YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASHAT NITZAVIM**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of Rabbi Abraham Halbfinger, *z”l.*

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**“And you shall return unto the Lord your God”**

**Rav Shimon Klein**

This week’s *shiur* will address the concept of *teshuva*. It is interesting to note the reciprocal nature of the process as presented in this week’s *parasha*. The first step is taken by the nation, which “recalls to its heart”; then comes God’s response, followed by another step by the nation, and then another step on God’s part, and so on. Thus, a process of both *teshuva* and redemption unfolds. We will explore the various stations in this process with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of the process as a whole.

**Internalization – past and present**

“And it shall be, when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you shall recall them to your heart among all the nations into which the Lord your God has driven you, and shall return to the Lord your God, and shall obey His voice according to all that I command you this day – you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul…” (*Devarim* 30:1-2)

The first step comes from the people. “And it shall be, when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you” – the point of departure for the step that they take is the historical context; i.e., it will happen in the wake of the era of the blessings and the curses. The blessings have already been set before the people, as have the curses, and now, in the wake of both, they will undergo a process. The unit is formulated in the singular, with the subject being the nation and what happens to it. “And you shall recall (*ve-hashevota*) them to your heart” – recalling to the heart (or, to use the English equivalent, “calling to mind”) is a deliberate act, not a natural, involuntary inner movement. The Hebrew term *hashava*, literally meaning “bringing back,” indicates a previous belonging of the thing to the heart; now, after a time of distancing, it is brought back to it. What is this thing that is to be brought back, “recalled,” to the heart? To answer this question we must look at what precedes our verse and what follows it. Preceding it is the introduction to the unit, describing the context in which the nation finds itself in the wake of the blessing and the curse. Following it, in the next verse, we read, “among all the nations into which the Lord your God has driven you.” Am Yisrael has been scattered by God among all the nations, and there, in that place of abandonment, starts an internalization and understanding of what has happened, and why.

“And [you] shall return [up] to (*ad*) the Lord your God” – In contrast to the “recalling,” where the process of internalization relates to events and the reality that has come about, the process is now oriented towards “the Lord your God” – it is to Him that you return, in keeping with your world. The choice of the preposition “*ad*” (up to) rather than the seemingly more obvious “*el*” indicates that there is still a distance, a barrier: “up to but not including.” “And [you] shall obey His voice” – a further step is obeying God (literally, “listening to His voice”). Not *shemi’a le-kol* (hearing) – implying and understanding and mutuality – but rather *shemi’a* ***be****-kol*, like a child who obeys his parents even if he does not fully understand why they tell him to do something. What is conveyed in this “voice”? The answer would seem to lie in the words, “according to all that I command you this day.” There is a command by Moshe, this day, and it is to this command that the nation will return. The command may refer to this specific unit – i.e., the subject of *teshuva* – but might also refer to all of Moshe’s commands in *Sefer Devarim*, which are based on the spiritual structure that forms the basis of the *Sefer* – a speech of Moshe (not God) that is delivered in the fortieth year. From the unique perspective of the eve of the entry into the land he repeats the commandments to the people. The nation’s return to its God is likewise undertaken from the place where the nation is at, via the vessels and realities of its life, without skipping over them. “You and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul” – you will be oriented towards this obeying, as will “your children,” as an expression referring to future generations, with all your heart and with all your soul. From the very innermost chambers of the heart, to the vast expanses of the soul.

**The ingathering of the exile, inheritance, and abundance**

“Then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the Lord your God has scattered you. (Even) if your outcasts are at the outermost parts of the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will take you, and the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it, and He will be good to you and multiply you more than your fathers.” (vv. 3-5)

“Then the Lord your God will turn (*ve-shav*) your captivity” – following the first step, when the nation “recalled to its heart” and contemplated what had happened to it, and turned its thoughts to God – now God turns (restores) its captivity. What is the meaning of this “turning”? We understand the concept of a person coming back to a previous position, or to his proper place. But what do we mean when we speak of God “returning”? Perhaps this hints to a sort of cooperation on God’s part with man’s return, crowning his efforts with the title of “return.” From a different perspective, God is present with the people in their suffering, and now He returns with them, as it were, in their *teshuva*.[[1]](#footnote-1) “And have compassion upon you” – why is the act one of compassion? Is the acquittal not a matter of justice? This indicates something of the embryonic state of the nation’s *teshuva*; they are not yet at a stage where it is possible to judge them. “And will return and gather you (*ve-shav ve-kibetzkha*) from all the nations amongst whom the Lord your God has scattered you” – in this response, too, God “returns,” and in this case the return is understood in the context of His allowing them to return to their land – or, as returning with them, having been with them in their exile. “(Even) if your outcasts are at the outermost parts of the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you” – this is a gathering up not just of the nation as a whole, but of its individual far-flung outcasts, to whom God is committed even if they are “at the outermost parts of the heavens.” “And from there He will take you” – after the act of gathering up, which restores a collective existence, there comes the act of “taking,” which describes a transition from the domain of the nations to the domain of the Holy Land. “And the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it, and He will be good to you and multiply you more than your fathers” – the closing of this circle comes with the arrival back in the land, its possession, and their wellbeing in it, at first by virtue of the forefathers, and later on, going beyond what the forefathers had, as an expression of the nation itself being part of the process.

**“Circumcising the heart to love”**

“And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (v. 6).

Now that the nation is back in its land, it is spread out, a great mass of people. The question is, where is all this leading to? The obvious direction is exposure to a new spiritual dimension. The keys to this development lie with God: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your descendants” – “circumcision” means the removal of that which obstructs and prevents an unmediated encounter. A person with an “uncircumcised heart” is one who exists within himself. His heart is sealed; he does not feel for or with others. The removal of this blockage would open his heart to new connections with sanctity and with love: “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” “Love of the Lord *your God*” means loving Him *as He is perceived in a person’s world, as his God*, within his life system. “That you may live” – all of this is meant for the sake of life, as a movement of empowerment, not as a movement of denial.

**Curses upon the enemies**

“And the Lord your God will put all these curses upon your enemies, and on them who hate you, who persecuted you” (v. 7) – this stage focuses on those who hate and are enemies of Israel,[[2]](#footnote-2) rather than on the nation itself. What is the purpose of this stage? What is the connection between it and the process of *teshuva* that the nation is undergoing?

Before answering these questions, let us first consider which “curses” (*alot*) are being referred to here. In the direct sense, the expression “all these curses” refers back to the beginning of the *parasha*, with its description of the ceremony in which the nation passes into “God’s covenant and His oath (*ala*).” The covenant – as a mutual commitment between the nation and its God, and the oath – lest the nation violate the covenant.[[3]](#footnote-3) The oath (*ala*) is described in this unit as the destroying of life,[[4]](#footnote-4) or - in the broader sense – it serves as a continuation of the curses set forth in great detail in Chapter 28. These curses come from God, but God has many messengers and agents – the haters and enemies of Israel who pursue them and strike at them. Now, the circle is about to be closed, and justice demands its place in the process, too. The enemies attacked Am Yisrael rightfully when the nation was mired in sin, but now the nation has come to its senses, returned to itself and to life, justice must address the enemies. And lo and behold – they are still haters and enemies. It now turns out that it was not as fair and rightful executors of justice that they attacked Israel, but rather out of their own hatred and sinfulness. This being the case, they will be punished for all the suffering and destruction that they caused.[[5]](#footnote-5) On the simplest level, this is bad news for these nations. On a deeper level, the fact that they are brought to justice beckons them to a new position, a place of responsibility for their actions, and this is a significant step towards the repairing and perfecting of the world.

Why is it God Himself Who brings the curses upon them? Why is this step not entrusted to Am Yisrael? The answer to this question would seem to lie in the previous stage. In the wake of the circumcising of their heart, their world is now one of connections – to the love of God, to the movement of life, “that you may live.” This, it seems, is not the state of mind of a nation that seeks to settle historical accounts with other nations over their persecution and cruelty in the past. A sort of “division of roles” has to be made between God and His people: they will maintain the first trait – loving God with all their hearts and with all their souls ‘that they may live’, while the attribute of justice and the punishment of the nations will be meted out by God’s hand.

**A renewed obeying of God**

“And you shall return and obey the voice of the Lord, and perform all of His commandments which I command you this day” (v. 8).

Now the text comes back to the part of the nation. At first glance, its action at this stage seems the same as at the first stage, with nothing new: In verse 3, we already read, “… and you return to the Lord your God and obey His voice according to all that I command you this day – you and your children – with all your heart and with all your soul….” In both cases there is returning (*teshuva*), obeying God, and observance of the commandments. So what is different? We might offer two answers. Firstly, even if the description was identical, the context in which the nation now finds itself lends a new and different meaning to the same words. The *teshuva* of someone who is outcast in some abandoned place at the uttermost edge of the heavens is not the same as the *teshuva* of a nation that is in its land and enjoying God’s bounty, its heart circumcised to love God. Now its obedience to God involves areas and contexts that previously did not apply, and the commandments that the nation must observe are also different.

Beyond this, however, the discrepancies in the wording testify to a fundamental difference. Let us first consider the specific spiritual movement that is embodied in each statement. In the first, the text describes a return to God - “… and you return to the Lord your God,” followed by obedience – “and you obey His voice” – with no new mention of God’s Name. This “obeying” refers to God Who was mentioned in the previous stage, and it rests upon that presence. This description emphasizes the importance of the act of *teshuva* as the primary concern, while obeying God’s voice is a later, secondary issue; it is a by-product of the *teshuva*, as it were, rather than a response to a renewed sense of God’s presence. As to the third element – “according to all that I command you this day” – there is nothing new at all; it simply casts the dual process (return to God and obeying His voice) as taking place by virtue of Moshe’s command which is now being communicated to the nation.

The later verse (v.8) has the opposite focus. The first part is devoid of God’s Name: “and you [shall] return…,” while the second part is oriented towards Him: “and obey the voice of the Lord.” This structure serves to place the focus on the second stage. *Teshuva* is the first stage that makes itself felt in the nation’s psyche, preparing it for the second and more significant stage, which includes obeying God. And what about the commandments? “…And you perform all His commandments, which I command you this day” - in contrast to v. 3, in which the commandments were the basis for the *teshuva* and obedience to God, in v. 8 they are an additional, new stage, giving practical expression to the stages that preceded it.

We might sum up the comparison as follows: both verses have a similar structure, which includes *teshuva*, obeying God, and observance of the commandments. In the earlier verse, the focus is on the act of *teshuva*; at this stage the obedience to God is still weak, and Moshe’s command comes to reinforce these two stages (*teshuva* and obedience), with no addition of new commands. This is a process whose essential core takes place in the heart of the people – as yet without any meaningful interaction with either God or the sphere of life in general. The later verse represents a significant development: once again the first step is an inner process of *teshuva* that the nation undergoes, but this is not the focus. The focus is on God’s presence, in the context of obeying Him; as a further stage, this presence and the consciousness of it is broadened into the practical observance of all the commandments. Now the commandments express the nation’s broad interaction with all areas of life, as commanded by Moshe.

There are further differences between the two verses. The latter verse starts, “and you shall return (*ve-ata tashuv*)” – a more direct way of addressing the nation and intensifying its belonging, instead of the more neutral “*ve-shavta*” in the earlier verse, formulated in the past tense with the conversive ‘*vav,*’ embodying a more fixed and defined position. “*Tashuv*” is the future tense, leaving the future open to possibilities of development. In addition, we have already commented above on the distinction between “*ve-shavta ad*” in the earlier verse, describing a limited *teshuva* – “up to but not including,” as opposed to the latter verse in which the barrier is removed and the *teshuva* continues to be realized and fulfilled in the stages that follow.

**“For the Lord will rejoice over you”**

“And the Lord your God will make you plenteous in every work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your land, for good; for the Lord will again rejoice over you (*yashuv hashem lasus alekha*) for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers” (30:9).

God will grant abundant blessing in all that you do, in the proliferation and increase of life, in the form of progeny, increase of your flocks and herds, and the produce of the land. This increase does not remain a subject in and of itself, but rather facilitates the next stage, in which God enters the picture, and a bond is formed between Him and His people: “For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good.” In contrast to the beginning of the process, where His stance towards the nation was one of compassion (“then the Lord your God will turn your captivity and have compassion upon you” – v. 3), now there is a movement of connection and reciprocity. The word “*lasus*” (or the noun - *sasson*) means joy, and refers to the attainment of something good, as in, “I rejoice (*sas anokhi*) at Your word, like one who finds great spoil” (*Tehillim* 119:162). This joy is bound up with the encounter with life, as expressed so beautifully in the prophetic imagery:

“For as a young man takes to himself a virgin, so shall your sons take you to themselves; and a groom rejoices over a bride – so shall your God rejoice over you” (*Yishayahu* 62:5).

God will rejoice over His nation as a groom rejoices over his bride.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Concluding *teshuva*

“If you shall obey the Lord your God, to observe His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the Torah, and if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (v. 10)

This verse concludes the unit on *teshuva*, and it describes three different states: the nation obeying God; observance of the commandments; and a wholehearted return to God. This raises some questions. Firstly, this is the third time within the space of this unit that these elements have been mentioned in juxtaposition: they appear in v. 3, then again in v. 8, and now once again in the closing verse of the unit. In the first two instances, the text described a process of *teshuva*, obeying God, and observance of the commandments. Now, the text repeats the same three elements, but presents a different structure: first it mentions obeying God, then observance of the commandments, and only at the end is there mention of *teshuva*. What is the meaning of this repetition? What message is conveyed by the new structure? And what is the significance of this verse as the conclusion of the unit on *teshuva*?

We have already noted the first structure, embodying a process of *teshuva* as an inner movement within a person; obedience to God once he has been exposed to a connection with God; and finally – observance of the commandments – as an expression of this connection in his lifestyle. This process is first presented with an emphasis on the stage of the *teshuva* itself, and then, as a more developed level, with emphasis on obedience to God and observance of the commandments. Now, the text once again sets forth the three-part process, but this time it serves as a context, a sort of precondition, for what appears in the preceding verse. The great abundance will come about, and God will rejoice over the nation for good, if and when the nation fulfills its role – by obeying God, observing His commandments and statutes, and returning to God with all its heart and all its soul. At first glance this description might seem superfluous, since in the verse preceding v. 9 these three elements already appeared. What is the point of their repetition?

Repetition is not merely restatement. Repetition hints to a new spiritual movement that is detected within the psyche of the nation. The previous verse had ended with the description of the living bond between God and His people, with God rejoicing over them for the good. Now, the text goes on to describe the conditions for the preservation and continuation of this good: “If (*ki*) you will obey the voice of the Lord your God.” The direct fuel for this live and living bond is obedience to God. This obedience and listening come in the wake of the spiritual reality arising from God’s rejoicing over His people. Only as a subsequent stage is there mention of the commandments: “to observe His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the Torah” – and whose essence will be an expression of the bond and the obedience to God in the entire experience of life, as pursuant to what is written in the Torah.

Finally, the text comes back to *teshuva*. And thus this concept undergoes a process: at first, *teshuva* is the point of departure for the process as a whole – “And you recall (*ve-hashevota*) to your heart…” (v. 1) – after the nation, from its place of dispersion and abandonment, internalizes the blessing and the curse. This *teshuva* grows out of harsh experiences, out of pain and suffering. From one stage to the next it leaves one form and takes on another: “And you return (*ve-shavta*) to the Lord your God” (v. 2) – as a first step on the road to God. In response, God turns back the captivity of the people: “Then the Lord your God will turn (*ve-shav*) your captivity and have compassion upon you” (v. 3). Following the circumcision of the heart to love God, *teshuva* makes another appearance – this time, drawing an entire process in its wake: “And you shall return (*ve-ata tashuv*) and obey the voice of the Lord your God and perform all of His commandments, which I command you this day” (v. 8). Now, in the wake of the living bond that has been created, and with God rejoicing over His nation for the good, life has matured and a new *teshuva* has developed: “…If you turn (*ki tashuv*) to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (v. 10). This *teshuva* concludes the process, and its motivation is now the living bond with God and its expansion to all areas of life.

The unit opens with the first step of *teshuva* – “and you shall return to (*ve-shavta ad*) the Lord your God”; it also concludes with a step of teshuva – “…if you turn to (*ki tashuv el*) the Lord your God.” The first step is “*ad*” (up to) the Lord your God – up to but not including. The latter is teshuva “*el” –* all the way to a state of connection. In between, there is an historical spiritual process that the nation undergoes, embodying and expressing a profound dialogue between the nation and its God. Between the beginning and the end there develops a process of teshuva and, at the same time, a process of redemption.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. “Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: See how beloved Israel are before the Holy One, blessed be He: in every place where they were exiled, the Divine Presence was with them. They were exiled to Egypt, and the Divine Presence was with them, as it is written: “Did I not appear to your father’s house when they were in Egypt…” (*Shmuel* I 2:27). They were exiled to Babylonia, and the Divine Presence was with them, as it is written: “For your sakes I have sent to Babylonia…” (*Yishayahu* 43:14). Also in the future, when they are destined to be redeemed, the Divine Presence will be with them, as it is written, “And the Lord your God will turn your captivity….” The verse does not say “bring back” but rather “turn, hinting that the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself returns along with them from amongst the places of exile.” (*Megilla* 29a) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “’And the Lord your God will put all these curses upon your enemies’ – this refers to those who are known to be open enemies, as in the verse (*Shemot* 15), ‘The enemy has said, I shall pursue…’; ‘and on them who hate you’ – referring to those who hate in secret, as in (*Vayikra* 19), ‘You shall not hate your brother in your heart’, and (*Devarim* 19), ‘If a man hates his neighbor…’ – where the hatred is hidden in his heart. ‘Who persecuted you’ – this refers to the rest of the nations who join together with the children of Esav and the children of Yishmael, as it is written (*Tehillim* 83), ‘The tents of Edom, and the Yishme’elim, of Moav, and hagerim… Ashur, too, is joined with them.’” (Pesikta Zutreta, Nitzavim 51,71). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "You stand this day all of you before the Lord your God – your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water, that you might enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, and into His oath, which the Lord your God makes with you this day, that He may establish you today for a people to Himself, and that He may be to you a God, as He has said to you, and as He has sworn to your fathers – to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov. Neither with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath…” (29:9-13). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “And the Lord shall mark him for evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant (*ke-khol alot ha-berit*) that are written in this book of the Torah, so that the generation to come of your children that shall rise up after you, and the stranger who shall come from a far land, shall say, when they see the plagues of that land, and the sicknesses which the Lord has laid upon it, and that the whole land is brimstone and salt and burning, that it is not sown, nor bears, nor does any grass grow on it, like the overthrow of Sedom and Amora, Adma, and Tzevoyim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger, and in His wrath - then all the nations shall say, Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What is [the meaning of] the heat of this great anger? Then men shall say, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt, for they went and served other gods, and worshipped them - gods whom they did not know, and whom He had not given to them, and the anger of the Lord burned against this land, to bring upon it all the curses that are written in this book. And the Lord rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day.” (29-20-27) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This analysis rests upon the fact that “upon your enemies and upon those who hate you” (*al oyvekha ve-al son’ekha*) is in the present tense, while “who persecuted you” (*asher redafukha*) is in the past tense. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rabbeinu Bechaye comments: “’for the Lord will again rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers’ – perhaps the text is hinting to the return of the king [to be] with the bride at the time of the redemption, such that the verse might be read as follows: “For the Lord will return to the good, to rejoice over you as He rejoiced over your fathers” – meaning, that God will give you abundance in all that you do – meaning, he will give you a great abundance when the King returns to His Kingdom, and then He will rejoice over you as He rejoiced over your fathers.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)