

Torah Table Talk

Shabbat Shuvah:



A Practical Guide to Repentance

Parshat Ha'azinu

Deuteronomy 32/ Hosea 14:2-10, Joel 2:15-27, Micah 7:18-20

Shabbat Shuvah is one of two special Sabbaths in the Jewish calendar when rabbis traditionally gave a major address to their congregation. On Shabbat HaGadol, just before Pesach, rabbis would discuss the laws of Pesach, and on Shabbat Shuvah, it was customary to give a rousing talk on the importance of repentance. This Sabbath is named after the opening words of the Haftorah which is read on Shabbat morning “Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai,” “Return O Israel to the Lord...” The word “Shuvah” is the root of the word Teshuvah, repentance or returning to God. In lieu of a discussion of this week's Torah portion, it seems especially appropriate to spend some time thinking about this season of the year and the call for repentance that is at the heart of the High Holy Days.

Turn, O Israel, to the Lord your God for you have fallen because of your sin. **Hosea 14:2**

I will heal their affliction; generously will I take them back in love; for my anger has **turned** away from them. **Hoses 14:5**

Blow the horn in Zion; solemnize a fast, proclaim an assembly! Gather the people bid the congregation to purify themselves. **Joel 2:15**

He will **turn** back to us in love; Jew will cover up our iniquities, He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. **Micah 7:20**

1. What is the mood of these verses taken from the special Haftorah which we read on Shabbat Shuvah?
2. How is the Hebrew root “Shuv” or “turn” used in these verses? Is Israel turning to God or is God turning to Israel in these verses?
3. What is the connection between repentance, turning and returning? How do we turn when we perform acts of repentance?
4. If you were a Rabbi what issues would you talk about on Shabbat Shuvah? If you could change one thing about yourself what would it be?

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 153a

When R. Eliezer said, "Repent, even if only one day before your death," his disciples asked him, "Does any man know what day he will die?" R. Eliezer: "Then all the more reason that he repent today. For should he die tomorrow, his entire life will have been spent in repentance. In his wisdom, Solomon also intimated [the need to repent] when he said, "Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment" (Eccles. 9:8).

1. If repentance involves changing one's behavior in significant ways, what use is repenting one day before one's death? What point is Rabbi Eliezer trying to make about the need for repentance?
2. Rabbi Eliezer says that one who repents is considered as if his whole life was spent in repentance. Do you think a person who repents past deeds should be treated as if his past misdeeds don't count? Are their deeds for which there should be no possibility of repentance?

Rosh Hashanah Survival Kit

Shimon Apisdorf offers the final steps for a practical application of Teshuvah:

1. Look at your life in terms of three spheres of relationships. One with yourself, one with God and one with other people.
2. Make a list of five mistakes you have made in each sphere and rank them from most to least serious.
3. Take the list with you to synagogue on Yom Kippur and plan a strategy for the day for thinking about these different mistakes.
4. Create a mental strategy for the coming year...construct a plan of action for when you will deal with them during the year.
5. Keep the list in a private place but make sure you don't lose track of it. You should review this list for 15 minutes once a month.
6. "Remember that Teshuvah is a unique mitzvah. With other Mitzvot if you are lacking part of the Mitzvah you lack the whole thing ...with regard to Teshuvah every little effort you make and every step brings you closer to where you want to be..."

1. Look at the Confessional prayer which we recite in synagogue on Yom Kippur. How many of these confessions fall into the three categories that Apisdorf mentions?
2. How many of the confessional statements apply to your life? Why do we confess sins that we have not committed?
3. Do you think it is possible to create a strategy for change in your life? Why or why not? What problems might you face in fulfilling such a strategy, and what might help you fulfill it?

Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 26b

How is one to tell whether a penitent is genuine? R. Judah said: When the penitent has the opportunity to commit the same sin once and once again, and he refrains from committing it.

1. How do we know if a person sincerely repents? Do you think the statement above is practical? What happens if the person never finds himself in the same circumstances?
2. How would you measure sincere repentance in your own life?

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