

Repentance and Redemption¹

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After the chapter of Reproof with its message of dire retribution and the making of the Covenant with its accompanying curses come words of consolation in which are clarified the relationship between Teshuvah (repentance) and Geulah (redemption). Here is the relevant passage (Devarim 30: 1-10):

And it shall come to pass when all these things befall you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which the Lord your God has driven you. (1)

And you shall return unto the LORD your God and hearken to His voice according to all I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul. (2)

Then the LORD your God will turn your captivity and have compassion upon you and turn and gather you from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. (3)

If any of you that are dispersed be in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there will the LORD your God gather you and from there fetch you. (4)

And the LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. And He will do you good, and multiply you above your fathers. (5)

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your seed to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you mayest live. (6)

¹ The following was reprinted from Nehama Leibowitz's "Studies in Devarim," *parashiyot Nitzavim-Vayelekh*.

And the LORD your God will put all these curses upon your enemies, and on them that hate you, that persecute you. (7)

And you shall return and hearken to the voice of the LORD, and do all His commandments, which I command you this day. (8)

And the LORD your God will make you over-abundant in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your land for good: for the LORD will turn again to rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers. (9)

If you shall hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes, which are written in this book of the law: if you turn unto the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (10)

Commentators have already drawn attention to the unusual structure and arrangement of this passage. We are not confronted by the normal progressive arrangement of: sin – punishment – repentance – redemption. The motif word “turn” or “return” (Hebrew-*shuv*¹) indicates a reciprocal movement: (2) “you shall return unto the LORD”: (3) “Then the LORD shall return”: (8) “and you shall return and hearken to the voice of the LORD”: (9) “if you shall turn unto the LORD.”

We see how this reciprocity recurs, from below to above (i.e. man to God) and from above to below and then again from below to above and above to below. It may well be asked: Which comes first? The return of Israel to their God or the return of God to His people? Is Teshuvah before Geulah or Geulah before Teshuvah?

Arama has observed that the process of redemption is not one single act, a leap from the abyss of sin to the pinnacle of purity. This is not the case, and the Torah describes it otherwise. In his *Akedat Yitzhak*, Arama elaborates on this theme, finding in Isaiah’s words on individual repentance the clue to national repentance:

Isaiah stated: “Let the wicked forsake his path and the iniquitous man his thoughts and return to the LORD.” We may ask: Surely if the wicked has forsaken his path, why “return to the LORD?” Surely the forsaking of the wicked path is itself repentance? But there are two stages – the first preliminary movement back to God which is furthered but feebly and with difficulty, but which is sufficient to leave the evil path behind, and the second, achieved after a greater effort, as momentum increases to attain the opposite extreme, as progress is made to draw near to God...

Arama now proceeds to explain our passage dealing with the repentance of the nation, beginning with the darkness of exile. He notes how the passage opens with a demand to the people to return to God:

They have to make the first step and arouse themselves from the depths of their lethargy and despair. Until they have aroused themselves to the best of their ability “in the land of their enemies”, they cannot hope for any encouragement, any redemptive sign from God. If that but small amount of moral initiative is not forthcoming, they will progressively become demoralised altogether. On the other hand, their first step in the right direction is immediately reciprocated, and “the LORD your God will return your captivity.”

This redemptive action must be immediately followed by further spurt of repentance “and you shall return and hearken to the voice of the LORD.” This second act of repentance will be followed by a further flow of Divine Blessing- redemption: “the LORD will make you over abundant in all the work of your hand.” This is to be climaxed by a final and yet stronger spurt of redemption: “if you shall return to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Strengthen yourself in your weakness to make a beginning to return “to Him” and hearken to His voice “according to all I commanded you this day, you and

your children with all your heart and with all your soul.” At least, let your hearkening be willing and devoted, even if, at this juncture, while you still suffer under the yoke of the Gentiles, your deeds cannot be perfect: but do your best in the circumstances...

The beginning of Teshuvah is to “bethink yourself among all the nations whither the LORD hath driven you and return to the LORD” – even when you suffer under their heavy yoke, you should bethink yourselves of your spiritual future. If you but open like the eye of a needle, He will open for you like the portals of a hall. “He will turn your captivity, gather you from the uttermost parts of heaven and bring you to land...”

Arama thus describes the first stage of repentance. With his own experience of the inroads made by the Inquisition as the Spanish Expulsion he foresaw how this return of Israel to God would also be followed by a healing of the people’s internal wounds, as the rifts between one section and another brought about by the dispersion would be bridged and distant brothers united both physically and spiritually.

Arama thus describes the gradual process of repentance, how it gains momentum and each new stage is passed and aptly finds all this respected in the structure and unusual repetitions of our passage. The first stage is described in verse 2, where the initial spiritual awakening of the heart is alluded to. The whole hearted and whole-souled will is there, but practical deeds are still lacking: “you shall return to the LORD and hearken to His voice...with all your heart and with all your soul.” Our passage ends with a description of the final stage of repentance where the return to God is whole hearted and whole-souled in thought and deed – “to *keep* his commandments and His statues written in the Torah.”

Between these beginning and final stages comes the intervention of the LORD, in redeeming them from the

bondage of exile, since repentance “with all your heart and soul” is inconceivable without the removal of various obstacles.² The nations itself cannot redeem itself from all of them single-handed. But God will not lend His helping hand unless the first steps are taken by the nation itself in at least returning to God, in its heart and soul alone. In this connection, Arama cites the dispute between the Talmudic sages as to which comes first: Teshuvah or Geulah.

Rabbi Nathan stated: Repentance is great since it brings Redemption nearer, as it is stated: “do justice and perform righteousness for my salvation is near and come to pass.” R. Eliezer stated: Repentance is great because it follows immediately after Redemption, as it is stated: “And the redeemer shall come to Zion and to those who return from transgression.”

Both views, Arama observes, “are the words of the Living God.”

According to Rabbi Nathan, Teshuvah must precede Geulah. According to R. Eliezer, Teshuvah comes only after Geulah and is impossible before that. According to Arama both views can be reconciled, since Teshuvah comes in different stages and requires salvation and a helping hand.

Notes

¹ For details see previous chapter.

² The same idea that full repentance is impossible in the unnatural conditions of persecutions and suffering in the Exile is found in Maimonides (Code, Teshuvah 9 and Introduction to Helek) “It is impossible for man to perform the commandments properly when he is sick and famished or thirsty of in time of war or siege. God therefore promised the removal of all these obstacles and that we should enjoy health and tranquility...”