



The Inspiration to Change

We read in Parashat Nitzavim that the *mitzvah* of *teshuva* is לא בשמים היא – “not in heaven or across the sea,” far away and unreachable, but rather within our grasp and our ability to accomplish. The Torah makes it sound so easy! Let’s look together at three cases of *teshuva* in Tanach to learn more about *teshuva*.

Upon realizing that Yehuda will never fulfill his promise of allowing Sheilah to marry her, Tamar, Yehuda’s daughter-in-law, disguises herself as a prostitute to tempt Yehuda, who does not recognize her. Several months later, when Tamar’s pregnancy from that encounter comes to light, Yehuda condemns Tamar to death for her adultery, as she was still tied to Sheilah. As she walks to her death, she sends Yehuda his ring, staff, and cord she had taken from him as collateral, and says הִכֵּר נָא – please recognize these items – whose are they? Yehuda hears the echo of the cruel הִכֵּר נָא message he sent to his father – “Do you recognize this coat dripping with blood as your son Yosef’s?”

At this moment, Yehuda faced a terrible choice: publicly humiliate himself by admitting to this intimate encounter with his daughter-in-law, or allow Tamar – and his own unborn children – to die by fire. Yehuda summons up the courage, and in two words redeems himself and rises to lead the family: צְדָקָה כִּמְנִי – she is more right than I. His recognition of his responsibility for the situation, combined with his strength of character and willingness to be humbled, inspired his successful *teshuva*.

Later, when Yosef’s brothers encounter the Egyptian viceroy’s hostility and false accusation, they whisper to each other, אָבָל אֲשָׁמִים אָנַחְנוּ – we are guilty, for we did not listen to our brother’s cries. What inspired their feelings of *teshuva*? It seems they did not feel remorse after the sale, nor after they see their father’s suffering when he concludes Yosef has been killed. They feel remorse when they experience *yisurin*: difficulties and suffering. As they experienced this persecution, and while they did not know for sure this was a punishment from G-d, they began to question, why is this happening?

David HaMelech, a descendant of Yehuda and Tamar, sees, desires and takes Batsheva while her husband is away at battle. Upon discovering she is pregnant, David invites her husband Uriah home from the battlefield, in the hope he will go home to his wife and thus assume the baby is his own. Uriah’s refusal to go home to be with his wife while *Am Yisrael* is in danger on the battlefield is an ironic condemnation of David’s sin. David then orchestrates Uriah’s death in battle and takes Batsheva as his wife after she mourns her husband.

Natan HaNavi goes to David and tells him a story about a rich man who takes a poor man’s sheep to feed to his guest instead of taking one from his own sizable flock. David pronounces that this man should be killed. Natan Hanavi responds to David – You are that man, and therefore you will suffer punishment: the sword will never leave your family, and another man will take your

wives openly: while you were able to sin secretly using the power of the king, your punishment will be public humiliation. After hearing this, David acknowledges his guilt: הִטְאַתִּי לָהּ. No excuses but simply: “I take responsibility.” Natan responds that G-d accepts the *teshuva*, at least partially, for he will not die. But the other punishments stand.

We have now three models: Yehuda’s *teshuva*, which is the ideal, since he is lucky enough to be offered the opportunity to admit his sin without suffering or punishment, and he has the courage and character to seize the chance; the model of the brothers, who as a result of their suffering, look at themselves and how they can mend their ways; and finally, David, who admits his sin only after hearing his punishment, but yet that *teshuva* is meaningful and accepted as well.

Rav Soloveichik writes in Halachic Man that “Repentance, according to the *halachic* view, is an act of creation – self-creation. The severing of one’s psychic identity with one’s previous ‘I,’ and the creation of a new ‘I,’ possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals – this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future.” At this challenging time, may we all find within ourselves the creative power to transform ourselves this year with sincere *teshuva* and lasting change.

Rabbanit Sally Mayer serves as Rosh Midrasha at Ohr Torah Stone’s Midreshet Lindenbaum.