



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

# SHABBAT SHUVAH 5775 • 2014

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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September 27, 2014  
Shabbat Shuvah

**God's Return Policy**



## Meaningful Sermons

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### ABSTRACT

As a good retail-conscious Jew, when you buy something, you are undoubtedly intimately familiar with the store's return policy.

You are well aware that returns are generally not encouraged. Items lose value with time; then there is wear and tear; and returns are harder to re-sell.

So it is with the world at large. Returns are not seen as a good thing. No sane person would desire to return the world to an earlier date, when the sword ruled, minorities were routinely persecuted, and the freedom and equality we know today were but a dream.

And yet this Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of Return, when we do aspire to return to a certain state. Why? What does this mean? To what are we returning and from where?

The answer lies in the true meaning of *Shabbat*, "rest," which is comprised of the same Hebrew letters as *tashav*, "return."

To rest is to return, to return is to rest. We rest from all things outside of ourselves in order to return to our true selves, for when we return to our core divine being, we are completely at rest.

This is God's return policy – his 5775-year return policy ... and counting.

## GOD'S RETURN POLICY

### 1. Full Refund (Joke)

A stingy miser – the biggest miser you ever met in your life – died and ascended on high for judgment. “What have you done to merit entrance into heaven?” inquired the heavenly tribunal.

After thinking for a moment, the cheapskate replied, “I gave a dime to a homeless person on the street about a week ago.”

The judges of this high court asked the research angel to check the CCTV tape. Sure enough, it was true: the miser had once dropped a dime into the empty coffee cup of a homeless person.

“That’s good and fine,” said the judges. “But it’s not quite enough to get you into heaven.”

“There’s more!” yelled the penny-pincher. “Twenty-three years ago I gave a different homeless person a quarter. I beg of you, please let me into heaven!”

The tribunal instructed the angel to check the recorded facts. Once again, the heavenly research department confirmed beyond reasonable doubt that this too was true. A miser he may have been, but he sure wasn’t a liar.

After the evidence had been gathered, and the miser pleaded his desperate case, the judges retreated to their cloudy chambers to deliberate among themselves: “What should we do? Should we allow him into heaven for these two charitable acts? Can two gifts adding up thirty-five cents really vindicate this lifelong tightwad?

After much back-and-forth, one of the celestial judges was struck with a glimmer of inspiration. He decreed: “Aha, I have found an appropriate verdict. I suggest we refund this miser his full thirty-five cents and tell him to go to hell.”

## 2. Refunds and Returns

I would like to talk to you today about refunds and return policies.

As good retail-conscious Jews, I'm sure that whenever you make a purchase you familiarize yourself with the fine print of the store's return policy, such as: return within 30 days for a full refund; after 30 days, return for store credit only, but not cash; tags must still be attached; may not be used, worn, or damaged; refund requires presentation of receipt; and so forth...

Why do most stores (except for Nordstrom's) have such strict return policies? And why can one never return items without their tags or once they have been used?

The answer is quite simple:

If an item is returned at a much later date, is used, or is without its tags, it loses considerable value. The world progresses; items go out of style, degrade in value, and become less desirable as time moves on. A shirt you purchased today will be on sale in a month, and off the shelves in a year; a new car once off the lot is worth a fraction of the original sticker price; a refurbished computer is cheaper than a new item.

Whatever has been purchased and returned has decreased in value.

This is why stores have strict return policies.

## 3. Return on a Global Scale

This idea of a return policy can also be applied on a more global scale, to countries, peoples, civilizations, cultures, and even religions.

If you asked a country, or a race, whether it desires to return to its point of origin, or to some other time in its past, it would likely look at you like you have lost your mind. Every normal society wishes to progress, to move forward, to create new experiences and better circumstances.

Imagine if Rome woke up one day and said it desired to return to a state of gladiators and slavery. Imagine if Spain said it wished to return to its inquisitions and persecutions. Imagine if France said it was returning to its pre-revolutionary days, or its days of the thirsty guillotine.

Imagine if Russia turned back its clock a thousand years, to a time of marauding Cossacks or to a more recent time of Stalin's purges. And how about Germany? Imagine if it decided to return to its so-called "supremacy." Even, for that matter, the United States, a country built on freedom, liberty, and pursuit of happiness – would not want to return to its origins, when only land-owners had the right to vote, when slavery and indentured servitude made the economy go round, when many of today's civil rights did not exist.

The only region of the world that is trying to return to some figment of the past is the Middle East – and what does that look like? Beheadings, kidnappings, rape, murder, lawlessness and chaos.

This just goes to show why no sane people– except perhaps for a few fundamentalist whackos – wish to return to an earlier time. The past is worse, much worse, than the progress that time and maturation have brought.

The world progresses, moves on, and advances; only a cruel zealot would desire to return to the past. The Dark Ages are called dark for a reason.

Logic then dictates that returns – both of products and of civilizations – are not exactly what people aspire to. We do not wish to return, but to progress; we do not wish to rewind but to advance. As time moves on, everything generally depreciates in value because as time moves on, progress creates better products and ideas, so the original is less valuable.

And yet, here comes the Torah, which seemingly espouses the exact opposite.

#### 4. Shabbat of Return

This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of Return. Its name is inspired by the Haftorah of the day which states:

*Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God...*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hosea 14:2.

Later in the Haftorah there is more return language and also in the Torah portion – *Parshat Haazinu* – that we just read:

*Remember the days of old; reflect upon the years of generations. Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will inform you.*<sup>2</sup>

If, as we have just so eloquently established, returns are not exactly the most desirable of things, why does our Haftorah, our Torah portion, and the name of our Shabbat all orbit around this concept of “return”?

Furthermore, the entire ten day period between the start of Rosh Hashanah and the end of Yom Kippur is called *Aseret Yemai Tshuvah*, the “Ten Days of Return.” Shouldn’t we, especially in this time of the year, be aspiring to new achievements, innovations, advancement, and forward progress? Why this fascination – almost fixation – on return and the past?

Additionally: If we are no longer new products but used ones, how can we be returned? Most of us do not have our tags still attached to us. Also, if the world has progressed so wonderfully and is in a much better place than it was in the past, why would we ever aspire to return?

Most of all: What exactly is this “return,” from which this Shabbat takes its name? Where are we returning from and what are we returning to?

The answer to these questions is found in the Hebrew name of this Shabbat, *Shabbat Shuvah*. And within it is encapsulated the profundity of the Jew’s relationship with God.

## 5. Rest and Return

As mentioned, this Shabbat, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is called *Shabbat Shuvah*. The word *Shabbat* (meaning “rest”) is composed of three Hebrew letters, *shin*, *tof*, and *bet*. These three letters also spell *tashav*, which means to “return.”<sup>3</sup> And, of course, *shuvah* also means “return.”

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<sup>24</sup> Deut. 32:7.

<sup>3</sup> See Genesis Rabbah end 22 (Yafa Toar); Tanya, Iggeret Hateshuvah end ch. 10.

Thus, there is a double correlation here between rest and return. We might say that to rest is to return and to return is to rest. So if we can understand Shabbat, we can understand what it means to return.

One of the myths/misconceptions about Shabbat is that Shabbat restricts you. Some people erroneously think that on Shabbat you are limited, you cannot do this and you cannot do that; you refrain yourself from being as you normally are and restrain yourself from letting loose. No electricity, no work, no email, no Twitter, no traveling, no shopping, no cooking, not even carrying things outside.

This does seem highly self-restricting. In reality, however, the opposite is true:

Shabbat is the day you rest from everything that is *not* you and you return to your true self. You don't *need* electricity to be; you *are* essentially electric. You don't *have* to work to exist; you exist and therefore you work. You do not *have* to cook in order to be nourished; you do not *have* to carry in order to be transported. Shabbat reminds us of this, and asks us to rest from all else so that we may return to our purest selves.<sup>4</sup>

Shabbat celebrates this idea of returning to yourself, of leaving everything *optional* aside and returning to the essentials. Sure, six days a week we strive to change the world in a proactive way by all means necessary, but on the seventh day, just once a week, we return home to our true selves, we stop creating and start being.

This then is the Jewish idea of return. You aren't returning an item to its original source; rather you are returning your very own self to yourself. You are not returning a progressive religion to its dark and dangerous past; rather you are returning your own self to the purity and nucleus of the religion itself, without distortions or misnomers.

## 6. Return to Purity

Most every product in existence has a return policy with restrictions, and the reason – as I said – is that these physical products depreciate with time and, the more they are used, the less valuable they become.

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<sup>4</sup> See Likkutei Torah, D'rushim L'Shabbat Shuva, p. 66c.



Why? Because these products are not *who* you are but *what* you own, and *what* you own changes with time while *who* you are does not. You began pure and you can always return to that purity.

The same is true with civilizations, cultures, and religions. Any civilization, culture or religion that began in darkness, can become enlightened over time. Such progress is excellent, and there is no upside to going backwards.

But Judaism began at Mount Sinai as pure – a bright light. As such, it is like a candle – just as each of our individual souls are like candles. Over the years, with all the darkness that the world has surrounded us, sometimes we have forgotten the brightness of the candle, or even that the candle is there. But all we have to do is look past all those distracting and shadowy elements and there it is – the candle is still shining bright. All we have to do is to return to the purity and light of our origins. That's it.

## 7. Judaism's 5775-Year Return Policy

Such a natural reality does not have a return policy, with conditions, restrictions, and expirations.

Judaism has a 5775-year return policy. And every year the policy increases by a year. No matter how much wear and tear, whether or not you have the receipt, or if the tags are still attached, the return policy is active, for it is eternal.

Why? Because you aren't returning something to someone – you are returning yourself to your own self. It is as simple and beautiful as that.

Someone once asked Mahatma Gandhi: "What do you think of Western Civilization?" Gandhi replied: "I think it would be a good idea."

Most of the world thinks it has to create civilized living; Jews know that all we have to do is uncover it and rediscover what we have always known.

For the Jews, who began with a pure message and will always carry that pure message in their core, return means returning to that purity, to that holiness, to that essential self.



## 8. Natural State of Purity (Chassidic Story)

This power of return, and the natural state of purity to which we return, is captured by the following story:

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev was known for his non-judgmental love of each and every person, and his ability to find a silver lining in even the most challenging situations.

And so, when he saw the Jewish wagon drivers of Berdichev getting ready for work, he judged them on the side of merit. As soon as it became light, so in order to save time, they would wrap *tefillin* and pray speedily next to their wagons, while doing all the little tasks necessary to prepare the wagons for the road that day. When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak first saw them doing this, he raised his eyes towards heaven, and exclaimed, "O Merciful Father, how wonderful are your children, the Jewish people. Even while they work, they pray!"

Of course, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak knew this was not the best way of reciting one's prayers and he sought to improve the situation. One day he approached the wagoneers and, walking right up to them, he mumbled: "Whydoyoupraysfastnoonecanmakeoutthewordsyadayadablah."

"Huh?" they asked in confusion. Reb Levi Yitzchak repeated the mumble:

"Whydoyoupraysfastnoonecanmakeoutthewordsyadayadablah."

"Rabbi, please slow down. And speak a bit louder. We can't understand a word you are saying."

"Aha!" Rabbi Levi Yitzchak exclaimed. "So how to you expect the Holy One to understand and accept your prayers, if you race through them faster than you drive your horses?"

"No, Rabbi," responded the most quick-witted one. "You misunderstand. Think of a baby that is first learning to talk. Its speech sounds like nonsense that no one can understand. Except the baby's mother; she can always understand her child."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the version of Yerachmiel Tilles, Copyrighted © by Ascent-of-Safed, 2008.

You see, for the Jew, *teshuvah* is like returning home. Whenever we speak to God, whether we are proficient in Hebrew or short on time, God understands. Because we are returning home, and He understands and welcomes us as his children, even if we mumble.

## 9. A Word About Repentance (Humor)

Now you might have heard that the term *teshuvah* is also translated as repentance, and that this is what the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* are all about.

Repentance, forgiveness, atonement – all of these scary words are but weak synonymous in the limiting English language for this divine concept of *teshuvah*.

Often times, we associate repentance and forgiveness with fire and brimstone preachers, yelling come hell or high water. They scare the hell out of you – or the hell into you – while urging you to repent lest you end up in some fiery pit. These preachers don't seem to realize that nothing could possibly be worse and more hellish than one of their condescending sermons ... which brings me to this bit of humor:

Abe and his young son Sam are in synagogue one Shabbat morning when Sam says, "When I grow up, dad, I want to be a Rabbi."

"That's OK with me, Sam, but what made you decide that?"

"Well," says Sam, "as I have to go to synagogue on Shabbat anyway, I figure it will be more fun to stand up and shout than to sit down and listen."

## 10. Conclusion

This Shabbat, *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of Return, teaches us that return and rest are two sides of the same coin:

Like true rest, which is resting from everything outside of you so that your true self can wake up, true return is returning from everything outside of you to the true divine being that you truly are – returning to the candle that you are, reacquainting yourself with your light.

This, my dear friends, is God's return policy – 5775-year-policy and counting.

Shabbat Shalom!