

Shabbat Shuvah 5777

The 'work' of Teshuvah

I've been talking a lot about the 'work' of this period of the Jewish year. It's the time in which we conduct a deep internal auditing of ourselves with a view to making ourselves better. This work is called Teshuvah, often translated as 'return' or 'repentance' but as many of you know, I prefer to think of it as 'change'. And making things right with those we have hurt, understanding where we still need to grow, making confession, ultimately trying to change ourselves – none of that is easy. Teshuvah is pretty demanding work.

Which means that today embodies a paradox. Shabbat is when we should not be working. And yet, it is Shabbat shuvah, *the* Shabbat of making Teshuvah, as the Haftarah (thanks Rebecca) indicates.

How can we resolve this paradox? I think the clue lies in the opening of the haftarah.

It begins '*shuvah yisrael AD adonai*' AD suggests distance. We've seen it before – it was in the long list of curses we read a couple of weeks ago, at the end of Ki Tavo, with a description of the people in the utmost exile, at the deepest point of despair – and from there, they come back. AD is a loooooong way. And a long way means hard work.

But only two sentences further away in the haftarah we have '*khu imakhem devarim v'shuvu EL adonai*' EL seems to be a bit closer than AD.

This made me think of a hassidic story. Once upon a time there was a king; and the king had a son. And one day the prince had an argument with his father. Goes far, far away – so far that when he calmed down and thought about coming back, he couldn't bear covering that distance again. So he sent a herald to his father – and the herald returned with a message from the king – you start walking and I'll start walking – and I'll meet you halfway. Do your best and I will come to you.

We find the same idea in one of my favorite *midrashim*, on the verse from the Song of Songs that reads, 'open the door for me, my beloved' - Rabbi Yissa taught: The HBO said to Israel, my children! Open for me just a single opening of teshuvah, like the eye of a needle – and I will open portals for you that carts and caravans could drive through.

The story and the midrash have the same moral. The story is a symbolic story, of course. The king is God, the prince is us, of course. We are not alone in this work. If we begin, then something else – something greater than we are – will take over the process and meet us halfway. And so, on this first Shabbat of the year, we don't have to work. The message is that we only have to take the first step.

Again according to the haftarah, we do that by using words.

We might not know what to say as we prepare for YK. It might feel overwhelming or intimidating. But the lesson of today, of Shabbat Shuvah, is that one way to achieve teshuvah is to identify one word – only one – and have the faith that will begin the process. That single word, if I can offer a metaphor of my own, is the key that will unlock all the gates of teshuvah. Failing everything else, I find myself with the image of offering whatever is in my head like a handful of foreign change, and knowing that something greater than I am will know what to pick.

We only have to begin.

See you on Yom Kippur

Shabbat shalom