Yom Kippur

Teshuvah is an incredible thing. When a person regrets his sin, admits to G-d that he alone is to be held accountable, and resolves to refrain from such activity in the future, then G-d erases that sin from the books. The sin is gone; it is as if it never happened. Historical revisionism? Yes. That is the power of *teshuvah*.

This is, admittedly, a difficult concept. That we can use the *teshuvah* process to effectively confront ourselves and become better people is understood. But fix the past? Change history? How is it possible for sins to be cleansed?

Listen to the words of the Midrash: "They asked Wisdom, 'What should happen when a person is guilty of sin?' Wisdom replied, 'Evil pursues sinners' (Proverbs 13:21). They asked Prophecy, 'What should happen when a person is guilty of sin?' Prophecy replied, 'The soul that sins should die' (Ezekiel 18:4). They asked the Torah, 'What should happen when a person is guilty of sin?' The Torah replied, 'Let him bring an offering [to the Temple]...' Then they asked G-d, 'What should happen when a person is guilty of sin?' G-d replied, 'Let him do *teshuvah* and be forgiven!'" (Pesikta of Rav Kahana 24). Apparently, only G-d promotes *teshuvah*. Wisdom, Prophecy, and even the Torah itself all have difficulty with the concept.

This is odd. *Teshuvah* is a mitzvah in the Torah. How could the Torah have trouble with it? What does the Torah really think of *teshuvah*?

The Midrash (Kohelet Rabba 7) describes *teshuvah* with the following parable: You are being held in a prison, and you discover a tunnel that leads you to freedom. That is *teshuvah*. But it also happens to be illegal.

The Talmud puts it this way, "*Teshuvah* is remarkable, for it breaks a Torah law" (Yoma 86b). The Torah teaches that a woman may not remarry her ex after being divorced or widowed from her secondhusband. But *teshuvah* breaks that law. For when we sin we leave G-d and go elsewhere (to a self imposed prison!), but yet, when we do *teshuvah*, G-d takes us back. That is the power of *teshuvah*.

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No matter what we might have done while we were away, G-d welcomes us back, regardless of Wisdom's thoughts on the matter. "Do I desire at all the death of the wicked man? … It is the fixing of his behavior so that he shall live [that I desire]!" (Ezekiel 18:23). G-d Himself cleanses us, purifies us, and then He remarries us. As the verse says, "G-d is the mikvah of the Jews" (Jeremiah 17:13, see also Mishnah Yoma 8:9).

This is *teshuvah* and this is Yom Kippur as well. Yom Kippur is the day on which we received the Second Tablets (Rashi to Shemot 33:11). On that first Yom Kippur, G-d forgave us for the sin of the Golden Calf, and reunited with us through the Second Tablets. This biblical event defines the essential nature of the day. Yom Kippur is the day on which G-d, in his infinite love and compassion, erases our sins and brings us back home.

Teshuvah is usually translated as repentance, but that is not altogether accurate. *Teshuvah* actually means to return. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveichik points out that the word *teshuvah* rarely appears in the Tanach, but we find it in the following context. Shmuel HaNavi (the prophet Samuel) was not just a prophet; he was a judge as well. And in his capacity as judge, he would travel the length and breadth of Israel in a yearly circuit, visiting communities and settling disputes: "Shmuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He would travel year after year, circling to Beth-el, Gilgal, and Mitzpah, judging Israel in all these places. Then he would return [u'teshuvato] to Ramah, for his home was there…" (Samuel I 7:15-17). To do *teshuvah* means to return home.

The miracle of *teshuvah* on Yom Kippur is not just about becoming a better Jew. *Teshuvah* frees us from the burden of our past and reunites us with G-d. After a long trip away, on Yom Kippur the Jew returns home.

Shabbat Shalom & Shanah Tovah