

We are standing on the threshold of new beginnings. As we read the final chapters of our Torah, we are experiencing with our ancestors the enormous paradigm shift from wandering as ex-slaves in the wilderness to building a new society as free people settling in unfamiliar territory. And for ourselves today, we are once again standing in the nexus of the old year and the new, like all those who came before us, but each of us with our own unique experiences of the past year along with the hopes and fears we take into the new year. It is truly a time of transition, especially in this unprecedented year when many of us can literally feel the ground shifting under our feet. Perhaps the uncertainty of our own present lives can give us insight into what our ancestors must have felt as they stood on the brink of this new era in their lives.

For the Israelites, it is a momentous, bittersweet time. Moses, nearing the end of his life, has tried his eloquent best to instill in this diverse, impatient, fearful, and stubborn group of people the values by which they should live. He has reiterated their history with all its ups and downs, he has elucidated all the laws and precepts that must govern their lives, he has outlined the structures upon which they are to base their society, and he has graphically depicted the consequences of making good choices (upholding our part of our eternal covenant with HaShem) versus making bad choices (breaking the covenant through lawless behavior). Now, he summarizes, outlining a mutual process of *teshuvah* (return). It is mutual because if we break our covenant by not honoring the commandments, HaShem will turn away from us. Of course, both HaShem and Israel may always return, but because we have strayed, it is up to us to take the first step. Only then will HaShem turn back to us and renew our covenant. Much of this discourse is addressed in the singular form. As we know, the viability of the whole depends on the actions of each individual.

The act of *teshuvah* - of returning to our covenant is a 3-step undertaking:

1. We initiate the process: *va-hashevota el levavcha* – literally return to your heart, i.e. take it to heart (We know this phrase from *Aleinu!*). You will become aware of your transgressions; you and your offspring will return to HaShem and listen to his **voice** *be'chol levav'cha u'v'chol nafshecha* – with all your heart and all your soul – as we read in the first paragraph of the *shema Yisrael*. It is noteworthy that the word here for returning 'to' is *ad* (up to). In other words, this is a good beginning. You have taken the first step, and you are now on the path of return, approaching HaShem with heart and mind pointed in the right direction.
2. And then HaShem will gather you from where you have been scattered and restore you to a good life. Today, this *galut* is more a spiritual than a geographic exile; most of us are diaspora Jews after all, but we are bound and united by our covenant no matter where we choose to build and live Jewish lives. Then, HaShem will circumcise your heart, cutting away all the barriers to understanding. I like to think of it as cutting away all the scar tissue we have accumulated during the year through the small and large transgressions we have committed, and which have been committed against us. Then, the channels are open for us to return and listen with understanding to the **voice** of HaShem.
3. Then, HaShem will place upon your enemies the curses that drove you into exile. And you will return and listen with understanding to the **voice** of HaShem and fulfill all his commandments. And finally, IF you return 'to' HaShem – now with the word *el* – meaning all the way, with all your heart and with all your soul, you will be abundantly rewarded and HaShem will rejoice over you for good things, as he rejoiced over your forefathers.

The word *kol* (voice) appears once in each step. *KOL* – the thunder and shofar blasts that are so overwhelming that the people standing at the foot of the mountain to receive the Torah actually see them. As it says in the piyut *unetane tokef*, at the beginning of the Musaf service on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, after the great shofar blast the small, thin voice – the *kol d'mama d'kah* whispers to our deepest soul. It is the sound Elijah sensed when he became aware that HaShem was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. It is what Moses tells the people when he says that the commandment is not concealed nor is it far away. It is not in heaven, not beyond the sea, but indeed, very close – in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it. In other words, if you don't internalize it, it won't take hold.

And so, as we enter the final week of Elul, many of us deep into the process of *teshuvah*, we return. We return to our deepest, truest selves, guided by our *kol d'mama d'kah* to that little *pintele yid*, that tiny Jewish spark that brings us home to our roots, to our people, and to HaShem. May you all have a gentle journey and a loving "homecoming."

Shabbat shalom!