

Rav Kook Torah

by Rabbi Chanan Morrison
website: ravkooktorah.org

The Special T'shuva of Reuven

Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 191-194

"Reuven returned to the pit, but Yosef was no longer in the pit. He tore his clothes [in grief]" (B'reishit 37:29).

Where was Reuven coming from? Why wasn't he together with the other brothers?

According to the Midrash, Reuven was "occupied with sackcloth and fasting", as he repented for changing his father's sleeping arrangements. (The word *vayashov* ("he returned") can also mean "he repented".)

The Midrash continues:

"The Holy One said: No one has ever sinned before Me and repented, but you [Reuven] are the first to repent. As you live, one of your descendants will stand up and be the first to urge repentance. And who was this descendant? Hoshei'a, who called out, "Return, Israel, to the Eternal your God" (Hoshei'a 14:2)."

This Midrash is quite difficult. There were a number of individuals who repented before Reuven's time, such as Adam and Kayin. Also, why does the Midrash state that Hoshei'a was the first to exhort the people to repent? We find

that the mitzva of t'shuva is already mentioned in the Torah (D'varim 30).

It must be that Hoshei'a informed the people regarding some aspect of t'shuva that had not been taught before.

Internal and External Consequences

The impact of sin is in two areas. Sin darkens the soul's inner holiness. But it also has a negative impact on the world at large. "When the people of Israel do not fulfill God's Will, it is as if they are weakening the great strength of Heaven" (Eicha Rabba 1:33).

With t'shuva we repair the soul and restore its original purity. But the damage caused in the world at large - this is only repaired through God's kindness. "I, yes, I am the One Who erases your transgressions for My sake" (Yeshayahu 43:25). The corrective power of t'shuva is a joint effort - partly by us, partly by God.

Nonetheless, it is possible for an individual to also repair the external damage. When one's goal is to elevate all of society, and one's t'shuva is focused on preventing one's own mistakes from harming and misleading others - such an individual increases light and holiness in all of creation.

Reuven's T'shuva

Reuven attended to both of these aspects in his t'shuva. First he occupied himself in fasting and sackcloth, repairing the damage to his own soul. But his t'shuva did not end there. He

then “returned to the pit”. An open pit in the public domain - “bor birshut harabim” - is a metaphor for a situation likely to lead to public trouble and suffering.

After repairing his soul, Reuven returned and looked at the pit. He examined the damage that he had caused outside himself, in the public domain. He then worked to rectify his actions so that they would not be a stumbling block for others.

[On a simple level, we may explain that Reuven sinned by upsetting the order in his family when he intruded on his father’s private life. He sought to correct this mistake by restoring harmony to the family, through his efforts to protect his brother Yosef.]

That is why the Midrash states that Reuven was the first to “sin before Me and repent”. He was the first to repair not only his soul, but also that which is “before Me”, i.e. everything that God created. In the words of the Midrash, what made Reuven’s t’shuva unique was that he “started with t’shuva”. Reuven aspired to correct the external damage ordinarily repaired by God’s kindness.

Israel Alone

Now we may understand the special level of t’shuva mentioned by the prophet Hoshei'a. In the Torah it says, “You will return to God... and the Eternal your God will accept your repentance” (D'varim 30:2-3). This is the common level of t’shuva. We work to repair the damage in our soul, while

God corrects the damage we caused in the world.

Hoshei'a, however, spoke of a higher form of t’shuva. He described a t’shuva like that of Reuven - an attempt to repair all the repercussions of one’s errors. Therefore he called out, “Return, Israel, to the Eternal your God.” Hoshei'a encouraged a complete t’shuva, performed by Israel alone. 