

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



GOD'S RETURN POLICY

T'SHUVA

What stores have the best return policies? Some vendors cheerfully take any product the customer presents; others make you feel like you're trying to cross a border from a totalitarian regime, and you never have all the required documents. God is like the first category. Our Maker wants us to Return; the Divine arms remain wide open 24/7, until 120.

There are many verses describing the beauty, efficacy and, even, inevitability of T'SHUVA, the 'return'. For example:

When all these things have happened, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you take them to heart in any of the nations where HaShem, your God, has dispersed you, and you shall return to HaShem, your God, and you shall obey his voice according to all that I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul (D'varim 30:1-2).

And even more famously: Return, O Israel, to HaShem your God, for you

have stumbled because of your wrongdoing... I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely: for My anger is turned away from them (Hoshei'a 14:1 & 4).

The glory of God's 'return policy' is also praised by our great thinkers. The Rambam declared: T'shuva is great for it draws humanity close to the Sh'china... T'shuva brings near those who were far removed. Previously, this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed, and abominable. Now, he is beloved and desirable, close, and dear... How exalted is the level of T'shuva! Previously, the sinner was separate from God, the Lord of Israel, as Yeshayahu states: Your sins separate between you and your God (59:2). One would call out to God without being answered as (1:12) states: Even if you pray many times, I will not hear... Now, this one is connected to the SHECHINA as D'varim 4:4 states: And you who cling to God, your Lord... (Laws of Repentance 7:6-7).

But the greatest declaration of God's infinite capacity for forgiveness is basically the mantra for this season of our year: HaShem, HaShem, benevolent God, Who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness and truth, preserving loving kindness for

thousands, forgiving iniquity and rebellion and sin... (Sh'mot 34:6-7). These are the Thirteen Attributes of God's Mercy. The funny thing is that we're sure that there are 13 traits. We just aren't sure how exactly to count them. The thorniest problem is that we don't know how to count the repetition of God's Name at the beginning of the verse.

Rashi claims, in this controversy, that these two names are themselves actually separate Attributes. The first HASHEM is God before someone has sinned; the second is God, Who is there for humanity after a sin has been committed.

What exactly does that mean? How are these different qualities? Isn't God immutable? Well, yes, but Rav Soloveitchik has a suggestion:

When man sins, he creates a distance between himself and God, and becomes in Rambam's words 'separated from the Lord, God of Yisrael... But who, then, will take care of the sinner after the Holy One removes Himself, and the sinner is left alone? ... Someone must give him a hand... Who is it that extends a hand to the sinner?... The second Holy Name is ready to listen even after the first has shut the Gates of Glory through which man passes to stand before his Maker... Only the

Name signifying the God who does not abandon man after he sins can lead him back, and extricate him from the dark dungeon of iniquity (On Teshuva, p. 84-88).

Cool! That does give meaning to the Rashi. However, there is a fascinating and original alternate approach offered by the Pachad Yitzchak, HaRav Yitzchak Hutner. He doesn't begin with the verse, but with the famous Talmudic description of the scene when God informed Moshe of the Big 13: Rabbi Yochanan said: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this, as it would be insulting to God's honor. The verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moshe the structure of the order of the prayer (Rosh HaShana 17b).

Rav Hutner asks why does God have to teach Moshe Rabbeinu how to daven? Isn't there a distinct mitzva for T'FILA (V'AVADTEM ET HASHEM ELOKEICHEM)? The Pachad Yitzchak has an amazing answer, which is based on a totally different, but even more famous event. When the Jews had their backs to Yam Suf, God tells Moshe not to pray (AL TITZAK EILAI). Why not? Because the splitting of the Sea was conditioned into the act of

Creation (Sh'mot Rabba 14:27). We don't pray for things which are built into the very fabric of the Cosmos. We pray about things which are mutable or have variables.

T'SHUVA shouldn't be a 'prayable' issue because it is one of the seven things created before B'REISHIT (P'sachim 54a). So, God must inform Moshe that there is a prayer process for T'SHUVA. Now, we can understand the two names of God: one is for the regular Mitzva of prayer, the other is for the unique prayer experience of T'SHUVA. Since T'SHUVA is a unique spiritual experience, it has its own form of addressing God. As Rav Hutner said: Just as there are prayers which work within the world of reciting the first HaShem, so, too, there is the order of prayers which function in the realm of the second HaShem. This idea is so profound and unknowable that it required a special MACHAZEH (prophetic vision) to reveal it (Pachad Yitzchak, Yom Kippur, 1:8),

During this T'SHUVA season it's very important to remember that God built this miraculous 'return policy' into the very foundations of our universe. We'd be ungrateful not to avail ourselves of this service. G'MAR CHATIMA TOVA! 