



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHABBAT SHUVAH 5773 • 2012

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 22, 2012
Shabbat Shuvah

**Who Are You: Id Or Yid?
Return Vs. Repentance**



Meaningful Sermons

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Do You Matter?

ABSTRACT

What is the true nature of a human being? Is man giving and virtuous or selfish and narcissistic?

Would you believe that the answer to this question is contained in one single Hebrew word, uncovering for us a revolutionary psychological model, which differs fundamentally from the prevalent secular model?

At best, many see the High Holidays (and Judaism in general) as a religious and cultural phenomenon. But few would imagine that this season provides us with tremendous insight into our psyches and can dramatically help us improve our personal lives and relationships. Yet, that is indeed the case.

And it's captured in the one word *teshuvah* or *shuvah* – the name of this special day – *Shabbat Shuvah* (so called because today's Haftarah reading begins: *Shuvah Israel ... "Return O Israel"*), within the period called the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*.

Teshuvah means "return," not like the conventional translation, "repentance." Return is actually the opposite of repentance, for repentance means to *leave* something behind. It means to be filled with remorse and to regret a past wrongdoing, and to resolve *never to return* to it again. But *teshuvah* means precisely to *return*. But return to what?

This sermon analyzes the subject of *teshuvah* – and the difference between it and repentance – revealing for us a radically refreshing perspective on human nature, which counters the idea suggested by the word repentance. We discover that when you dig into the inner recesses of the soul you find not the Id but the Yid...

WHO ARE YOU: ID OR YID? RETURN VS. REPENTANCE

1. The Unconscious (Humor)

The Jewish psychologist Rabbi Abraham Twerski tells about his father objecting to psychoanalysis because it took so long, and because no one knows after so many years whether the therapy had any effect, or whether any changes happened simply due to the passage of time.

The elder Rabbi Twerski demonstrated his skepticism with a story of a town where the local nobleman had a beloved dog. An anti-Semitic advisor to the nobleman once fell upon a scheme to incite him against the Jews.

He told the nobleman: "I see that you really love your dog. What would you say if I told you that you that there are some people that can teach your dog to speak, which would then allow you to have conversation with him?"

"No, that's not possible," said the incredulous nobleman.

"I assure you it is. The Jews that you are friendly with – they have this secret. They can teach your dog to speak. But they will deny it and pretend they can't do it out of spite. You will have to insist that they do this favor for you."

The nobleman (clearly more in love with his dog than with his brains) bought the ruse hook, line and sinker, even thanked his advisor: "If that were doable I would give you half my kingdom. Nothing would make me happier than to be able to converse with my beloved dog."

He immediately summoned the leaders of the Jewish community, demanding that they teach his dog to speak. "We are friends, correct?" asked the noblemen of the Jews.

"Indeed," they replied.

"Is there any favor that you would refuse me?" continued the nobleman.

"Absolutely not," the Jews assured him.

"Well then, I have heard about your secret, and I ask you to teach my dog to speak."

The Jews, of course (as “predicted” by the anti-Semitic advisor), adamantly insisted that this is impossible. But the more they persisted, the angrier the nobleman got, until he threatened to exile all the Jews unless they taught his dog to talk. “I give you three days to come back with your assurance that you will teach my dog to speak.”

The Jews were frantic. “What do we do? The nobleman has gone mad!” They gathered all the Jews to synagogue to pray that God abolish this insane decree.

At the end of the prayer, an old Jew arose and told the elders: “Bring me along when you return to the nobleman after the three days. I know what to tell him that will calm him down.”

“What will you say?”

“Please leave it up to me. Trust me.” They had no other choice, so they agreed.

When the three days were up they returned to the nobleman, and this old Jew said the following: “Yes, indeed, I will teach your dog to talk. But it will take some time. It takes us humans several years to learn to speak. A dog will take as long as five years.”

That made sense to the nobleman, and he gave the dog to this old Jew, leaving the anti-Semitic advisor seething, but what could he do.

When they left the nobleman, the Jewish elders asked the old man, “What did you do? You lied to him. We both know that you can’t teach this dog to speak – not in one year, not in five years, not in a hundred years. You are just going to make him angrier when you return after five years with the same mute dog.”

The Jew replied, “Five years? In five years, who knows what will happen? The nobleman could die, I could die, the dog could die. For now, we’re fine.”

This was why the elder Rabbi Twerski opposed psychoanalysis.

But there is an end to the story.

Five years did pass. And no one died. The dog didn't die, the nobleman didn't die. The anti-Semite didn't die. And the old Jew didn't die. The fateful day came – the fifth anniversary of the promise to have the dog speaking. And the Jews became frantic again. The old Jew calmed them down. "Don't worry, I know exactly what to do. Trust me." Little choice did they have.

The old Jew, this time insisting to go alone, arrives at the nobleman's palace, with the nobleman waiting with great anticipation. And with the anti-Semitic advisor waiting in the wings, relishing the moment.

"So, did you teach my dog to talk?" the nobleman asked.

"Indeed, I did," answered the Jew. "But before I bring your talking dog back to you, I wanted to see you alone and tell you the following: When your dog began speaking, it started sharing all its experiences with you. It said that a few years ago on a certain night you went to visit a certain someone I will not repeat, which I don't think you want your wife to hear. On another night you got drunk and did some things I can't mention. On yet another vacation holiday you behaved in such and such a manner, which my respect for you doesn't allow me to articulate. Bottom line is that since your dog has opened his mouth, he can't shut it. I just wanted to warn you before bringing your dog back to you."

The nobleman was deeply shocked and disturbed. In a fit of rage, he told the Jew, "Do me a favor. Kill the dog immediately! And never mention this again to anyone...!"

2. Shabbat Shuvah

Today is *Shabbat Shuvah*, and it is so called because today's Haftarah reading from Prophet Hosea begins: *Shuvah Israel* ... "Return O Israel."¹ Some call the day *Shabbat Teshuvah*, being that is the Shabbat of the Ten Days of Teshuvah (the ten days from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur).

This single Hebrew word – *teshuvah* – uncovers for us a revolutionary psychological model, which differs fundamentally from the prevalent secular model.

¹ Hosea 14:2.

Teshuvah means “return,” which differs profoundly from “repentance” which is the standard, conventional translation. Indeed, return is actually the opposite of repentance, for repentance means to *leave* something behind. It means to be filled with remorse and to regret a past wrongdoing, and to resolve *never to return* to it again. But *teshuvah* means precisely to *return*. But return to what?

This one word *teshuvah* – and the difference between it and repentance – reveals for us a radically refreshing perspective on human nature, which counters the idea suggested by the word repentance.

3. The Unrepentant (Humor)

Now, it’s true that some people are what you’d call “unrepentant.” Take for example Sam Benson, the thief.²

One day, Sam, who was the most notorious thief in the entire community, called on the town rabbi: “Sir, I found a purse full of gold. I would like you to help me locate the owner.”

“Why, of course!” exclaimed the rabbi, surprised by this request. “I’ll make an announcement in the synagogue. The owner will undoubtedly claim his property.”

A few minutes after Sam left, the rabbi discovered that his watch was missing. He immediately sent his secretary to bring Sam back, and sure enough, he had the watch in his pocket.

“I just can’t figure you out,” exclaimed the rabbi. “Here you return a purse full of gold, and then you steal a watch that costs less than five rubles. I don’t understand you at all.”

“What’s to understand?” answered the thief. “A mitzvah (of returning a lost article) is a mitzvah. But business is business!”

Now he has something to learn about *teshuvah*...

² As related in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor*, compiled and edited by Henry D. Spalding, p. 75.

4. Dissecting Sin

Before we discuss the true meaning of *teshuvah*, we need to first dissect the nature and meaning of sin. As well as the true nature of the human being. We need to answer the question: Are we inherently good people or bad – selfless or selfish?

According to the prevailing Freudian view the most basic of all human instincts is the Id – the primal, unconscious source for satisfying all of man's basic needs and feelings. It has only one rule – known as the Pleasure Principle – “I want it and I want it now.” The Id wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the reality of the situation or the good of others.

Then there is the Ego, the rational part of the mind that relates to the real world and operates via the Reality Principle, which recognizes that you can't always get what you want. The Ego realizes the need for compromise, and it negotiates between the Id and the Superego, which might be called the moral part of the mind.

The Superego is an embodiment of parental and societal values. It stores and enforces rules. The Ego's job is to get the Id's pleasures but to be reasonable and bear the long-term consequences in mind. The Ego denies both instant gratification and pious delaying of gratification.

Freud described the human personality as being basically a battlefield:

He [the personality] is a dark-cellar in which a well-bred spinster lady (the Superego) and a sex-crazed monkey (the Id) are forever engaged in mortal combat, the struggle being refereed by a rather nervous bank clerk (the Ego).

According to this perspective, selfish behavior is natural, and noble behavior is an anomaly. As such, repentance is the best word to use when people regret hurting someone or misbehaving and want to leave behind their errant past, and turn a new leaf.

What is the difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist? If you say to a psychiatrist “I hate my mother,” he will ask “Why do you say that?” while a psychologist will say “Thank you for sharing.”

Therefore, the best you can expect from this model is that people will “analyze” or “share” their experience, but not that it will lead to fundamental change (no more than a tiger can change its stripes). Except perhaps the change that may come with time (like the wishful hope of the Jew in the story with the talking dog).

5. Torah Model

However, according to the Torah model, a Jew is driven by the Yid not the Id – by the *pintele yid*, or spark of the Divine which is part of any human being created in the Divine Image.

Goodness is inherent to the human condition, and self-control is an innate – not an acquired trait, as the Alter Rebbe, the 18th century founder of Chabad Chassidut, writes in the *Tanya*³ (over 100 years before Freud). Transgression is the anomaly and aberration. Thus, correcting ones errant ways means returning to one’s inherent essence ... returning to one’s source in God.

This is what distinguishes the human being from all other creatures. A “dog” or any other animal can only follow its innate nature. A dog cannot learn to speak. A dog can also not transgress, but neither can he reach any lofty heights.

We human beings, by stark contrast, were created (on Rosh Hashana) in the Divine Image. As such, our essence is divine. Even if we transgress, our essential goodness remains intact. And, through proper *teshuvah*, we return to our core goodness, and we can reveal the Divine in the loftiest and most sublime experiences.

That is what *teshuvah* is all about, and what makes it so special – so much so that the sages say: “In the place where *baalei teshuvah* (“returnees”) stand, even complete *tzaddikim* cannot stand.”⁴

³ Chapter 12.

⁴ *Berachot* 34b.

6. Tzaddik vs. Baal Teshuvah

Now, how can that be?

A *tzaddik* is one who has made the divine will the very substance of his existence! And he cannot reach the exalted place that a sinner can?

I mean, all things that the *tzaddik* encounters in life – the food he eats, the clothes he wears, the experiences he garners – are elevated by him and raised to their divine function. And besides that, the *tzaddik* confines himself to the permissible, never digressing from the boundaries that the Torah sets for involvement with God's world.

And what of the *baal teshuvah*?

He is one that has transgressed and betrayed himself (and perhaps others as well). He has resolved to sin no more, I grant you, but he *has* wallowed in the muck, so to speak, and has emerged with more than a few stains on his overcoat. And what's more, he is someone who has turned his back on his very essence and his connection to his source in God. But having done so, he now has access to a unique potential – the potential for *teshuvah*.

Teshuvah is fueled by the utter dejection experienced by one who wakes to the realization that he has betrayed himself and hurt all that is beautiful and sacred in his life ... by the alienation and displacement of one who has wandered away from his calling and destiny.

Teshuvah is man's amazing ability to translate these feelings of demoralization, alienation and pain into the drive for rediscovery and renewal.

7. Lost in the Desert

The *baal teshuvah* is a person lost in the desert whose thirst, amplified a thousand-fold by the barrenness and aridity of his surroundings, drives him to seek water with an intensity that could never have been called forth by the most proficient well-digger.

The baal teshuvah is a person whose very abandonment of God drives him to seek Him with a passion the most saintly tzaddik cannot know.

In this way, the *baal teshuvah* accomplishes what the most perfect *tzaddik* cannot.⁵

8. Unique Opportunity

So, today, we have a unique opportunity. As none of us here is a complete *tzaddik*, as we have all transgressed in some way, we now have the chance to do *teshuvah* and to return to a higher place than the one we have abandoned through our transgression.

Now, there are several ways to go about doing *teshuvah*. The great 12th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, enumerates the following steps for doing *teshuvah*: 1) recognize what you have done wrong; 2) acknowledge it; 3) regret sincerely the error of your ways; 4) and resolve to return to the righteous path. In addition, if you have caused harm to someone, then restitution is in order to set things right, as is asking the other person for forgiveness.

In a few days on Yom Kippur, we will be asking God for forgiveness, and we prepare for this by also asking each other for forgiveness.

9. The Challenge of the Moment

And so we come to the challenge of the moment.

If you have not done so already, make a list of people you have hurt in some way. (And be sure that God is on the list too.) Describe what you must do to ask their forgiveness.

And do it.

⁵ *Tanya*, ch. 7, and *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. V, p. 3; *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. VII, pp. 22-23.

Believe me, the reward is well worth the discomfort inherent in this exercise.

By having done hurtful, wrongful things, you have stretched the cord that binds your soul to its source to the point of excruciating tautness. But by doing *teshuvah*, you will rebound with a force that exceeds anything experienced by those who never leave the divine orbit.

You will feel it.

You will not be the same.

Indeed, *teshuvah* will reveal the real you – something which you may have never seen before: the true, unadulterated essence of your being.

And then, on Yom Kippur, you can stand higher than the angels.

Amen.