

## Meshech Chochmah Parshas Vayelech

### Shabbos Shuva

שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֹנֶךָ. קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵל ה'

*Return Yisrael, unto Hashem your God, for you have stumbled in your sin. Take words with you and return to Hashem. (Haftarah, Hoshea 14:2-3)*

### Reuven's Teshuvah and Hoshea's Message

After Yosef had been sold by the brothers, the pasuk states, "וַיָּשָׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל הַבּוֹר" – Reuven returned to the pit."<sup>1</sup> Commenting on this pasuk, we find the following in the Midrash:<sup>2</sup>

והיכן היה? בשקו ובתעניתו... אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא, מעולם לא חטא אדם פני ועשה תשובה, ואתה פתחת בתשובה תחילה, חייך שכן בנך עומד ופותח בתשובה תחילה, ואיזה? זה הושע, שנאמר "שובה ישראל עד ה' אלקיך"

*Where was he [returning from]? From his sackcloth and fasting. Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to him, "No one ever sinned before Me and did teshuvah. You were the first one to open with Teshuvah. By your life, it will be your descendant who stands and opens first with teshuvah." And who is this? It is Hoshea, as it is written, 'Return Israel, to Hashem your God.'*

The sin to which the Midrash refers for which Reuven was doing teshuvah was the episode with Bilhah, as mentioned earlier on in Bereishis.<sup>3</sup> The Gemara<sup>4</sup> explains that when Rachel died, Yaakov moved his bed into the tent of her maidservant, Bilhah. Reuven felt that this was an affront to the honor of his mother, Leah, and moved his father's bed into her tent. It was for this sin of counteracting his father's wishes that Reuven was repenting.

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<sup>1</sup> Bereishis 37:29.

<sup>2</sup> Beriehis Rabbah 84:19.

<sup>3</sup> 35:22.

<sup>4</sup> Shabbos 55b.

A number of questions arise concerning this Midrash:

1. Was Reuven the first person ever to do teshuvah? There are sources in Chazal which trace the idea of teshuvah back to as early as Adam and Cain.
2. Similarly, was Hoshea the first *navi* to exhort the Jewish people to do teshuvah? Practically every *navi* since the time of Moshe Rabbeinu himself exhorted the people to do teshuvah!
3. Why does the pasuk allude to Reuven's teshuvah over the episode with Bilhah in the section which deals with the sale of Yosef?
4. What is the meaning of the phrase "פתחת בתשובה תחילה" – You opened with teshuvah first"? Is the one who "opens" not *by definition* the one who is "first", leaving one of these two words basically redundant?

### **Teshuvah for an Aveirah Bein Adam Lechaveiro**

The Meshech Chochmah explains. As we know, the mitzvos of the Torah can be divided into two groups: "*bein adam laMakom* – between man and Hashem" and "*bein adam lechaveiro* – between man and his fellow man." It is easy to see how if a person commits a sin between himself and Hashem then in order to do teshuvah he needs to ask Hashem for forgiveness. Likewise, if one sins against his fellow man, he will naturally need to ask that person for forgiveness in order to atone for his aveirah. It is also important to realize, however, that even after he has apologized to his fellow, he still needs to teshuvah toward Hashem for sinning against his fellow man. The reason for this is that if he has sinned against his fellow, it is a symptom of the fact that he has moved further away from Hashem and his Torah; for if a person was fully connected to Hashem, he would never treat his fellow man in an objectionable or unacceptable way. It is only by distancing himself from Hashem and His ways that a person can allow himself to act in a cruel or insensitive way towards others, perhaps even developing an ideology which condones and supports such behavior.

This was Reuven's contribution to our understanding of the teshuvah process. Reuven's sin was essentially in the realm of *bein adam lechaveiro* – denigrating his father's honor by countermanding his wishes. The reparative act for that sin, therefore, came in the form of him putting himself out to save Yosef, thereby upholding his father's wishes even at his own expense. Yosef had, in some respects, already superseded Reuven himself as Yaakov's firstborn. Nevertheless,

Reuven set all personal considerations aside to honor his father's wishes.<sup>5</sup> With this act, his earlier infraction had seemingly been resolved. Yet the Torah informs us that it was specifically at this stage that Reuven engaged in teshuvah. He realized that his actions toward Yaakov were the result of his having distanced himself from Hashem and hence he sought to resolve the matter at its root by returning to Hashem.

This is what Midrash means when it says that Reuven was “פּוֹתַח בַּתְּשׁוּבָה תַּחִּילָה,” for he introduced (פּוֹתַח) the idea of seeking the beginnings (תַּחִּילָה) of his sin, recognizing that they ultimately lay in a shortcoming in his relationship with Hashem.

Likewise, it is this idea that Hoshea introduces to the Jewish people, saying “שׁוּבוּהָ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֹנֶךָ” – Return Israel to Hashem you God, for you have stumbled in your sin.” The message is that even when the sin you have committed is “your sin,” i.e. in matters that exist between members of the Jewish people, nevertheless, you have to return to Hashem over those sins as well. This idea is further explicated in the following pasuk which states: “קָחוּ ה' עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵל ה'” – Take for yourselves words and return to Hashem.” The first part of the pasuk, “take for yourselves words,” refers to the words of appeasement with which one needs to approach his fellow Jew against whom he has sinned. The second half of the pasuk states that after the aggrieved party has granted him forgiveness, the person needs to then return to Hashem over the distance between them which allowed him to sin against his fellow.

In light of these words of the Meshech Chochmah let us suggest that the words of the pasuk which we recite so many times on Yom Kippur, “מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָרוּ” – From all of your sins, before Hashem you shall be purified,<sup>6</sup> remind us that purity from *all* of our sins – including *bein adam lechaveiro* – comes from being in a state of closeness “before Hashem.”

גמר חתימה טובה!

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<sup>5</sup> See Berachos 7b, cited in Rashi to Bereishis 29:32.

<sup>6</sup> Vayikra 16:30.