



## Reuven's Return

After considerable deliberation, Yosef is sold by his brothers to a caravan of Ishmaelite traders. Reuven, however, was not present at the time of the sale as the Torah relates that he returned to the pit where he suggested Yosef be held, in an attempt to save him from being condemned to death. *“Vayashav Reuven el habor ve’hinei ein Yosef babor vayikra et begadav — And Reuven returned to the pit, and behold, Yosef was no longer there. He rent his garments [in grief].” (Bereisheet 37:29)* Reuven expresses his distress to his brothers, bemoaning the loss of Yosef. Chazal teach, *“Vayashav Reuven — and Reuven returned - repented,”* this expression indicates that he was returning from repenting for the sin he committed by rearranging Yaakov Avinu’s bed into his mother’s tent.

The Midrash relates, “Hashem proclaimed: “Prior to you [Reuven] a man never sinned before me and then repented, indeed, you were the first to repent.” The Midrash concludes, “Reuven’s descendant, Hoshea, will also be one who will encourage others to do teshuvah, saying, *“Shuvah Yisrael.”*” (*Bereishit Rabbah* 84:18) Obviously we must ask, we know there were others before Reuven, such as Adam and Kayin, who sinned and

did teshuvah. What then is the meaning of the Midrash?

One approach is offered by Rav Yitzchak Meir ben Menachem. Adam and Kayin only engaged in teshuvah after Hashem confronted them with their wrongdoing. Hashem **asked** Adam if he ate from the tree, Hashem **asked** Kayin where his brother was. Hashem opened the conversation to guide them to recognize their error and repent for their sins. Reuven, however, was the first to take initiative toward teshuvah, hence, the language of the Midrash, *“patachta,”* you “opened;” you identified your error and took steps to repair it.

Rav Moshe Feiveitz zt'l in *Siach Moshe* shares a different approach. Reuven genuinely believed that he acted appropriately to protect his mother’s honor. Nevertheless, after further contemplation, he realized his wrongdoing and undertook the process to make amends. Thus, he is described as the first to do teshuvah “before Hashem,” since his repentance was vis a vis his recognition of the rupture in his relationship with Hashem. Reuven is the model of one who objectively examines his deeds and discerns that what appeared to him as outstanding conduct was indeed wanting in the eyes of Hashem.

In *Alei Shur*, Rav Wolbe zt'l explains that since we are created *be'tzeelm Elokim* — in G-d’s image, we are connected to Hashem as a shadow follows the movement of an object. It is only our sins that creates a disruption

in this relationship, like something obstructing the source of light causing a shadow to disappear. Viduy is the process by which we can reconnect and repair our Divine bond. Teshuvah is not a time bound mitzvah; each day we can recreate the closeness between us and Hashem. “*Salachti Ke’devarecha* — I have forgiven according to your word.” When we sincerely ask for forgiveness and say, “*Selach na* — [Hashem] please forgive,” and express the desire for a close relationship, Hashem grants our request.

Reuven is the paradigm of one who engages in honest introspection and does teshuvah without prompting. He is the example for us to increase our self-awareness and continuously examine our ways, working to strengthen and improve our relationship with Hashem. ■

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