



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHABBAT SHUVAH 5777 • 2016

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Shabbat Shuvah

The Physics of Return



Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart 5777”

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The Physics of Return

ABSTRACT

What can a rubber band teach us about *teshuva*?

What can a catapult teach us about using pent up energy to propel us upward?

What can a slingshot teach us about slinging forth our best shot?

These are the questions before us on this Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – *Shabbat Shuvah* – the Shabbat of Return.

Teshuva means return. Return is the snap of a rubber band. Return is the click of a catapult. Return is the release of a slingshot.

The further back you pull, the further forward you spring.

The rubber band can teach us much about *teshuva*, as it also helps us decipher a cryptic verse in this week’s Shabbat Shuvah Haftarah: *I am like a green cypress tree*.

Return is not only about returning to the place you were before. Return is about using the tension of built-up energy to propel yourself forward, and become even greater than you were before.

Is there a better way than this to enter the holiest day of Yom Kippur?

OF RUBBER BANDS, CATAPULTS & SLINGSHOTS: THE PHYSICS OF RETURN

1. Advice from Magen Avraham

When he was not yet 30 years of age, Rabbi Avraham Abele completed one of the most comprehensive and profound commentaries on the *Orach Chaim* pillar of the *Shulchan Aruch* – the first of the four sections of the Code of Jewish Law that covers and addresses the vast breadth of the “road and manner of life,” including a day in the life of a Jew, Shabbat and the festivals. This monumental work was published posthumously and became known the world over as *Magen Avraham*, the “Shield of Abraham.”

In its mention of *Shabbat Shuva* – the “Shabbat of Return” which falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (that is today) – the *Magen Avraham* states that it is the rabbi’s duty to inspire the community to walk along the divine path and to provide practical guidance how to do so.¹

And this is my task today.

But before we proceed to the deep and resonant, a humorous anecdote and a simple analogy will help us understand the power of *teshuva*, the power of return, return to G-d.

2. Slingshot Fixation (Humor)

A patient in the psychiatric ward of a major hospital was being reviewed for possible release.

When asked what he would do if released, he replied, “I am going to make a slingshot and come back here and break every single window in the place.”

¹ Orach Chaim 429:1.

Obviously, his release was denied.

Six months later, the board was again considering his release and again asked him the same question. His reply was the same. "I am going to make a slingshot and come back here and break every single window in the place."

Again, he was turned down.

Several months later he was complaining to a fellow patient that he was never going to get released. The other patient asked him about his interview process and when he heard what had happened, he said, "Of course, you will never get released with answers like that! You have to tell them what they want to hear. Let me give you some advice on how to answer their questions."

After considerable coaching, the man felt that he was ready for the next board meeting.

And, when the board met again, they again asked him what he would do if they let him out. He answered, "I am going to find an apartment, get some furniture, and begin to make a life for myself."

"Good," they said. "And then what?"

He said, "I am going to go looking for a job, join a gym, and begin dating."

They agreed he was making real progress and asked, "And then what?"

"Then, I am going to go to a store and buy suits for my job, athletic wear and shorts for the gym, and nice clothing for dating."

"Wonderful," the excited board exclaimed. "We really think you are rehabilitated and have completely transcended your challenges. But, out of curiosity, what will you do next?"

"Well," said the fully recovered patient. "I am going to take the elastic out of those gym shorts, make myself a slingshot, come back here and break every single window in this place!"

3. Elastic Bands, Slingshots and Catapults

Unlike some people's intensely unwavering ambitions, elastic is flexible in its many uses, from creating a snug waistband for gym shorts to fashioning a great slingshot.

How does a slingshot work? You place an object in an elastic material, such as a rubber band or a piece of stretchable fabric. You pull back the flexible material and, when you let go, it snaps back, in the process catapulting the object forward. The further back you pull the elastic material, the further forward the object flies. Physics 101: the more tension captured, the greater the force when it is released.

The catapult works on a similar principle of pulling back and locking in tension which, when released, propels the object forward with great force. Catapults were used in ancient warfare and they are still used today. On aircraft carriers, for example, where space is at a premium and fighter jets have to take off from shortened runways without the required space to accelerate to the speeds necessary for liftoff, a modern catapult system is used to propel the fighter jet forward like a giant projectile, providing the push and speed for lift off.

The basic principle is that a significant force of energy is captured in a defined space, creating tension by the energy's desire to escape. When that energy is released, it shoots forth, propelling along with it whatever is attached to it as well.

Now, what does any of this – elastic waistbands, slingshots, rubber bands, catapults – have to do with Judaism in general and *Shabbat Shuvah* in particular?

4. Shabbat Shuvah

Shabbat Shuvah finds its name from the first word of today's Haftorah – *Shuvah Yisrael... Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God.*²

² Hosea 14:2.

To better understand the physics of *shuvah*, or *teshuva*, meaning “return,” let us take a look at another verse in our Haftorah:

Ephraim will say: “What have I to do any more with idols?”

And I [G-d] will respond ... “I am like a green cypress tree; in Me your fruit is found.”³

The Prophet Hosea states that Israel will turn away from false imagery, and G-d will respond. But what does *I am like a green cypress tree* mean?

That is what we need to understand, for in the second half of the verse is hidden a profound secret to the path of return.

Let’s dissect these words:

I am like a green cypress tree – Ani ki’vrosch ra’anan:

1. *Ani* – “I” – is a much more informal and casual way of saying “I” than the typically used and formal *Anochi*. Why would the Prophet Hosea quote G-d referring to Himself as *Ani* and not *Anochi*?
2. *Ki’vrosch* – “like the cypress tree” – should really be translated as “a young cedar tree.” When mature, the cypress is called *erez* or cedar. What’s the difference between the mature *erez* and the young *brosh*? *Brosh* is a fresh and moist tree whose branches are still flexible and pliable, unlike the older tree which is staunch and firm, unbendable and unyielding.
3. *Ra’anan* – “green” also implies “fresh” and “moist.”

What is the Haftorah teaching us about *teshuva*, “return,” by sharing that *Ani*, the informal form of “I” referring to G-d, is like a young, green, moist cypress?

To answer that question let us talk a bit about trees, which the Torah sees as a metaphor for us human beings.

³ Hosea 14:9.

5. Tree Dynamics

*Man is a tree of the field,*⁴ states the Book of Deuteronomy.

There are different types of trees – young trees and old trees, fruitful trees and trees that have not yet matured into fruit-bearing stage ... wizened trees that make very few mistakes and deviate even less from their roots ... young impetuous trees that are more easily swayed hither and yon. Then there are grandfather trees that know the profound import of strong foundations unseen underground ... and there are rebellious teenage trees that care less for that which is buried deep and look more to that which is overhead.

These two general types of trees are captured in a beautifully poetic verse in the Song of Songs:

*The beams of our houses are cedars, our corridors are cypresses.*⁵

Beams are fashioned from cedars (that is of *erez*). Corridors are constructed from cypresses (that is of *brosh*).

Why?

Beams, upon which one builds, must be strong. Mature trees are firm, rigid, and unyielding. Beams, foundational materials upon which an entire edifice will stand, require uncompromising materials. If a beam is a little too malleable, then the entire structure is at risk of collapsing.

Corridors, however, are very different than beams. Corridors are not foundations. Corridors are hallways, meant for passing through.

There are parts of life upon which we are meant to build, foundations that should be unwavering and unyielding. These, generally, are subterranean, hidden within our hearts, unseen by the world.

But then there are pathways, corridors through which we walk every single day. The more flexible we are in the externals of life, the more we will grow.

⁴ Deuteronomy 20:19.

⁵ Song of Songs 1:17.

There is also the importance of instilling foundational truths and unwavering cedar pillars into our youths, of teaching them, while they are in their flexible and malleable state, what it truly means to be a Jew.

Both are necessary, and they complement one another. And therein the sages find the inner meaning and personal lesson of *teshuva*.

6. The Mystical View

The Chassidic masters teach⁶ that a great secret lies in the green and flexible cypress tree. And our snappy, rubber band opening now serves to unlock it.

As I mentioned, the difference between a seasoned cedar (*erez*) and a young, green cypress (*brosh*) is that the seasoned tree is hard and firm, but the green tree is supple and pliable.

If you place an object on a seasoned, sturdy cedar branch, it will stay there unmoving and firmly supported. But if you place something on the branch of a young and green cypress, the branch will bend down, seemingly falling toward the ground. But, at the last second, the branch will snap back up like a rubber band, catapulting the object to soaring heights.

This is why this verse – *I am like a green cypress tree; in Me your fruit is found* – is a metaphor for *teshuva*.

Teshuva is compared to a young, malleable and flexible green tree. Because, quite literally, *teshuva* is the process of catapulting us forward, taking the energy of everything that was pulling us down and using it to propel us to new heights.

This is why the informal term *Ani* is used over the more formal *Anochi*. Adolescents and jean-wearing teenage trees, flexible in all their ways, are very informal. And *teshuva* is an *Ani* relationship with G-d, like a teenager that makes mistakes but then shoots forward with exuberant energy.

⁶ Likkutei Torah, Drushim l'Yom Hakippurim, p. 68b.

And, precisely here, in the snapping, bouncing and catapulting forward experience of *teshuvah* – of return to G-d – is where the “fruit” is found.

7. Young and Supple

Children are flexible, supple; when they fall, they recover quickly because they and their bones are malleable. The younger something is, the more impulsive and foolhardy, but also the more flexible and resilient. Like rubber bands, they may snap but they will snap back.

We adults must tap our “inner children” to be supple and flexible as well. A mistake should serve as a lesson learned. A fall can become a catalyst for great growth. A setback can teach us how to improve. Being constricted can generate tremendous forward thrust. A wrong we do, or when we are wronged, is not the end of the world. There is a way forward – a way to make amends, a way to forgive and be forgiven. We can catapult over our mistakes and come back stronger.

To err is human. To forgive is divine.

Like a fighter jet taking off from an aircraft carrier, *teshuvah* gives us the ability to lift-off even out of a tight space. It is the gift of being supple and young.

And, we all are young somewhere inside. We just have to look and believe. And this is what these Ten Days of Return leading up to Yom Kippur are all about – and especially today, *Shabbat Shuvah*. They are all a heavenly reminder of the tender suppleness and dexterous flexibility of our being.

At heart we are not hardened cedars. We are soft and yielding, and always have the ability to change and grow. For a human being, with a divine soul, there is no such thing as being stuck in our ways. We always can bounce back. And indeed, our shortcomings can catapult us to great heights.

8. Pull Back, Sling Forward (Practical Advice)

Every act we do contains energy. A positive and constructive act generates positive energy. A negative act – a mistake, a wrong, a sin – contains negative energy. You can call it bottled energy, waiting to be released. That energy can either bring us down and demoralize us, or it can motivate us to grow through our mistakes, correct a wrong and become wiser and stronger in the process.

Doing something wrong, making a mistake, is like trapping energy, like pulling back your potential and not allowing it to release, creating much tension. If all you do is pull back, creating more and more tension, sooner or later you will snap. Either way, your potential will never be realized and your vast energy will be wasted.

Sooner or later, something is going to give. The question is: When that happens, have you positioned yourself to catapult yourself forward?

Teshuva is return, letting go, releasing the tension, snapping back but shooting forward – not just returning to your previous position but propelling yourself past where you were before.

There are things in life that must be like cedars – rigid, staunch, firm, unmovable. These are foundations; these are good things; these are eternal things, wise and ancient.

But there are also things that must be malleable, flexible, supple, less formal so that we don't take everything – least of all ourselves – too seriously.

Here is a good exercise: After Shabbat, sit down, by yourself or with your spouse, or with any loved one, and draw a tree. Beneath the tree, make two columns. The first column label "Firm Roots." The second label "Flexible Branches." Begin filling each column, enumerating the items in your life that are firm and unwavering like mature cedars (i.e. family, faith, honesty...), and the items that are flexible and bendable like young cypresses (i.e. character traits, ambitions, methods, career goals...). After your two lists are complete – though they could and should be a work in progress – see if any of the items belong in the other column. What in life should be firmer and what should be more flexible?

What should be used to build predicable and reliable foundations and what should be used to catapult you to unpredictable places?

What you find will surprise you.

9. Seesaw or Catapult? (Joke)

What is the difference between a seesaw and a catapult?

An overweight friend.

10. Conclusion

But seriously...

Sometimes you feel as if life is a seesaw – it goes up and down in a predictable and boring rhythm. But what happens if every once in a while you drop a heavy load on the opposite end of the seesaw? Then, when you are down, that heavy load on the opposite end will cause the down side to snap up and hoist you to great heights – a seesaw magically transformed into a catapult.

If you are sitting on one end of a seesaw, and a massive weight is dropped on the other end, you will be catapulted upward, propelled off the ground. The greater the weight dropped on the other side of the seesaw, the higher you will be catapulted.

This is *teshuva*.

A mistake, a transgression, a sin is heavy (sometimes seemingly weighing an unbearable amount); it is density, mass, trapped energy. If that were the end of the story, that would indeed be a true sin. The true sin is leaving it trapped, for then it will just stay there building up until it explodes and causes major destruction.

However, when that trapped energy is released, returned in the process of *teshuva*, then it can catapult and propel you to places unreachable without this impetus.

Imagine every mistake you ever made was pulling the slingshot tighter. Now, all you have to do is release it and, *voila*, away you fly!

On this Shabbat Shuvah – and during these Ten Days of Teshuva – we have the opportunity to look at our past errors and allow them to propel us to great heights.

Gmar Chatima Tova and Shabbat Shalom!

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