a personality across narratives in Tanach, Chazal identify Yona as the son of the Shunamit woman, whom Elisha haNavi resurrected from the dead.¹⁰ Ironically, Yona's entire existence is based on G-d's love 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, stemming from His love, allows us to be reborn and begin anew.

The concept of teshuva is such a foundational pillar of Judaism that not only does the Torah begin with references to teshuva, it ends with teshuva as well. In Sefer Devarim, which takes place during the fortieth year of the desert, Moshe addresses the second generation of Jews as they stand on the threshold of entering the Land of Israel. With his death imminent, this is Moshe's last lecture. He is desperate to impart the most fundamental messages to the Jewish people before he dies, cementing their connection to G-d and to Torah and ensuring their successful entrance into the Land of Israel. Before

he begins reviewing the Torah, which represents the crux of the sefer, Moshe describes a future where there will be generations of Jews who turn away from G-d and choose a life of sin:

כי תוליד בנים ובני בנים ונושנתם בארץ והשחתם ועשיתם פסל תמונת כל ועשיתם הרע בעיני ה' אלקיך להכעיסו.

When you beget children and grandchildren and will have been long in the land, you will grow corrupt and make a carved image, and you will do evil in the eyes of Hashem your G-d to anger Him.

Devarim 4:25

The description of destruction that ensues is detailed with the Jews being kicked out of their land, scattered among the nations, becoming a minority and losing their identity. In the end, however, G-d promises,

ובקשתם משם את ה' ומצאת כי תדרשנו בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך.

From there you will seek Hashem your G-d and you will find Him if you search for him with all your heart and all your soul.

The message is clear; after living a life of sin, the opportunity to return to G-d remains. These pesukim are read as the Torah portion on Tisha B'Av, our national day of mourning; amid the remembrance of the suffering throughout the history of the Jewish people emerges the message of teshuva — that it is never too late to return to G-d.

The underlying message of teshuva is evident throughout the sefer. What does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Moshe asks Bnei Yisrael rhetorically, after describing the events surrounding matan Torah and the ensuing sin of the golden calf.

מה ה' אלקיך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה את ה' אלקיך ללכת בכל דרכיו ולאהבה אותו ולעבוד את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך

לשמור את מצוות ה' ואת חקותיו אשר אנכי מצוך היום לטוב לך.

What does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d, to follow in all His ways, to love Him and to serve Hashem your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul to observe the commandments of Hashem and His decrees which I command you today for your benefit.

Devarim 10:12-13

Rashi clarifies the message here that despite everything Bnei Yisrael did wrong, G-d still loves them and desires a relationship with them, and for that reason, He enables them to do teshuva and return to Him even after sinning.

Moshe's final message to Bnei Yisrael not only begins with teshuva, it also ends with teshuva. After completing the review of Torah that he articulated throughout Sefer Devarim, Moshe ends his discourse in Parshat Nitzavim with the final mitzva — the mitzvah of teshuva:

והיה כי יבאו אליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר נתתי לפניך והשבת אל לבבך בכל הגוים אשר הדיחך ה' אלקיך שמה, ושבת עד ה' אלקיך ושמעת בקולו ... ושב ה' אלקיך את שבותך ורחמך ושב וקבצך מכל העמים אשר הפיצך ה' אלקיך שמה.

It will be when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you, then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem your G-d has dispersed you, and you will return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice ... Then Hashem your G-d will bring back your captivity and have mercy upon you and He will return and gather you in from all the peoples to which Hashem your G-d has scattered you.

Devarim 30;1-4

Moshe ends the description of this final mitzvah promising abundance of blessings:

כי ישוב ה' לשוב עליך לטוב כאשר שש על אבותיך.

When Hashem will return to rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your forefathers.

Devarim 30; 9

The motivation for the allowance of teshuva is G-d's love for His people and His desire to rejoice in them as He rejoiced in the avot.

Immediately following this last mitzvah completing the review of Torah, Moshe concludes with one final impactful message:

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלת היא ממך ולא רחוקה היא ... כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפין ובלבך לעשותו.

For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you and it is not distant ... Rather, the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it. (Devarim 30;11-14)

While many commentators interpret that this concluding message is referring to the accessibility of all the mitzvot Moshe just reviewed throughout the sefer, others, including the Ramban believe it specifically pertains to the mitzvah of teshuva that was just enumerated. The Ramban explains that teshuva is clearly intimated in the words, "b'ficha uvilvavecha" referring to the two facets of repentance: confession with one's mouth (Vayikra 26;40) and returning to

G-d with one's heart. (Devarim 30;2)

The message throughout the sefer is clear; Hashem's desire for Bnei Yisrael to do teshuva stems from His deep love for His people, and that love is the underlying theme throughout the Torah. Rashi, in his commentary, introduces each of the Five Books of the Torah by referencing the theme of G-d's love for the Jewish people, framing the message of the entire Torah.¹¹

Just as he begins the Torah with this message, Rashi ends with this message as well. Following the death of Moshe, the Torah concludes by summarizing what Moshe accomplished:

ולכל היד החזקה ולכל המורא הגדול אשר עשה משה לעיני כל ישראל.

And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel.

Devarim 34;12

Rashi explains that this refers to the breaking of the luchot with G-d's endorsement, which Moshe performed before the eyes of Israel.

שנשאו לבו לשבור הלוחות לעיניהם... והסכימה דעת הקב"ה לדעתו שנאמר י"ש כח ששברת.

That he decided to break the luchot in front of them ... And the Holy One, Blessed be He, concurred as it says "[asher shibartra] You did a great thing (yasher koach) by breaking [them]."

This concludes his commentary on Torah.

This final message, the same message that is disseminated throughout the Torah, is that despite the sins of Bnei Yisrael, despite the broken luchot, G-d's love for His people prevails, enabling them to repent and the relationship endures.

Recognizing the source of the gift of teshuva and understanding the place of deep love from whence it comes, should inspire us to take full advantage of this tremendous gift that G-d offers us year after year.

Endnotes

1. Breishit Rabbah 1:4.
2. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer ch. 3.
3. Rashi on Breishit 1:1.
4. Breishit 3:9 and 4:9 and Rashi there.
5. Sefer Yona 4:1-3.
6. Sefer Yona 1:11.
7. Sefer Yona 1:12.
8. Sefer Yona 2:4-7.
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).
11. See Rashi on Bereishit 1;1, Shmot 1;1, Vayikra 1;1, Bamidbar 1;1 and Devarim 1;1.



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