



Courageous Change • Parshiyot Nitzavim-Vayeilech

Apropos to the rhythm and pulse of the Jewish calendar, *Parshat Nitzavim* is read right before Rosh Hashanah and contains a sustained meditation on repentance. Within the first ten verses of the 30th chapter, words with the grammatical root *shin – vov – bet*, meaning repentance, appear seven times. This key word first appears with the injunction to “Return (*veshavta*) to the Lord your God” (30:2) and concludes with the blessing that will be accrued when “you have returned (*tashuv*) to the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul” (30:10).

According to Nahmanides’ reading, Moses continues to clarify the proximity and place of spiritual return. Repentance “is not hidden from you, neither is it distant. It is not in heaven...Nor is it beyond the sea... This idea is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart for you to keep it” (30:11-14). The message is not necessarily about the ease of repentance, but its accessibility. Do not seek external salves to address a spiritual sickness. The responsibility for change is internal. This sense of agency carries over to the next verses where the decision between life and death, good and evil, blessing and curse, are presented. While the Israelites are adjured to “choose life” (30:14), they are ultimately empowered with the agency to choose.

Moses also alludes to the internal mechanisms of repentance: “It is in your mouth and in your heart for you to keep it” (30:14). Returning to God requires the “mouth” to confess verbally and to articulate regret. The “heart” also needs to be

engaged, but this is not a simple process. Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky in his Hasidic work *Netivot Shalom* notes that true repentance is not cosmetic. It is not about fixing external or trivial problems. Just as a sickly tree may need to be uprooted and replanted or a dilapidated house may need to be knocked down and rebuilt, repentance can require a deep overhaul of behaviors and dispositions.

Repentance of the heart requires vulnerability and the courage to confront our flaws honestly. We need to tear down the rationalizations and defenses that keep us in perpetual spiritual and moral struggle. The Latin root of the word courage is *cor*, heart. The process of change is in our hearts. It requires psychological and moral courage to engage in self-reflection and transformation. Acknowledging our failures and shortcomings has the potential to engender shame, which can be a debilitating emotion that many of us consciously or subconsciously attempt to avoid. Dr. Brené Brown, a popular researcher who studies emotion, defines shame as the “intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”

Shame is distinct from healthy feelings of guilt. Shame is a total evaluation of self: “I am bad.” Guilt acknowledges wrongdoing but focuses on action: “I did something bad.” Guilt is a healthy and adaptive negative emotion that is important for growth. Shame is paralyzing and is inversely

correlated with change and improvement. Michael Rosen, in his elucidation of the thought of Rabbi Simhah Bunim of Peshischa distinguishes between two types of emotions related to repentance in Hasidic thought. There is an adaptive and healthy bitterness that comes along with self-analysis, “a reflective sorrow when one realizes that one was unable to respond; a sense of missed opportunity.” Yet, there is “an alternative type of brokenness that leads to despair... that leads to resignation, apathy, and hopelessness” (*The Quest for Authenticity*). The former would align with guilt; the latter with shame.

In another essay, Rabbi Berezovksy notes that the word *shavta* – return – is comprised of three letters – *shin, bet, taf* – the same letters as the word *boshet* – *bet, shin, taf*. While *boshet* is usually translated as shame, it more likely aligns with guilt. *Shavta* also shares the same spelling as the word *shabbat* – *shin, bet, taf*, representing an elevated awareness of God as Creator and by extension the capacity for re-creation of the self. The inspirational and aspirational elements of the Sabbath help engender the courage necessary to challenge shame, experience healthy guilt and regret, and achieve whole-hearted repentance.

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is an assistant professor at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, Director of Leadership Scholars at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, the associate rabbi at Kingsway Jewish Center, and the author of Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being through the Weekly Parsha.

Character Challenge: How could you improve one aspect of your spiritual life if you had the courage to change?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “Shame and necessity give rise to a culture of tragedy. Guilt, repentance, and responsibility give rise to one of hope. If we have free will, we are not slaves to fate. If at the heart of reality there is a forgiving presence, then we are not condemned by guilt. “Penitence, prayer and charity avert the evil decree,” goes one of the most famous Jewish prayers. There is no fate that is inevitable, no future predetermined, no outcome we cannot avert. There is always a choice.” (*Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, p. 210).