

Parshas Vayelech – Shabbos Shuvo – R. Jonathan Shooter (reprinted)

ו תשרי תשע"ו – 19th September 2015 – שבת פ' וילך

What's the haftara about? - The haftara of Shabbos Shuva is made up of verses from three of the twelve Minor Prophets. The verses from Hoshea contain a call to teshuva. Only in Hashem will they 'find compassion' (14:4). Then follows Hashem's reaction to teshuva and its effect on the Jews. Yet it takes a knowing person to understand, 'the ways of Hashem are just, the righteous will walk in them, but sinners will stumble on them' (14:10). For more on this verse see haftara of Parshas Vayeitzei. The verses from Yoel describe the prophets warning to repent. Catastrophe will otherwise follow in the form of a plague of locusts. He describes the nature of the fast, 'rend your heart and not your clothing' (Yoel 2:13). Hashem will accept sincere repentance and the plague will be removed. There will be a future abundance without any further plagues, and then a satisfaction not known before. Finally, the book of Micha mentions the Divine attributes of mercy. This section is the basis of tashlich as it mentions the verse 'And cast into the depths of the sea all their sins' (Micha 7:19).

What's the connection to Shabbos Shuva? - The Ten Days of Repentance are the most appropriate time for teshuva. The haftara begins with a call to teshuva, 'Shuva Yisroel', hence the name 'Shabbos Shuva'. Contained are the basic principles of teshuva, a fast day and a 'return to Me with all your heart' (Yoel 2:12). It's all in the heart; it is there that true repentance takes place. How much a person beats his chest, at what speed and with what expression on his face is irrelevant. It's the thoughts of the heart and the desire to improve there, that is important. The verses from Micha correspond to the 13 attributes of mercy mentioned in the Torah. These verses are also read following the book of Yona on Yom Kippur.

The Gemora (Yevamos 49b) cites the verse 'Seek out Hashem when He can be found' (Yishaya 55:6). However another verse says that Hashem is close 'whenever we call to Him' (Devarim 4:7). So is He close whenever we call, or only at certain times when He can be found? The Gemora answers that one verse refers to when the individual seeks Hashem out, the other verse refers to when the tzibbur seeks out Hashem. The Dubno Maggid cites a parable that explains this idea. A certain city rebelled against the king. Fearful of punishment, they selected their finest scholars and dignitaries to go to the king. At the palace there was hardly any difference between them and the king's own dignitaries and they were able to get an audience with the king easily and he forgave them all. If a common man would sin against the king, he wouldn't have a hope of getting past the palace gates. Even if he did, as an individual the king isn't as likely to forgive. If however the king is passing through some towns and he allows anyone to present their requests to him, then even the individual stands a chance.

The rest of the year, the Shechina is in the heavens and the gates of tefilla are relatively more closed and it is harder for an individual to get in. When the tzibbur band together they have some important talmidei chachomim and tzaddikim with them and nothing stands in their way. In the Ten Days of Repentance, Hashem's presence is closer to earth, and He more readily hears our prayers and accepts true repentance gladly. This is seen in the verse 'Return Yisroel until Hashem your G-d for you have stumbled through your iniquity' (14:2). This speaks to Yisroel as individuals; that they should repent now in these days set aside for teshuva. The rest of the year may contain several barriers and obstacles in the way to teshuva. However for the multitudes, the next verse says 'Take words with you and return to Hashem' (14:3). For them there is no fixed time, the way to teshuva for the masses is always open.

Getting in - Why does the verse say that Yisroel should return 'until Hashem', and not 'to Hashem'? The Dubno Maggid says that if one has a dispute with his friend over a certain matter, and says that he will take the judgement 'to' the king, this shows that he was already before the lower authorities and lost the case there. He suspects that those judges didn't do their jobs properly, and so he wanted to take it to the king himself. If one says 'I'm going to take the case until the king', this shows that at the outset he wants to skip all the lower judges and go directly to the king. The lower judges cannot overturn any of the laws of the country; they have to fulfil the laws of the land. Only the king can act over and above the law, and can choose to have mercy and do chessed. The same is true in the heavenly courts. It's only if we take the case to Hashem, that He can have mercy and overturn the laws He has made in the way the judgement usually runs. This is the meaning of the verse 'Return Yisroel until Hashem', because a person cannot be sure of his judgement, the only option he has is to go directly to Hashem for mercy.

The verse says 'for great is the day of Hashem and exceedingly awesome, who can endure it?' (Yoel 2:11). The Medrash says that this 'day' refers to Yom Kippur, when the sealing of the verdict takes place. Rav Aharon Kotler says that the essence of Yom Kippur is that the day itself is characterised by mercy, yet how then can the prophet say 'who can endure it?' Another question he poses is that the verse says 'Return Yisroel until Hashem', the name Hashem referring to His attribute of mercy. If one doesn't, then Hashem becomes 'your G-d', referring to the attribute of strict justice, and the defender becomes the accuser. We understand that an accuser can replace a defender, but how can a defender turn into an accuser? Rav Kotler answers that Hashem has given us the valuable opportunity to do teshuva. He gave us Yom Kippur, a lifeline to grasp onto. If a person doesn't take the initiative and return to Hashem, then there will be a great accusation against him. The attribute of mercy is now replaced with additional accusations. It is regarding this that the prophet says 'who can endure it', the defender becomes an accuser.

How to succeed - The verse in Micha says 'He bears iniquity and overlooks transgression' (Micha 7:5). The Chofetz Chaim says that there is a way that can cause Hashem to overlook a person's sins. If a person overlooks the offences people commit against him, then Hashem will overlook those done against him. The Chofetz Chaim says that we have to realise the severity of the punishment for our sins, and the seriousness of the judgement. Then if we consider that a person will accept any amount of humiliation to avoid a financial loss, and certainly to avoid physical harm, then how much more so should he accept what others do to him if it could ward off heaps of Gehinnom. The Chofetz Chaim goes on to say that if his sentence would just be lightened somewhat by this, then it would be worthwhile. If he will be forgiven for all his sins, even those that put him in the category of evil, then as long as he intends not to repeat them, then Hashem will overlook his sins. The most ideal way to do this is by overlooking those sins done against you that are done intentionally. Then ones own intentional sins will also be overlooked. This trait can save a person from death. The Gemora (Rosh Hashana 17a) says that Rav Huna was very ill and Rav Papa came to visit him. When he saw how serious the condition was he instructed Rav Huna's family to prepare burial shrouds. In the end however, Rav Huna recovered. Rav Papa was very embarrassed until Rav Huna told him that indeed he was right, he was destined for death, but at the last minute, Hashem spared him because he overlooked that done to him.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz says that there is a condition for this to work. The gemora says that this only works when he makes himself like *shirayim*, like leftovers. In the same way that leftovers aren't important, so too when he overlooks the bad done to him, it has to be only because he considers himself lowly, and it is done out of humility. If he does it because of other reasons, then his overlooking won't have the effect it should and he won't be forgiven for his sins. Therefore, says Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, we have to work on our trait of humility, and with that we will merit a favourable verdict.