

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



Nitzavim-Vayeilech

RETURN TO WHERE YOU ONCE BELONGED

Nu, what do you say when everything's been said? Well, you say it again. Rav Soloveitchik based his famous T'SHUVA addresses on the Rambam's Laws of T'SHUVA, and he used to say that he knew that they had covered this ground before, but there is no study session which doesn't uncover new insights (EIN BEIT MEDRASH B'LI CHIDUSH). Well, I hope that I can discover a new insight when analyzing a couple of verses we read on the Shabbat before Rosh HaShana every year.

Here are the three verses I will endeavor to clarify:

When you shall experience all these things - the blessing and the curse that I have set before you-and you shall reflect (HASHEIVOTA) among the various nations to which your God the Eternal has banished you, and you turn back (V'SHAVTA) to your God the Eternal, and you and your children heed God's command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then your God the Eternal will restore (V'SHAV) your fortunes and take you back in love.

[God] will bring you together again from all the peoples where your God the Eternal has scattered you. (D'varim 30:1-3).

These verses are hard to translate, because the critical word in this section is the Hebrew word SHAVA. Now what does that word mean? Well, normally we would say 'return', but in the translation above it is rendered: reflect, turn back, and restore. It's a conundrum.

The translation of HASHEIVOTA as 'reflect' comes from Rav Aryeh Kaplan. He suggests both here and earlier in chapter 4 that when the word SHAVA is used with 'you heart' (L'VAVECHA) it is referring to the intellectual princess of reflection. It suggests turning inward to contemplate, because in the ancient world the heart was usually considered the seat of intellect, not emotion.

Also, the word SHAVA is used as both an active verb of bringing an item back, as in HASHAVAT AVEIDA (bring back a lost object). But it is also used widely as the verb for repenting, a return from the realm of sin.

So, is our little section about a physical return or a spiritual return?

Well, both.

The Netziv points out that the physical return to Eretz Yisrael is also a spiritual enterprise, because part of the reason for the return is to

perform Mitzvot. After all, a majority of Mitzvot can only be performed in the Holy Land. Therefore we cannot separate the physical return from the spiritual return.

Even though I appreciate the Netziv's point, I must state unequivocally that for me the process of making ALIYA is a most spiritual task. I will never forget landing at Ben Gurion Airport as an OLEH CHADASH. I know that we usually translate OLEH as 'immigrant', but I felt much more like a pilgrim. I wasn't becoming a stranger in a strange land; I was coming HOME.

We have clear references to an ingathering of exiles in our verses. This entails a most physical act or movement, but the discussion of returning in or of the heart sounds much more like T'SHUVVA, repentance. It seems that because of our firm and ancient connection to Eretz Yisrael, we cannot separate physical return from spiritual return.

The next problem to discuss is whether the emphasis in our verses is one of an individual's 'return' or a national ingathering. Again, I think that the answer is both.

All of the appearances of the verb SHAVA are in the singular. But we could be addressing the nation, which would require a singular verb. On the other hand, the discussion of reflection in one's heart does sound like the

behavior of an individual.

The Ramban makes a valiant effort to place our verses into a historical framework. He discusses the return of the Ten Lost Tribes preceding another ingathering of the tribes of Yehuda and Binyamin. He views the entirety of our section as a detailed prophecy about the Messianic Age. All the references are to concrete historical or future events. I find his undertaking fascinating, but not convincing. My biggest problem with his explanation is his insistence that Ten Tribes must return before the two tribes, but we already had a return of the two tribes under Ezra and Nechemia. Does that major event not count?

When all is said and done I find myself in a quandary. I love the idea that our nation's future redemption is being foretold and promised. On the other hand, I usually apply these verses to my private, personal struggle to do T'SHUVVA every year, and I'm thankful to read this as part of my High Holiday effort to improve.

I think Rabbi Yehuda Amital z"l also struggled with this issue, and in 2004 during the second Intifada came up with, I believe, a powerful approach to the issue. He explained that through most Jewish history, people primarily thought about their own safety and spiritual efforts on the Days of Awe, but:

This year (2004) especially, we are in a period in which our concern is not for our own personal survival. In Israel we aren't worried about "What will happen to me?" Our main worry is: What will happen to Am Yisrael? What will happen to the State of Israel? In such a period, a person thinks: When there are such great worries, what does it matter if I'm a little better or a little worse? Is that really the issue - my personal problems? There are huge national problems! ... The final redemption is an exalted level, but first there is the redemption on the everyday level. We, with our personal t'shuva, are doing something for all of Israel. Our t'shuva is not cut off from what is happening to Am Yisrael; it is all connected! Therefore, our personal introspection is not divorced from national concerns. It represents, in fact, active participation in the issues and concerns of the nation as a whole. Let us pray to God that He give us the strength to remedy our faults and to return to Him wholeheartedly. May the Holy One send forgiveness, pardon and atonement to us and to all of Israel, and inscribe both Am Yisrael and each one of us for a good year.

You see, the ambiguity in our verses gives us the power to decide where our spiritual emphasis must lie. Most years we just work on ourselves, but in times like these that's not enough.

Let us all resolve to dedicate this year's T'SHUVA effort to the safety and success of our people both here in Eretz Yisrael and throughout the world! 