

Shabbat Shuvah - Haazinu 5785
What to Return to in 5785?
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Shabbat Shalom.

Today is widely known as Shabbat Shuvah, which means the Shabbat of Teshuva. The repentance process is the theme of the holidays and spans from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. As you probably know, the word Teshuva means “return”. But return to what?

Today someone might answer that we are to return in a couple ways- return to G-d, return to each other, return to our best self. I want us to realize that there are several layers here and the answer to what we return to has changed over time.

Yehuda Mirsky of Brandeis wrote a nice piece about this, parts of which I will highlight here.

When we start at the beginning, the Bible, we are called to return to G-d. Our Torah reading today doesn't name it, but just a few weeks ago in Nitzavim we read about the Israelites entering the land and straying from G-d before changing their behavior and renewing the covenant.

They do this by returning to G-d.

Deuteronomy 30:10: “Ki Tashuv El Hashem - When you will return to Hashem your G-d with all your heart and soul.”

Here's another example from later in the Bible: King David famously commits adultery, and he seeks Teshuva from G-d for this great sin. When he confesses, he does so to G-d, not to anybody else, as he says in Psalm 51 “Against You alone have I sinned.” That is, he seeks forgiveness from G-d rather than from other people. We recognize where we have fallen short of G-d's expectations and confess to restore our standing with G-d.

It was only later that other people were involved in the process, as we know it today. The rabbis in the Mishna define this clearly. Here is a well-known Mishna that is worth reviewing these days in particular:

For transgressions between a person and G-d, Yom Kippur atones; however, for transgressions between a person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person.

This means that we have to apologize to the other person before we can be cleared of our misdeed. Before it was just G-d, but here we have to seek out the other and say Sorry. That's sometimes harder to tell another person than G-d. At this stage, we are now able to return to our original relationship with that other person. We had broken the trust between us, but apologizing restores that trust and returns our relationship with our friend or family to its previous state. The upshot of returning to being in good stead with G-d and with others is we return to our best selves, as we course correct to be on our best behavior again.

Mirsky continues his essay describing cosmic Teshuva, which is too mystical for me to understand, so you can ask Hazzan Sandler about that piece. But the larger point is that "return" came to include more and more over time.

What about this year, 5785? I think for American Jews in particular, many of us have returned to a greater sense of Jewish peoplehood. Of course lots of us here always felt connected, but something happened to us after October 7th. Many more American Jews sought to be with other Jews. Across the board, more attended synagogue, sent their kids to Jewish Day School, sent their kids to Jewish summer camp and the like.

Being Jewish is unique because we are both a faith and a people. We are a faith because Judaism is a set of core beliefs. Anyone not born Jewish may convert and join us.

But we are also more than a faith. We know that a Jew who does not believe in G-d is still fully Jewish for the rest of their life. Once you are in the family, you are always in. Yossi Klein Halevi finds a verse in the Book of Ruth that supports this dual identity. "Ruth tells her mother-in-law. Naomi, "your people shall be my people, and your G-d my

G-d.” That is, peoplehood and faith are the two strands that make up the double helix of Jewish identity.

In the United States, most Jews identify Judaism with their religion. We go to synagogue to be with other Jews because we don't find it in the public Square. We celebrate religious holidays and connect to Israel. We speak about those who “ belong” to that Jewish community as those who are affiliated with a synagogue, a religious institution. Hanukkah, for example, is a religious holiday for us. We do it because it's part of our faith.

Israel is different. Of course many Jews there go to synagogue, but many others do not, and being Jewish is still top of mind for them. Because in Israel Peoplehood comes to the fore. They never need to attend synagogue to learn Hebrew, learn about the Bible, learn about Jewish history, or celebrate holidays. Hanukkah over there is a Civic holiday, and while some light the candles because it's a Mitzvah, others do so because it's a Civic holiday, a national holiday, like how we celebrate Thanksgiving here because we are Americans.

After October 7th, I think many American Jews felt being Jewish was even more important than before, for the peoplehood piece, not the faith piece. We felt solidarity with the people of Israel, some of whom we know, and many of whom we don't, who live half a world away. We felt a sense of global community like never before. Many American Jews felt a renewed connection to the Jewish people this year, and that strengthened relationship, that return, is only a good thing.

We all hope and pray that many things in Israel change over the next year. That the hostages be returned home. That displaced Israelis in the North and South return to their homes. That Israelis everywhere return to a life of safety and security, though that seems far off. But I also hope that the solidarity that Jews feel toward each other remains firm in place.

Shabbat Shalom.