

THE OU WOMEN'S INITIATIVE IS PROUD TO PRESENT:

—ASERET YEMEI TESHUVA—

IDEAS & inspiration

*Dedicated by Elaine Feigenbaum Jaye
in loving memory of her dear parents
Mordechai ben Yitzchak and Fayga bas Avraham.
In the zchus of learning the words of Torah in this booklet,
may their neshamos have an aliya.*

THE
Women's
INITIATIVE

OU
ORTHODOX
UNION
תורה ומצוות



Transliterations in this publication are based on Sephardic or Ashkenazic pronunciation according to authors' preferences.

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A message from

**REBBETZIN DR.
ADINA SHMIDMAN**

Founding Director, OU Women's Initiative

שובה ישראל עד ה' אלקיך כי כשלת בעונך:

We read two Haftorot during Aseret Yimei Teshuva. On Tzom Gedalya, we read בְּהַקְצֵאוּ דְרִשּׁוּ ה' *seek Hashem when He is close* from Sefer Yeshayahu. On the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we read אֵלֶיךָ שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֵלֶיךָ *Return, O Israel, to the L-RD your G-d* from Sefer Hoshea. Why are these Neviim delivering what seems to be the same message to the Jewish people? The question is strengthened by the fact that they both lived at the same time - certainly there was overlap between the audiences Yeshayahu and Hoshea were addressing. What is the unique message delivered by each prophet? What ideas and insight of these Haftorot can we incorporate into the Yimei Ratzon repentance process?

Understanding the backgrounds of Yeshayahu and Hoshea helps us understand their messages. Yeshayahu was from the tribe of Yehuda as well as a close relative of the ruling family. He was a first cousin and father in law of King Chizkiyahu. He had the ear of the leadership and therefore was able to communicate a message that had a strong likelihood of implementation. His words reflected that power and access. Yeshayahu spoke of dramatic change of character and even thought reformation, יַעֲזֹב רָשָׁע דְרָכָו וְאִישׁ אָנוּן מִחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ יָשׁוּב אֶל־ה', *Let the wicked give up his ways, The sinful man his plans and return to Hashem*. The king who Yeshayahu addressed had the capacity to issue sweeping edicts and enact change in an instant. Yeshayahu employed nature metaphors that describe a sweeping and impressive reaction to national repentance, הַהָרִים וְהַגְּבָעוֹת יִפְצְחוּ לְפָנֶיכֶם רְנָה וְכָל־עֵצֵי הַשָּׂדֶה יִמְחַאֲרֻךְ *the mountains and hills will burst forth before you in jubilation and all the trees of the field will clap hands*. The teshuva of Yeshayahu is fast and forceful.

By contrast, Hoshea was from the tribe of Reuven. He was not related to the powerful figures of the day and did not have access to them in the way that Yeshayahu did. Hoshea spoke to the common man rather than the monarchy. He understood that for the average person, change can be difficult. One must approach character development slowly and often there are frustrations and challenges along the way. Growth can be an arduous albeit rewarding process. His words speak of slow change, moving from אֵלֶיךָ שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֵלֶיךָ *Return Israel until Hashem Your G-d* to וָשׁוּבוּ אֶל־ה' *and return to Hashem*. Teshuva begins with small steps approaching Hashem as the Ibn Ezra comments, *slowly, slowly*. The reaction of nature reflects this theme of process. The flower slowly unfurls, the dew lands softly in recognition of the spiritual journey of mankind.

Yeshayahu and Hoshea agree on the message of teshuva, but differ on the method. In this booklet, you will read about how different figures in Tanach approach their teshuva journey. We should feel encouraged that there is more than one path to teshuva. Recognizing that there are different access points affords us opportunities and avenues to achieve our goal of renewed and restored connection with Hashem. To paraphrase Robert Frost, there are two paths before me and I have chosen the one that speaks to my nature and this has made all the difference.

I wish you a year of continued growth, good health, happiness and holiness with all of Hashem's blessings.

כתיבה וחתימה טובה!

Adina



By Mrs. Shira Schiowitz

Teshuva: Lessons from the First Generations

Humanity's first attempts at teshuva are a colossal failure. Instead of taking ownership, Adam passes the blame for his sin onto Chava, who in turn blames the snake. This, all after hiding from G-d, Who chases Adam down with a call of "ayekah", where are you? (Bereishit 3:9) Banished from the Garden of Eden, Adam's son Kayin does even worse. After killing his brother Hevel in a fit of jealousy over the acceptance of Hevel's sacrifice and not his own, it is G-d, again, Who makes the first move asking, "Where is Hevel your brother?" Like his father Adam, Kayin evades the question, responding, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Bereishit 4:9) Kayin's punishment is an intensified version of Adam's: the land will no longer produce for him and he is forced to become a wanderer. This too Kayin rejects, responding to G-d with another rhetorical question: "Is my sin too great for you G-d to bear?" (Rashi Bereishit 4:13). Hashem responds by softening the punishment.

Chazal say that G-d created teshuva before He created the world (Pesachim 54a). And yet, in the early stories of the Torah we seem not to have the knack for teshuva. Bothered by this and by Kayin's mild punishment, Ramban rereads the Kayin story as one of the quintessential penitent. Instead of interpreting his words as a rejection of his punishment, Ramban reads Kayin's words as a statement and not a question, rendering them the first viduy, "My sin is too great to bear!" thereby turning the story from Kayin's devastating descent, to an inspiring return, even for the ultimate sinner.

But even with Ramban's optimistic reading of Kayin, the message of the story may lie more in the opportunities of teshuva than in the teshuva itself. At every step of the way, G-d turns to Kayin in the hopes of his return. His questions to Kayin, like to Adam, invite him to do his own reflection and admission. Even prior to the murder, when Kayin's sacrifice is rejected, G-d encourages him by saying, "Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right sin crouches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master." (Bereishit 4:7) Despite his rage and jealousy that threaten to bring him down, it is G-d who has faith in Kayin, whispering his potential in his ear at every turn. And in spite of Kayin's failure, G-d's hope (and perhaps Kayin's as well) continues for the next generation, as the later verse (Bereishit 4:17) describes the birth of his son Chanoch and the city that Kayin built for him. Teshuva is rooted in G-d's faith in humanity, and His patience. Perhaps Kayin did teshuva. But even if not, G-d waits for us and calls in our ear, "You will overcome".

Shira Schiowitz is a Tanach teacher at SAR High School where she also serves as Co-director of Professional Development. She previously taught Tanach and chaired the Tanach Department at Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School in Teaneck, NJ. Shira served as Assistant Dean at Lamdeinu of Teaneck, a full-time learning program, during its first year, planning and implementing its opening. At the OU Women's Initiative, Shira taught the first part of Sefer Yeshayahu to over 6,500 women worldwide as part of first cycle of the Torat Imecha Nach Yomi Program, an interactive in-depth course examining the relationships between the melachim and Nevi'im in Tanach as part of the ALIT Summer Learning Program and served as a scholar-in-residence for Nach Shabbat 2022. She is teaching Sefer Shoftim for the current cycle of Torat Imecha Nach Yomi. Shira is the Rebbetzin of the Shaare Tefillah community in Teaneck, NJ where she and her husband have served for the past 19 years. She received her master's degree in Bible from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University.



By Mrs. Sarah Lipman

Why is Yishmael in the Machzor?

The Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashana is excerpted from *parshas Vayeira*, opening with the fulfillment of G-d's promise that Sarah will conceive a child. But the Torah reading does not stop at Yitzchak's birth. Instead, we go on to read that Sarah saw Yishmael's mockery and insisted that Avraham send him away.

Why is the story of Yishmael in our Rosh Hashana *machzor*? What is its relevance to the Day of Judgement?

In the desert, Yishmael was dying of thirst. The angels rushed to condemn him.

'Master of the Universe, will you raise a well to save a man who will murder your children by thirst?!' G-d said to them, 'Right now, is he a tzaddik or a rasha?' They said, 'Tzaddik.' He replied, 'I will not judge a person other than where he is at the moment.' (Ber. Rabba 53)

Yishmael was a *tzaddik*? Really?! He was a *rasha* with tendencies for promiscuity, idolatry, violence, and abuse! When did Yishmael become a *tzaddik*?

When Yitzchak was born, people were skeptical.

"Do you see this old man and woman who took an orphan off the streets and claim he is their son?..." What did Avraham do? He invited the influencers of the generation, and Sarah invited their wives, who brought their babies... G-d made a miracle for Sarah, and her breasts gave milk enough to nurse all the babies... and Yitzchak's features changed to look like Avraham's... (Bava Metzia 87a)

G-d made it publicly known that the existence of the first Jewish child was miraculous — laughably impossible, yet absolutely undeniable. It is no coincidence that Yishmael's eviction follows the feast celebrating Yitzchak's life. **It was Yishmael who insinuated that Yitzchak was an abandoned orphan.** On the very occasion that G-d was emphatically demonstrating the miracle of Jewish existence, Yishmael was undermining it. This was the mockery that Sarah witnessed (Chasam Sofer).

And in that moment, his life was overturned. The father who loved him tied him screaming to his mother's back and sent him away. His mother threw him, sick and dehydrated, under a bush and withdrew from his pain.

At death's door, rejected by his father, discarded by his mother, the truth dawns on Yishmael: it isn't Yitzchak who is an abandoned orphan — it is Yishmael. His life has become the lie he invented.

Yishmael realized the absolute justice of his situation, as clear as day. He regretted and repented for his actions, accepting that G-d's judgement is just and fair (Rav Schwab).

An angel...called to Hagar... 'G-d has heard the boy's voice where he is now' ...and G-d opened her eyes, and she saw a well..."

Yishmael, at that moment, was a *tzaddik*.

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“היום הרת עולם. Today all creatures of the universe stand in judgement... As sons, have mercy as a father is merciful... As servants, our eyes turn to you to... bring our judgement forth like light.”

On the day that all people are individually assessed before G-d, we read about Yishmael, who could learn from his judgement. With each set of shofar blasts, we pray that G-d will “bring our judgment forth like light”: whatever G-d in His Goodness will activate for us this year, may we merit to see the message clearly, with confidence in His love and in His justice.



Mrs. Sarah Lipman is the founder and CTO of Power2B Inc., and award-winning inventor of its 3D touchscreen technology. In two decades as a User Interaction professional, primarily in mobile and telecoms, she has authored numerous patents and published pieces, innovating new technologies years ahead of the state of the art. While living in Jerusalem for 16 years, she founded the Kishor Women's Professional Network and The Jerusalem Hub (both now projects of Temech), for which work she received the prestigious Boneh Yerushalayim award in December 2010. Now residing in Los Angeles, Sarah teaches Chumash and the history of Jerusalem at Bais Yaakov Machon Los Angeles high school. She is active in communal affairs and coaches to mid- and top-level executives in UX-design and education. At the OU Women's Initiative, Sarah taught Sefer Mishlei as part of the Torat Imecha Nach Yomi program and Themes of Sefer Bereishit Through the Commentary of Rav Hirsch, as part of the ALIT Summer Vitruel Beit Midrash 2021.



By Mrs. Michal Horowitz

Reuven: Implications of Sin

When Yosef was sold by his brothers to Egypt, the *pasuk* says: וַיָּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל-הַבּוֹר, וְהִנֵּה אֵין-יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר; וַיִּקְרַע, אֶת-בְּגָדָיו and *Reuven returned to the pit, and behold, Yosef was not in the pit; and he tore his garments* (Gen.37:29).

Chazal (Gen.Rabba 84:19) teach:

וַיָּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל הַבּוֹר... וְהִיכֵן הָיָה? רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר בְּשִׁקּוֹ וּבְתַעֲנִיתוֹ, כְּשֶׁנִּפְנָה הַלֵּךְ וְהִצִּיץ לְאוֹתוֹ בּוֹר, הִדָּא הוּא דְכִתְיָב: וַיָּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל הַבּוֹר, אָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מַעֲוָלָם לֹא חָטָא אָדָם לִפְנֵי וַעֲשָׂה תְשׁוּבָה, וְאַתָּה פָּתַחְתָּ בְּתְשׁוּבָה תְּחִלָּה

“And Reuven returned to the pit”; and where had he gone? Rabbi Eliezer says he was busy with sackcloth and fasting in repentance for rearranging his father’s bed (Gen.35:22), and when he was free he went and looked into the pit. Hashem said: No man has ever sinned before Me and repented; you are the first to initiate teshuva!

This *Medrash* refers to an episode that occurred years prior to the sale of Yosef. After Rachel died, Yaakov took his couch, which was regularly in the tent of Rachel, and moved it to the tent of Bilhah, Rachel’s handmaid. Reuven took offense to the insult to his mother, and he said: *‘If my mother Leah was subordinate to Rachel, must she also be subordinated to Rachel’s handmaid?’* Therefore, he rearranged Yaakov’s bed by moving it to Leah’s tent (Rashi to Gen.35:22).

And then, at the time of the sale of Yosef, Reuven was busy with sackcloth and fasting, as a means to repentance. Why did Reuven wait till the sale of Yosef to repent for an earlier transgression? And what *chiddush* in *teshuva* did he initiate, that G-d declared that before Reuven no one had ever repented before Him!

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l offers a novel interpretation: “Only now did Reuven finally realize the staggering implications of his sin. After his brothers witnessed Reuven acting in a disrespectful manner toward their father in the Bilhah incident, their own respect for Yaakov declined. While from the perspective of the deed itself, Reuven’s infraction was minor, *the consequence of the deed was devastating*. Reuven undermined Yaakov’s authority in his own household, and the ensuing loss of respect for Yaakov by Reuven’s brothers ultimately resulted in their proposal to kill Yosef. Reuven finally understood the full implications of his earlier actions, and therefore, immediately after hearing their threat to kill Yosef, *he was taken up with his fasting and sackcloth*” (Chumash Masores HaRav, Bereishis, p.283-284).

It was not until the brothers plotted to dispose of Yosef, the beloved son, that Reuven realized *the full impact of his earlier actions*. As the firstborn of Yaakov, the brothers looked to him for guidance. When he himself undermined Yaakov’s authority by switching his couch from the tent of Bilhah to that of Leah, it paved the way for the brothers to undermine Yaakov’s authority and commit the tragic and shocking sin of disposing of their brother, Yosef.

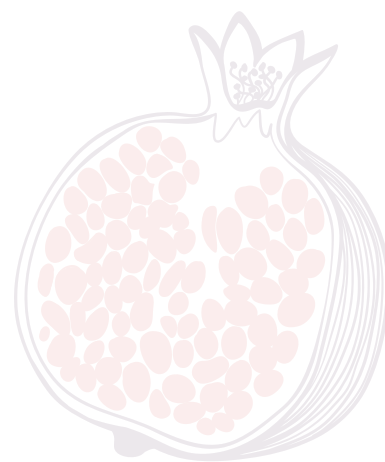
The Sages teach (Tamid 32a) “Who is wise? One who sees the outcome of his actions.”

Reuven teaches us that *teshuva* is not only repenting for the sins we have done. It is attempting to rectify *the ripple effects* of our sins as well.

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Says Rabbi Soloveitchik, “The realization of the ultimate implications of his sin overwhelmed Reuven, and he therefore separated from the brothers and fasted at the time of the sale itself. *Teshuva* is motivated by the acknowledgement of the wide reaching ramifications of what one has done” (Machzor Masores HaRav Yom Kippur, p.151).

שובו בָּנִים שׁוֹכְבִּים, אֶרְפָּה מְשׁוּבְתֵיכֶם - *Return, wayward children; I will heal (you from) your waywardness* (Jer.3:22). With the gift of *teshuva*, there is always the beautiful possibility of return and repair.



Mrs. Michal Horowitz holds a Bachelor of Science from combined studies at York University, Toronto, and Brooklyn College, NY. She holds a Master of Science from Brooklyn College, NY. She offers weekly shiurim in her home community of the Five Towns, NY, and in the greater NY area. Michal is a speaker at Yeshiva University's Midreshet Yom Rishon and has been a featured speaker for the last four years at the RIETS Shavuot Yarchei Kallah program. At the OU Women's Initiative, she inaugurated the Torat Imecha Parsha program presenting weekly Parsha shiurim on Sefer Bereishit. Michal taught Sefer Yehoshua, Sefer Tehillim 36-41, and Sefer Divrei Hayamim II to over 5,000 women across the globe as part of the Torat Imecha Nach Yomi program. Michal presented Rosh Chodesh, Selichot Night and Nach Yomi Siyum shiurim and taught in-depth courses at the ALIT Virtual Summer Learning Programs of 2020 and 2021. She has been a guest lecturer and scholar in residence in schools and communities, both nationally and internationally. Selections of her recorded shiurim are posted on YUTorah.org and TorahAnyTime.com. Michal lives in Woodmere, NY with her husband and children.



By Mrs. Sara Malka Winter

Rachav: A Story of Transformation

When one of my students stops trying, it's almost never because she is lazy. And although it may present as apathy, that is not the true cause either. She knows what success looks like, she wishes it were hers, but after too many failed attempts and false starts, she is resigned to the fact that despite what that nice teacher in the front of the room believes, she knows the truth. She cannot change her reality, so why go through the painful drill yet again?

When this time of year comes around, I believe we can all relate to that frustrated and weary student. We also have dreams of change, but we've been around this road so many times. We also know the drill all too well. Get inspired, find areas to improve, even set realistic goals, until life happens, and we put away growth for yet another year. And it's not that we aren't motivated, but it does feel a bit pointless to even get excited about change and seek inspiration to connect, just to face yet another disappointment.

We wish for tangible evidence that true growth is possible, and that it matters.

The story of Rachav Hazona (Yehoshua perek 2) is one of drama, danger and intrigue. Two spies from Bnei Yisroel arrive in Yericho on a reconnaissance mission. They stay in Rachav's home, but within hours are discovered by the Royal Army. With cunning and courage, this Canaanite woman successfully hides the spies, and in turn is promised refuge and clemency for her entire family. The story ends with the satisfactory dramatic flair of the spies being lowered down by rope from her window to safety.

And what became of this woman? Inspired by the truth and power of Hashem, she converted to Judaism (Megillah 14b), and brought her family to safety. She married none other than the leader of the Jewish nation, Yehoshua, and merited to have 8 prophets who were priests come from her! (*ibid.*)


This would be an unbelievable story of meteoric rise to greatness even without the backstory from mechilta that while the Jews had spent the last 40 years drawing close to G-d and becoming his nation, Rachav had spent that same time as a prostitute, luring many into her home, through the very same window, using the very same rope.

Perhaps, the phrase "תִּקְוַת הַשָּׁנִי" the "scarlet line" that Rachav tied in her window to identify her home for protection as instructed by the spies, reveals the tool she used in this remarkable transformation, "תִּקְוָה", "hope". Hope that despite her past failures, she could change. Hope that this time the change would be long-lasting. Hope that her efforts would be enough. Her descendants were prophets.

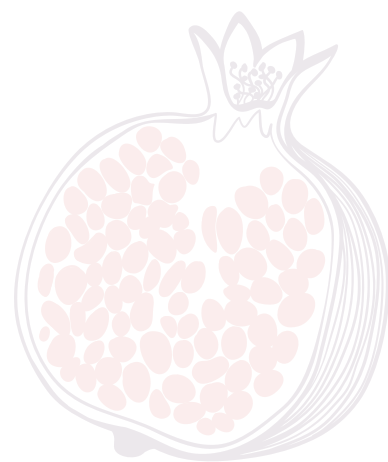
Mussar Haneviim writes that the mission, and greatest challenge, of the prophets, was not to convince Bnei Yisroel that G-d is great, but that *they* were. That the lofty G-dly mission for them was not unreachable. In other words, to give them hope. But they often spoke to a despondent, cynical audience, demoralized by past failures. And that's when they took out their silver bullet. How powerful it must have been when they were able to say. "Do you think change is unattainable? Let me tell you about my mother..."

And what of us? We too find in Rachav's incredible story of transformation - resilience, conviction and hope.

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Mrs. Sara Malka Winter lives in Silver Spring, Maryland. As a teenager, Mrs. Winter cofounded Ashreinu, a Canadian kiruv organization dedicated to Jewish outreach to the Russian immigrant community, which has influenced hundreds of girls. Mrs. Winter lived in Israel for eight years with her family, where she taught and lectured across Jerusalem in seminaries, outreach centers and high schools. In 2008, Mrs. Winter moved to Maryland to help found the Greater Washington Community Kollel, together with her husband, Rabbi Menachem Winter. She continues to lecture throughout the Washington DC area as a Senior Lecturer for the Kollel on diverse topics including Tefillah, Chumash, Nach, Tehillim, Chagim, and Mitzvos. Mrs. Winter is also a beloved teacher at the Yeshiva of Greater Washington Girls Division. At the OU Women's Initiative, Sara Malka taught Sefer Tehillim 53-62 and 120-134 to over 5,000 women worldwide as part of the Torat Imecha Nach Yomi program.





By Mrs. Slovie Jungreis Wolff

The Teshuva of Dovid HaMelech

Looking into the spiritual mirror of Chodesh Tishrei with honesty can be most painful. Words were said, tones used, deeds done, that bring a cringe to the soul. We feel guilty for those we hurt and shame for actions taken.

What do we do now?

Hakadosh Boruch Hu gave us the footsteps of Dovid Hamelech to guide us and provide each of us with direction. The teshuva of Dovid becomes our lighthouse, illuminating our way back to rediscover the splendor of our souls.

Nosson HaNavi appears to Dovid and confronts him for his incident with Batsheva (II Shmuel 12). Despite the fact that Dovid had technically not sinned, the Navi holds Dovid accountable to a higher level. Responding to Nosson's parable, Dovid does not recognize that he has just cast judgement on himself. "You are the man!" Nosson exclaims. Now Dovid hears the difficult consequences that he must endure along with strong words of mussar.

Dovid HaMelech is in shock. What is the king's reaction?

"*Chatasi LaHashem*-I have sinned to G-d." A space added after the words "*Chatasi LaHashem*", alludes to the fact that Dovid wanted to proclaim full viddui at that moment (Yalkut Meam Loez). Hashem knew that Dovid's remorse was real, his regret had shattered his soul. Hashem sees and hears all. No, there was no need for Dovid to say any more.

Dovid shed countless tears. He also composed Tehilim 51 for us to embrace when we find ourselves with a desire to repair the destruction we've caused. 51-Nun Aleph, spelling out the word 'na-please', reflecting Dovid's aching neshamah. We are given a window into Dovid's deepest emotions.

"*Laminatzeach Mizmor LeDavid*" (Tehillim 51) - What is there to sing about?

These words were born upon one of Dovid's darkest moments. And yet, they give life to one of Dovid's greatest legacies. The triumph of the soul, the ability of man to transcend and rise above his human frailties. The wonder of renewal, reconnection to our Creator, the gift of teshuva. A neshama once pure, now soiled. Are we not beyond repair? It is only through the chesed of Hashem and His miracles that the fractured becomes whole again. Dovid calls out "*Chaneini Elokim-G-d, be gracious to me, for You are kind. Since You show great mercy, erase my transgression.*"

What is it that Hashem requires from us on these days?

The words of Tehilim 'na' continue to encourage us.

"*Lev nishbar-a broken and contrite heart, dear G-d, You never reject.*" Hashem does not want to hear our excuses or rationalizations. It is easy to blame, point fingers, and look everywhere but within. Dovid could have, but he did none of these. Instead, Dovid accepted responsibility.

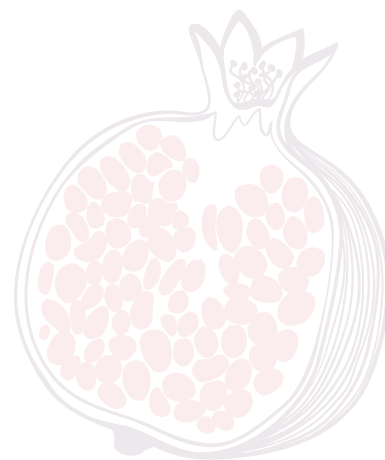
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Teshuva is not about wallowing in guilt. Sincere repair of our stained selves comes with true regret, humility, and the desire to begin anew. *“Lev tahor-G-d, create in me a pure heart and renew within me a true spirit”*.

Teshuva is capable of removing even the grossest of sins. Each of us can grasp onto the words of Dovid Hamelech as we approach these Days of Awe. *“Al tashlicheni milphanecha-Do not fling me from Your presence. Veruach kadshecha-and Your holy spirit do not remove from me”*. I want to live inspired. I am a spiritual seeker.

Help me come home. *“Tivneh Chomos Yerushalyim”*.

Slovie Jungreis Wolff is an acclaimed author, renowned lecturer and parenting instructor. She is one of the most sought after and passionate speakers in the Jewish world today. Slovie is the leader of Hineni Couples and has taught about life, relationships and marriage for more than 30 years. Slovie's groundbreaking parenting hand book 'Raising A Child With Soul' is published by St. Martin's Press and has been a source of guidance to parents and families all over the world. She has given workshops and lectured extensively throughout the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Panama, Europe and Israel and has addressed thousands at South Africa's Sinai Indaba by the invitation of Chief Rabbi Goldstien. Slovie is a popular columnist for the renowned site Aish.com where her articles about life and Judaism have inspired people worldwide. Her parenting workshops on JewishEbooks.com. has reached audiences around the globe. She is also a columnist for Ami magazine and The Jewish Press. Slovie is the daughter of Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis and continues her mother's legacy of rekindling the spark within every soul.





By Mrs. Tal Attia Of Friends & Fate

“Show me your friends, and I’ll show you your future.”

Considering the reality that people and friendships evolve, it is fascinating to consider the notion that Friends and Fate are linked. The closest of friends oftentimes lead distinct lives, hold opposing values, or go their separate ways. What about friendships are so telling of someone’s future?

Torah insight comes from an unlikely source: A friendship gone terribly wrong. Pirkei Avot 6:3 brings this to the fore:

הַלּוֹמֵד מִחֲבֵירוֹ פֶּרֶק אֶחָד אוֹ הֶלְכָּה אֶחָת אוֹ פְּסוּק אֶחָד אוֹ דְּבַר אֶחָד אוֹ אָפֶלּוֹ אוֹת אֶחָת, צָרִיךְ לְהוֹגֵב בּוֹ כְּבוֹד, שֶׁכֵּן מְצִינּוֹ בְּדוֹד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁלֹּא לָמַד מֵאַחִיתֶּפֶל אֶלָּא שְׁנֵי דְּבָרִים בִּלְבָד, קִרְאוּ רַבּוֹ אֶלּוּפּוֹ וּמִיָּדְעוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תהלים נה)...
... (תהלים נה)...

One who learns from his fellow one chapter, or one halacha, or one verse, or one word, or even one letter, is obligated to treat him with honor; for so we find with David, king of Israel, who learned from Achitophel no more than two things, yet called him his master, his guide and his beloved friend. (Psalms 55:14)...

II Shmuel 17:1 reveals that while Achitophel began as a valued advisor to King David, he ultimately betrayed him by providing counsel to Avshalom, fueling rebellion.

What two lessons did Achitophel teach David? And given his treachery, why did Avot cite this as its paradigm?

Rashi describes how Achitophel “schooled” David:

Next to the verse, “But it was you, a man my equal,” is another verse adjacent (Ps. 55:15), “Which together we sweetened counsel.” As Achitophel had found David sitting alone and involved in Torah study. He said to him, “Why are you studying alone? ... And again another time he found him entering his House of Study with an upright posture. He said to him, “And has it not already been stated (Lev. 19:30), ‘and revere My holy place’ - that a man should enter there with reverence...”

Achitophel taught David that Torah is best learned b’Chevruta, with someone to sharpen your ideas. He also impressed upon him to approach Torah study with humility and reverence. Knowing his friendship ended in betrayal, David still generously described Achitophel as an equal, teacher and friend, and implies what he taught him.

The Torah is replete with examples of ethics exchanged between people, but it is this paradigm that Pirkei Avot highlights... Chastisements of a king by a traitor. The nuanced insight here is that lessons learned from friends, even those who have wronged us, must stick with us. It’s easy to cherish friendships that last, to value what we learn from those in our good graces. To retain insight from friendships that sour... that is a taller order.

Teshuva is often considered from an individualistic perspective. What resolve to grow do I have within? How can I change by introspecting? When we do look beyond ourselves, it might be to aspirational figures. In spotlighting Achitophel and David, and the lessons exchanged, Avot teaches that even the most temporary of friendships – including those that end badly - are critical to self-refinement. Whether an ethic taught by a former friend, or a lesson learned by the evolution of the relationship, our future can be improved by our friendships. All of them.

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By Mrs. Tzivi Zuckerman

Yoshiyahu: Choosing G-d's Will

King Yoshiyahu ruled during a period which held the last hope for the Jewish people's spiritual regeneration before the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash as related in II Melachim 22-23. Although he did not succeed in his major life project with its goal of forestalling the destruction, his moving personal declaration just before his death can guide us in our own path toward teshuva.

Yoshiyahu ascended the Judean throne after his father Amon and his grandfather Menashe had nationalized idolatry in the Judean kingdom, turning the majority of the nation away from Jewish observance. As a young king, Yoshiyahu spearheaded a comprehensive spiritual revolution, eradicating idolatrous shrines and encouraging devoted Jewish observance. The Talmud (Shabbat 56b) calls him a model baal teshuva. Unfortunately, Yoshiyahu did not realize that his revolution had only a superficial impact on the people, many of whom continued to practice idolatry in the privacy of their homes.

Yoshiyahu's mistaken belief that his people were on a high enough spiritual level to protect them from military aggression by foreign powers led him to deny the request of the army of Egyptian Pharaoh Necho to pass through the land of Israel on its way to the battle of Carchemish. Without consulting Yirmiyahu HaNavi, who could have enlightened him about the nation's religious duplicity, Yoshiyahu attempted to obstruct the Egyptians and tragically, he was killed in the process (Ta'anit 22b with Maharsha).

The Maharsha explains that as he lay dying, Yoshiyahu recognized his fundamental error in not consulting with Yirmiyahu, proclaiming *צדיק הוא ה' כי פיהו מְרִיתִי*, Hashem is righteous, for I have rebelled against His word (Eichah 1:18). Yoshiyahu, as a model of teshuva, humbly recognized his mistake in not consulting with Yirmiyahu HaNavi, the representative of G-d's Will, acknowledging that sometimes Hashem's ways are beyond human intellectual comprehension. In response, Yirmiyahu calls him Mashiach Hashem (Eichah 4:20).

Teshuva is the means through which we renew our relationship with G-d. When we do teshuva, we fundamentally alter who we are by actively choosing to become aligned with our true selves, instead of passively allowing ourselves to be pulled by our physical desires, which don't represent who we truly are. When we make good spiritual choices, we are using our Divinely granted gift of independent free choice to recreate ourselves. Teshuva, then, is the ultimate way in which we model ourselves on G-d as Creator and bring His presence into this world. (See Ch 7 in "The Choice to Be" by Rabbi J. Kagan)

When Yoshiyahu, in the most challenging of circumstances, moments before his tragic death, aligned his will with G-d's, he brought G-d's presence into this world. This made him worthy of being called Mashiach Hashem, since Mashiach is the representative of Hashem who will bring clarity and recognition of G-d's presence and power into this world.

We might ask ourselves if we are taking the lesson of Yoshiyahu's last moments to heart. Do we choose humility and incorporate G-d's will in our lives or do we allow ourselves to be pulled along, and down, by our desires and personal biases? Teshuva is the choice that aligns us with our deepest selves. Let's choose that path.

Tzivi Zuckerman holds a BA in History, an MA in Jewish History, and taught World History, Jewish History and Tanach for almost 15 years at a variety of schools, including Stella K. Abraham High School for Girls, Michlalah Jerusalem College, Bais Yaakov of Baltimore and Columbus Torah Academy. Since moving to Columbus, Ohio, where her husband is the Assistant Rosh Kollel of the Columbus Community Kollel, Tzivi has taught a range of community classes on Taharas HaMishpacha, relationships, Jewish history and Jewish thought. She currently creates programming and educational opportunities for the city's Jewish women. At the OU Women's Initiative, Tzivi presented at the Haggadah Ideas and Inspiration Program, was a scholar in residence for Nach Yomi Nach Shabbat and taught Melachim II for the current cycle of Nach Yomi Torat Imecha.



By Professor Shoshana Schechter

The Privilege and Paradox of Teshuva

Sefer Yona presents the story of Yona HaNavi commanded to warn Ninveh of its upcoming destruction. Popular belief dictates that this story is read on Yom Kippur because it depicts a story of evil people (Ninevites) 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. The problem with this interpretation is that according to this perspective, the sefer should end after perek 3.

In perek 1, Yona is commanded by G-d to go to Ninveh and he runs away. In perek 2, he is swallowed by a fish, prays to G-d from inside and is spit out to safety. In perek 3 Yona goes to Ninveh and delivers the message. If this book was just about various people doing teshuva, it would end here. However, the story continues in perek 4 with a somewhat strange series of events leading to an abrupt ending.

The final perek begins with Yona feeling extremely angry. He prays to G-d stating the reason he ran away was that he knew G-d is, "קל חנון ורחום ארך אפים ורב חסד ונחם על הרעה," a gracious and compassionate G-d, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and relenting of punishment. 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 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. Yona's anger is rooted in his belief that G-d is not truthful. The people of Ninveh sinned and deserve 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 is overcome by a storm, the sailors ask what to do. Yona calmly tells the sailors to throw him overboard. He knows that he is at fault and must pay the consequences of his sin. 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, he remains a man of rigid truth, stating his personal predicament and despair and expressing belief that G-d will save him but only because he will now fulfill his obligation.

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 is truth, evident even in his name, יונה בן אמיטי. He is so distraught in perek 4 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 allowance of teshuva. Yona needs to learn that G-d's gift of teshuva to mankind, and 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.

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By Rabbanit Shani Taragin

Ruth - Repentance, Redemption & Royalty

Though read on Shavuot, Megillat Ruth is replete with themes of repentance relevant for these days of *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*. Megillat Ruth opens with the repetitive employment of “shem/sham” (7 times) followed by the *mila mancha* (leitwort or guiding word) – “shuv” (12 times – 6 times to Yehuda, 6 times to Moav), indicating that the underlying theme of the chapter is “return.” ChaZa”L teach us that when Naomi entreated upon her daughters in-law, “Return, my daughters.” (1:8,11,12), she was encouraging them to “Return, return in repentance” - *shuvu, shuvu be-teshuva* (Zohar Chadash, Acharei Mot 78a).


This same root word “shuv” appears as a *mila mancha* (7 times) in Sefer Devarim chapter 30 and teaches us what the process of repentance entails post-iniquity and punishment. The process must begin with two steps - (1) Returning to our hearts (i.e. introspection in exile) (2) Returning to Hashem through proper observance of mitzvot. These two human initiatives are reciprocated with a two-step process of national return to our homeland via Hashem’s hand: וְשָׁב ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ אֶת-שְׁבוּתָנוּ וְרַחֲמָנוּ וְשָׁב וְקִבְּצָנוּ מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְצֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ שָׁמָּה: (Devarim 30:3). Once we are returned from captivity to Eretz Yisrael we must continue the process of return with sincere devotion and return to observance of all the laws (v.8) including the *mitzvot hatehuyot ba'aretz* (land-dependent). When we obey and “cleave” to Hashem, we will be granted abounding prosperity in all our undertakings, and Hashem will again delight in our well-being as in that of our ancestors (v.9).

Shmuel HaNavi, by revisiting themes of “return” in Megillat Ruth, is teaching us that Naomi’s initiative to return from the fields of Moav to Eretz Yisrael was an outgrowth of personal introspection following her move to Moav and the deaths of her husband and sons. As learned from Devarim, once a rift between man and G-d has been created due to sin, it is man’s responsibility to initiate the restoration and repair of the relationship. Naomi followed the process delineated in Devarim, hopeful for Hashem’s symbiotic response of “return” through successful resettling in the Land of Israel. Ruth facilitated Naomi’s “return” through insisting on accompanying her mother-in-law and “cleaving” to her, while abandoning her own birthplace and heritage. Imagine how disappointed Naomi must have been when after her sojourn home she felt that G-d had “returned her empty!” (1:21).

The story continues the process of “return” through the kindnesses of Boaz, Naomi and Ruth, one to the other. The initial return/repentance was transformed to redemption as Boaz insisted on “redeeming” and salvaging the legacy of Naomi’s family through purchasing the land of the deceased and marrying Ruth. Subsequently, Naomi’s return was completed by Hashem who “restored” her family name through the birth of a child to Ruth and Boaz - a child “who will renew life” (4:15) and perpetuate the “toladot” (generations) of his ancestors and father the “toladot” of royalty through David HaMelech.

Man’s initiative of repentance never goes unanswered. National repentance delineated in Sefer Devarim is revisited and relived by individuals in the story of Ruth. The Torah teaches us that “teshuva” leads to restoring our relationship with Hashem manifest through the blessings of Eretz Yisrael; Megillat Ruth teaches us that “teshuva” also leads to “geulah” (redemption of the land) and “malchut” – the restoration of the Davidic line and messianic royalty!

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Rabbanit Shani Taragin received her B.A. and M.A. in Tanakh and Talmud from Bar-Ilan University and is a graduate of Nishmat's Keren Ariel Program for certification as a halachic advisor (yoetzet halacha) in issues of family purity law. She is the educational director of Matan Eshkolot – Tanakh teachers' education program and of the Morot l'Halacha program in Matan Renana. Shani serves on the advisory committee for the Mizrachi Olami Shalhevet program for shlichim and lectures throughout Israel and North America on topics of Tanakh, Jewish Education, and Jewish Law. She is a senior lecturer in Matan and is the curriculum coordinator for the Matan – Bnei Akiva program (MTVA). In addition, Shani is a Ra'mit Tanakh in Midreshet Lindenbaum and teaches at Migdal Oz, the Women's Beit Medrash of Efrat and Gush Etzion and in Matan Ramat Shiloh. Shani has presented many shiurim at the OU Women's Initiative, including, introduction shiurim to each sefer of the Torat Imecha Nach Yomi Program, Weekend of Inspiration and Selichot Night Shiurim, ALIT Summer Learning Program courses in Israel and in the USA, and Rosh Chodesh shiurim. Together with her husband, Reuven, she serves as Rosh Beit Medrash for the Beit Medrash Program in Machaneh Moshava Pennsylvania during the summer and as Educational Director of Mizrachi Olami-RZA. Shani lives with her family in Alon Shvut, Gush Etzion-Israel.



By Mrs. Leah Feinberg

The Compelling Confession of Ezra HaSofer

I admit it. I was wrong. Such a simple, straightforward statement, yet so difficult to articulate. We often believe that such an admission indicates weakness and exposes us to ridicule or contempt, and fail to appreciate that it paves the way for positive change. Rather than an expression of weakness and vulnerability, it demonstrates courage and willingness to grow. As such, admission of guilt is a necessary step in the teshuva process.

One of the most profound and moving examples of the power of viduy to effect positive change is found in Sefer Ezra. Ezra arrived in Yerushalayim from Bavel just one year after the dedication of the Second Temple. Shortly thereafter, he was approached by the leaders of the community, who informed him that among those who had resettled the city were many who had assimilated and intermarried. Ezra was devastated; he rent his clothing and tore his hair in mourning, and sat as one stunned until the time of the afternoon offering. Many assembled to hear Ezra's reaction, and when he began to speak, Ezra opened with an admission of guilt:

“אֱלֹקֵי בְשָׁתִי וְנִכְלַמְתִּי לְהָרִים אֱלֹקֵי פָנַי אֵלֶיךָ כִּי עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ רַבּוּ לְמַעַלְהָ רָאשׁ וְאַשְׁמָתָנוּ גָדְלָה עַד לַשָּׁמַיִם:”

“My G-d, I am embarrassed and ashamed to lift my face to You, My G-d, for our sins have mounted high and our guilt extends up to the heavens.” (Ezra 9:6) Ezra's impassioned prayer, beginning with viduy, continuing with the recognition of Hashem's great kindness in having bestowed His favor upon the nation, and concluding with a plea for mercy, was effective in bringing about complete teshuva, as the people rejected their non-Jewish wives and returned fully to the service of Hashem. What made the tefillah of Ezra so successful?

Mishbetzot Zahav highlights one of the salient features of Ezra's viduy. He notes the repetition of the term “אֱלֹקֵי” “My G-d”, in Ezra's admission of guilt. Ezra is expressing that due to the distancing between Hashem and the Jewish people caused by their sinfulness, he is embarrassed to stand before Hashem; at the same time, he recognizes that Hashem never abandons His people, and all we have to do to repair the relationship is to seek Him out, to articulate our awareness that He is still “MY G-d”, who cares for me and longs for me to return to Him, no matter how far I may have strayed. The people absorbed this message, and acted accordingly, admitting their sins and changing their behavior.

A second significant feature of Ezra's viduy is its expression in the plural form - “We are steeped in guilt.” Not even having been present when the sinful behavior was committed, Ezra includes himself in the community of sinners. Effective viduy requires that we humble ourselves and accept responsibility for the behavior of others as part of one communal whole. Moreover, Ezra offers no excuses; we were wrong, period, and You, Hashem, are just. Such an admission of vulnerability paves the way for heartfelt return, for the reparation of the breach between Hashem and His people as an outpouring of love without entitlement.

Psychologists posit that the reason we find admitting guilt so difficult is because it introduces cognitive dissonance, as we focus on the discrepancy between our actions and what we know to be true. How beautiful is viduy that is part of the teshuva process, resolving the inherent dissonance through the transformation of our behavior as we return to Hashem's merciful embrace!

Mrs. Leah Feinberg is a master educator, who taught at Stella K. Abraham High School for Girls in Hewlett for 21 years, also serving as Tanach Department Chairperson and New Teacher Mentor. She was a popular maggedet shiur in the Woodmere community, where she taught a weekly Navi shiur for women. Since making aliyah in 2017, Leah has taught at Michlalah and the Emek Learning Center, and is a frequent lecturer at Kehillat HaElah in Ramat Beit Shemesh and at the OU Israel Center where she has lectured at Yemei Iyun, the ALIT Summer Learning Program both in person and on Zoom, and at a Beit Midrash series of classes. Leah taught Megillat Esther in the first cycle of Torat Imecha Nach Yomi and Sefer Shmuel Bet in the second cycle.



The OU Women's Initiative creates and promotes programming focused on Torah study, leadership development and community engagement for women worldwide.

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