

Return O Israel!

(The Haftarah of Shabbat Shuvah)

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“This Sabbath which comes between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called *Shabbat Shuva* “The Sabbath of Return” after the first word of the Haftarah: *Shuvah* – “Return” in the opening phrase: “Return, O Israel unto the Lord thy God” (Hosea, 14,2). It is popularly called *Shabbat Teshuvah* – the Sabbath of Repentance of Amendment, since it falls within the Ten Days of Penitence....It is not customary for a youth to be called upon to read the Haftarah but rather for a person of note”. (Agnon, Days of Awe, p. 189)

שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעִוְוֹנֶךָ

**Return O Israel unto the Lord thy god;
for thou hast stumbled in thine iniquity.**

In this passage from the end of *Hosea*, Israel are called upon to make amends, to repent and they are promised that their repentance will be accepted. The above verse is the classic quotation of all Jewish preachers from the Sages of the Talmud onwards in proof of this assertion. We read in the Talmud Yoma 86a:

Said R. Levi: Great is repentance in that it reaches as far as the throne of glory, as it is stated: “Return O Israel (*ad*) as far as the Lord thy God (i.e. “return” or repentance reaches to the Lord thy God)”.

The same idea is more vividly expressed in *Pesikta Rabbati* (*ad loc*):

Rabbenu Ha-kadosh (R. Judah the Prince, editor of the Mishnah) expounded: Great is the power of repentance; for once man begins to contemplate repentance in his heart,

forwith it rises upwards not by ten, twenty or even a hundred miles but as far as a distance of five hundred years, and not just to the first heaven but as far as the seventh heaven; and not just to the seventh heaver but it stands before the throne of glory. Thus said Hosea: "Return O Israel as far as the Lord thy God".

The second part of our passage "for thou hast stumbled in thine iniquity" has puzzled many commentators. What is the force of the preposition "in" *be* in Hebrew? Does the phrase mean "thou hast stumbled *on account of* thine iniquity?" In other words, your iniquities are responsible for your stumblings and discomfitures and they are the root cause of all your misfortunes? Or perhaps the verse implies "thou hast stumbled through thine iniquities?" It is your iniquities that constitute your stumblings; the stumblings are not the outcome of your iniquities; but the iniquities themselves constitute the defeats, decline and downfall. Is the *be* instrumental or causative? Is the "stumbling" the punishment caused by the iniquity or the iniquity itself? Let us note the opinions of our commentators:

Hardships overtook you on account of your iniquities.

(Rashi)

And there is none to raise you up but the Lord.

(Ibn Ezra)

It is because you yourselves realize that you have stumbled in your iniquities that you have to return to the Lord blessed be He; for only a return to Him can raise you up from stumbling.

(Radak)

For you see that it is your iniquities that have caused you to stumble and brought you low.

(Biur)

Thus Rashi interprets the passage to mean that the prophet rebukes them by pointing to the punishment that had already overtaken them ("on account of your iniquities").

Ibn Ezra's comment is not clear since his "raising up" is just as ambiguous as the "stumbling" in the verse itself. It may refer to external physical raising up, to economic or political recovery or to the internal raising of one's morale and self-respect from the humiliation of sin. Radak and the *Biur* apparently follow the second approach that the iniquities are the stumblings and not the punishment that comes in their wake.

The latter approach would seem to fit the plain sense of the text, particularly, if we take into account the rest of the context where we read "I will hear their backsliding" (verse 5), since, as Ibn Ezra observes, the backsliding of the soul is like the sickness of the body. For this reason the text uses the term "I will heal". Accordingly, the Almighty who punishes them has to heal not only their wounds but also the backsliding that led to this punishment; for that itself was a malady.

The question may then be asked: If it is the Lord who heals backsliding, what role is left to man in the context of repentance? To this the prophet answers that what we have here is a reciprocal movement of the people towards God and of God towards man. The patient has to take the first step before the physician can intervene. The patient must call in the physician. Jeremiah voices this very idea: "Return ye backsliding children, I will heal your backslidings" (Jer. 3, 22).

What iniquity had they stumbled into? The answer to this is given in verse 4 in the words which the prophets counsels Israel to take with them:*

אַשׁוּר לֹא יוֹשִׁיעֵנו,
עַל-סוּס לֹא נִרְכָּב,
וְלֹא-נֶאֱמַר עוֹד אֶלֶּהֵינוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ

**Ashur shall not save us.
We will not ride upon horses;**

**neither will we call any more the work of our hands
our gods.**

Does the text here refer to political sins? It would seem logical to assume this to be the case. The prophet was delivering his message during the confusion that followed the death of Jeroboam II, in whose reign the vain tribute was paid to the king of Ashur in the hope that he would save them from their enemies in time of trouble. In *2 Kings* 15:19 we are told: “here came against the land Pul the king of Assyria; and Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, that his hand might be with him to confirm the kingdom in his hand”.

But his alliance proved a vain hope. Some 15 years later Tiglath Pilese king of Ashur invaded the Israelite kingdom and tore from it “Ijon and Abel-beth-maacah and Janoah and Kedesh and Hazor and Gilead and Galilee and all the land of Naphtali” exiling part of the people of Assyria. The repentance therefore referred to by the prophet pertained to the political field, turning away illusory alliances and vain hopes.

Yehezkel Kaufmann in his *Toldot Ha-emunah Ha-yisraelit* (vol. 3, 1, pp. 138-139) emphasizes Hosea’s opposition to exaggerated militarism and respect for physical might *alone*. Other passages from Hosea bearing out his detestation of reliance on things giving a false sense of security are cited in his book:

וַיִּשְׁכַּח יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-עֹשֶׂהוּ וַיִּבֶן הַיְכָלוֹת
וַיְהוֹדָה הַרְבֵּה עָרִים בְּצָרוֹת...
...and Judah hath multiplied fortified cities...

**For Israel hath forgotten his Maker, and
buildeth palaces, and Judah hath multiplied
fortified cities...(8:14).**

חֲרָשְׁתֶּם-רָשָׁע עֹלְתֵהּ קְצָרְתֶם
אֲכַלְתֶּם פְּרִי-כַחֵשׁ

כִּי-בָטַחְתָּ בְּדַרְכֶּיךָ, בָּרַב גְּבוּרֶיךָ:

Ye have plowed wickedness, ye have reaped iniquity, ye have eaten the fruit of lies; for thou didst trust *in thy way*, in the multitude of thy mighty men (10, 13).

“In thy way”: *Biur*: you relied on your prudence and many mighty men. *Mezudot*: in your resorting to Egypt and Assyria for succour.

Kaufmann emphasizes the political sin involved in resorting to these idolatrous peoples such as Assyria and Egypt for succour. Israel was to be condemned for appealing to them not as allies or victors to whom tribute is paid but relying on them as the support and basis of the sovereignty of Israel.

The reliance on idolatrous powers is the most unmistakable form of forgetting God, of trust in an ungodly force – Ashur and Egypt as the saviours of Israel in place of God! The prophet sensed in all this an acknowledgement of idolatry, a submission to the outlook of the heathen world. The confession that the prophet places in the mouth of Israel is “Asshur shall not save us. We will not ride upon horses; neither will we call any more the work of our hands our gods”.

We see therefore that the sin Israel was guilty of was a political one. But it was also a religious one of idolatry. Accordingly, Hosea reproves them for trust in no-gods, in calves and images:

עַמִּי בָעֲצוֹ יִשְׁאַל, וּמִקְלוֹ יִגִּיד לוֹ:
כִּסְפָם וְזָהָבָם עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֲצָבִים לְמַעַן יִכְרֹתוּ:
וַעֲתָה יוֹסֵפוּ לְחַטֹּא וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם מִסַּכָּה מִכִּסְפָּם כְּתֻבּוֹתָם
עֲצָבִים מַעֲשֵׂה חַרְשִׁים

My people ask counsel at their stock, and their staff declareth unto them (4,12).

Of their silver and their gold have they made them idols, that they may be cut off (8,4).

And now they sin more and more, and have made them molten images of their silver, according to their own understanding, even idols, all of them the work of the craftsmen (13,2).

In a more general manner the prophet reproves them by defining their sin in a formula which is not dated to any particular ancient epoch of idolatry but which includes in its condemnation all idolatry, of whatever kind, the human instinct of idolatry in all ages to flee from the service of God, the eternal sin of man to “call the work of our hands our gods”.

What is the feature common to all the sins whose avoidance the prophet demands in the confession he outlines?

אַשׁוּר לֹא יוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ, עַל-סוּס לֹא נִרְכָּב, וְלֹא-נֹאמַר עוֹד
אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ

Ashur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; neither will we call any more the work of our hands our gods.

This alludes to the faith in things that are not God, man's trust in himself, in the work of his hands, whether they are actual images of wood and stones or slogans or banners of his own fabrication.

Since this faith of man in himself – the deifying of his own aspirations, desires and work of his hands is the original fount of all sin, the prophet called upon Israel to forsake it. This is the stumbling, the falling that is behind every downfall —

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**Return O Israel unto the Lord thy god;
for thou hast stumbled in thine iniquity.**

Questions for Further Study:

1. Can you explain something which has puzzled many students – why the confession that the prophet puts in the mouth of the children of Israel (Ashur will not save us etc.) ends with an appeal to God as He who is merciful to the fatherless?
2. Abarvanel regards this confession as regret both for trust in Ashur and for their trust in Egypt. Where is there an allusion to the reliance of Egypt?
3. We read in Talmud Yoma:
Rabbi Meir used to say: Great is *teshuvah* (repentance) since the whole world is pardoned on account of the individual who has repented, as it is stated: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for Mine anger is turned away from him” (Hos. 14, 5). It is not stated “from *them*” but “from *him*”.
 - (a) What grammatical point prompted the above comment of R. Meir?
 - (b) Can you recall a similar grammatical parallel in other passages in Scripture?
 - (c) Explain the underlying idea in R. Meir’s dictum. In what way does it contradict the ideal of justice?
 - (d) Can you recall any other passages in Scripture or Rabbinic writings containing the same idea?

Note

* According to the Pesikta this is precisely what distinguishing Hoshea from all other prophets: “All the prophets call Israel to repentance but not like Hoseah. Jeremiah said 4,1: ‘If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, yea, return unto Me,’ and Isaiah said 55,6: ‘Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near’. But they did not instruct Israel what to say. Whereas Hoseah said that they should make amends and instructed them how they should intercede for themselves: ‘Take with you words and return unto the Lord, *say unto Him*: Forgive all iniquity and accept that which is good; so will we

render the bullocks of our lips. Ashur shall not save us, we will not ride upon horses neither will we call any more the work of our gods our gods.