

Parsha Halacha - Parshat Veyelech/Shabbat Teshuvah

Six Teshuvah Lessons

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Whenever the Torah portion of Vayelech is read as a separate Torah portion, it coincides with Shabbat Teshuvah, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (see [here](#)).

In fact, this Torah portion has no Haftorah of its own, for when it is joined with the portion of Nitzavim, we read the Haftorah of Nitzavim, and when it is read separately, we read the Haftorah of Shabbat Teshuvah.

In honor of Shabbos Shuvah (so called because of the first words of the Haftorah and the need to focus on Teshuvah during this Shabbat), this article will focus on various levels of Teshuvah.

Vayelech and Teshuvah

The connection between Vayelech and Teshuvah is in the name of the Torah portion Vayelech, which means “to go.” One of the differences between a Tzadik (righteous person) and a Baal Teshuvah (penitent) is that the Tzadik serves G-d in a more gradual way, like one who walks, whereas the Ba'al Teshuvah's service to G-d is more intense and can be compared to one who leaps (Torat Menachem 5742 vol. 1 page 32).

Six Who Did Teshuvah

In the Slichot for Tzom Gedalya that begins with the words “הורית דרך תשובה You have shown a path for Teshuvah,” we read about six people (or groups of people) who did Teshuvah. They are Adam, Kayin, Reuven, Yehudah, Achav, and the people of Ninveh (in the time of the prophet Yonah). This article will focus on what we can learn from the teshuvah of each of these people.

Adam HaRishon

Adam (and Chava) sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The Talmud ([Eiruvim 18b](#)) says in the name of Rabbi Meir that “Adam, the first man, was very pious. When he saw that death was imposed as a punishment because of him, he observed a fast for a hundred thirty years, and he separated from his wife for a hundred thirty years, and wore belts of fig leaves on his body as his only garment for a hundred thirty years.”

- **Teshuvah is the Foundation of the World**

Rabbi Shlomo Kluger explains (Chochmat HaTorah, Berieshit pg. 483) that since Adam, who was hand-made by G-d, sinned, it is clear that mankind as a whole is destined to sin (from time to time). In addition, because Adam sinned and began the teshuvah process soon after he was created, this indicates that the existence of the world was founded on the ability of mankind to overcome their shortcomings and rectify them.

Kayin

After Kayin murdered his brother Hevel, G-d decreed that “נָע וְנָד תְּהִי־הָאָרֶץ You shall be a wanderer and an exile in the land” ([Gen. 4:12](#)). Kayin did a partial teshuvah when he said to G-d (ibid, verse 13), “Is my iniquity too great to bear?” As a result, G-d lessened His decree and declared that no one would be allowed to kill him for seven generations (verse 15). In addition the verse says (verse 16) that Kayin was punished in that “וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ נֹד” He dwelt in the land of Nod.” This indicates that, although originally G-d decreed that he would be both נָע וְנָד (wandering and exiled), in the end he was only punished to be נֹד wandering. This means that he only had to wander within one land but did not have to be constantly exiled from one land to another (Pesikta DeRav Kahan entry Shuvah, page 160).

- **Half-Baked Teshuvah Helps**

Kayin’s teshuvah was not complete as he never expressed true remorse for his deed. All he did was ask G-d to bear his sin, i.e., that he should not be punished too badly. As such his punishment was lessened by half (see above), but he was not completely absolved. The lesson we can learn from this is that G-d accepts even a partial teshuvah and forgives to the extent of that level of teshuvah (Tzror HaMor by [Rabbi Avaham Saba](#), on [Gen. 4:16](#))

Reuven

Reuven sinned by rearranging his father’s bed and placing it in his mother’s tent instead of leaving it in the tent of Bilhah where Yaakov had placed it after the death of Rachel. His sin was so severe that the Torah considers it as if he committed adultery (see [Gen. 35:22 in Rashi](#) and other commentaries). The Midrash ([Bereishit Rabbah 84:19](#)) says that Reuven did teshuvah by fasting and wearing sackcloth. Consequently, he was saved from a decree of death (Shivlei Haleket 18).

The First To Do Teshuvah

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah ibid) says that G-d said to Reuven “No man ever sinned before me and did teshuvah. You were the first to do so. I swear by your life that your descendant [the prophet Hoshe’a] will be the first to exhort [the Jewish people] to do teshuvah.” As the verse (Hoshe’a 14:2) says, “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd, your G-d, because you have stumbled with your sins.”

The commentaries wonder why Reuven is considered the first to do teshuvah since (as mentioned above) Adam and Kayin had already done teshuvah. In addition, Hoshe’a was not the first one to exhort the Jewish people to do teshuvah as Moshe had already done so many centuries earlier (see Deut. 4:30 and 30:2 and in many places).

- **Holy Sins**

The Kotzker Rebbe explains (Emet Ve’Emunah ot 6) that Reuven’s repentance was the first that was done for a sin committed with holy intentions. The Talmud ([Shabbat 55b](#)) says that Reuven rearranged his father’s bed in order to honor his mother as he felt she had been slighted by Yaakov’s moving his permanent dwelling to the tent of his handmaiden (Bilha) rather than Leah’s. Thus, in his mind, Reuven’s sin could be considered a mitzvah. Adam and Kayin, on the other hand, had both committed sins that were clearly sinful. When one commits a sin with holy intentions, it is more difficult to do teshuvah as one can excuse himself by saying that the sin was for a good reason.

Reuven was rewarded for his teshuvah by having a descendant who exhorted the Jewish people to do teshuva for the sins they committed with good intentions as he said, “Return, O Israel, to the L-rd, your G-d,” meaning that we should return even for sins committed for the sake of “the L-rd, your G-d.”

Yehudah

Yehudah sinned by having relations with Tamar who he thought was a prostitute (see [Gen. chapter 38](#)). Because she was in fact his former daughter-in-law, at that time this relationship was actually considered a mitzvah as it fulfilled the concept of Yibum (the Levirate marriage). However, because Yehudah was not aware of her true identity, it was regarded as a sin on his part (Ramban on Gen. 38:26). When Tamar was about to be burned alive for becoming pregnant while awaiting her Levirate marriage and Yehudah realized that he was the father of the babies, he publicly admitted it, thus saving her life. He did this even though it was very embarrassing for him (see Shivlei Haleket ibid).

- **Admitting the Truth Despite Personal Loss**

Yehudah's teshuvah was unique in that he publicly admitted to his sin despite the fact that it sullied his reputation. He did so because he recognized the truth and had the strength of character to admit it. In truth, this admission was of personal benefit to himself as he thus saved his own progeny. In point of fact, though, he could have pardoned Tamar using a different excuse instead of admitting the whole truth, but Yehudah had the trait of honesty and was willing to face embarrassment rather than obfuscate the truth (see insights on the Artscroll Mesorah [Bereishit Rabbah 99:8](#) in the name of Rabbi Shalom Schwadron.)

Achav

Achav, king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, is described as doing "that which was bad in the eyes of the L-rd more than all before him" ([Kings I 16:30](#)). He set up idols throughout the land (Yalkut Shimoni on *ibid*) and denied the existence of G-d ([Sanhedrin 102b](#)). (Achav's wife Izevel (Jezebel), who was the daughter of the king of Tyre, influenced him to commit many of these sins.) In addition he had a part in the murder of his neighbor Navot whose beautiful vineyard he then confiscated (see [Kings I 21](#)).

Nevertheless, when confronted by Elijah, the prophet, for his sins, he repented, as the verse says (*ibid* verse 27), "And it was when Achav heard these words, that he tore his garments and put sackcloth on his flesh and he fasted and he lay in the sackcloth and walked slowly (וַיֵּהָלֵךְ וַיִּהְיֶה עַל סַבְּלָתוֹ)." The Midrash (Pirkei DeRabi Eliezer 43) adds that from that day on, Achav would fast, pray, and study Torah. In addition he would have King Yehoshafat administer lashes to him. (The two were connected through marriage as Yehoshafat's son married Achav's daughter.)

G-d accepted his teshuvah and delayed the fulfillment of the prophecy that his family would be wiped out until after his death, as G-d told Elijah, the prophet, "Have you seen that Achav is submissive to me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; [rather] in the days of his son I will bring the disaster upon his house."

- **Slowly but Surely**

The question has been asked, why does the verse only mention that Achav tore his clothes, wore sackcloth, and walked slowly when in fact he also prayed, studied Torah, and had lashes administered to him? (Some say that וַיֵּהָלֵךְ means that he walked barefoot [see Shir HaShirim Rabah 1:5]).

Rabbi Eliav Edry explains (Even Sapir page 229) that the verse only mentions the aspects of teshuvah that are easily accomplished and that one can accept to keep long term. Although sudden bursts of repentance and prayer are also significant, G-d mainly wants for us to take the small steps of teshuvah that we can maintain in the long term.

The City of Nineveh

The city of Ninveh was so wicked that G-d instructed the prophet Yonah to go there and announce its impending destruction (See [Jonah 1](#)). After some escapades in the deep sea, Yonah came to Ninveh and informed the city and the king of G-d's prophecy. The king immediately decreed that "Neither man nor beast, neither cattle nor sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not graze, neither shall they drink water. And they shall cover themselves with sackcloth, both man and beast, and they shall call mightily to G-d, and everyone shall repent of his evil way and of the dishonest gain which is in their hands."

G-d accepted their teshuvah as it says, "G-d saw their deeds, that they had repented of their evil way, and the L-rd relented concerning the evil that He had spoken to do to them, and He did not do it."

- **Even a Temporary Teshuvah**

The people of Ninveh eventually reverted back to their evil ways and were once again deserving of destruction. (Later on they were active participants in the destruction of the First Beit HaMikdash.) As a result of their sins, several decades after the story of Jonah, Ninveh was sacked and destroyed by the emerging Babylonian empire (Pirkei DeRabi Eliezer 43).

G-d, who is omniscient, certainly knew that the inhabitants of Ninveh would backslide.

Nevertheless, since in Yonah's time their intentions were good, he accepted their teshuvah and forgave them. We learn from this that if a person does sincere teshuvah, it will be accepted even if in the future he may not maintain it.

May G-d assist us to sincerely and permanently return to Him!

Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom and a Gmar Chatimah Tovah!

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