



Who Takes the First Step?

הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֵלֶיךָ וְנִשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יִמֵּינוּ כְּקֶדֶם.

**Take us back, O L-rd, to Yourself,
and let us come back;
renew our days as of old!**

Eicha 5:21

This line is burnt into our consciousness as the concluding verse of Eicha. Except that it is not really the last verse. It's the penultimate verse. The last verse is actually much more pessimistic (כִּי אִם מָאֵס מְאֹסְתָנוּ) However, we customarily repeat the optimistic verse (הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה') so that the conclusion of Megillat Eicha already invites us to look toward rectification, in the direction of *teshuva* and the High Holidays.

What is the real content of this verse within its original context in Megillat Eicha? What is its meaning for our own daily lives?

הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֵלֶיךָ – this is a request from G-d to return us to Him. This is strange – ostensibly it is man who is expected to repent, not that G-d should return him. According to some opinions, repentance is a positive commandment. On the other hand, we pray three times a day, הַשִּׁיבֵנו אֲבִינֵנו לְתוֹרָתְךָ... וְהִחְזִירְנוּ בְּתִשְׁבּוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ “Return us, our Father, to Your Torah.” It's possible that this request here expresses the depth of the destruction – we are so deep into exile and despair we can no longer return alone. At most, we can ask G-d to return us to Him. Perhaps just the request of G-d to return us is already a significant initiation on our part.

וְנִשׁוּבָה – At first glance, this seems like a condition. We will return to G-d if – only if – He returns us to Him. If so, it is once again a passive stance on man's part – we will not take the first step; we ask G-d to do so. But perhaps we can read deeper. We are promising that if G-d takes the first step and returns us to Him – we will respond. We will return. It's not a condition, it's a

promise. What's the significance of this promise?

In any damaged relationship, the question arises – who will take the first step toward reconciliation? Who will take responsibility? Sometimes each side waits for the other to take the first step, for the other to take responsibility. If I take the first step, it might seem like I am pleading guilty. It might seem like I am giving in, admitting defeat. But there is another, more subtle consideration. I might be afraid to take the first step, lest the other side will not respond, lest I be rejected.



In any damaged relationship, the question arises – who will take the first step toward reconciliation? Who will take responsibility?

This is the importance of the promise וְנִשׁוּבָה. We tell G-d we can't take the first step. Not because we want to win the argument, but because we have no strength in the depth of the exile. Therefore, even though we can't initiate the actual first step, we initiate the request. What's more, we promise that if G-d takes the first step, we will respond. We will not reject Him.

Thus we conclude Megillat Eicha with a request for redemption which breaks

forth from great distress and difficulty. But we don't impose everything on G-d – the request includes responsibility and partnership on our side as well.

From here to the continuation of the verse: תְּחַדֵּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם, “Renew our days as of old.” We request “new days,” renewed days; and on the other hand, like days of old. How can we have “new-old” days?

It seems to me that we must read this verse as a continuation of the previous one – לָמָּה... תַּעֲזָבֵנוּ לְאָרְךָ יָמִים, “Why have You forgotten us utterly, forsaken us for so many days?”

Instead of “forsaken for so many days,” we ask to “renew our days as of old.” Perhaps we must understand the novelty of “days of old” as antithetical to the forsakenness of “many days.” The old days to which we've grown accustomed are the days upon which G-d forsook us. They are long and arduous (אָרְךָ also means long). When G-d returns to us, when He is with us, when He does not abandon us – there is a great renewal from the days upon which we were forsaken. And yet, it is a return to the days of old, when G-d was with us. Our desire stems from a memory of these days of old.

In our generation, we've merited that G-d answered our prayer and returned us to Him, to His Land. Will we keep our promise, וְנִשׁוּבָה? If so, perhaps we will merit that G-d will not abandon us for “many days,” but will “renew our days as of old.”

Rabbi Avraham Blidstein is the Rav of Tekoa and heads the Tochnit Hemshech in Midreshet Nishmat.