

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parashat Hashavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This parasha series is dedicated
Le-zekher Nishmat HaRabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig z"l.**

PARASHAT NITZAVIM-VAYELEKH

**This shiur is dedicated in memory of
Dr. William Major z"l.**

**Teshuva
By Rav Yehuda Rock**

The parasha of teshuva (repentance) comes in the aftermath of Moshe's admonishments and threats of exile, beginning in parshat Ki Tavo and continuing in the first part of parashat Nitzavim. This parasha details a plan for the repentance of the Jewish people, their return to God, and their redemption (Devarim 30:1-10).

The unit on teshuva presents a number of textual problems, requiring that the parasha be viewed as a combination of two aspects. Let us start by looking at the wording of this unit:

- (1) And it shall be, when all of these things befall you – the blessing and the curse which I have placed before you, and you "return to your heart" among all the nations to which the Lord your God has driven you,
- (2) And you return to the Lord your God and obey Him, as all that I command you this day – you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul –
- (3) Then the Lord your God will return your captivity and have mercy on you, and once again gather you from all the nations among which the Lord your God scattered you.
- (4) Even if your outcasts are at the furthest parts of heaven, the Lord your God will gather you from there, and from there He will take you.
- (5) And the Lord your God will bring you to the land which your forefathers possessed, and you will possess it, and He will do good to you and make you more numerous than your fathers.
- (6) And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the hearts of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.
- (7) And the Lord your God will inflict all these curses upon your enemies and upon those who hate you, who have persecuted you.
- (8) And you will repent [or "return"] and obey the Lord, and perform all of His commandments which I command you this day.

(9) And the Lord your God will make you prolific in all that you do: in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your land, for good; for the Lord will once again rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your forefathers -

(10) If you will obey the Lord your God, to observe His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the Torah, for you will have returned [repented] to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

The unit is clearly structured: verses 1-2 describe the repentance of the Jewish people in the wake of their exile. This repentance will lead, in turn, to the next stage: the redemption described in verses 3-9. Verse 10 comes back to the repentance of the nation which is the initial catalyst for their redemption, and thereby emphasizes the need for this initiative on the part of the Jewish people in order to trigger the redemption.

We shall now examine the verses in order, paying attention to textual difficulties.

Verse 1 describes the first stage in the repentance of the Jewish people, which is "returning to the heart" – i.e., study and internalization of the message arising from the historical events of the blessing and the curse.

Verse 2 includes two clauses: "and you return to the Lord your God," and, "and you obey Him... with all your heart and with all your soul." Seemingly, the verse includes two further stages in the repentance of the nation: the stage of returning to God – an existential movement of searching and turning to God; and a third stage of practical implementation of repentance, by fulfilling the commandments of the Torah.

However, the verse is problematic: the adverbial phrase, "with all your heart and with all your soul," is appended to the second clause – the clause focused on obeying God. If the idea of obeying God had appeared here alone, we could legitimately conclude that the adverbial phrase comes to tell us that obeying God must not be a mechanical act that is devoid of significance, but rather a response to God's command that flows from a genuine return to Him. However, the verse explicitly describes the existential movement and the results of the practical implementation in two separate clauses. This being the case, we must ask: would it not have been more appropriate that the adverbial phrase follow on from the return to God that is described in the first clause?

Let us consider the clause as it seemingly should have been written: "And you return to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and you obey Him, as all that I command you this day, you and your children." This would appear to represent a far more logical syntactical structure.

Support for our view may be brought from the end of the unit. In verse 10, the Torah once again mentions the repentance of the nation, which is the initial catalyst for the entire process of redemption that is described here. And, there, the Torah repeats the two verbs from verse 2 – both "returning to God" and "obeying Him," as well as the adverbial phrase, "with all your heart

and with all your soul." However, the order of these elements is different, such that the adverbial phrase is indeed appended to the return to God:

If you obey the Lord your God, to observe His commandments and His statutes that are written in this book of the Torah, for you will have returned to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Further support for the same idea is to be found in a different source that is built on our verses here. King Shelomo, in his prayer at the inauguration of the Temple, describes future situations in which the people of Israel will utilize the Temple as a focal point for prayer. One such situation is exile, and the description of the nation's response to that eventuality is based on our verses:

But if they take to heart in the land to which they have been carried in captivity... and return to You [repent] with all their heart and with all their soul. (Melakhim I 8:47-48)

Here, again, the adverbial phrase is attached to the return to God. Why, then, is the verse in our parasha not formulated in the same way?

Verses 3-5 describe the physical redemption: the return of God and of the Jewish people from captivity to the land of Israel; the ingathering of the exiles; the possession of the land, and the blessing upon Israel in their land.

Verses 6 and 8 describe what we may refer to as the "spiritual redemption": God will aid and assist in the process of repentance; He will complete the process of Israel's return to God. The significance of these verses is that, in the wake of the initial repentance by the Jewish people, God will accept this as sufficient reason to redeem the nation from its captivity and to gather the exiles together in their land, where He Himself will cause the process of repairing the relations between the people and Himself to be completed.

There are two problematic aspects to these verses:

Firstly, although the structure of the unit shows that verses 6 and 8 are talking about stages of repentance that are more advanced than those discussed in the opening verses, similar expressions are used in both instances. In verse 6, the words, "And [He will] circumcise [your heart]... to love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul..." are very similar to the first part of verse 2; likewise, the expressions in verse 8 – "And you will repent and obey the Lord and perform all of His commandments which I command you this day," are identical to the wording of the second part of verse 2. Hence, the Torah is not setting forth different stages of the process of repentance, but rather is repeating the same things. This raises the question of why God needs to initiate these stages of repentance once the Jewish people have already repented on their own, as described at the beginning of the unit. On the other hand, if these are, indeed, further stages of repentance, then what preceded them? We may, of course, imagine different stages which

would conform to the respective expressions in the verse, but since the expressions used for both stages are so similar, the Torah does not seem to be expressing any difference between them.

Secondly, we must address the relationship between these expressions and verse 7. Verse 7 describes a stage in the physical redemption, whereby God will take vengeance on Israel's enemies. Therefore, the proper place for this verse would seem to be prior to verse 6, rather than in between verses 6 and 8.

The first part of verse 9 (up until "for good") describes a stage in the physical redemption of the Jewish people. Here we might posit that since the text is describing later, more distant stages, it makes sense that this clause is introduced only after verse 8.

In verse 10 the Torah comes back to the unit's original point of departure: redemption will come in the wake of the repentance of the Jewish people. The purpose of the verse is to indicate the primary cause, the catalyst, of the entire process. Hence it seems strange that the verse speaks of two elements of repentance, which – at the beginning of the unit – were described as two stages: obeying God, and returning to God.

It seems that the key to understanding this unit lies in the duality, or perhaps contradiction, between the return to God ("with all your heart and with all your soul"), and obeying Him. The repetition, or contradiction, between these two expressions appears in three different places:

- In verse 2, "obeying God" interposes between "returning to God" and the adverbial phrase, "with all your heart and with all your soul," which refers to the return to God.
- In verses 6 and 8, the connection between "love of God" (which is similar to "returning to God" in that it is a movement that is undertaken "with all your heart and with all your soul") and "obeying God" is broken by verse 7. It is also unclear how these two experiences can be additional stages of repentance, since they were mentioned already at the beginning of the unit. Furthermore, if these are indeed additional stages, then what did the initial repentance consist of?
- In verse 10 both expressions appear as primary causes leading to the process of redemption and repentance.

We may explain the above difficulties by viewing the unit as combining two different layers or aspects.

We adopt here the exegetical methodology known as the "*shitat ha-bechinot*," "the dual aspect approach," developed by my Rav and teacher, Rav Mordekhai Breuer z"l. (Rav Breuer sets out his approach, and the commentary in which he implements it, in his books, "Pirkei Mo'adot," "Pirkei Bereishit," and "Shitah ha-Bechinot Shel Harav Mordekhai Breuer.") According to this approach, God writes the Torah in layers, with narratives or halakhic units that parallel one another – different "aspects" – each of which is able to stand alone and to be read in its own right, such that sometimes they appear to contradict one another.

Often, these aspects are intertwined, creating a complex or multi-layered unit. This complex unit blurs the points of transition between one aspect and the other, but highlights the difficulties inherent in these transitions. Each story expresses its own independent content, which is important in its own right; however, there is some relationship between them, which justifies their integration into a single text. By delving into the difficulties that arise from the joining together of the two aspects – such as repetitions or contradictions – we are able to expose the two independent "aspects," and thereafter to explore their significance. Here we shall apply this methodology to the unit on repentance.

In order to understand precisely the relationship between the various expressions of repentance, let us categorize the verses according to the two aspects:

Verse 2 must be divided in such a way that the adverbial phrase, "with all your heart and with all your soul" is a direct continuation of, "and you return to the Lord your God"; as such, they must belong to the same aspect. The clause in the middle of the verse – "and you obey Him, as all that I command you this day, you and your children," will therefore belong to the other aspect.

Hence, the difference between the two aspects may be defined as the sort of repentance that leads to the process of redemption. According to one aspect, the Torah describes a wholehearted return to God: a genuine, profound, existential movement of searching and turning to God, but one that does not necessarily involve a proper implementation of the return to observance of Torah and the commandments. The other aspect describes obeying God – i.e., a return to observing Torah and the commandments.

What is the nature of this second aspect, consisting of a return to observing God's commandments but without a "return to God"? The answer would seem to be set forth explicitly in verse 1: "And it shall be, when all of these things befall you – the blessing and the curse... and you call return to your heart..." The expression, "return to your heart" is used in Tanakh to describe an intellectual process of contemplation, study, understanding and internalization. For example, the verse in Devarim (4:39) states – "And you shall know this day, and call to mind that the Lord is God." Other examples comes in the following verses in Yeshayahu (44:18-19) – "They have not known, nor called to mind, for He has shut their eyes from seeing, and their hearts from understanding. And so none recalls to mind, nor is there knowledge or understanding..."; and later on, "Remember this and take heart; recall to mind, sinners. Remember the former things of ancient times..." (46:8-9).

Apparently, the expression "return to your heart," in verse 1, belongs to the same aspect in which repentance begins with obeying God and observing His commandments. The Jewish people contemplate their historical trials and tribulations, and see how observing the Torah led to blessing, while abandoning it brought curses upon them. They study and internalize the message, calling to mind and understanding that they must mend their ways. This understanding leads them to obeying God, a return to adherence to Torah and observance of the commandments.

As noted, then, the difference between the two aspects lies in the primary cause of the process of redemption. According to one aspect, this first cause is an existential searching and a return to God, "with all of your heart and with all of your soul," while according to the other aspect it all starts with contemplating the ways of Divine Providence, understanding, and an actual, practical mending of our ways.

The descriptions of redemption in verses 3-5 apparently belong to both aspects, as there is no compelling reason to categorize them either way, and, furthermore, the actual description of redemption is vital to the central message of both aspects.

Verse 6 describes the completion of the process of repentance by God. This completion consists of the repairing of the hearts of the Jewish people to love God with all their heart and with all their soul. This verse would seem to belong to the aspect in which the beginning of the process of repentance was a mending of ways following contemplation and understanding. In other words, the message of the unit, according to this aspect is: if you contemplate the blessing and the curse that will come about, having learned from them to mend your ways, then God will gather your exiles, bless you in your land, and repair your hearts so that the mending of your ways will be complemented with the close spiritual connection characterized by love of God.

Verse 8, obviously, belongs to the other aspect, and describes the completion of the repentance in the opposite direction: if, in the wake of the suffering from the curse that will befall you, you turn to God, cry out to Him, and seek Him, and this quest is undertaken with all your heart and with all your soul, then God will gather your exiles, bless you in your land, and help you to implement, in your practical lives, the return to Him, through a return to observing His commandments.

In between verse 6 and verse 8 we find God's promise to "inflict all these curses upon your enemies and upon those who hate you, who have persecuted you." As noted above, it is appropriate that this verse (7) appear prior to the description of the completion of the repentance through Divine aid. In view of the division into aspects, we may posit that this is precisely what happens: verse 7 belongs to the same aspect as verse 8, and not to the aspect of verse 6; hence, it is, indeed, included in the part that discusses the process of redemption, before the text indicates that God will complete the process of repentance.

Why is verse 7 limited to only one aspect? Is God's vengeance on Israel's enemies dependent on the type of repentance that the Jewish people undertake?

To answer this question we go back to verse 1: "And it will be, when all of these things befall you – the blessing and the curse, which I have placed before you...." Apparently, the existential return to God is not dependent on the blessing at all; it comes about only in the wake of the curse, the troubles that befall the nation. It is out of their misery, in the midst of their troubles, that the Jewish people turn to God for salvation. Only in the aspect that speaks of contemplation and understanding is repentance dependent on both the blessing and the curse, since it is only through God's Providence, changing its appearance, in light of the Jewish people's actions, from blessing

to curse, that teaches them to mend their ways and to return to observance of God's commandments. Therefore, it would seem that verse 1 must be divided, such that a continuous reading of one aspect would be: "And it will be, when all of these things befall you, and you return to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...." From the perspective of this aspect, the words, "all of these things" refer only to the troubles and suffering. The other aspect would then read: "And it will be, when the blessing and the curse which I have placed before you, befall you, and you return to your heart among the nations to which the Lord your God has driven you...."

From the perspective that begins with "return to the heart," in the wake of the blessing and the curse, the Jewish people are in exile; looking back on the blessing that they enjoyed while they were in the land of Israel, and on the curse that brought the exile upon them. However, the time when they contemplate the blessing and the curse is not necessarily a time of suffering. It is certainly possible that they are living in exile, in relative comfort (like most Jews of western countries today). Thinking about catastrophes that befell them in the past would teach them that it would be wise and proper to go back to obeying God, so that such suffering would not be repeated, and in order that they would merit to receive the blessing in the land of Israel. In fact, not only is there no indication that the contemplation of this historical lesson will necessarily take place at a time of suffering, but – on the contrary – a situation of relative calm, coming after suffering, would serve as an easier and more likely context for such contemplation.

For this reason, the perspective of this aspect need not discuss God's revenge on the enemies of Israel, "who have pursued you": while the Jewish people are still subservient to the nations, they are not necessarily being persecuted. Verse 7, describing God's revenge on the enemies and persecutors of Israel, belongs only to that aspect that speaks of repentance as a return to God, "with all your heart and with all your soul," in the wake of the disasters that befall the nation. And in this aspect the verse does indeed continue directly on from the descriptions of redemption, while appropriately preceding the description of the completion of repentance in the land in verse 8.

The first part of verse 9, describing the continuation of the fulfillment of the blessing in the land, in the more distant future, may belong jointly to both aspects. Let us skip over the second part of verse 9 for the moment, continuing directly to verse 10.

As stated, verse 10 goes back and summarizes the initial cause of the redemption, the catalyst that is necessary for a continuation of the process of repairing the relations between Israel and God. The two parts of the verse describe the two types of repentance that have been discussed: obeying God (stemming from a "return to the heart," as discussed at the beginning of the unit) and observance of His commandments on one hand, and a return to Him, "with all your heart and with all your soul" on the other. Thus, each of the two parts of verse 10 belongs to a different aspect.

The significance of the two aspects is clear. Both aspects present the dependence of redemption upon repentance, and the fact that God Himself is willing to help complete the repair

of the relationship, so long as it is the Jewish people who take the first step. Each aspect describes a different path of repentance, thereby elaborating on the basic message: the condition of repentance is not a single, rigid one, but rather flexible. Every corrective step by Israel that reflects or demonstrates some sort of return to God will be accepted, and will lead to redemption and to the completion of the process of repentance. "'Open for me' – Rabbi Yassa taught: 'the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: 'My son, open for Me [just] one opening of repentance, as small as the point of a needle, and I will open for you openings where wagons and coaches could pass through'" (Shir ha-Shirim Rabba 5:2).

Let us now go back to the second part of verse 9. At first glance, it looks like a direct continuation of the first part of the verse. The verse would thus teach that God will bless Israel with an abundance of goodness when He once again rejoices over them for the good. The verse comes to describe the blessing as expressing the significance of God once again feeling a deep love for and joy over Israel.

However, the structure of the verse, on this reading, is odd. If God's return to rejoicing over Israel is included in the stages of the process of redemption and blessing, then it should seemingly have continued the syntactical continuity of the clauses that are formulated in the future tense (using "vav ha-hippukh," the "vav" prefix of inversion): "And you will return... He will once again... and He will bring you... and you will possess it, and He will do good to you and multiply you... and He will circumcise... and He will give... for you will have returned...." Similarly, God's "return to rejoicing" should appear prior to its results, i.e., prior to the "blessing of abundant good." The Torah could have said, "The Lord will once again rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your forefathers, and the Lord your God will make you prolific in all of your endeavors... for the good."

In structural terms, the second part of verse 9 is similar to each of the two parts of verse 10, in that it opens with the word "ki" (when, or because). It would seem that the significance of the verse is like that of verse 10: a description of the initial cause that brings about the beginning of the process. In this sense the verse deviates from the pattern that we have seen so far: instead of making the redemption dependent on a first step by the Jewish people in returning to God, the second part of verse 9 makes the process dependent on an initiative of God, Who once again rejoices over Israel.

It would seem, then, that the three clauses beginning with "ki" at the end of the unit actually define three different aspects. Two of them – those which stand out in the unit and give it its primary tone – make redemption dependent upon human repentance of one type or another. The third aspect describes a reality of redemption without repentance: redemption encapsulated by the phrase, "for the Lord will once again rejoice over you."

The various aspects express the tension between the different manifestations of God's Will, between different attributes of His Providence. The attribute of Divine justice demands that the nation cannot be redeemed while absorbed in sin. The nation must repent fully in order for redemption to be justified. On the other hand, God's love for Israel gives rise to a desire to initiate their redemption, even if they have not returned to Him. These two aspects of His will, or factors,

clash with one another and are therefore expressed in different aspects, which appear to contradict each other in a plain reading of the text.

Obviously, on the practical plane, there must be an actual decision in accordance with one or other of the two aspects, or the forging of some compromise between them. However, it is not clear from the verses what this bottom-line decision is.

The first two aspects, which make redemption dependent upon repentance, are the more manifest ones, and they stand out more prominently in a superficial, continuous reading of the unit. The third aspect, on the other hand, is not a complete one that is apparent over the course of the unit; rather, it appears only in veiled form, towards the end. Perhaps the significance of this is that this aspect reflects only God's abstract Will, which cannot be implemented in practice, because of the counter-pressure of first two aspects. However, we may regard the matter differently: the unit is not meant as an indulgence in speculative philosophy about God's Providence and His ways of running the world. Rather, it is a practical, existential call to the Jewish people to repent, in order that the process of redemption might thereby be initiated. It is for this reason that the first two aspects give the unit its principal tone, and not because the practical aspects take precedence.

This topic, of the interdependence of redemption and repentance was dealt with by Chazal. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 97b-98a) records a controversy between the Tannaim:

This is a matter of tannaitic dispute, as recorded in the following baraita (tannaitic statement): Rabbi Eliezer said: "If [the people of] Israel engage in repentance, they will be redeemed; if not – they will not be redeemed." Rabbi Yehoshua responded: "Is it possible that if they do not engage in repentance then they will not be redeemed? [Surely not;] rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, will place over them a king whose decrees are as harsh as those of Haman, then Israel will repent and will mend their ways."

A second baraita records: Rabbi Eliezer said: "If [the people of] Israel engage in repentance, they will be redeemed, as it is written (Yirmiyahu 3:14), 'Return, you wayward children, and I shall heal your shortcomings.'"

Rabbi Yehoshua answered him: "Was it not then previously written (Yeshayahu 52:3), 'You were sold for no worth, and you shall not be redeemed for money'? 'You were sold for no worth' – meaning, for idolatry, 'nor shall you be redeemed for money' – i.e., not through repentance and good deeds."

Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Yehoshua: "Is it not written (Malakhi 3:7), 'Return to Me, and I shall return to you'?"

Rabbi Yehoshua answered: "But is it not written (Yirmiyahu 3:14), 'For I have taken you for Myself – one from a city, and two from a family – and I will bring you to Tzion...?'"

Rabbi Eliezer said: "Is it not written (Yeshayahu 30:15), 'In ease and rest you will be saved'?"

Rabbi Yehoshua answered Rabbi Eliezer: "Is it not written (Yishayahu 49:7), 'So says the Lord Redeemer of Israel, his Holy One, to the one who is despised, who the nation abhors, to a servant of rulers; kings will see and rise up, princes will prostrate themselves?'"

Rabbi Eliezer said to him: "Is it not written (Yirmiyahu 4:1), 'If you will return, o Israel, says God, then return to Me'?"

Rabbi Yehoshua answered: "Is it not written (Daniel 12:7), 'And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, and he lifted his right hand and his left hand to the heavens, and swore by the One Who lives forever that it will be for a time, times, and a half, and when the crushing of the power of the holy people will be complete, then all these things will be finished'?"

And Rabbi Eliezer was silent.

In Rabbi Eliezer's view, redemption is dependent upon repentance; Rabbi Yehoshua maintains that if the Jewish people will not repent of their own accord, God Himself will initiate a process of repentance and redemption.

Unrelated to the above analysis, it is clear that the concepts of repentance and redemption, and the relationship between them, stand at the center of the textual unit. In fact, this unit represents the principal biblical source for the discussion of these concepts. It is therefore most surprising that, throughout the dialogue between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, no mention is made of any of these verses!

The explanation for this would seem to be that their debate originally concerned this unit and its exegesis. For this reason, once they had argued about the biblical passages and their meaning, they could only resort to bringing proofs from elsewhere. On the basis of our discussion above, we posit that the Tannaim were divided as to the practical selection among the various aspects. According to Rabbi Eliezer, the first two aspects are decisive. To Rabbi Yehoshua's view, the compromise between the aspects is that God will initiate the process, if need be, and will bring it about in such a way that it includes the repentance of the Jewish people.

The Gemara (ibid.) cites a dispute among Amoraim on the same issue:

Rav said: All of the estimated dates [of the redemption] have come and gone; the matter depends solely on repentance and good deeds.

But Shemuel said: Suffice it that the mourner maintains his mourning.

It seems that Rav is responding to the final proof brought by Rabbi Yehoshua, from Sefer Daniel. Rabbi Yehoshua brought as proof of God's ultimate redemption of Israel, even without their initiative of repentance, the oath of the "man garbed in linen" who prophesized to Daniel that that redemption would come "la-mo'ed" – at a certain time. This time is also referred to in the same chapter in Daniel as "ketz" (literally, "end") (verses 4, 6, 9, 13). Rav concludes as follows: all of the times that could possibly be referred to in this passage in Daniel have already gone by, therefore redemption is dependent upon the two first aspects of our parasha – "repentance" – i.e., returning to God with all our heart and with all our soul, and "good deeds" – i.e., obeying God and observing His commandments.

Shemuel, on the other hand, deduces from our parasha that a time will come when "God will once again rejoice over you for good"; a time when God, Who mourns over His beloved Israel, will arise from His mourning and once again love and rejoice in them.

It seems that history has already decided this controversy. In modern times we have merited to witness expressions of God's kindness and love in redeeming His nation from foreign dominion – not as the result of repentance and the mending of our ways; but on the contrary – despite secularization and an abandonment of God. We have witnessed redemption, but not yet the realization of the promise "I shall circumcise your hearts"; we have yet to reach the stage of "you will return to listen to God...." Perhaps these stages are now dependent on our own initiative and repentance; perhaps not. We, as a nation, must commit ourselves to repentance and good deeds in order to complete the repair of our relationship with our Creator; at the same time we must pray to God that He not wait for this repentance, but rather that He "circumcise our hearts" to love Him again, to obey Him and observe His commandments, thereby meriting the full measure of blessing promised to us in our land.

Translated by Kaeren Fish