



GEULAS YISRAEL

RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN
RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

YOM KIPPUR

Yom Kippur: Believe in Teshuva and Believe in Jews

Western civilization generally views history as open-ended and evolutionary. The future is unknown, shaped by human choices and unfolding events. Judaism views history very differently. History follows a predetermined arc and, in a deeper sense, is cyclical. It moves steadily toward a conclusion that echoes its beginning: a perfected world in which Hashem's presence is fully recognized and no longer contested by Man. Our world is never static. History is always coursing toward its destination, toward what we call redemption, or *geulah*.

Yet an intriguing position cited in the Gemara in Sanhedrin (97b) calls this inevitability into question. Rabbi Eliezer claims that our final *geulah* depends upon *teshuvah*. If we perform *teshuvah*, we will be redeemed; if we refuse to do so, redemption will not come.

A CONDITIONAL REDEMPTION?

This position stems from a simple reading of the end of Sefer Devarim. The *tochachah* of *Ki Tavo*, which is generally understood as

describing our final *galut*, does not conclude with an unconditional redemption or return from exile. Instead, the resolution appears only in Parshat Nitzavim, which describes a broad national *teshuvah*:

וְשָׁבַת עַד ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ... וְשָׁבַת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֶת שְׁבוּתְךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשָׁב וִקְבַּצְךָ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְצִיךָ ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ שָׁמָּה.

“You will return to Hashem your God and listen to His voice... and Hashem your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy upon you, and He will return and gather you from all the nations among which Hashem your God has dispersed you.”

Rabbi Eliezer reads this sequence literally. If we succeed in performing *teshuvah*, we will be redeemed. If we do not, we will remain in exile. This represents a dramatic departure from our assumption that *geulah* is the inevitable terminus of Jewish history.

TESHUVAH AS PROPHECY

Astonishingly, the Rambam adopts Rabbi Eliezer's position that final *geulah* depends upon prior *teshuvah*. Yet he understands that position very differently. He reads the pasuk not merely as a condition for redemption but as a prophecy that this condition will eventually be fulfilled. In the seventh *perek* of *Hilchos Teshuvah*, the Rambam asserts: וכבר הבטיחה תורה שסוף ישראל לעשות תשובה

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“The Torah has already promised that at the end of their exile, Israel will ultimately perform *teshuvah*, and immediately they will be redeemed.”

Structurally and logically, the Rambam agrees with Rabbi Eliezer. Final *geulah* must be preceded by *teshuvah*. But the Rambam adds that this national *teshuvah* has already been promised and will certainly occur. If the *teshuvah* is assured, then the *geulah* that follows it is assured as well.

By describing this verse not as a narrative about a possible *teshuvah* that might lead to *geulah*, but as a prophecy that this *teshuvah* will certainly occur, the Rambam strengthens a conviction essential to *teshuvah*: our faith that teshuva is actually possible. Additionally this Rambam reshapes how we view the Jewish people and their future.

THE LEAP OF FAITH

Teshuvah is not obvious. It requires a leap of faith. Will HaKadosh Baruch Hu really forgive even the most grievous sins? The Midrash describes Adam meeting his son Kayin after Kayin had murdered his brother Hevel. Adam asks what became of his punishment, and Kayin responds that he performed *teshuvah* and that his sentence was mitigated. Adam is stunned. He had never imagined the possibility of *teshuvah*. He had simply accepted his own fate and left Gan Eden. It never occurred to him that he could repent and recover from his sin. *Teshuvah* was never self-evident to mankind. What happened had happened, and there was little reason to believe that a person could turn back the clock and somehow rewrite his story.

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opened his heart and, with painful candor, exposed the inner landscape of his *teshuvah*, as mortifying as that disclosure must have been. He understood his role as teaching us that *teshuvah* is possible and thereby strengthened our faith in its power.

That faith was not always easy to summon. The prophets of the First Beit HaMikdash repeatedly pleaded with us to return. Some were stubborn, refusing to acknowledge that they had sinned and rejecting any criticism of their behavior. Others recognized their failures but despaired of the possibility of return. They could imagine sin, but they could not imagine recovery. *Teshuvah* demands faith that Hashem has granted us this extraordinary gift: that failure need not be final and that even after we have fallen, a path back remains open.

FAITH IN OURSELVES

Teshuvah demands faith not only in Hashem, but in ourselves. Have we fallen too far to recover? Perhaps our sins have poisoned us so much that we are no longer capable of returning. It takes great faith in the inner

 **Mazel Tov to** 

Arlene Friedson Saslow

and family on the engagement

of her grandson

virtue and nobility of man to believe that no matter how deeply we have fallen, recovery remains possible.

The Gemara in Chagigah (15a) tells of Elisha ben Avuyah, known as Acher, the great scholar who abandoned his faith and descended into apostasy. He heard a heavenly voice, a *Bat Kol*, proclaiming: שבו בנים שובבים חוץ מאחר — “Return, wayward children, except for Acher.” He understood the *Bat Kol* as declaring that everyone was invited to perform *teshuvah* except for him.

Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that the *Bat Kol* could not actually have excluded Elisha ben Avuyah. That would contradict the very premise of free will and *teshuvah*: every person, no matter how far he has fallen, retains the capacity to return. Even Yonah, buried in the depths of the sea inside the belly of the fish, still possessed a direct path back to Hashem. The *Bat Kol* called everyone to return. It was Elisha’s own despair that added the words חוץ מאחר — “except for Acher.” He was so convinced that he had fallen beyond recovery that he actually heard himself being excluded from an invitation that was addressed to everyone.

He had fallen so far that he could no longer believe in his own capacity for *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* therefore requires faith not only that Hashem will accept us, but that something within us remains intact enough to return.

BUILT INTO HISTORY

The Rambam’s prophecy strengthens both forms of faith: faith in Hashem’s willingness to accept our *teshuva* and faith in our own capacity to achieve it. The very concept of a prophecy about *teshuva* is surprising. *Teshuva* is an expression of free will, while *nevu’ah* realities that are destined to unfold.

How can a freely chosen act be guaranteed in advance?

The message that emerges from the Rambam is that these two ideas can somehow coexist. Each individual retains complete freedom to choose whether to perform *teshuva*. Yet on the national level, the Jewish people are destined to return. National *teshuva* is somehow woven into the course of Jewish history without eliminating the freedom of any individual Jew.

That prophecy should strengthen our own faith in *teshuva*. If *teshuva* is destined to emerge from the Jewish people, then the *capacity* for *teshuva* must already lie within us. *Teshuva* is not an alien possibility that we somehow have to manufacture. It draws upon a deep human capacity for renewal that Hashem has planted within us.

BELIEVE IN JEWS

But the prophecy of the Rambam speaks not only about *teshuvah*. It also reveals a crucial truth about the people destined to perform it. At certain moments in history, the prospect of national return may seem remote, even implausible. Yet the endpoint has already been foretold. Something will awaken the Jewish heart, whether an internal stirring, an external jolt, or some combination of the two, and turn it back toward HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

If our return is guaranteed, then prolonged estrangement can never extinguish our capacity to return. Something within us survives distance and alienation and remains capable of awakening. Believe in Jews, the Rambam teaches us. Our return is not merely a hope, but a part of the prophetic trajectory of Jewish history.

FAITH IN A DIVIDED NATION

Today, our faith in the Jewish people is

being challenged on a different front. We are living through a deeply divided moment in our history. We are immersed in sharp and painful ideological debates, and the coming election season will likely deepen our polarization and harden our positions. Our nation faces questions that appear almost irreconcilable, while comprehensive solutions remain elusive. Where are we headed as a people?

This Rambam does not promise that every national disagreement will somehow disappear or that every political and social question will find an easy resolution. But he does teach us something profound about how we are meant to view the Jewish people. We must not judge our future solely by our present condition. If we are asked to believe in the seemingly improbable prospect of a great national *teshuvah*, we should also believe that our people can find a path through the divisions that currently overwhelm us.

A people whose eventual spiritual return is guaranteed possesses depths that are not always visible at a particular moment in history. We may not yet see how our divisions will be resolved or where a common path will emerge. But the Rambam asks us to maintain faith in the people who must eventually find it.

During this season of *emunah*, the Rambam calls upon us to believe. Believe in *teshuvah*. Believe in the Jewish people. Believe in me. Believe in you. ■



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