

A T'shuva (repentance) and Forgiveness – Two Sides of One Coin: Reframing the Past and Shaping the Future

I. The Root and Meanings of T'shuva

The three letters root of T'shuva is ש.ו.ב.

Heshiv – הָשִׁיב – (third body, masculine, Hif-eel) – returned something back to its origin:

וְשָׁב אֶת כָּל הָרְכָשׁ וְגַם אֶת לוֹט אָחִיו וּרְכָשׁוֹ הַשֵּׁיב וְגַם אֶת הַנְּשִׁים וְאֶת הָעָם :

Genesis 14:16: He **returned** all the possessions; he also **returned** his kinsman Lot and his possessions, and the women and the rest of the people.

Heshiv – הָשִׁיב – (third body, masculine, Hif-eel) – responded to someone's words:

חֲכָמוֹת שָׂרוֹתֶיהָ תַעֲנִינָהּ אִם הִיא תֵשִׁיב אֲמַרְיָהּ לָהּ :

Through the window peered Sisera's mother, Behind the lattice she whined: "Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?"

Judges 5:29: Her wise ladies answered; She, too, responded to her own wondering thoughts:

"They must be dividing the spoil they have found: A damsel or two for each man, Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera, Spoil of embroidered cloths, A couple of embroidered cloths Round every neck as spoil."

Heshiv – הָשִׁיב – (third body, masculine, Hif-eel) – answered a question:

וְאָרָא וְאִין אִישׁ וּמַאֲלָה וְאִין יוֹעֵץ וְאִשְׁמָלָם וְיִשְׁיבוּ דְבָר :

I looked around and there is not a man, nor an advisor; Not a person that I can ask and he can answer my question.

T'shuva – תְּשׁוּבָה – answer to a question.

תְּשׁוּבָה נִצְחָת הַשִּׁיבָה כְּנִסְתַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְנָבִיא

Bavli Sanhedrin 105a: The congregation of Israel answered with a convincing response to the prophet.

T'shuva – תְּשׁוּבָה – repentance.

אָמַר לָהּ נָבִיא לְיִשְׂרָאֵל חֲזְרוּ בְּתִשְׁבָּה

Ibid, ibid: The prophet said to the Jewish people: Repent...

Shuv – שׁוּב – Again (and again, more than twice).

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂאוֹל חָטֵאתִי שׁוּב בְּנֵי דָוִד

I Samuel 26:21: Saul said, “I am in the wrong, again, my son David.

What is the connection between the various meanings of the word T’shuva? Why does the Hebrew language use the same word for these seemingly different meaning?

Deuteronomy 30:1-3 is a perfect example of the use of the root ש.ו.ב. In its multiple meanings. This repetition, even though has different meaning each time the root is used adds significant depth and meaning to these verses:

וְהָיָה כִּי יָבֹאוּ עֲלֶיךָ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ וְהִשְׁבַּתְתָּ אֶל לְבָבְךָ בְּכָל הַגּוֹיִם
אֲשֶׁר הִדִּיחֶנּוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה:

וְשִׁבַתְתָּ עַד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹל כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּנְךָ הַיּוֹם וּבָנִיתָ לְבָבְךָ וּבָכַל נַפְשְׁךָ:

וְשׁוּב יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת שְׁבוּתֶךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשׁוּב וּקְבַצְךָ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפִּיצְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה:

When all these words and things, befall upon you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you – you will **return** them into your heart [take them to heart] amidst all the various nations to which the LORD your God has banished you,

You will **return-repent** to the LORD your God, and will attentively listen to his voice, heeding to His commandments that I am enjoining upon you today – you and your children – with all your heart and soul,

then the LORD your God will **return** to him [take back, accept] your **return-repent** and will have mercy on you; He will **return** you to be together [as and where you have been in the past] from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.

II. Biblical and Talmud quotes

Lamentations 5:21:

הַשִּׁיבֵנו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁוֵבָה חַדְשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם:

Return us to You, O LORD, and we will **return-repent**; Renew our days as of old (in the East).

Bavli B'rakhot 34b:22:

דָּאָמַר רַבִּי אֲבָהוּ: מְקוֹם שֶׁבַעֲלֵי תְשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין — צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִים אֵינָם עוֹמְדִין, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "שְׁלוֹם שְׁלוֹם לְרַחוּק וְלִקְרוֹב". "לְרַחוּק" בְּרִישָׁא, וְהַדֵּר "לִקְרוֹב".

Rabbi Abbahu said: In the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand, as it is stated (Isiah 57:19): “Peace, peace upon him who is far and him who is near.” Peace and greeting is extended first to **him who is far**, the penitent, and only **thereafter** is peace extended to **him who is near**, the full-fledged righteous.

Interesting to put the context to this statement – by looking at the rest of the quoted verse: Shalom (peace, wholeness), Shalom (doubling the word peace makes it even more meaningful, maybe different kind of peace) [first] to the one who is far, and [then] to the one who is near, said the Lord, and I will heal him [according to the same order?].

Why is that?

Rambam gives us an explanation (Mishne Torah, Laws of Repentance, 7:4):

Let not a penitent man (Ba-al T'shuva) imagine that he is far removed from the Righteous (Tzadik) on account of the iniquities and sins which he had committed. In truth, it is not so: The Creator considers him beloved and desirable, as if he had never known of any sin. Moreover, his reward is great; for, after having partaken of the taste of sin, he separated himself therefrom and conquered his passion. The sages said: "**In the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand**" as if saying: "their degree is above the degree of those who ever did not sin, because it is more difficult for them to subdue their passion than for the others.

The value and merits of Repentance – Bavli Yoma 86:

אָמַר רַבִּי חָמָא (בַּר) חֲנִינָא : גְּדוּלַּת תְּשׁוּבָה שְׂמֵבִיאָהּ רַפְאוֹת לְעוֹלָם, שְׁנֵאָמַר : "אֲרָפָא מְשׁוּבְתָם אוֹהֲבִים נְדָבָה".

Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said: **Great is repentance, as it brings healing to the world, as it is stated: "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely"** ([Hosea 14:5](#)), which teaches that repentance from sin brings healing *both to those who repent and to the world. More about this concept when we learn the teaching of Rambam.*

תְּנִינָא, הִיָּה רַבִּי מְאִיר אוֹמֵר : גְּדוּלַּת תְּשׁוּבָה, שְׂבִשְׁבִיל יַחֲיד שְׁעֵשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה — מוֹחְלִין לְכָל הָעוֹלָם כּוּלּוֹ, שְׁנֵאָמַר : "אֲרָפָא מְשׁוּבְתָם אוֹהֲבִים נְדָבָה כִּי שָׁב אִפִּי מִמֶּנּוּ". "מֵהֶם" לֹא נֵאָמַר, אֶלֶּא "מִמֶּנּוּ".

It was taught in a *baraita* that **Rabbi Meir** would say: **Great is repentance because the entire world is forgiven on account of one individual who repents, as it is stated: "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for My anger has turned away from him"** ([Hosea 14:5](#)). **It does not say: From them, i.e., from the sinners, but "from him," i.e., from that individual.** Because he repented, everyone will be healed.

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן : גְּדוּלַּת תְּשׁוּבָה (שְׂמֵקֶרֶת) אֶת הַגְּאוּלָּה, שְׁנֵאָמַר : "וַיָּבֵא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֵל וּלְשָׁבִי פָּשַׁע בְּיַעֲקֹב", מָה טַעַם "וַיָּבֵא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֵל" — מְשׁוּם דְּ"שָׁבִי פָּשַׁע בְּיַעֲקֹב".

Rabbi Yonatan said: **Great is repentance, which hastens the redemption, as it is stated: "And a redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who repent from transgression in Jacob"** ([Isaiah 59:20](#)). **What is the reason that "a redeemer will come to Zion?" It is because there are "those who repent from transgression in Jacob."**

אָמַר רַבִּי שְׂמוּאֵל בַּר נַחֲמָנִי אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן : גְּדוּלַּת תְּשׁוּבָה שְׂמֵאֲרַכֶּת שְׁנוֹתָיו שֶׁל אָדָם, שְׁנֵאָמַר : "וַיִּבְשׁוּב רָשָׁע מִרְשָׁעוֹ (חַיּוֹ) יַחֲיֶה".

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said that **Rabbi Yonatan** said: **Great is repentance, which lengthens the years of a person's life, as it is stated: "When the wicked man turns from his wickedness that he has committed, and does that which is lawful and right, he will preserve his life"** ([Ezekiel 18:27](#)).

The summary of repentance – all that one must say and mean: Bavli Yoma 87b:

אמר [מר זוטרא](#) אבל אמר: "אבל אנחנו חטאנו" — תו לא צריך.

Mar Zutra said: if he said the words: **But we have sinned, he need not say anything further** because that is the essential part of the confession.

III. Liturgy Quotes

From U'Netaneh Tokef (IMHO – the cornerstone of the High Holidays prayers):

ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזירה.

And Repentance, Prayer and Righteousness avert the severity of the decree.

The source for this statement comes from B'reshit Rabbah 44:12, which in turn relies on II Chronicles 7:14. Let's see the verse first:

וּיִכְנְעוּ עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר נִקְרָא שְׁמִי עֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְפַּלְלוּ וַיִּבְקְשׂוּ פָנַי וַיִּשְׁבוּ מִדַּרְכֵיהֶם הָרָעִים וְאֲנִי אֶשְׁמַע מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶסְלַח לְחַטְאֵתָם וְאֶרְפָּא אֶת אֲרָצָם:

when My people, who bear My name, humble themselves, pray, and seek My Countenance and turn from their evil ways, I will hear in My heavenly abode and forgive their sins and heal their land.

רבי יודן בשם רבי אלעזר אמר שלשה דברים מבטלים גזרות רעות, ואלו הם, תפלה וצדקה ותשובה, ושלישתן נאמרו בפסוק אחד, ה' הוא דכתיב (דברי הימים ב ז, יד): ויכנעו עמי אשר נקרא שמי עליהם ויתפללו, זו תפלה. (דברי הימים ב ז, יד): ויבקשו פני, הרי צדקה, כמא דאת אמר (תהלים יז, טו): אני בצדק אחזה פניך. (דברי הימים ב ז, יד): וישבו מדרכיהם הרעים, זו תשובה, ואחר כך (דברי הימים ב ז, יד) ואסלח לחטאתם וארפא את ארצם.

Rabbi Yudan in the name of Rabbi El-Azar says: three things avert the severity of the bad decrees, and they are: Prayer (T'filah) and Acts of Righteousness (Tz'daka) and Repentance (T'shuva). All these three are said in a single verse (II Chronicles 7:14), saying: "when My people, who bear My name, humble themselves, pray"

- that is Prayer; "seek My Countenance" – that is Righteousness, as it is said (Psalms 17:15): "I, in Righteousness, will vision Your Countenance"; "and turn from their evil ways" – this is Repentance (T'shuva). And then – "I will hear in My heavenly abode and forgive their sins and heal their land".

From a sermon I gave last year on this very verse:

In the Un'taneh Tokef prayer we envision God as the King, the Ultimate Supreme Judge that assigns each of us to a "good" or "bad" destiny. We chant together "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die." Followed by a series of questions: "Who by fire and who by water? Who in hunger and who by thirst? Who by thunder and who by plague?" Reading these verses, the feeling that we have no role in our destiny is climaxed.

I'd like to suggest a little different reading, active tense rather than passive: "Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I will write the Book of my own Life".

From this perspective, we need to understand the prayers as poetic metaphors, that are meant to draw our attention to God, that gifted us with the free will and ability to make choices and inspire us. When we pray, we are more likely to change ourselves through actions and thus influence our community and the surroundings that we interact with, ultimately causing the change of reality.

The very same prayer offers us a path how to conduct our lives forward:

"T'shuva, T'fillah and Tz'dakah mitigate the severity of the decree."

The decree, death, is already known and shall happen to all of us. The severity of the decree is not the eventual dying one way or another but how we will feel when we get there, a result of stocktaking of what we have done till then.

From Ne'ilah Service

אֱתָהּ נוֹתֵן יָד לְפוֹשְׁעִים וַיִּמְיָנָהּ פְּשׁוּטָה לְקַבֵּל שְׂבִיִּם. וַתִּלְמְדֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְהִתְנַדֵּוֹת לְפָנֶיךָ עַל כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ, לְמַעַן נַחְדֵּל מֵעֶשְׂק גְּדִינוּ, וַתִּקְבְּלֵנוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ

You reach out Your hand to transgressors, and Your right hand is extended to receive those who [truly] repent. You have taught us, Adonay, our God, to confess before You all our iniquities and transgressions so that we may refrain from the injustice, exploitation and oppression of our hands; so that You will completely accept our repentance and returning back before You.

The following prayer is an accurate quote of Rabbi Hamnuna, cited in Yoma Tractate 87b,6:

אֱלֹהֵי. עַד שֶׁלֹּא נִוצַרְתִּי אֵינִי כְדָאִי, וְעַכְשָׁו שֶׁנִּוצַרְתִּי כְּאֵלוֹ לֹא נִוצַרְתִּי. עָפָר אָנִי בְּחַיִּי. קֵל וְחֶמֶר בְּמִיתָתִי. הֲרִי אָנִי לְפָנֶיךָ כְּכֹלִי מְלֵא בִּישָׁה וּכְלֵמָה. יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי שֶׁלֹּא אֶחְטָא עוֹד. וַיִּמָּחַטְאֵתִי לְפָנֶיךָ מְרַק בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ הַרְבִּיִּם. אֲבָל לֹא עַל יְדֵי יְסוּרִים וְחֻלִּים רְעִים :

God, before I was created, I was unworthy [to be created]. And now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed. I am like dust while I live, how much more so when I am dead. Here I am before You like a vessel filled with shame and disgrace, humiliation. May it be Your will, Adonay, my God, and the God of my ancestors, that I shall sin no more, and the sins I have committed before You, cleanse them in Your abundant mercies; but not through suffering and severe illness.