The Inspiration to Change

We read in Parashat Nitzavim that the mitzvah of teshuva is “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, her message she 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: צדקה מני – 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, who “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.