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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT NITZAVIM

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**The Revolution in the Conceptualization of *Teshuva*<sup>1</sup>  
in the Halakhic and Historical Perception of Rav Yehuda  
Alkalai**

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a. “Return is arrival”

The halakhic, philosophical and historical revolution wrought by Rav Yehuda Alkalai is especially manifest in his commentary on the biblical unit on *teshuvah* (*Devarim* 30) and his definition of the concept of *teshuvah* in *Halakha* and in history. This textual unit, and the concept of *teshuvah*, become a central focus of his overall worldview and his activities.

His book *Petach Ke-chudah shel Machat*<sup>2</sup> is devoted in its entirety to his revolutionary exegesis, but the concept of *teshuvah* and his understanding of it are given fairly extensive treatment in many other works too.<sup>3</sup> The title page of the first edition of *Petach* bears the following epigram, in rhyme (in the Hebrew), representing the essence of his innovation:

He who gives himself over in *teshuvah* to the good and  
expansive land — return is arrival!  
To give you a future and hope.  
I shall heal from their captivity with an outpouring of love,  
and they shall mourn no more;  
Return us, O Lord, to You, and let us return.

Rav Alkalai introduces his book by pointing out a difficulty arising from Rambam's definition of the concept in the beginning of *Hilkhot Teshuva*:

Why does [Rambam] address ... the mitzva of *teshuvah* [only] incidentally, saying: “When a person does *teshuvah*, he is obligated to confess”? He should have said: it is a positive mitzva for a person to return to the Lord his God.

He goes on to ask why the text associates *teshuvah* with the End of Days: after all, the mitzva of *teshuvah* applies every day, as no one knows which day will be his last. Here, using simple, easily understandable terms, he arrives at the crux of his revolutionary interpretation, surprising even to the modern reader:

Therefore it would seem to me that we must conclude that there are two [types of] *teshuvah*: individual *teshuvah* and general *teshuvah*.

According to Rav Alkalai, all of the extensive discussions of the concepts and laws surrounding *teshuvah*, from the time of Chazal up until the *Acharonim*, address individual *teshuvah*. General *teshuvah*, in contrast, is the return to *Eretz Yisrael* of the entire nation, and therefore it takes place at the End of Days.<sup>4</sup>

By drawing this distinction, Rav Alkalai turns the concepts of *teshuvah* and redemption upside down: redemption is still dependent on *teshuvah*, but not individual *teshuvah*; rather, it is dependent on general (national) *teshuvah*. In truth, these two processes are identical: “Return is arrival.”

To state it in his own words:

Individual *teshuvah* means a sinner turns from his sin, in accordance with the definition of *teshuvah* as set down by the *Rishonim*... We call this individual *teshuvah* because it pertains to the individual: each person engages in *teshuvah* in accordance with his sin. The more grave his transgression, the weightier his *teshuvah*.

General *teshuvah*, on the other hand, means that the entire Jewish People returns to the Lord our God, to the land of our forefathers' inheritance. For “one who lives outside of the Land is considered as someone who has no God,”<sup>5</sup> and Jews [while living] outside of the Land, are unwitting idolaters,<sup>6</sup> as it is written, “And there you shall serve man-made gods, wood and stone,” concerning which Rashi comments, “Since you are in servitude to those who serve [idols], it is as though you serve [idols] yourselves.”<sup>7</sup>

All the prophets commanded [that the nation engage in] this general *teshuvah*, as our teacher [Rambam] writes:<sup>8</sup> “All the prophets demand *teshuvah*, and the Jewish People is redeemed only through *teshuvah*. The Torah promises that the Jews are destined to do *teshuvah* at the end of their exile, and immediately they will be redeemed.” This refers to general *teshuvah* – the idea that the Jewish People will return to the Holy Land.” (*Petach*, p. 324)

The fundamental ideas entailed by this view of *teshuvah* include the following:

- Exile is a sin, not only a punishment. This concept is somewhat familiar from Chazal's teachings, but Rav Alkalai's conclusions, while very simple, are far-reaching.
- Since exile is a sin, this sin must be rectified through *teshuvah* – i.e., a return to the Land of Israel, on our own initiative, as a movement of *teshuvah*.
- Exile is a general sin, just as it is a general punishment. Therefore *teshuvah* – the return from exile – must likewise be general (i.e., organized on a national scale). This requires planning and organization.
- The *teshuvah* at the End of Days in the Torah<sup>9</sup> and enjoined by the Prophets (“Return to Me and I shall return to you”<sup>10</sup>)

elevation of the world and the revelation of the sanctity within Israel and within the world, for Rav Alkalai the whole concept is simple, clear, and unequivocal: it refers to nothing more or less than the return (*teshuvah*) of the entire Jewish People, as a nation, to the Land of Israel.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ketubot* 110b; Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:12, and elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> See *Avoda Zara* 8a.

<sup>7</sup> *Devarim* 4:28, and Rashi ad loc.

<sup>8</sup> *Hilkhot Teshuva* 7:5

<sup>9</sup> *Devarim* 4:28; 30:1-10.

<sup>10</sup> *Malakhi* 3:7, *Hoshea* 14, *Yeshayahu* 40ff, *Yirmeyahu* 31 and elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> *Teshuva* is usually defined as “repentance,” but the term may more accurately be translated as “return,” as we shall see below.

<sup>2</sup> *Kitvei Ha-Rav Alkalai* Vol. II, p. 323ff. The work was apparently written in 1849 and published in 1854.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the introduction to *Minchat Yehuda*, which was printed in 1843 in *Kol Korei* (608), *Kitvei Ha-Rav Alkalai* Vol. I, *Sefer Ha-chayim* (1856); *ibid.* Vol. II, and elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> This idea, which is a cornerstone of Rav Kook's *Orot Ha-teshuvah* (especially chapters 15 and 17), seems to have its foundation in the writings of Rav Alkalai. However, while for Rav Kook this process is part of the

is in itself a return to the Land, and at the same time is in itself also the redemption. This is the meaning of the idea that redemption depends on *teshuva*, as we shall see below.

As appropriate to a prominent scholar and proponent of the Hebrew language, and as the author of a book for studying Hebrew that appeared a whole generation before Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's, Rav Alkalai bases his interpretation of the term *teshuva* on linguistic analysis:

Know that the primary meaning of *teshuva* is that a person returns to the place from whence he came, as in, "And his return (*teshuvato*) was to Rama, for there his home was" (*Shemuel I* 7:17). *Chazal* then borrowed the term to refer to repentance for one's sin... And once the term was given this meaning, it was applied extensively, and all the *Musar* teachers used it, such that out of habit it became natural, as though the word *teshuva* never had any other meaning, and its original meaning was forgotten. But general *teshuva*, according to the original meaning of the word, means that we return to the land that we left, for it is our eternal home. (*Petach*, p. 326)

**b. The textual unit on *teshuva* in light of Rav Alkalai's interpretation**

Let us review the unit on *teshuva* as it appears in the Torah (*Devarim* 30:1-8), in light of Rav Alkalai's interpretation:

Text – <i>Devarim</i> 30:1-4	Meaning
And it shall come to pass, when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you,	
and you shall call them to mind	[i.e., the fact that you are dispersed, exiled, and full of transgression]
among all the nations in which the Lord your God has driven you,	
and shall return to the Lord your God, and shall obey His voice	[yearning to return to the Land]
according to all that I command you this day,	[the actual return to the Land]
you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul,	[and then, when you start to return, representing an awakening from below]
that then the Lord your God will bring back your captivity and have compassion upon you, and return and gather you from all the nations amongst which the Lord your God has scattered you.	[God will return your captivity with an awakening from Above, for the awakening from Above is dependent on the awakening from below, <sup>11</sup> and therefore the redemption is entirely dependent on <i>teshuva</i> – i.e., the initiative of returning to the Land; without this it will not happen]
If your outcasts are at the utmost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He	

will fetch you.	
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This interpretation solves two of the main difficulties arising from this unit:

- a. Why does the Torah formulate the Jews' *teshuva* and God's response using exactly the same terms? We find *veshavta*, and you shall return; *veshav*, [God] will bring back; *veshav* [God] will return (and gather you). Most interpretations (see Rashi ad loc.), which focus solely on individual *teshuva*, have trouble explaining God's return, as it were (from exile?). According to Rav Alkalai, however, this return is a rectification of the sin of exile. In light of this, the verse makes perfect sense: you will return to God – meaning, to the Land – and God will bring you back – i.e., He will gather you and restore you to the Land, out of all the nations, from the lands of exile.
- b. The second difficulty leads Ramban<sup>12</sup> to propose an interesting and profound exegesis of "heart" (see table below). According to his interpretation, the point in history referred to in these verses represents the end of the era of free choice between good and evil, because the desire to sin, molding the human experience since the time of Adam in the Garden of Eden, will no longer exist. The problem with this proposal is that we cannot but ask how uncircumcised hearts can appear after the wondrous *teshuva* described in the preceding verses, in which the Jews obey God's voice "according to all that I command you this day, with all your heart and with all your soul." How can it be, after all of this, that their hearts remain uncircumcised?

Once again, in light of Rav Alkalai's interpretation the problem is resolved and we do not understand the text in a way that contradicts its plain meaning:<sup>13</sup> the initial *teshuva* is the return to the Land, while the circumcision of the hearts comes as a later stage that is oriented towards love of God.

Text – <i>Devarim</i> 30:5-8	Meaning
"And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.	[exposing you to the manifestation of <i>teshuva</i> in the Land]  [love of God]
And the Lord your God will put all these curses upon your enemies, and upon those who hate you, who persecuted you.	
	[and then the <i>teshuva</i> will reach the level of the commandments:]
And you shall return and obey the voice of the Lord, and fulfill all His commandments which I command you this day.	

We might therefore summarize the unit as describing three historical stages in the process of *teshuva* (return):

<sup>11</sup> Zohar, *Bereishit* 82:2

<sup>12</sup> *Devarim* 30:6; cf. Seforno, Chizkuni et al.

<sup>13</sup> See *Shabbat* 63a and Rashbam, *Bereishit* 1:1 and 37:2.

- a. First, a return to the Land
- b. Then, a return to love of God
- c. Finally, a return to the *mitzvot*.

Most religious philosophers, in contrast, see redemption as predicated upon a return to the commandments. Therefore, they have less to say about the return to the Land. This, in Rav Alkalai's view, is the reason for the length of the exile with all its suffering: "Since they did not return to the Land, the redemption was delayed." (*Petach*, p. 328). He asserts that all the dates for the final redemption, as calculated by various sages over the generations, were in fact genuine:

Heaven forbid that one should say that those worthy ones were mistaken in their forecast. Rather, all of those times were indeed times of [divine] favor [but the people did not return to the Land].

In other words, it is not that the times calculated for the redemption were mistaken; rather, the Jewish People was mistaken in its understanding of the *teshuva* that was required as a precondition for redemption. It was not God Who let us down, but rather we who let Him down. According to Rav Alkalai's view, the return to the Land to build the Second Temple, after the Babylonian exile, failed to materialize into the final redemption only because the people failed to come back en masse, in accordance with the opinion of Reish Lakish.<sup>14</sup>

### c. Return, Virgin Israel

The concept of general *teshuva* appears explicitly in the prophecy of Yirmeyahu. After describing Rachel's weeping and God's promise to her that "the children shall return to their border," the prophet continues (31:20):

Set up waymarks for yourself; make yourself signposts; set your heart towards the highway – the way on which you went; return, Virgin Israel, turn back to these, your cities.

This is a clear and explicit call for a return to the Land as an expression of *teshuva*, helped along by a memory of the way and its signposts. Whether deliberately or not, for generations this verse has been read and interpreted out of context and with disregard for its plain meaning, as a call for a return to observance of the *mitzvot*.<sup>15</sup> The prophet in the next verse rebukes the Daughter of Israel for the bashfulness or lethargy that prevents her from returning,<sup>16</sup> to the point where he declares:

How long will you turn about, faithless daughter? For the Lord has created a new thing in the earth: a woman shall court a man.

Contrary to the way of the world, according to which a man courts a woman, the world will witness a revolution in which the

Jewish People will return in search of God, via its inheritance in the Land.

Rav Alkalai regards the alternative explanation – the conventional view that redemption is dependent upon individual *teshuva* – as altogether far-fetched. For even if all Jews were to collectively engage in perfect *teshuva*, in accordance with all its rules and definitions – a most unlikely scenario which has never materialized in the two millennia since the Destruction – in any event, even then we would not achieve the level of our forefathers, the generation that left Egypt. Hence, there is no point in pursuing this possibility.<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, the Talmudic discussion and the dispute among the *Tanna'im* and *Amora'im* as to redemption and *teshuva*<sup>18</sup> is likewise interpreted by Rav Alkalai in reference to the Land. It is therefore easy to understand the opinion of R. Eliezer: "If the Jews do *teshuva*, they are redeemed." In other words, if they [take the initiative and start to] return to the land, God will bring them back. If not, then they are not redeemed. All of the calculated times for redemption are real opportunities to encourage a return to the Land; if there is no response on the Jews' part, then the moment passes and there is no redemption.

Tragically, we are also able to understand the opinion<sup>19</sup> maintaining that if the Jews do not engage in *teshuva* [i.e., do not return to the Land], then "the Holy One, blessed be He, gives them a king whose decrees are as harsh as those of Haman [who sought to destroy the Jewish People], and the Jews will do *teshuva* [i.e., they will flee from him, and will seek to return to the Land, prompted by the persecution and hatred] and they will return to the proper path [in the Land]."<sup>20</sup>

### d. Is there a set time for the redemption?

What remains for us to understand is the opinion maintaining that there is a set time by which the exile must come to an end, as in mourning: "Suffice it that the mourner completes his period of mourning."<sup>21</sup> This opinion, too, can be understood in accordance with Rav Alkalai's approach, and here we must invoke *Kabbala*. Although Rav Alkalai is well-versed in *Kabbala* and in no way avoids Kabbalistic teachings, his approach to the concept of *teshuva* is built on linguistic analysis and biblical exegesis, as well as the teachings of the Prophets and of *Chazal*, so as to provide a firm foundation even without invoking *Kabbala*. However, he does refer to teachings of the Zohar and of the kabbalists, whether directly or indirectly, especially for the purposes of addressing a question that disturbs any revolutionary thinker (especially one whose approach seems so simple and self-evident once he has stated it): how did no one propose this interpretation before? As Rav Alkalai himself puts it:

I have heard it said: If this matter [i.e., Rav Alkalai's interpretation of the concept of *teshuva*] were true, it would have been stated [before now] by the great

<sup>14</sup> See *Yoma* 9b and the discussion of the "three oaths" in *Ketubot* 111a; *Petach*, p. 326. The contrasting positions are set forth extensively in Professor Aviezer Ravitzky's *Ha-ketz Ha-meguleh U-mdinat Ha-Yehudim* (Tel Aviv: 5753), chapter 2; *Cheirut al Ha-luchot* (Tel Aviv: 5759), pp. 11-48.

<sup>15</sup> See Sifrei on *Parashat Ekev*, end of 43; for interpretation of the verse in relation to Torah, see *Eruvin* 54b and elsewhere.

<sup>16</sup> See Rashi and Redak ad loc.

<sup>17</sup> *Petach*, p. 328.

<sup>18</sup> *Sanhedrin* 97b-98b; *Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 1:1.

<sup>19</sup> Voiced by R. Yehoshua or R. Eliezer, depending on the version; see below, n. 21.

<sup>20</sup> We are all witness to the realization of this terrifying prophecy. It was specifically the deeply religious sector in which many were so firmly locked

into an understanding of individual *teshuva* as the precondition for redemption that they stayed behind and perished by the decrees of "Haman."

<sup>21</sup> This represents the opinion of Shemuel, and perhaps also the view of R. Yehoshua, as opposed to the opinion of R. Eliezer. To my mind this interpretation has only the flimsiest foundation: the description of "a king whose decrees are as harsh as those of Haman" appears as a response after the word "rather" in the Babylonian Talmud; in the Jerusalem Talmud, it appears after "He said to him." According to the latter, then, this is R. Eliezer's response, explaining how the redemption will eventually come about, even if the Jews do not do *teshuva* of their own free will. According to the Babylonian Talmud, however, this is R. Yehoshua's response.

teachers of Israel, whether *Rishonim* or *Acharonim*! But... thus the Divine wisdom decreed it, that they would not contemplate this matter until the End of Days – i.e., the year 5600.<sup>22</sup> (*Petach*, p. 351)

In his work *Shelom Yerushalayim*, written in the year 5600 (the 600<sup>th</sup> year of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium), Rav Alkalai writes:

Had Israel merited it, they would have been redeemed in the first sixty years of the sixth millennium – and likewise in each and every period of sixty years. But if they do not merit it, the end of the exile will be after six hundred years. (*Shelom Yerushalayim, Kitvei Ha-Rav Alkalai* I, 33)<sup>23</sup>

In other words, there is a final end to the exile, according to both the Talmud and the Zohar, and it is the year 600 (of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium). In stark contrast to all those who were profoundly disappointed and mired in crisis after the year 600, Rav Alkalai looked around expectantly, took a close look at what was happening in the world<sup>24</sup> and pointed to the year 600 as the beginning of the process of redemption.<sup>25</sup> He therefore had a good explanation for the idea of the fixed end of the exile – something like the end of mourning, in accordance with the discussion in the Talmud – as well as a good explanation for why no one before his time had proposed this understanding of *teshuvah*.

#### e. What obstructs general *teshuvah*?

Here we reach the crux of Rav Alkalai's innovation. He does not mean his exegesis as a purely theoretical exercise. He draws practical conclusions, and these are the essence of his approach.

Individual *teshuvah* is obstructed by twenty-four things, as enumerated by Rambam (*Hilkhos Teshuvah*, ch. 4). But Rav Alkalai finds only two elements that obstruct general *teshuvah*: immigration certificates approved by the relevant authorities and money for travel expenses and for sustenance in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Since, in his view, these are the only impediments to *teshuvah* (and hence redemption), and since the Jewish People is obligated to return to God in order to save itself from the sin of exile (as well as from the king whose decrees are as harsh as those of Haman), a solution must be found for these two problems.

The solution, according to Rav Alkalai, entails a gathering of elected representatives of all Jewish communities throughout the world, who meet in one place, establish a fund to defray travel expenses and living expenses in the Land, in the early stages; and, of course, to elect a leader to go and meet with world leaders with the aim of obtaining permission for mass Jewish immigration to *Eretz Yisrael*.<sup>26</sup> This leader, elected by the general assembly, would be no less than Mashiach ben Yosef himself,<sup>27</sup> and he would operate through natural means – i.e., through political channels – to obtain the support of the kings and leaders (an aim that seemed altogether attainable to Rav Alkalai at that time).

Obviously, the figure whom Rav Alkalai – as a rabbi who fights for the sanctity of Israel and the Torah – has in mind, is not the formerly assimilated journalist Theodor Herzl, the man who merited to bring the beginning of Rav Alkalai's vision to fruition, without even knowing it.<sup>28</sup> It seems clear that the figure Rav Alkalai has in mind is Sir Moses Montefiore who, he believes, is capable, with the massive and open support of all of world Jewry, of attaining international approval for mass *aliya*, with the help of well-known Jewish figures of stature and influence, such as Minister Crémieux and Baron Rothschild. He writes:

The sages of Israel will one day have to give an accounting for not announcing to the Jewish lay leadership that their redemption is dependent upon their asking, and for failing to arouse our brethren, the Jewish People, to general *teshuvah*. And this asking is the responsibility of our great and powerful men who are close to the monarchy, and whose words carry weight; it is they who are commanded to have mercy on the remnant of our people. (*Kitvei Ha-Rav Alkalai* I, pp. 206-221)<sup>29</sup>

This fiery, emotional appeal, expressing urgency as time is running out, sheds light on Rav Alkalai's more general worldview. His worldview is a religious and historico-political one, sharp and realistic, and completely integrated with his simple and revolutionary interpretation of the commandment of *teshuvah* and the idea of general *teshuvah*. All that is needed is to tie up the loose ends in the form of the general assembly of representatives of the entire Jewish People.

Rav Alkalai's plan for general *teshuvah* is a political program, remarkably similar in its general outline to what eventually emerged as the Zionist program. However, his plan is nourished entirely by *Tanakh*, exegesis, *Midrash*, the teachings of *Chazal*, the wisdom of the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, *Halakha*, *Aggadah* and *Kabbala*. Was it for this reason that his plan was delayed for an entire generation – a delay that was critical in historical terms?

Rav Alkalai is well aware of the enormous perceptual gap separating him from his readers and from the rabbis of his time, and he understands the improbability of their taking determined action towards this critical goal. He therefore ends off on a sorrowful note of apology, with consolation for the future:

Had these words been uttered by great leaders of Israel, they would have been stated with greater power, for I am aware of my meager worth. I am not a well-known writer, and I am quite familiar with the villainy of book critics, for it is their foolish way to cast aspersions on words of truth and to pervert the words of the righteous – all the more so when it comes to a forsaken matter such as this, which has been forgotten and neglected. Yet I shall proceed wholeheartedly, "For the ways of the Lord are straight; the righteous shall walk in them and the sinners shall stumble

<sup>22</sup> According to R. Dosa (*Sanhedrin* 99a) and the Zohar on *Parashat Vayera* 444-445, 477-478 (*Ha-sullam* edition, Jerusalem 5714).

<sup>23</sup> In accordance with R. Shalom Buzaglo's *Mikdash Melekh* on the Zohar (Amsterdam: 5506), part I, 153b.

<sup>24</sup> See Aryeh Morgenstern's book, *Meshichiyut Ve-yishuv Eretz Yisrael Be-me'a Ha-19* (Jerusalem, 5745), pp. 197-240.

<sup>25</sup> Signs included the wars of independence in the Balkans and in Central Europe; more liberal regimes in the West, especially Sir Moses Montefiore's status as "president of the Jews throughout the world," specifically after his success in halting the blood libel in Damascus; and more.

<sup>26</sup> We can only imagine how the Jewish world would look had all the Torah leaders, *roshei yeshivot* and *admorim* accepted Rav Alkalai's interpretation and his conclusions, while there was still time.

<sup>27</sup> *Petach*, pp. 334-335.

<sup>28</sup> Notably, Y.Z. Zahavi, *Me-haChatam Sofer Ve-ad Herzl (Toldot Ha-Tziyonut Be-Hungaria)*, *Ha-sifriya Ha-Tziyonit* (Jerusalem: 5726), ch. 12, pp. 264-276, argues that Rav Alkalai's ideas were disseminated by his disciple, Rav Yosef Natonek, within the environment and community in which Theodor Herzl grew up, in Vienna, and in the synagogue in which he celebrated his bar mitzva.

<sup>29</sup> This is an excerpt from the introduction to his work *Minchat Yehuda*, written in honor of Montefiore following the resolution of the Damascus Affair.

in them”;<sup>30</sup> “The zeal of the Lord of Hosts shall do this.”<sup>31</sup>  
So let this be my consolation – for the truth shall show His way, and what the human mind fails to accomplish will come about through time. (*Petach*, pp. 351-352)

Surely such words could only emerge with divine inspiration.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>30</sup> *Hoshea* 14:10

<sup>31</sup> *Yeshayahu* 37:32