



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHABBAT SHUVAH 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 19, 2015
Shabbat Shuvah

**Cain & Abel: A Modern Day
Story**



Meaningful Sermons

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Cain & Abel: A Modern Day Story

ABSTRACT

Is there anything you cannot reverse?

There was one man who, singlehandedly, slaughtered a quarter of the world. Could such a person ever do *teshuvah* – could he ever return to God after such a betrayal of his divine essence?

Indeed, can any killer ever return to purity?

Yes, in fact, the Ruzhiner Rebbe teaches that returning to purity is as easy as sinning.

The first documented case of *teshuvah* was Cain. Yup, the same guy that slaughtered his own brother Abel, when there were only four people on earth (Adam, Eve and their two sons, Cain and Abel).

When Adam heard that Cain did *teshuvah*, he composed a psalm – a psalm which Moses taught the Nation of Israel and which we sing every Shabbat.

This soul-inspiring sermon explores the connection between these seemingly disparate ideas and, through a fascinating story about *teshuvah* that happened to Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, redefines our very definition of *teshuvah* itself.

It's all about returning to the scene of the crime – before the crime was even committed.

CAIN & ABEL: A MODERN DAY STORY

THE FIRST DOCUMENTED CASE OF TESHUVAH

1. Ruzhiner Rebbe Story

A certain individual once came to Rabbi Yisrael, better known as the Ruzhiner Rebbe, to confess before him that he had sinned and would like to do *teshuvah* – that is, to repent and return to a pure and holy path.

The Ruzhiner Rebbe commended the man, offering him words of support and encouragement.

However, the fellow told the Ruzhiner Rebbe that he did not know how to do *teshuvah*.

The Ruzhiner Rebbe asked: “And from where did you know how to sin?”

To which the man responded: “I didn’t. First I sinned and only after did I know that it was a sin.”

The Ruzhiner Rebbe responded with a glint in his eye: “The same is true with *teshuvah*, with returning to your innermost essence and calling: first you do it – you bemoan your errors, you feel remorse for your iniquities – and *teshuvah*, return to purity, will then come as a result.”¹

2. What Is Teshuvah?

Today is called *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of Return. Its name is derived from the first words of our Haftorah where we read, *Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity.*² We read this Haftorah on this Shabbat, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the period called the Ten Days of Teshuva (*asoret yemei teshuvah*).

¹ Printed in *Yalkut Meshalim, Sippurim, Imrei Chochma* from Eliezer Shteinman (p. 228).

² Hosea 14:2.

This ten day period is the most opportune time to mend the rifts of the past, to regret the wrongs we have done, to learn from our mistakes, and to return to our purpose, our souls, our God – in short, to do teshuvah. About these days we are told *dirshu Hashem b'himatzo dorshuhu b'Hiyoso korov*, Seek out Hashem when He is found, call Him when He is near.³

You have heard every rabbi – a category in which I count myself – repeat this idea a thousand times. The power of return, of *teshuvah*, of repentance, is infinite and it can change decrees, turn darkness to light, negativity into positivity, illness into healing, bad into good.

Throughout our prayers over the past week, we have been repeating this exact idea over and over. Yet, is this ideal truly possible? Can we indeed do *teshuvah* – return to our core selves, to holiness and God? As much as repeat the words, is it more like lip service to an idea than an actual possibility?

Is there perhaps something we may say today, on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of Return, that could bring this idea home in a personal, relevant and real way?

I think we can, but for this we have to go back a few years.

3. The First Sin

The first sin in the history of the world was committed 5,776 years and five days ago, on the first day of existence⁴ – the first Rosh Hashanah ever – when Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. This is well documented and all who have ever opened a Bible – and even many who haven't – know this.

But when was the first documented case of *teshuvah*, often translated as “repentance,” or “penitence,” but literally meaning, “return”? We know when the first person sinned and lost innocence, but do we know when the first person returned to innocence?

³ Isaiah 55:6. Talmud Yevamot 49b.

⁴ Which was the sixth day of creation, when humanity was created.

Was it Adam or Eve?

As a matter of fact neither of them were the first returners, they were merely the first sinners.

Indeed, Adam actually learned the idea of *teshuvah* from another person.⁵ Who was that person, what was his sin, and when did he do *teshuvah*?

4. The First Case of Teshuvah

Adam and Eve had two sons⁶ named Cain and Abel. These loving brothers were destined to inherit the earth – quite literally.

But then Cain murdered⁷ his brother Abel and that was the end of that – so much for brotherly love.

A sin of fratricide is not easily overcome. As a matter of fact, we are told that, as a consequence of this horrendous act, Cain's line was destined to end after seven generations.⁸

But what happened to Cain himself after this sin? Did he live on? And, if so, how does someone continue living after he slaughters his very own brother?

The Torah states:

And Cain said to the Lord, "Is my iniquity too great to bear? Behold! You have driven me today off the face of the earth, and I shall be hidden from before You, and I will be a wanderer and an exile in the land, and it will be that whoever finds me will kill me." And the Lord said to him, "It shall be that whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be wrought upon him sevenfold,"

⁵ C.f. Pirkei d'Rab Eliezer chapter 20.

⁶ According to the Midrash Adam and Eve also had daughters. Genesis Rabba 22:3 states "two went up and seven came down." Cain was born with a twin sister and Abel with two sisters making up a set of triplets.

⁷ The reasons for this are described in the verse itself and discussed in Genesis Rabba 22.

⁸ CSee Rashi to Genesis 4:15; Likkutei Sichot vol. 31, p. 7.

*and the Lord placed a mark on Cain that no one who found him would slay him. And Cain went forth from the presence of the Lord, and he dwelt in the land of the wanderers, to the east of Eden.*⁹

After God meted out Cain's punishment – to be a living wanderer, whose descendants will be wiped from the face of the earth after seven generations – the Torah states: *And Cain went forth from the presence of the Lord.*

5. The Midrash Expounds

The Midrash¹⁰ expounds upon the words *And Cain went forth*, as follows:

Adam [his father] met him on the way and asked, "What was the result of your judgment?" Cain responded: "I did *teshuvah* and was reconciled." Adam clapped his hands to his face, "This is the power of *teshuvah* and I didn't know?!"¹¹ Immediately Adam stood and recited, "*Mizmor shir layom haShabbat* – a song sung for the day of Shabbat."¹²

Said Rabbi Levi, "This song Adam sang and it was forgotten after his generation; then Moses came and revived it in his name." *Mizmor shir layom haShabbat. Tov lehodot laHashem* – It is good to give thanks to the Lord..."¹³

This Midrash says that Cain was the first documented person to do *teshuvah*, and that Cain taught his father Adam the awesome power of *teshuvah*.

But this Midrash seems to raise many more questions than it answers:

⁹ Genesis 4:13-16..

¹⁰ Genesis Rabba 22:28.

¹¹ See Matnot Kehunah and Eitz Yosef ad loc, which reconcile the fact that Adam himself did *teshuvah* for 130 years (Eiruvin 18b). Compare to C.f Pirkei d'Rab Eliezer chapter 20, which seems to be more difficult to reconcile.

¹² Psalms 92:1.

¹³ Ibid 2.

- What did Cain's *teshuvah* consist of?
- How could Cain, someone who had just slaughtered his own brother – a quarter of the world – do *teshuvah*?
- Didn't the Torah just say that Cain would be punished to the extent that all of his offspring would be wiped away forever after seven generations? So what did his *teshuvah* accomplish?
- And why, when Adam heard about the power of *teshuvah*, did he recite a *Mizmor*, a psalm about Shabbat?

Perhaps a story about Rabbi Saadiah Gaon may enlighten us.

6. Saadiah Gaon Story

More than 1,000 years ago, there lived a great and holy sage and teacher by the name of Rabbi Saadiah Gaon. The Gaon had many pupils, and all of them had a great thirst to learn. Even a casual movement or word from their revered teacher provided them a lesson for life.

One winter morning, two of his pupils happened to be walking in the mountains when they heard a strange sound on the other side of a hill. When they approached the summit they were surprised to see their master sitting on the snow-covered ground, weeping, praying and clearly engaged in the act of *teshuvah*. Why would a *tzaddik* (a perfectly righteous person such as him) need to repent? Could he have possibly committed some sin?

Perplexed, they hurriedly departed. But later that day, they could no longer restrain themselves and asked their teacher about what they saw.

"I do that every day," he said to them. "Every day I repent and plead with God to forgive my shortcomings and failings in my service of Him."

"Your failings?" they asked. "Of what failings does the Gaon speak?"

"Let me tell you a story," said Rabbi Saadiah Gaon. "Something that happened to me a while ago.

"At one point in my life, I decided that all the honor and attention I was receiving from everyone around me was interfering with my service of the Creator. God must be served with joy, but without complete humility, joy is impossible. So I decided that I would spend several months in a place where no one recognized me.

"I dressed in simple garments and began my self-imposed exile, wandering from town to town. One night I was in a small inn run by an old Jew. He was a very kind and simple man, and we spoke for a while before I went to sleep. Early the next morning, after I had prayed *Shacharit* (the morning prayer), I bade him farewell and was again on my way.

"What I didn't know was that several of my pupils had been searching for me, and a few hours after I left the inn they appeared, hot on my trail. 'Did you see Rabbi Saadiah Gaon?' they asked him. 'We have reason to believe that he was here.'

"'Saadiah Gaon?' replied the bewildered old Jew. 'What would the great Rav Saadiah be doing in a place like mine? Rav Saadiah Gaon in my inn? No . . . I'm sure that you are very mistaken! There was no Rav Saadiah Gaon here!'

"But when the young men described me to him and explained about my exile and 'disguise,' the old Jew grabbed his head and cried: 'Oy! Rav Saadiah! Rav Saadiah was here! You are right! Oy, Oy!' and he ran outside, jumped into his wagon and began urging his horse to go as fast as possible in the direction I had taken.

"After a short time he caught up to me, jumped from his carriage and fell at my feet, weeping: 'Please forgive me, Rav Saadiah. Please forgive me. I didn't know that it was you!'

"I made him stand up and brush himself off, and then said to him: 'But my dear friend, you treated me very well, you were very kind and hospitable. Why are you so sorry? You have nothing to apologize for.'

"'No, no, Rabbi,' he replied. 'If I would have known who you are, I would have served you completely differently!'

"Suddenly I realized that this man was teaching me a very important lesson in the service of God, and that the purpose of my exile had been fulfilled. I thanked him and blessed him, and returned home.

"Since then, every evening when I say the prayer before sleeping, I go over in my mind how I served God that day. Then I think of that old innkeeper, and say to myself: 'Oy! If I had known who You are, God, I would have served you completely differently! 'Oy! If I had only known about God in the beginning of the day what I know now, I would have served Him completely differently!'

"And that is what I was repenting for this morning."¹⁴

7. The Answers

So now we have the answers to the questions raised earlier.

Firstly: If Cain could do *teshuvah*, anyone can do *teshuvah*.

Secondly: *Teshuvah* doesn't mean the consequences of one's negative actions are wiped away. Cain's punishment (no lineage after seven generations)¹⁵ and his *teshuvah* are two different things.

Teshuvah is return. We all make mistakes and there are often dire consequences to those mistakes. Controlling those consequences is not necessarily the role of *teshuvah*, as the Ruzhiner Rebbe told his disciple.

Rather, as Rabbi Saadiah Gaon teaches us, the role of *teshuvah* is to look back at the situation of yesterday with the opened eyes of today. After you acted a certain way in a given situation, you can return to that same situation with what you know now, after you saw what happened, and ask yourself if you would do the same thing.

Teshuvah means return – returning to the clarity of seeing things the way they are as opposed to the way we perceive them. Every error, every sin and transgression is a moment of blindness, blinding us from seeing the destructive consequences of our actions. When we do *teshuvah* for a past mistake, we are opening our eyes to seeing our actions for what they are. We come to an awareness, that had we known then what we know now, we would never have transgressed in the first place.

¹⁴ As related by Rabbi Tuvia Bolton.

¹⁵ Though see Likkutei Sichot *ibid.*, where seemingly his seed did not dry up, as Naama, Noah's wife, was his granddaughter.

8. Personal Lesson

If you met a smelly beggar in the street and treated him badly, and then the next day you realized that he was the king of the universe, would you treat him differently? Of course, you would.

That realization and resolve to behave differently is *teshuvah*.

No matter how high you might be (like Saadiah Gaon) or how low you might fall (like Cain), this approach to life applies. With what you know now, how will you have acted in the past and how will you act in the future?

Teshuvah is realizing what you know now applies both to the past and the present.

Surely, if we all lived like that, we wouldn't ever transgress in the first place. Imagine, before every act you thought: When I return to this act with the wisdom and experience and knowledge I will have learned from this transgression, will I ever do it again?

Of course not.

If Cain had asked himself this question before he slaughtered Abel, he would have kissed his brother instead.

If Adam and Eve would have not been blinded by the moment, and would have known about *teshuvah* and the consequences of their actions, surely they would have nourished the Tree of Knowledge instead of eating from it.

And all of us in our personal lives: If we approached every situation with the *teshuvah* principle, we would be proud to return to each one of our decisions and look upon them with humility.

9. Shabbat Shuvah (Conclusion)

Now we can finally understand the secret to *teshuvah* in general and *Shabbat Shuvah* – the Shabbat of Return – in particular.

Mizmor shir layom haShabbat. Tov lehodot laHashem. Literally this means, "A song is sung for the day of Shabbat. It is good to praise God."

But it may also mean, “A song is sung to the day of Return. It is good to confess to God.”

The word Shabbat contains the same letters as *tashav*, meaning “return.” And *hodot*, meaning “to praise,” comes from the same word as *vidoi* (or *hoda’ah*), meaning “confession/admission.”

Shabbat in general – and the Shabbat of Return in particular – is a reminder to always return to who we are, why we are, and to whom we are.

Tov lehodot laHashem – no matter where we go or from where we come, when we are honest with God and honest with ourselves (one without the other doesn’t work), then it is good.

Shabbat and *Shuvah* are really one and the same: they are both reminders of what we have always known.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova!