

## Shabbat Shuvah — Vayelekh — Deu 31:1 – 30

*In honor of Gerda Korner and Carolyn Koestel, zichrona livracha, two women of valor who left us this week and are sadly missed.*

At the beginning of this year 5783 we gather on the pivotal 4<sup>th</sup> day between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. 3 ½ days of reflection and repentance have passed, 3 1/2 more days lie ahead.

We are here on Shabbat Shuvah, seated and standing in this holy place and in our homes, and yes! on this Shabbat of turning **we are already constantly turning** — with the world as it turns. And we are looking back and repenting our What Rabbi Aviva Richman of HADAR sweetly calls our “*missteps and blind spots*”

— and here we are preparing to turn again and look forward to the blessings of the coming year.

We are committed individually and as a community to the Way of Torah, in this week to restoring our relationship with God and restoring our relationships here on earth with each other and the world. Sometimes this process can be simple and easy, sometimes it can be arduous and painful. We may have to dig deep into our lives and habits to find the turnings that will lead us to a renewed, different, better life in Torah. We are the Congregation Netivot Shalom, we can do this.

As Maimonides in the late 12<sup>th</sup> Century wrote in The Law of Repentance in the Mishneh Torah, there are sins against God, which are intentional or unintentional violations of the mitzvot.

And there are sins against life on earth: these are intentional or unintentional violations, injuries to our relationships with other people, communities, and life on earth – even to the earth itself.

We must recognize the violation, the transgression, the harm we have caused, regret our actions or inactions, confess to God or to the person or living being or community we have harmed, and do better going forward. Each step may be simple, complex, or life challenging and life changing.

First and second, recognition and confession:

OK, here’s what comes to **my** mind: Forgetting to take the garlic out of the vegetables at a Shabbat dinner at the home of a friend who is allergic; failing to monitor the bank who did not disburse the bequests in my uncle’s will until almost a year had past; failing to pay state income tax by the deadline; snapping at one friend who asked too many questions too quickly and another who gave me more forceful advice than I wanted.

What have I failed to remember? Oh yes. I never checked up on the young, homeless Algerian woman who had been kicked out of her parents’ house at age 17 and was huddled with her

young cat under the edge of the roof of the CVS on Telegraph on a cold afternoon. She wouldn't let me drive her to the youth shelter because she didn't trust strangers. Her name is Raine. I gave her some cash and a wool blanket and told her it was a special blanket I carried with me since I was in college and would bring them both warmth and shelter. What has happened to her?

Truthfully? Keeping the mitzvot seems almost like the easy part. I have apologized and tried to make recompense to those I harmed (maybe not if you include the CA Franchise Tax Board) but I still wonder where Raine is and if her strong will and principles have enabled her to build a safer, better life.

Third, what does doing better mean? It has to mean more than having good intentions in the last seconds of Yom Kippur and in that precious second when we are newly clean and shining with hope.

Now, the rabbis distinguish between an occasional and habitual sinner. Teshuva is a much harder challenge when we want to change habitual harmful behavior because it has been locked in. Like water trickling through sand: as the water flows it deepens the channel until the water is prevented from turning and finding a new path. So, too, our weaknesses and bad habits reinforce themselves. Elul and these days of teshuva are a blessing **and** an opportunity (to twist a metaphor out of shape) to let the water of our life first **trickle**, then **flow into new channels**.

So change can be easy or hard. But we mustn't get bogged down in regrets.

A small example: When I was working on the reform of environmental law in the former Soviet Union, I was leading small groups in defining the purpose and structure of the new laws protecting water, air and soil. My colleagues in Ukraine, Serbia and Kazakhstan found this mental exercise **almost impossible!** They were expert at describing the cruelties, inhumanity and practical failures of their existing system — to the exclusion of all else.

The Israeli poet Tuvia Ruebner wrote in despair:

Oh, let the darkness cover our eyes!  
Where can we flee from the sound of our hearts  
proclaiming: It was our hands that spilt our blood!  
To where can we run from ourselves?<sup>1</sup>

Have you noticed how looking back, identifying and assessing failures can weigh you down, dull your mind, drain your energy and vitiate your imagination?

Are our lives a procession of *missteps and blindspots* that take us off the path and *teshuva* that returns us to the path? I once had a colleague who had a strong element of "beagle" in his

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<sup>1</sup> Transl. Rachel Tzvia Back, *With an Iron Pen, Twenty Years of Hebrew Protest Poetry*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2009, p. 115.

character — in every discussion he would dart off the path after whatever caught his attention. And we would call him back saying (more or less) “Hey, we are walking on this path to the other side of trees where the sun is shining and flowers are growing. Come back, let’s get going!”

Maybe instead of thinking of ourselves as caught up in a cycle of wandering or darting or galloping off the path and then trying to find our way back, maybe we could think of ourselves as dancing – the dance of turning away and turning back, teshuva, the dance of returning.

The last lines of the old Shaker song “Simple Gifts” say it so clearly:

To turn, turn will be our delight  
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

Let’s remember the joy in the process of teshuvah.

The words of Psalm 126<sup>2</sup> can strengthen us for the task:

*He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him. (JPS, Psalm 126:6)*

Yes, we weep with regret, but we are not entering the year 5783 empty-handed.

Yes, **we bear precious seed** — whether a handful, a bowlful, or a sack on our back.

These are the seeds of our healing as individuals and in our relationships on earth and with God. Our renewal, our growth, our future, and the future of our communities, cities, countries, and planet.

If we turn, now, away from our *missteps and blind spots* of the past year and focus on planting and nurturing these new seeds, how much joy will we find in our labor? In the growth of the plants to come?

That joy can and will expand and grow, I have seen how it can expand to crowd out our missteps and blind spots, faults and failures, so they shrivel up and blow away. Nurture the seeds and joy will come. Joy will grow.

How much joy will we find in this year’s planting and harvest?

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<sup>2</sup> As most beautifully set to music by Johannes Brahms in “Ein Deutsches Requiem”.