

the sense that we can shape our lives by choosing where to invest our focus and intention, by choosing which forms to follow and which to let go.

This is not a linear process, not something that takes a clear nor even discernible path. Rather it happens in fits and starts. Sometimes it may not even seem to be happening at all. But the gates are in fact open, and if our intention is aligned with this spiritual reality, then transformation also opens as a real possibility, even if it doesn't manifest itself right away.

Parshat Netzavim is the beginning of the grand coda of the Torah. It is usually read the week before Rosh Hashanah, and since no new readings are introduced until after the holiday, Netzavim hangs over the Ten Days of Teshuvah like a ghostly presence. This is fortunate, as it happens, because Parshat Netzavim addresses Teshuvah itself, the process of active transformation we experience during the ten days, more directly and to greater effect than any other portion of the Torah.

And it shall come to pass when all these things have come
upon you,

The blessings and the curses that I have set before you,
And they will rise up again [*ha-shev-ota*] in your heart
Among the nations to whom the Lord your God has
driven you

And you will return [*v-shav-ta*] to the Lord your God
and listen to God's voice. . . .

Then the Lord your God will turn [*v-shav*] your captivity
And have compassion on you and turn [*v-shav*]

And gather you in from all the nations where you have been scattered. . . .

And God will circumcise the foreskin of your heart
So that you can love God with all your heart and with all
your soul. . . .

And you will turn [*ta-shuv*] and you will hear the voice of
God

And do all the commandments which I have commanded
you this day. . . .

And God will turn [*ya-shuv*] and rejoice over you again for
the good,

The way God rejoiced over your ancestors. . . .

If you turn [*ta-shuv*] to the Lord your God with all your
heart and with all your soul. . . .

DEUTERONOMY 30:1-10

The most apparent aspect of this passage is that the word-root *shuv* (to turn, to return, to repent — the root of the word Teshuvah) is repeated seven times. As we have noted, this sort of ritual repetition signifies that the word is extremely significant. Here it illuminates several important facets of the process of Teshuvah.

First of all, we learn that Teshuvah can arise in the most hopeless circumstances. In fact it often seems to begin that way. This passage begins in the darkest days of exile, when we are sitting "among the nations to whom the Lord your God has driven you." Most of us only embark on the difficult and wrenching path of transformation when we feel we have no choice but to do so,

when we feel as if our backs are to the wall, when the circumstances of our lives have pushed us to the point of a significant leave-taking, when we have suffered loss or death, divorce or unemployment. Transformation is just too hard for us to volunteer for. Interestingly, God is depicted as the one who is doing the pushing here. We are in the predicament that has brought us to the point of transformation because God has driven us there. In other words, that predicament is part of the process. It is a gift, the agent of our turning.

Second, this passage shows us the complexity of transformation. Transformation is not something that happens once and for all time. The people turn three different times in this passage, and as it closes, they are promised a great blessing, but only if they continue to turn in the future.

Transformation does not have a beginning, a middle, or an end. We never reach the end of Teshuvah. It is always going on. We are awake for a moment, and then we are asleep again. Teshuvah seems to proceed in a circular motion. Every step away is also a step toward home.

And it may never be clear to us that the work of transformation has borne fruit. This is usually the case in the realm of spiritual practice. Real spiritual transformation invariably takes a long time to manifest itself in our lives. Spectacular, immediate results — sudden changes in aspect or in the way we see the world — are always suspect, and usually suggest a superficial rather than a profound transformation. Profound transformation only manifests itself over time. When Jacob has his great vision of the ladder and realizes he has been visited by God, he exclaims out loud, “My God! God has been in this place all along and I never

Rambam on Teshuvah

כל מצות שבתורה בין עשה בין לא תעשה אם עבר אדם על אחת מהן בין בזדון בין בשגגה קשיע עשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו חייב להתודות לפני האל ברוך הוא שנאמר (במדבר ה ו) "איש או אשה כי יעשו" וגו' (במדבר ה ז) "והתודו את חטאתם אשר עשו"

*Any of the mitzvot of the Torah, whether positive or negative, if a person transgresses (**avar**) any of the mitzvot of the Torah, whether a positive command or a negative command - whether willingly or inadvertently - when they return (**t'shuvah**) and return from their sin, they must confess before Hashem, blessed be, as [Numbers 5:6-7] states: "When a man or woman has committed a wrong against their fellow human being... They shall confess (**v'hitvadu**) the wrong (**hatatam**) that they have done."*

זה ודוי דברים. ודוי זה מצות עשה. כיצד מתנדין. אומר אנא השם חטאתי עויתי פשעתי לפניך ועשיתי כך וקר וקר נחמתי ובשתי במעשי ולעולם איני חוזר לדבר זה. וזהו עקרו של ודוי.

*This is verbal confession (**vidui**). This confession is a positive mitzvah. How does one confess? One says: "Please, Hashem, I have sinned, I have acted wrongfully, I have transgressed before You. I have done such-and-such. And behold, I regret and am ashamed of my deeds, and I will never again return to this thing." This is the essence of confession/**vidui**.*

- Mishna Torah, Hilkhos T'shuvah 1:1 (Trans. by Rabbi Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks)