



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHABBAT SHUVAH 5774 • 2013

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 7, 2013
Shabbat Shuvah - Two

Letter to God



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

This is a new, experimental sermon format. It is offered to you for free, as a bonus to the standard Shabbat Shuva sermon. Please let us know how you feel about it: Is it useful to you? Would you like to see more sermons like this? We wait to hear.

The opening verse of today's Haftorah states: *Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity.*

This is why this Shabbat is called the Shabbat of Return, because this is when Israel is called to return to God, to the Torah, and to recommit to everything holy and divine.

This sermon is an open letter to God – an emotional letter to God from the heart of man. And words that come from the heart enter the heart.

We ask God: Have we not returned enough? We have returned to You for thousands of years through hells and evils, so perhaps it is time, on this *Shabbat Shuva*, that You, God, returned to us, retuned us to our homeland, to our Jerusalem, to our Temple which You promised to rebuild.

In support of our argument, we bring a story of survival – how a young teenager literally returned from the grave, returned to life, returned to the world, returned from hell.

We have returned to God, to the Torah, many times over the last two thousand years. Is it not time that all was returned and restored to us?

But maybe God has another agenda. If we could imagine God's response would it contain the words of this Haftorah, which begins with us returning to God, and which concludes with God retuning to us and granting compassion, freedom, redemption!

A LETTER TO GOD: REPLY FROM GOD

1. Returning from the Grave (Inspirational Story)

I would like to share with you a letter, an open letter, a heartfelt letter, a letter from the very depths of the soul, a letter that was written to someone very dear to my heart, a letter which was written in blood, sweat, and tears:

Dear Creator of the Heavens and the Earth:

Imagine our roles were reversed. Imagine it was You who had gone through everything we have gone through; imagine it was You who had done everything right, raised families and lived holy lives; imagine it was You who worked tirelessly to do every mitzvah and fulfill every potential. And imagine it was I, on high, transcending it all, pure in my essence, unsullied, unworried, untouched, never persecuted, never murdered, never buried alive beneath the one's I love. Imagine it was You who lived this story that we have been experiencing for thousands of years, from the beginning of our very existence.

Imagine it was You, God, who had to go through this:¹

The year was 1941. The day was Rosh Hashanah. The place was Eisysky in Lithuania. It was the Jewish New Year and every synagogue was packed beyond capacity, overflowing with the Jews of that city and all the surrounding towns.

Every single man, woman and child was praying on that Rosh Hashanah, in those Shuls like they have never prayed before.

The main synagogue was especially full, and more and more people kept on coming: men wrapped in prayer shawls; women toting aromatic delicacies freshly prepared for Yom Tov; children dragging blankets and pillows in their wake.

The Lithuanians had herded the more-than-four-thousand Jews into the synagogues.

¹ Adapted from "Jew, Go Back to the Grave", printed in Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust (Oxford 1982) pp. 53-55.

In their evil cruelty, the Lithuanians had released some sixty mentally ill Jewish patients from the nearby Selo asylum to oversee the crowds.

The ill patients were laughing hysterically, gesticulating and yelling at no one in particular; the Lithuanians kept yelling at them to control the crying crowds. It was the saddest sweet New Year. The beginning of the year 5702 was the beginning of the darkest hell.

Every Rosh Hashanah since the beginning of time, the families would go home from Shul to a candle-lit table and the holiday feast.

This year, from the Shuls of Eisysky, the Jews were led at gunpoint to the horse market. At the head of this procession of horror, walked the rabbi of Eisysky, Rabbi Shimon Rozowsky, dressed in his Yom Tov finery, a tall silk yarmulke standing proud atop his head. Next to him, walked the Chazzan, Mr. Tabolsky, wrapped in his tallit and holding the Torah scrolls. Together, the Rabbi and the Chazzan led the community in reciting the Vidduy, the confession of the dying.

Systemically, in groups of 250, first the men then the women, the people were taken to the old Jewish cemetery in front of the open ditches. They were to undress and stand before the open graves. They were shot in the back of the head by the Lithuanian guards with the help and encouragement of the local people. The chief executioner was the Lithuanian Ostrovakas (may his name be forever erased). Dressed in a uniform, a white apron and gloves, he personally supervised the killing. He had reserved himself the privilege of killing the town's notables, among them Rabbi Rozowsky, and he practiced sharpshooting at the children, aiming as they were thrown into the graves.

Among the Jews that Rosh Hashanah, September 25, 1941, in the old Jewish cemetery of Eisysky was one of the shtetl's melamdim (teachers), Reb Michalowsky, and his youngest son Zvi, age sixteen. Father and son were holding hands as they stood naked at the edge of the open pit, trying to comfort each other during their last moments. Young Zvi was counting the bullets and the intervals between one volley of fire and the next. As Ostrovakas and his people were aiming their guns, Zvi fell into the grave a split second before the volley of fire hit him.

As he lay there, he felt the bodies of his family, his neighbors, his friends, his community piling up on top of him. He was soon covered in death. He felt the streams of blood around him, over him, through him, and the trembling pile of dying bodies moving beneath him.

It became cold and dark. The shooting died down above him. Zvi made his way from under the bodies, out of the mass grave into the cold, dead night. In the distance, Zvi could hear the Ostrovakas and people singing and drinking, celebrating their great accomplishment. After 800 years, on September 26, 1941, Eisysky was Judenfrei.

At the far end of the cemetery, in the direction of the huge church, were a few Christian homes. Zvi knew them all; they were his neighbors. Naked, covered in blood, he knocked on the first door. The door opened. A peasant was holding a lamp which he had looted earlier in the day from a Jewish home. "Please let me in," Zvi pleaded. The peasant lifted the lamp and examined the boy closely. "Jew, go back to the grave where you belong!" he shouted at Zvi and slammed the door in his face. Zvi knocked on door after door, but the response was always the same.

Near the forest lived a widow whom Zvi knew. He decided to knock on her door. The old widow opened the door. She was holding in her hand a small, burning piece of wood. "Let me in!" begged, beseeched, pleaded Zvi. "Jew, go back to the grave at the old cemetery!" She chased Zvi away with the burning piece of wood as if exorcising an evil spirit, a dybbuk.

[And then Zvi had an idea. He shouted at her ...]

"I am you lord, Yoshke Pendrik! I came down from the cross. Look at me – the blood, the pain, the hurt, the suffering of the innocent. Let me in," said Zvi Michalowsky. The widow crossed herself and fell at his blood stained feet. "Boze moj, boze moj (my god, my god)," she kept crossing herself and praying. The door was opened.

Zvi walked in. He promised her that he would bless her children, her farm, and her, but only if she would keep his visit a secret for three days and three nights and not reveal it to a living soul, not even the priest. She gave Zvi food and clothing and warm water to wash himself. Before leaving the house, he once more reminded her that the lord's visit must remain a secret, because of his special mission on earth.

Dressed in a farmer's clothing, with a supply of food for a few days, Zvi made his way to the nearby forest. Thus, the Jewish partisan movement was born in the vicinity of Eisynsky.

Imagine it was you, God, who had to return again and again from the grave, just to live in this world that does everything in its power to destroy us. This is a world that deifies the sullied and persecutes the pure.

This is what has happened to us, time and again: we have been left for dead and we have risen from the grave. Every generation, the world has tried to snuff us out; and yet we return, we return, we return again and again.

2. Words (Inspirational Story cont.)

The second verse in the Haftorah states: "Take words with yourselves and return to the Lord. Say, "You shall forgive all iniquity and teach us good, and let us render, in the place of bulls, the offerings from our lips."

We have offered much more than words from our lips. We have offered, sacrificed our very bodies, our families, our communities. We haven't merely returned to You with words; we have returned to You with our lives and the lives of the people we love!

Imagine this is what You, God, had to do, if our roles were reversed – imagine You were the one who experienced this story? What would You do, God, if You were in our shoes?

Would You, God, not do the same? Would you not consider all sacrifices of history sufficient? How could you ask more of a people? How could a father expect more from his children?

You, as an Entity beyond, may not appreciate the nuance, so let me explain.

We have been going through this hell you call a world for thousands of years. And we have done what we had to do. Yet this is our reality. We come back from the grave. Again and again and again.

Again and again and again, we have returned from the darkest pits of hell ... from the clutches of death we have returned to the Tree of Life that is Your Torah. We have returned from Auschwitz, we have returned from Rome, we have returned from Babylon, we have returned from Egypt.

So, perhaps, this year, today, this Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat of Return, it is high time You returned to us, returned to us the purity and the innocence, returned to us the Temple and the peace, restore to us the collective soul of creation to its rightful state.

I think we have returned from the grave enough; perhaps it is time you abolished all graves and all evil and all death from the face of this earth.

I hope this letter finds You well. And, please forgive any disrespect.

I seal this letter with the tears that roll down my cheeks.

Sincerely,

Man

3. Return Mail

This is the letter I wrote to God on Rosh Hashanah, in my prayers, in my heart.

And just today I received this letter in response:

Dear Beloved Man:

Our roles can never be reversed for where you go, I go. The tears you cry, I cry. The pain, the blood, the hurt you experience, I experience with you.

Do you for a second think I was not with You in the grave? Do you for a second think I am not with the ones that did not return from the grave? I have breathed myself into you! And it hurts like only you can know.

But allow Me, please, to conclude this letter by quoting the final three verses of this Shabbat's Haftarah:²

"Who is a God like You, Who forgives iniquity and passes over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not maintain His anger forever, for He desires loving-kindness. He shall return and grant us compassion; He shall vanquish our iniquities, and You shall cast into the depths of the sea all their sins. You shall gift the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from the days of yore. He shall return and grant us compassion."

In all of the above, the Prophet refers to Me, God.

²Micah 7:18-20.

His message is called Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat of Return. And conventional wisdom would have you believe that it is Man returning to God. And this is true. But, as you mentioned, you have been returning to Me since the beginning of time! It is enough!

I am not much one for conventional wisdom. I read the Haftorah like this:

"I shall return and grant you compassion ... shall gift the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham, which I swore to our forefathers from the days of yore."

You are right. It is time I, God returned and granted compassion, harmony, redemption.

Yes, I do believe that the time is now, on this Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat preceding Yom Kippur.

We have returned to one another. May this upcoming Yom Kippur see the High Priest walk into the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem, and may we never part ways again!

Yours truly,

God

PS: Gut Shabbos and a Gmar chatima tova!