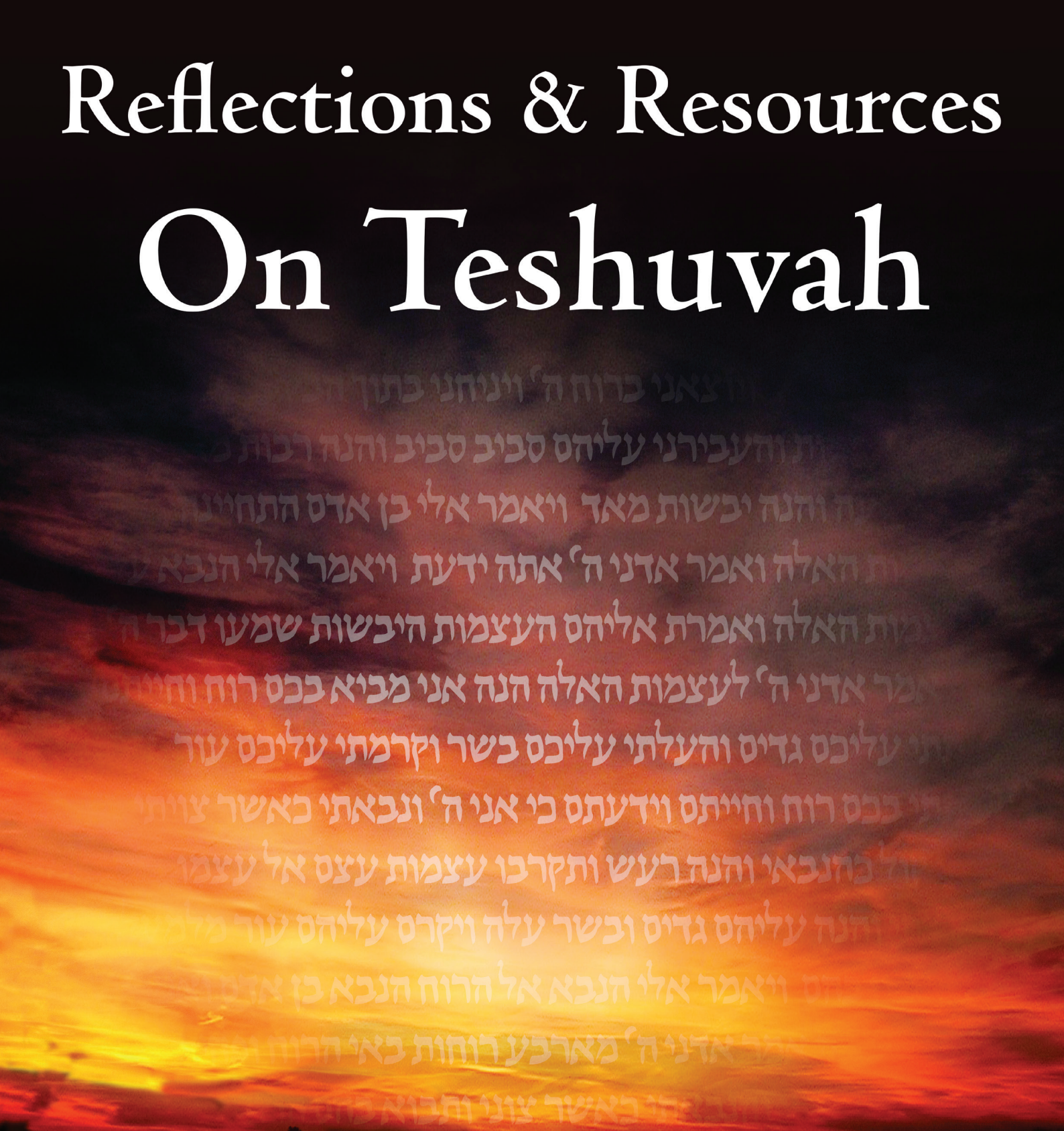
Reflections & Resources

On Teshuvah



Selected readings from *Returning*
supplemented by Jewish sources

Yael Shahar

Reflections & Resources on Teshuvah

Yael Shahar / Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo

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Returning is based on a true story — more precisely, on two true stories. Names and identifying details have been changed in some cases. As far as possible, I have preserved Ovadya's testimony just as originally told in his journals and correspondence. These things, while painful to read, are too important to leave out. I have taken greater liberties in conveying Yael's story — sometimes straying from the strict chronological order of events — in order to better convey the inner reality as it was lived.

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Returning

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How to use this Guide

This discussion guide explores some of the difficulties and dilemmas facing those seeking to heal the wounds of their own souls — especially self-inflicted wounds. How do we change our life's course without negating the past? What happens if there is no one left to grant forgiveness? And, perhaps most difficult of all, how can we forgive ourselves without at the same time excusing our actions?

These questions and more are explored through a series of dialogues between a very unusual *Ba'al Teshuvah* and his rabbi. Ovadya ben Malka, a former member of the Birkenau Sonderkommando in search of atonement, originally approached Rav David Ish-Shalom to be his judge. However, the rabbi soon stepped out of that role, becoming mentor, confidant, and healer. Without Rav Ish-Shalom's wisdom and compassion, Ovadya's story would have had a very different ending.

Ovadya's story is told in detail in *Returning*. However, this discussion guide stands on its own; the included dialogues can be read and pondered without reference to the rest of the story.

Each discussion topic focuses on a particular dialogue between Ovadya and the rabbi, supplemented with sources from Jewish texts. Each topic is followed by a few questions to get the discussion going. Feel free to add your own as you go along!

Note: Page numbers are from the paperback edition; page numbers in the hardover edition will be different.

The Context of the Excerpts

Although this guide is meant to be used as a stand-alone resource, those who have not read *Returning* may wish to know the context of the excerpts that follow.

The book opens with Yael reaching out to a rabbi on behalf of "Alex". "I need you to find a rav," Alex tells her. "My only stipulation is that it be someone who knows the law inside and out and also not someone who will be blinded by my tears — someone who will judge fairly, applying the Law, not an emotional interpretation of it. I need to see the sources and how they are interpreted. Otherwise it will not help. I do not believe in miracles."

In subsequent correspondence with the rabbi, Rav Ish-Shalom, we learn that Alex's real name is Ovadya, and that he was deported to Birkenau from his home in Salonika, Greece at the age of 17. His mother and sister were gassed on arrival and Ovadya was sent to the Sonderkommando, the group of prisoners responsible for running the machinery of murder.

Ovadya wants the rabbi to serve as a rabbinic judge — essentially to put himself on trial for what he did in Birkenau. "The fact that good people can be forced to do wrong doesn't make them less good," he says. "But it also doesn't make the wrong less wrong." However, he is unable to speak of what he did to survive, and his past is gradually revealed in a series of letters to the rabbi and to Masha, a woman who was forced into prostitution during the war. He is able to tell her what he cannot speak aloud.

Stepping out of the role of judge, Rav Ish-Shalom becomes mentor and confidant, and guides Ovadya on the path of Teshuvah and healing.

Ovadya's story is proof that Teshuvah is always possible. Even in the case of acts committed under coercion; even when we don't know whether we had a choice; and even when the wrong can never be put right.

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The Revival of the Dead & the Miracle of Return

Nathan Lopes Cardozo

Returning is a book about memory — Jewish memory. It tells the story of a soul's descent into hell and, after a long and arduous journey, back into life.

But it's also a book about something else, something that we hesitate to name. Something we fear to call attention to, perhaps out of fear that we will be laughed at, or fear that we will be wrong, yet again. It is something that has entered into the Jewish worldview and become part of everything we do, a certainty and a faith that has carried us through the darkest times. We pronounce our belief in it three times daily. And yet, we have no idea what it really means.

I speak about the belief in *T'chiat HaMetim*, the revival of the dead. This is indeed a book about the revival of the dead, of one soul's journey back to life. The theme of returning from death — death of the will, death of the heart, death of faith — runs all through *A Damaged Mirror*. The characters themselves are conscious of this theme. But there is a deeper theme buried just beneath the surface, and it is that which makes this book a unique testimony for our times. Because this book could not have been written before the Birth of the State of Israel.

One of our authors finds herself in Jerusalem, at the home of a rabbi who teaches at Neve Yerushalayim, the yeshiva where I also once taught. The scene is familiar to me — the gathering of young people around the Shabbat table, getting to know what it means to be Jewish. The familiar rituals of Shabbat punctuated by the lively conversation of young minds.

> The host, a rabbi who taught at a nearby yeshiva, asked each of his young guests to tell a bit about what had brought them to Israel. Besides the humorous answers: "An El Al 747!" and the facetious answers: "A desire for the quiet life," there were also more thoughtful ones. In fact, for most, the question was not easily answered. There was a sort of bemused wonder that they were here at all.
>
> And a few of them had no rational answer. Some mentioned recurrent dreams — or nightmares; vague memories from early childhood, now scarcely recalled; a desire to rebuild something that they no longer remembered; a persistent pull without any reasonable explanation . . . .
>
> "Would the three of you be willing to come back after Havdalah to help me with a project?" asked the rabbi.

It turns out that the rabbi wants to write down their individual stories, but the reason why goes beyond the simple preservation of memory. Such stories hint at a great secret about the age we are living

in now. The rabbi described here could have been any of us; we've all heard these stories. But not everyone connects the dots in the same way.

> "You see, at the yeshiva, we get a lot of people who come in search of something they feel they've lost. In most cases, it's just a deeper, more meaningful lifestyle than the one they grew up with. But every year we get a few who describe their journey in much the same way as you three did last night: rebuilding someone else's life, seeking relief from a nightmare they can't clearly recall.... Well, let's just say that I think I understand the reason these people — people like you — are here.
>
> "This index file here.... This is a record of a miracle that is happening in our day, right now, all around us."
>
> He paused and looked intently at each of his listeners. Then in a voice filled with wonder he said, "We, in our generation.... We are witnessing T'chiat haMetim — the revival of the dead. And I am keeping a record."

The revival of the dead, for Jews, is more than a metaphor; it has taken on substance and form in our tradition.

Isaiah prophesied:

> Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits. Come, my people, enter into your rooms and close your doors behind you; Hide for a little while until indignation runs its course. For behold, the Lord is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; and the earth will reveal her bloodshed and will no longer cover her slain.

This took on more concrete imagery in Ezekiel:

> Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am The Lord.

From a few lines of lyrical and allusive prophecy, whole worlds have taken shape. We have formed a picture of what the Revival of the Dead will entail. This picture is based largely on the speculations of our sages during the time of the Second Temple and — even more — after the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginnings of a long exile.

We seldom stop to think — and we certainly should do so more often — that in taking the words of our sages as a description of mere fact, we may miss the deeper meanings which they meant to convey. As a rule, *aggadah*[1] should not be taken literally; rather, it must be interpreted with the understanding that a higher truth is being alluded to — a truth that is beyond historical perspective, philological expression, or the dimensions of scientific observations. Agaddah speaks to that part of us that understands but cannot articulate what it understands. It allows us to go beyond the realms of the definable, perceivable,

1 Interpretive story, usually based on a Biblical text, but designed to teach something unrelated to the text.

and demonstrable. In this sense, aggadah is a form of religious metaphor, a mirror that enables us to form mental images of the indescribable.

Isaiah's words, "the earth will reveal her bloodshed and will no longer cover her slain," are eerily appropriate to the phenomenon described in this book: a memory from beyond the grave takes form and substance, and stands in accusation against the murderers. In fact, this is not as rare a phenomenon as we might think. Perhaps this is simply the natural response of a people to sudden and traumatic loss of the memory of individuals: the memory must find another route to reach the next generation. Perhaps we are taking note of it now only because the magnitude of the catastrophe makes it impossible to ignore. Perhaps. But perhaps this is something that we haven't seen before, something different not only in degree but in substance.

Whichever is correct, we are led to ask a more pertinent question: could this phenomenon be the fulfillment of the prophetic vision?

The same prophecies that speak of national — and perhaps even individual — revival also contain harrowing accounts of the days before this miraculous rebirth of the State of Israel. It's been suggested by many that the Holocaust was *ikveta d'mashihah* — the catastrophe foretold to herald the arrival of the Messiah.

The author doesn't state an opinion on these matters, but the question is never far below the surface. Early in the book, a discussion is recorded among a group of young people at a kibbutz. The participants marvel at the miraculous resurrection of Israel and speculate on whether we are entering the Messianic Age. If so, who then is the Messiah?

> "Who's the Mashiah? Easy!" Uri, a kibbutz member their own age, plopped down on the grass between Aaron and Dov. He was their go-to man on the kibbutz, equally at home in Hebrew, English, and half a dozen other languages. "It's obvious who the prophecy's talking about!"
>
> "Yeah? So who is it?" asked Aaron, with less skepticism than was his wont.
>
> "David Ben Gurion!" said Uri. He was met with blank stares all around, except for Dov, who looked at him with shocked disapproval. "No, really! Think about it. Ben Gurion met all of the Rambam's conditions — he restored Jewish sovereignty, set up a government, health care system, unions, the works — even before the Brits left. He ruled pretty much like a king for the first thirty years.... He could have installed himself as lifetime dictator if he'd wanted and no one would have objected. He rebuilt Jerusalem — as much of it as he could reach anyway. He institutionalized the return of the exiles. And then, once the Jewish state was well on its way toward a golden age, he quietly left the government and went to live in a little one-room hut on his kibbutz. He not only rode in on a donkey, but he rode back out on one!"

Irrespective of Uri's speculation, it is no doubt true that our image of what a messiah might look like may keep us from recognizing the real thing when it stands before us. Could it be that we have embellished the long-awaited event with so many aggadic flourishes that we can no longer recognize the reality when it happens? Could our overly literal reading of our sages' poetic descriptions have led us to overlook completely the miracle as it happened?

One of the dangers of taking the statements and speculations of our sages as literal truth — when they were not meant as such — is the distortion of our expectations.

In a remarkable *midrash* (commentary) on Proverbs, we read the following: "All of the festivals will be abolished in the future [the Messianic Age], but Purim will never be abolished."

The miracle of Purim is very different from the miracles mentioned in the Torah. While the latter were overt miracles, such as the ten plagues in Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea, the miracle of Purim was covert. No law of nature was violated in the Purim story and the Jews were saved by seemingly normal historical occurrences. Had we lived in those days, we would have noticed nothing unusual. Only retroactively are we astonished that seemingly unrelated and insignificant human acts led to the redemption of the Jews. The discovery that these events concealed a miracle could only be made after the fact.

Covert miracles will never cease to exist explains the *Torah Temimah*[2]. In fact, they take place every day. The midrash on Proverbs is not suggesting that the actual festivals mentioned in the Torah will be nullified in future days. Rather we should read the midrash as follows: Overt miracles, which we celebrate on festivals mentioned in the Torah, no longer occur. But covert miracles such as those celebrated on Purim will never end; they continue to occur every day of the year. Purim, probably rooted in a historical event of many years ago, functions as a constant reminder that the Purim story never ended. We are still living it. The Megillah is open-ended; it was not and will never be completed!

Such miracles are rarely apparent to those living through them. Only in hindsight are they revealed as miraculous at all. The Midrash hints that the messianic age itself is not meant to be an age of open miracles, but of miracles hidden in plain sight. Perhaps this includes the messianic personage himself. Have we, in trying to interpret aggadot about the Mashiah literally, lost sight of what aggadah is all about? It would not be the first time that an over-emphasis on the minutiae of our tradition has led us to lose sight of the substance!

Jews have been an ever-dying people that never died. They have experienced a continuous resurrection, like the dry bones that Ezekiel saw in the valley. This has become the *sine qua non* of every Jew. It is the mystery of the hidden miracle of survival in the face of overwhelming destruction. Our refusal to surrender has turned our story into one long, unending Purim tale.

And herein is the essential tension in *A Damaged Mirror*. In speaking of one type of T'chiat HaMetim, we are led to the very boundaries of something that may well be the thing itself — the fulfillment of prophecy. Are we already in the early stages of the Messianic Age?

Returning describes a spiritual journey. But what makes this journey significant is not its particulars — the memory of this or that incident, traumatic and world-shattering as it was. No, what makes this journey significant is that it is *our* journey, as a nation. Ovadya's struggle with faith after what he has seen is common to many of us. Yael's attempt to put down roots in the Land of Israel is representative of *Am Yisrael* in our

2 A commentary on the Torah written by Rabbi Baruch ha-Levi Epstein (1860–1941).

day. The need for closure and atonement is the great need of a nation coming out of the darkness of exile and blinking in the sunlight of a new dawn.

"You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy," said Isaiah, "for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits. Come, my people, enter into your rooms and close your doors behind you; Hide for a little while until indignation runs its course."

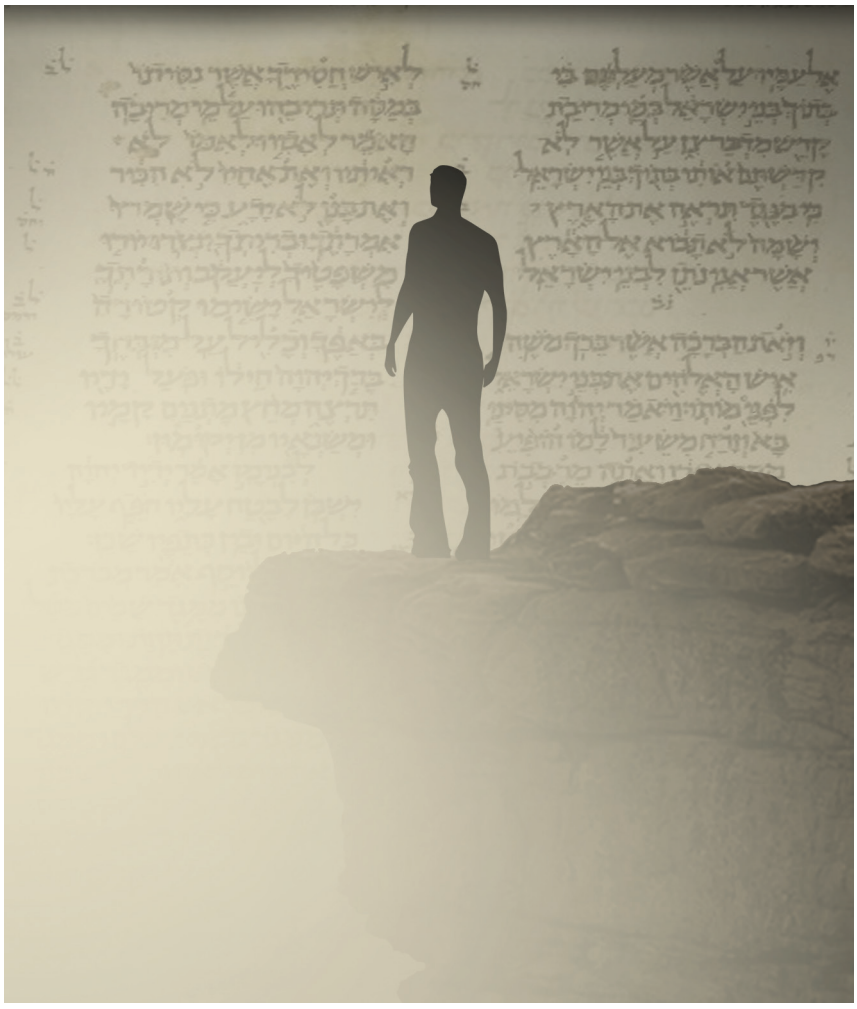
Can we believe — dare we hope — that the indignation has passed and that the dawn has come?

פעם אחת היה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי יוצא
מירושלים, והיה רבי יהושע הולך
אחריו, וראה בית המקדש חרב.
אמר רבי יהושע: אוי לנו על זה שהוא
חרב. מקום שמכפרים בו עונותיהם של
ישראל.
אמר לו: בני, אל ירע לך. יש לנו כפרה
אחת שהיא כמותה, ואיזה? זה גמילות
חסדים. שנאמר: "כי חסד חפצתי ולא
זבח".

Once Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai and Rabbi Joshua were walking by the ruins of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua said, "Woe to us that the place where atonement for the sins of Israel was made has been destroyed!"
But Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai replied, "Do not be grieved, my son. We have a means of atonement that is just as effective. And what is it? Gemilut hassadim — acts of loving-kindness, as it is said, 'For I desire hesed — loving-kindness — and not sacrifice!'" (Hosea 6:6).

— Avot d'Rabbi Natan 4:21.

Topics for Discussion



ר' יודן בשם ר' אלעזר אמר: שלושה
דברים מבטלים גזירות רעות, ואלו הם:
תפלה וצדקה ותשובה, ושלושתן נאמרו
בפסוק אחד, הה"ד (ד"ה ב ז): ויכנעו עמי
אשר נקרא שמי עליהם. ויתפללו, זו תפלה.
ויבקשו פני, הרי צדקה, כמה דאת אמר:
(תהלים יז): אני בצדק אחזה פניך. וישובו
מדרכם הרעה, זו תשובה. ואח"כ (ד"ה ב
ז): ואסלח לחטאם וארפא את ארצם.

בראישית רבה, מד:יב

R abbi Yudan said in R. Eleazar's name: Three things nullify a decree, and they are: Prayer and charity (or righteousness) and Teshuvah, and all three are enumerated in one verse: If My people, upon whom My Name is called, shall humble themselves, and pray… (2 Chronicles 7:14) — here you have prayer,… And seek My face (ibid.)… — alludes to charity, as you read, 'I shall behold Your face in righteousness' (Psalms 17:15),… And turn from their evil ways… (2 Chron. loc. cit.) — denotes repentance,… after that, Then will I forgive their sin (ibid).

Genesis Rabbah 44:12

Does prayer annul the decree?

Rav Ish-Shalom,

I wish to tell you something I have learned, and acted upon. I would like to know your thoughts on this, and whether you agree or disagree.

It is that one must never, ever, plead with God before a Selekzia, and never praise God when it is over. To plead not to be taken is simply to ask that another be taken instead. The urge to do so is very strong, but you will have to live with yourself afterward — at least until the next one. And the same goes for thanking God for being spared. Should we praise God for someone else's suffering?

Shalom, Ovadya,

I understand how you feel. I disagree strongly. Let me illustrate with some sources.

The Gemara says that the Kohen Gadol prayed to G-d, on Yom Kippur, as he stood at the entrance of the Holy of Holies, that G-d should not listen to the prayers of travelers when the world needs rain. One might wonder — would it not be preferable to instruct travelers not to pray that it should not rain? The answer seems to be that G-d expects and allows — nay, probably even desires, prefers and longs for — people to be natural, to be connected with their feelings and needs and preferences, and to express them naturally. Other people may pray for the opposite — that is all right, too. G-d wants us to be human beings, not angels.

There is a fundamental principle of Jewish belief at work here: G-d is a free agent, as human beings are free agents.

Just in case you might argue that the above may be true for common people, but that great men of faith are expected to hold to a higher standard, let me give another illustration. The Gemara notes that when Yirmiyahu and Daniel prayed, they removed words of praise that Moshe had said about G-d in his prayer. Moshe had turned to G-d as HaEl haGadol haGibor v'haNora (the Great, Triumphant, and Awesome God), but Yirmiyahu and Daniel had left out the last two words after they saw the destruction of Jerusalem and the oppression and murder of the

תשובה תפילה
וצדקה מעברין את
רוע הגזרה

Teshuvah, Prayer, and Charity annul the evil decree.

Unetanneh Tokef,
12th century

Should one pray for something that comes only at the expense of someone else?

From "When not to Pray," p.173.

Jewish people. The Gemara explains the answer to their question of faith, and that the Anshei Knesset Hagedola restored the use of the full phrase used by Moshe Rabbenu in our daily prayer.

But then, the Gemara asks, did not Yirmiyahu and Daniel know that same answer that the Anshei Haknesset knew? Why did they leave those two words out of their prayers? And the Gemara answers: because they knew that G-d is a G-d of truth — and so they could not pray what they could not feel! Intellectual understanding is one thing, and having human emotions — and bringing them to G-d — is something else. And that's how it should be!!

So, one can pray for G-d to save one's life, even if the only way that might seem likely to happen is if someone else is taken (because there do exist other possibilities, even if they are unlikely). One doesn't have to plan for G-d how He will work things out — it is sufficient to cry out to be saved, and let G-d work out the details. Not only that — one cries out to G-d, but G-d is free to decide how to respond. Similarly, if one has been saved — then it is right to be naturally grateful. It is only human. And one can do that simultaneously with feeling pain over the loss of someone else who was taken.

There is more. But let that suffice for now. Just be human. And know we are free. And that G-d is free, too.

What do you think?

- Do you agree with Rav Ish-Shalom? Wouldn't praying for something we know must come at someone else's expense lead to cognitive dissonance, or even corruption of the soul?
- Does prayer presuppose that God listens to prayer?
- How do we avoid treating prayer as a bargain with God?

The limits of charity

In those circumstances we are reduced to bare existence, bereft of all that we once believed to be our essence. Naked, we have no pockets in which to store the things that we once used in the natural trade of human interactions. Instead, we come to value a different currency—our humanity. It is this currency that truly defines us, and even death cannot entirely devalue it. The more is taken away, the more we value what is left.

Haltingly, I tried to convey something of this to Rav Ish-Shalom. "Such acts of kindness were not the exception; they were the rule. I don't mean that people acted altruistically, without thought of their own interest. It was just that many realized that their own interest encompassed that of others. There was a saying: the unit of survival is two. It means that one alone has no chance."

"It's a lesson learned the hard way," said Rav Ish-Shalom.

I nodded. *Do you also feel so overwhelmed by it all that kindness is the only way to preserve sanity?* I wondered. Is helping me your own answer to what has happened to us?

It was not my place to ask him personal questions, but he answered the unspoken thought. "There is only one answer to what happened there: Give me the love for one human being for another. Give me social justice and an end to intolerance. Give me anything which helps to end the suffering of people living here and now. That is the only answer."

It was a better answer than any I had found. "But we don't always have anything to give."

"That's true when charity is done with food or money or other material things, and especially if it's impersonal. But if the help you give is pesonal, then as long as you're alive, you're never broke!"

And yet, having something to give can bring its own dilemmas. Yes, even there…

"In the Krema…" I stopped. Rav Ish-Shalom's gaze was open, waiting.

In the Krema, we have access to a large quantity of "treasure"—food and medicines that are very much needed. But to whom to give it?

Are acts of kindness situation -dependent?

From "Priorities and Charity," p. 318.

Those who need it most are also those least likely to survive. Does one give food only to those with good chances?

Things came to a head one night in autumn of '43 when some two hundred men were brought over from the main camp towards nightfall. They were veterans and knew what was going on. They had been dumped — quite literally dumped — in the courtyard, and some were injured by the fall. They had not eaten in three or four days. We had a pile of tins upstairs from the day before and wanted to share this with them. Because it was cold, we had to place heaters in the leichenkeller first in order to warm up the room. So we had something more than an hour to wait. Several of our group went to fetch some food that had been cached upstairs. An argument broke out up there with other team members about whether it was right to give food to those who would be dead in another few hours. Would it not be better to save it for the women's camp across the road, where it might make the difference between life and death?

The argument might have become violent, had not someone decided to ask the Dayan. He said that according to halakhah, when food means life, it must go only to those whose life can be saved. Those downstairs could not be saved, but others could.

So in the end, the men who went upstairs returned empty handed. The rest of us took whatever we had on us and gave that instead. It was very little and simply caused a lot of ill feeling.

"This has haunted me for a long time." I said, surprised to find that my teacher had somehow followed me back into the past. "I understand the reasons for the Dayan's decision. But still, we are also in the category of 'already dead'. No one believes they will let us live, having seen what we have seen. Do we have the right not to give to others in the same situation? Can one weigh one life against another?

What do you think?

- Do you agree with the judgment of the Dayan? What would you have done in this circumstance?
- What does this story teach us about the notion that "charity and good deeds cancel the (evil) decree"?

How fairly do we judge ourselves?

Ovadya:

Imagine yourself there, in that situation [in the undressing room with the victims about to be gassed], forgetting everything you know now. How would you judge me?

And what could I say to you in my defense? Would it carry any weight with you to know what it's doing to me to have to be here? Would it really matter to you that I'm here under duress, and that any material gain — extra food, warm clothing — I may obtain from being here is far outweighed by the anguish of seeing you here? Would you see me any differently if you knew that several decades down the line I would still be paying for what I was forced to do?

I think the answer is obvious. People are only human. There is no question in my mind how you would answer. There is an unbridgeable chasm that separates those facing death from those who will live on — even if only for a short time. And in that place there was little enough compassion to spare on either side of that chasm.

Masha:

Ovadya, I don't think the chasm is as wide as you perceive it to be. I can understand why it felt that way, and still does, but I don't see it in the same way. The chasm was not between men like you and the soon-to-be-dead. It was between the Nazis and everyone else. They were the ones who had lost their humanity, and that was not through having been forced into it, but through willing choice. Can't you see that?

It seems to me that there wasn't much time to deliberate on one's moral choices under those circumstances. You and I were still trying to decide whether to opt out or stay in right up until the end! Those kinds of decisions are major ones, and would take any sane person a good while to contemplate thoroughly before making the final call. Did we get a moment even to think straight, to gather our wits about us and ask for divine guidance? Hardly! That's part of

אמר רבא ואיתימא
רב חסדא אם
רואה אדם
שיסורין באין עליו
יפשפש במעשיו...
ברכות ה:א

If one sees that suffering has come upon him, let him examine his deeds…

Brachot 5a

From "A Conversation with the Dead," p. 125.

the problem, I think. You and I are both still carrying a sense of guilt for having co-operated with the enemy, even though in our hearts we were not actually co-operating, and every minute of every day was a debate about whether or not to go on, and every day was a desperate attempt to make the very best possible decision.

How do you feel about the other Sonderkommando members? Do you condemn them as harshly as you condemn yourself? This is a genuine question — I'd really like to know the honest truth. And how do you feel about women like myself? We, too, surely deserve exactly the same condemnation as you do?

What do you think?

- If you were one of the victims, would you see Ovadya and the rest of the SK as a traitors?
- "The fact that good people can be forced to do wrong doesn't make them less good," Ovadya says in a different conversation, "But it also doesn't make the wrong less wrong." Do you agree? Do you think Ovadya is judging himself too harshly? If so, what might account for this harshness of judgment?
- Do you think we are ever able to judge ourselves fairly? If not, what impact does this have on our ability to do Teshuvah?

To what degree are we responsible?

והייתם לי
קדשים כי קדוש
אני יהוה ואבדל
אתכם מן העמים
להיות לי

ויקרא כ:כו

You must be holy to Me because I, Hashem, am holy, and I have set you apart from the other peoples to be mine.

Leviticus 20:26

I looked down at the book in front of me. This was my first glimpse of the Mishne Torah, written in the 12th century by Rav Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides), known by the initials of his name—the Rambam. In a work comprising fourteen large volumes, he had integrated nearly a thousand years of cultural, political, and psychological wisdom into a vast web of law and philosophy.

> The entire house of Israel are commanded regarding the sanctification of [God's] great name, as it's written: "And I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel." Also, they are warned against desecrating [His holy name], as [the above verse] states: "And they shall not desecrate My holy name."

The words stared at me in mute accusation, and I stared stubbornly back at them: black Hebrew letters that threatened to squeeze through any chink in the armor that I had painstakingly built over decades of isolation. R av Ish-Shalom read the next few paragraphs, commenting and adding context as he went.

"Note that this touches on the foundation of our calling — what it means to be a Jew. We are meant to be a holy people, a Kingdom of Priests, and if we abrogate that calling, we abrogate our reason for existence. Jews are required to serve as an example in every walk of life, including — perhaps especially — in extreme circumstances. We are expected to choose death over wrong-doing in these cases, to put love of God above love of life.

"Now, in almost all cases, saving life takes precedence, but there are three crucial exceptions."

I started to speak, but Rav Ish-Shalom held up a hand. "Wait. We'll get to your question soon enough…"

> When does the above apply? With regard to all mitzvot other than the worship of other gods, forbidden sexual relations, and murder. However, with regard to these three sins, if one is ordered: "Transgress one of them or be killed," one should sacrifice his life rather than transgress.

From "Yehareg V'al Ya'avor," p. 281

I had known this much already, but my mind was filled with angry questions. What did the Rambam know of Birkenau? What did he know of what we faced there? What if all of us are to be killed? What if by collaborating in one murder, we save ten people? What if — ?

Rav Ish-Shalom cut through my unvoiced objections. "I repeat: What matters is not what will have been done, but what will *I* have done."

I shook my head. "But had we all gone to the wire, then the memory of those who passed through would have died with us — or would have lived on in the minds of Germans or Poles, not Jews."

I realized that I was twisting the rav's tablecloth in knots, and forced myself to be still. "It wasn't only our physical existence they wanted to destroy, but our culture and memory as well. Why give them that victory? They have defeated us in every way possible. At least this much we can hold back from them."

"Ovadya, the value of our lives — of anyone's life — is not to be found in giving or withholding victory from this or that evil person or culture to whom we stand in opposition. Shall we allow others to determine what our value is?"

What do you think?

- Are we giving the enemy a victory by defining ourselves in opposition to them? Is there another way to resolve the dilemma?
- The rav tells Ovadya, "It is not what has been done that matters, but what I have done." Do you agree?
- Is there some higher standard upon which we can base our decisions?
- Do you feel that Rav Ish-Shalom is being overly harsh in judging Ovadya?

Right and wrong: result or process?

"I have some questions…." I said, as we settled down at Rav Ish-Shalom's dinning table.

"I may have some answers," Rav Ish-Shalom quipped.

I took a deep breath and dove in. "First question: The case is clear-cut when an enemy tells us: 'kill this person or you will be killed.' But what if both are under sentence of death and there is a chance that one might survive if he obeys…? You see, this is the way we saw it at the time: the victims are already dead. We also are under sentence of death, but it is a suspended sentence. Perhaps something will happen to save us before it is carried out. Why should all die when it will not save anyone?"

"It is indeed clear cut," said Rav Ish-Shalom. "Perhaps more clear than you realize. 'Kill him or you will be killed" includes "Either you kill him and I will spare you, or I will kill you both.'"

I shook my head. "But what if the entire Jewish people is going to be wiped out, and this is the only way to save a single person? Shouldn't that one person be saved?"

"And who exactly determines who that one person is to be?" asked Rav Ish-Shalom, "You? The esteemed kapo in charge of your team?" His voice dripped with sarcasm. "And how are you to determine that person's worthiness to be saved, over all others?"

"It was all chance there anyway…." I murmured.

Rav Ish-Shalom looked away and closed his eyes, as if in pain. "Yes, life and death were in the hands of chance," he said. "And that being the case, your best hope — no, your *only* hope — is to keep it so!"

I looked up, startled. My teacher was looking at me intently. "Ovadya, it is not the end result that determines what is right or wrong. It is the process. One is not to take part in the murder of others at any price. Remember: not 'what will have been done', but rather 'what will *I* have done?'"

"Then what are you suggesting? That we should simply offer to die like sheep?" My hands were clenched together so hard that my knuckles had gone white. I took a deep breath, but my voice still shook. "The

העידתי בכם היום
את השמים ואת
הארץ החיים
והמות נתתי לפניך
הברכה והקללה
ובחרת בחיים
למען תחיה אתה
וזרעך.

דברים ל:יט

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live

Deuteronomy 30:19

From "In a Time of Persecution," p. 302

choice we faced was to choose life on any terms at all, or death on the enemy's terms. Should we play into their hands by choosing death over life?"

Rav Ish-Shalom did not rise to my anger, but his reply was no less forceful. "Ovadya, it is not our aim to die. However, when we imbibe 'willingness' to die for our sacred principles, then there is some hope we will be driven to find meaning in living for our sacred principles."

The anger drained away. I thought of that long slide into inhumanity. "But of course, we could not know the consequences of anything at the time — neither living nor dying."

"Ovadya, I repeat: right and wrong are not determined by the consequences. Wrong acts may lead to desirable consequences, and right acts may lead to undesirable consequences."

What do you think?

- Ovadya first comes to Rav Ish-Shalom as a judge. Why does the rabbi step outside of this role? Is his reason his own or does he see himself as acting on behalf of Am Yisrael as a whole?
- What are the limits of our responsibility when all choices seem be wrong? How does Rav Ish-Shalom advise us to respond to these limits? Do you feel that his reasoning is correct?
- Do you agree with Rav Ish-Shalom that right & wrong are independent of consequences?

What if there was no choice?

"Teshuvah is always possible," said Rav Ish-Shalom. "Always. Perhaps your Teshuvah will never be Teshuvah G'murah — Completed Teshuvah. But it will still be Teshuvah.

I could only shake my head at that. How does one do teshuvah at all for wrongs against the dead?

"In fact," my teacher continued, "your self-doubt may itself be part of what requires Teshuvah."

I must have looked mystified, because Rav Ish-Shalom smiled in that mischievous way that he had when he managed to befuddle me.

"Someone who has not actually committed a transgression, but who believes that he has, is still required to bring an atonement offering to the Temple. In fact, the one who merely believes himself to have transgressed is required to bring twice the amount as one who knows beyond doubt that he has transgressed!"

This made perfect sense to me. "So just the belief that what we are doing is wrong is an injury to the soul, and needs to be healed?"

Rav Ish-Shalom gestured for me to explain.

"What I mean is, just as pain, even in the absence of a physical injury, still requires treatment, so guilt, even in the absence of an actual transgression, still requires healing?"

"I didn't say guilt in the absence of a transgression," said Rav Ish-Shalom. "One who did nothing wrong is not required to do Teshuvah. Here, the emphasis is on doubt. The doubt and the guilt accompanying it are the hint that something needs repair."

I was not satisfied with this answer. We also feel guilt over the very fact of having been brought so low, even if we never took any action at all.

"But Teshuvah represents closure. No one is in greater need of closure than the one who believes he did wrong, but is not sure he had a choice. So, the one who believes that he did wrong is liable to a greater offering than one who knows beyond doubt."

Rav Ish-Shalom shook his head. "No and no! One who was coerced is not in need of T'shuvah at all. He is innocent of any wrong-doing. A woman who has been raped is the classic example — she has no need to do Teshuvah. 'Ought to have done' exists only where there is choice. "

הכל צפוי והרשות נתונה.

— משנה אבות ג:טו

All is foreseen; yet freedom is given.

Rabbi Akiva:
Mishnah Avot 3:15

Can one do Teshuvah for acts committed under coercion?

From "The Double Offering," a dialog not included in the final version of *Returning.*

"But that's just it! She may be innocent, but she does not feel innocent! So also with the man who has been forced to do wrong; he knows that he has been a tool of evil. He feels contaminated."

"He may feel contaminated, but that does not imply guilt. From a strictly legal point of view, he is blameless."

"And is Teshuvah a strictly legal issue? You yourself have taught me that it is not."

My teacher leaned back in his chair, his arms behind his head, challenging me to prove my point.

"Look, if someone brings a case to you to judge, obviously you can base your ruling only on whether there was choice or not. But Teshuvah kicks in where human justice ends." I felt suddenly embarrassed to find that I sounded more like Rav Ish-Shalom than he did himself. I pressed on. "From the point of view of a judge, if there is no responsibility — if a person did what he did out of overwhelming coercion — then there is no responsibility, and therefore he shouldn't feel any guilt.

"But we do feel guilt. Even if it's 'merely' the guilt of having survived a day longer than someone else. We take on a sense of involvement and implication long past the bounds of physical responsibility. It's not a rational thing, but it is a very human thing. What are we to do with such feelings?"

My teacher had the look of an orchestra conductor when the strings come in exactly on time. He waved his imaginary conductor's wand at me to continue.

"So let me put it another way: you told me that no human court would convict me for what I did under coercion. Nevertheless, the Hillul Hashem remains, as does the failure in Kiddush Hashem. That is a wound to the soul. Should I be denied the healing of Teshuvah, just because the injury is beyond any human court to heal? The answer, according to what we are learning, is that even in the absence of social responsibility, the need for atonement can be met. If the feeling of contamination or guilt comes from our being brought to the point where we experience our ultimate helplessness, then the healing comes from our realizing that we can take responsibility for our own lives from this point on. If the feeling of impurity comes from our living through our own deaths, then the healing comes from the ability to partake of life and give life as much and as selflessly as possible.

"Should a person be denied the healing of Teshuvah, just because he isn't guilty?"

Rav Ish-Shalom looked thoughtful. "So you're saying that Teshuvah is an act of closure and healing, completely apart from the halakhic issue of physical responsibility…" He sat for a moment with his eyes wide open, gazing off into space. Finally, he turned to me and said, "And how do you tie all this in with the double offering made by the one in doubt?"

I had actually forgotten how we had gotten started on this. Clearly, my teacher had kept the entire course of the discussion in mind from the start. "I can only speak from my own experience," I said, "The one who believes — but is not sure — is stuck in a kind of vacillation. He is still wavering on the brink of 'did I or didn't I? Did I have a choice or not?' I know from experience that this isa terrible place to be. The double offering serves as an emphasis: 'Yes I did this thing.' It marks his acceptance of the responsibility quite apart from any other consideration, such as why he did what he did. It allows a kind of closure. One cannot reach closure until one is able to say, 'Yes, this is what I did. Yes, it was I who did this.' We identify with both deed and doer, and accept both."

"I see…" Rav Ish-Shalom nodded thoughtfully. He continued looking off into space for some time. Suddenly he turned to me with a smile and said, "Thank you. You have taught me something."

What do you think?

- Do you feel that one should, or can, do Teshuvah for acts committed under extreme coercion?
- What do you think the Rav learned from Ovadya? Can you extend the lesson to other cases?
- Might self-doubt also be perceived as a loss of faith in God?
- Is the Rav too focused on the absence or presence of "choice," especially in these circumstances?
- If the dead could respond, what might be their reaction be to the Rav's advice?

אמר רבי פינחס: "על כן יורה חטאים
בדרך" (תהילים כה) שמורה דרך תשובה.
שאלו לחכמה חוטא מהו עונשו?
אמרה להם "חטאים תרדף רעה".
שאלו לנבואה חוטא מהו עונשו?
אמרה להן "הנפש החוטאת היא
תמות". שאלו לקודשא בריך הוא חוטא
מהו עונשו? אמר להן יעשה תשובה
ויתכפר לו, היינו דכתיב "על כן יורה
חטאים בדרך" יורה לחטאים דרך
לעשות תשובה.

תלמוד הירושלמי, מכות פרק ב' ה"ו.

Wisdom was asked, "What is the punishment of one who sins?". Wisdom answered, "Evil pursues the wicked." Prophecy was asked, "What is the punishment of one who sins?" Prophecy answered, "The soul that does wrong shall perish." The Holy One was asked, "What is the punishment of the one who sins?" He answered, "Let him repent and he will be forgiven."

Yerushalmi, Makkot 2:6

What is atonement?

Just as there are different levels of wrong-doing, there should be differences in the degree of redress required… I read the passage again:

Hilkhot Teshuvah, Perek 1, Halakhah 4

> Even though Teshuvah atones for all [sins] and the essence of Yom Kippur brings atonement, there are sins that can be atoned for immediately and other sins which can only be atoned for over the course of time.

Atonement. *Kapparah.* But what is *kapparah?*

"What does the word sound like?" asked Rav Ish-Shalom.

I hadn't realized I'd voiced my thoughts aloud, and was unsure what he was asking.

"Cover," he said. "It sounds like the word 'cover'. So think of it as 'covering over' the harmful effects of a wrong act. The act is still part of the fabric of the universe, but the outgoing ripples that carry the ill effects are damped down."

"A pot-holder for the soul!" I said.

A tiny smile broke through Rav Ish-Shalom's solemnity.

I thought of something I had read only the day before. Serendipitous timing… Rav Solovietchik defines kapparah as a nullification of the consequences of an action.

"It's as if our Teshuvah is outside of time," I said. "As if we can go back in time and alter the effects of actions that we ourselves have set in motion."

"It is not 'as if'," said Rav Ish-Shalom. "That is exactly what happens. We will see that Teshuvah has an effect not only on the future, but on the past as well." Then, forestalling any further exploration down that particular avenue, he said, "All in good time. For now, let's stay with the Rambam: Kapparah is given in different ways for different actions…"

> What is implied? If a person violates a positive command which is not punishable by *karet* and repents, he will not leave that place before he is forgiven. Concerning these sins, [Jeremiah 3:22] states: "Return, faithless children! I will heal your rebellious acts."

א"ר אבהו מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין

— ברכות לד:ב

Rabbi Abbahu said: In the place where a Ba'al Teshuvah stands, the wholly righteous cannot stand.

B'rachot 34b

From "Death Atones," p. 369

"Let me see if I see where this is going," I said. "Say a person forgot to say a bracha before eating, and later realized it, then the regret and the inner — even subconscious — resolve not to forget gratitude a second time grants immediate kapparah?"

Rav Ish-Shalom shook his head. "No. Let's say that one neglected to pray *Shaharit*."

It took me a moment to see the difference. Then I understood how finely-tuned was the Rambam's language. He was not talking about things that we *should* do, but things that we are *obligated* to do.

Rav Ish-Shalom continued, "Had one neglected the prayer with no feeling of regret, then it might have been different. In that case the omission may reflect some deeper issues. But the fact that one felt regret…"

I completed the sentence, "…means there is no damage to the soul."

He thought about it. "Damage to the soul is a good way to put it. Every action in this world, every word, every thought, has an effect. But the actor is also acted upon by his action. The condition on which you are allowed to make a change in the world is that the world changes you as well."

What do you think?

- The Rambam defined "the Soul" in such a way as to include what we would today call the psyche and the seat of emotion. How would you define "the soul"?
- Do you think that wrong-doing does damage to the soul?

Atonement and suffering

In summarizing the levels of wrong-doing, the Rambam also breaks down the levels of atonement:

> If a person violates a prohibition that is not punishable by *karet*, nor execution by the court, and repents, Teshuvah has a tentative effect and Yom Kippur brings atonement as [Leviticus, loc. cit.] states "This day will atone for you."

"So, the next level would be if one did something with actual harmful consequences," I said. "Then kapparah comes with Teshuvah and the additional factor of Yom Kippur, which is a communal atonement." I thought I was beginning to see the glimmerings of a pattern behind the Rambam's reasoning. "It's because the act had implications for his relations with others, not just himself."

There was a particular gesture that Rav Ish-Shalom had, a drawing out motion, as if he were conducting an orchestra. He used it now to urge me to explain.

"If someone did something that undermined the trust of others, then the communal forgiveness of Yom Kippur is necessary for him to feel that he is no longer outcast. And so Yom Kippur is needed for kapparah."

Rav Ish-Shalom pondered this a bit. "Yes, that's one way to see it," he said. We pressed on.

> If a person violates [sins punishable by] *karet* or execution by the court and repents, Teshuvah and Yom Kippur have a tentative effect and the sufferings which come upon him complete the atonement. He will never achieve complete atonement until he endures suffering, for concerning these [sins, Psalms 89:33] states: "I will punish their transgression with a rod."

"This is a much more serious level of wrong-doing," said Rav Ish-Shalom.

"Wrong against the community as a whole?" I asked.

"Any wrong that is particularly grave," said Rav Ish-Shalom. "Acts such as murder or rape — acts that would have incurred capital

אמר רבי עקיבא, אשריכם ישראל לפני מי אתם מטהרין מי מטהר אתכם אביכם שבשמים... מה מקוה מטהר את הטמאים אף הקב"ה מטהר את ישראל.

משנה יומא ח:ט

Happy are you Israel, before whom do you become pure, and who purifies you? Your Father in heaven..... Just as a mikve purifies the impure, the Holy One Blessed Be He purifies Israel.

Mishna Yoma 8:9

From "Death Atones," p. 369

punishment or the spiritual cutting off from the Jewish people — *karet*." He paused and leaned back in his chair, thinking it through. After a few minutes, he said, "Yes, wrongs against the community, but taken in its broadest sense. Wrongs against Klal Yisrael."

I felt a chill. Wrongs against Klal Yisrael… Wrongs so grievous that Teshuvah alone would not heal the wounded soul, nor would Yom Kippur heal the isolation from the community. Was I in this category?

I wondered at the deeper meaning. Behind the Rambam's terse formulation lay a whole world of psychological and social wisdom. Acts of murder or rape are not committed by normal people in normal circumstances. Which is just to say that if someone does these things, he is no longer normal. There must be some deep underlying imbalance of the mind, some wound in the soul, for a person to kill another in cold blood, or to destroy another by rape. How can such a person ever atone, much less become whole? The fact that the wrong can never be put right — let alone the underlying psychological imbalance — would seem to make final restoration impossible. And yet, the Rambam was saying it was possible. But it required not only sincere Teshuvah — with all that it entails — and Yom Kippur — with all that it entails — but on top of that, it requires suffering. But how can that alter anything?

What do you think?

- Do you have an answer for Ovadya's question? Why would suffering affect atonement?
- What is the underlying premise to the idea that suffering can atone for ones wrongs?
- Is there a specific time limit for suffering and the need for atonement?
- Survivors were often told "it's time to let go of the past." What is the premise behind this statement? Might guilt and suffering be a way of coping with the past?

Teshuvah as freedom

We are taught that to choose slavery is an affront to God. "For Bnei Yisrael are servants to Me; they are My servants whom I freed from the land of Egypt." We can't be both. We can only chose whom we serve.

Rav Ish-Shalom had once told me that one who has recovered from an illness or from giving birth must wait a prescribed time before bringing a sacrifice to the Temple. "Defeated and vulnerable is not a state in which God wants our company…"

I had objected: Was it not exactly in times when we are defeated and vulnerable that we most need God's company?

Only later did I understand what he meant. It isn't that our prayers aren't accepted when we are defeated and broken. In fact, we say, "there is nothing so whole as a broken heart." It is in those moments of need that our prayers are most powerful.

But what Rav Ish-Shalom was speaking of was not prayer, but service. That can't be offered unless we are free agents. We could not stand at Sinai until we were released from slavery. Only free men could enter into a contract like the Covenant, because only free men are masters of their own loyalty. This is one of the reasons why we stand up to pray. We give to God of our strength, not our weakness. *"Kol Me'odecha"* — All your might.

There are free men with the spirit of a slave, and slaves whose spirit is full of freedom. He who is true to his inner self is a free man, while he whose entire life is merely a stage for what is good and beautiful in the eyes of others, is a slave.

R' Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook: Orot HaKodesh

From "Can the Dead Forgive," p. 395

What do you think

- How do we prepare to be in G-d's company without bringing traces of defeat and vulnerability?
- Do you thnk choosing slavery is a form of selfishness? Or a form of addiction?

...אבל כיון שכחו המוסרי מתעורר מיד
נגלה אור הנשמה, וע"י האור נבדקת
היא נפשו כולו אצלו, ורואה הוא את
כל כתמיה, ולבו דואג בקרבו בחרדה
גדולה על מעוט שלמותו ועומק נפילתו.
אבל דוקא אז ישים אל לבו, שראיה זו
והדאגה הבאה עמה הנה הן הסמנים
היותר טובים המבשרים לו ישועת
עולמים בתקון הנפש, ויתחזק מאד בזה
בה' אלהיו.

הראיה קוק, אורת התשובה:טז

Because of the moral power that has awakened, the light of the soul shines forth, and he sees every blemish and his heart falters inside him at the lack of wholeness, at the depth to which he has fallen. But it is exactly this that he must take to heart, that this inner vision and this despair are the signs of deliverance and the restoration of the soul. It is from this that he will draw great strength with Hashem his God.

Rav Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook:
Orot HaTeshuvah

Teshuvah as healing

Teshuvah, I learned, can mean many things — return to purity, healing, rebuilding a sense of worth — all of which are inner processes, things felt and experienced. I had found that Teshuvah has much in common with mourning. Mourning is a process: We sit shivah, we retell again and again, we bring out the photographs, we process our loss....

In Teshuvah, we go through some of the same stages. We acknowledge our mistakes; we experience regret, understanding the full import of what we have done and mourning the consequences. We become someone else, someone who even if brought to exactly the same circumstances, would not make the same mistake again.

And, like one in mourning for a part of himself — for the missed opportunity — we retell. We express the inner turmoil and make it concrete and real, and at the same time reach closure with it. This is the last stage of Teshuvah — the *viddui*. By telling, we acknowledge our mistakes and their consequences, our wrong turns and blind alleys, and by speaking them aloud, we take possession of them. But more, we bring them from the private space of our individual lives into the public space of communal existence; our mistakes and their consequences enter the memory of our community. Putting something into words — bringing forth into consciousness what is otherwise wordless and inarticulate — is a way of bringing something into the stream of time. Perhaps this is why the Torah pictures the world as being created with words.

But the Viddui is not just a way to give voice to the inner process. It also allows others to trust us again. By humbling ourselves before those we have wronged and asking forgiveness, we bring ourselves back into relationship with others and with our better selves.

גדולה תשובה שמביאה רפואה לעולם... יחיד שעשה תשובה מוחלין לו ולעולם כולו.

יומא פו:א

Great is Teshuvah, for it brings healing to the world....The Teshuvah of a single individual heals the whole world.

Yoma 86a

From "Can the Dead Forgive," p. 395

What do you think

- How is the process of mourning similar to the stages of Teshuvah?
- One of the attributes of both mourning and Teshuvah is to "retell". It's interesting that we do the same in reading the Hagaddah and the Megillah. Is there a common healing process here?
- If Teshuvah is personal, why do we need communal involvement?
- In what ways does Teshuvah depend on trust?

Quotes & Inspiration

Few are guilty, but all are responsible."

— Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*

I dreamt — marvelous error! — that I had a beehive here inside my heart. And the golden bees were making white combs and sweet honey from my old failures.

— Antonio Machado

How you interpret challenges, setbacks, and criticism is your choice. You can interpret them in a fixed mindset as signs that your fixed talents or abilities are lacking. Or you can interpret them in a growth mindset as signs that you need to ramp up your strategies and effort, stretch yourself, and expand your abilities. It's up to you.

— Carol Dweck, Pscychologist

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

— Mahatma Gandhi

Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colors. And the people there see you differently, too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving."

— Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*

Quotes from Returning

We give to God of our strength, not our weakness. But we also say: "Da lifneh mi ata omed" — Know before whom you stand. We know what we are in the face of that. We see the full picture — God and ourselves. We cannot see ourselves as more than we are because we see how much greater is the reality. But we must not lessen our value in our own eyes either, because we are a necessary part of this reality. It is no small thing that we are able to "stand" and to address that reality.
It would be good if we could approach life the way we approach prayer, knowing before whom we stand.

— Ovadya ben Malka

There is a continuity in our lives — a strain of music that flows through it all, unaltered by death or pain. It is true that in the face of pain and death, we are very small. But in the face of life and memory and love, even death is very small.

— Ovadya ben Malka

The fact that good people can be forced to do wrong doesn't make them less good. But it also doesn't make the wrong less wrong.

— Ovadya ben Malka

Are we not, all of us, in some way, damaged mirrors? Are we not constantly engaged in focusing the light of thought — memories out of the depths of human experience — onto the photographic plate of each moment? The image captured in this instant is a snapshot of all eternity, subtly altered by our own brokenness. And who's to say that the image formed by a damaged mirror is not a truer picture of the universe?

— Yael Shahar

We stand on the edge of the abyss, across whose unknowable face we paint meaning so as not to see into it. It is always there. But we're here too, and we are no less real than the abyss. We are no less meaningful for being transient creatures caught up in something too big for us. There is still value to our lives. I've learned that those things that are most fragile are also the most precious.

— Ovadya ben Malka

Regret is not the same as guilt. It is expressed by: "I can't believe I did that. It's not like me. This is not how I am! How could I do such a thing?" It means to see ourselves as the best we can be, and to be disappointed in not living up to that.

— Rav Ish-Shalom

Q & A with Yael Shahar

Returning must not have been an easy book to write. What drove you to write about such difficult subject matter?

It certainly wasn't a conventional "I want to write a book" project! *Returning* grew out of a deep compulsion — an obligation, really — to tell what had happened, coupled with a complete inability to talk about it. Ovadya's story had been a part of my inner world for so long that it was eating me from within, demanding to be told. I eventually found that the words would come out, slowly and haltingly, on a computer keyboard, even if I couldn't speak them out loud. Gradually, the writing became a path to healing — both physical and spiritual.

Once I started, the process took on a momentum of its own, taking up six years of almost full-time engagement. Only years after I started did I begin thinking seriously about trying to make what I was writing into a book — and considering my own extreme reactions to the trauma I wrote about, it was a major challenge trying to work all this into a book that anybody would actually want to read!

The end result makes for quite a gripping story. A lot of the writing in *Returning* is strongly visual; many parts of the book could almost be used as a shooting script for a movie. Was this something you did deliberately?

I don't think it was a conscious choice. *Returning* is largely about memory and what memory can do to a person, but it was also written *from* memory. It turns out that my most vivid memories tend to be largely visual.

To the extent that there's technique involved, it's mostly a matter of knowing what to leave out. I try to be fairly minimalist, describing just the few things that pop out at me. If those are the things that stuck in my own memory, I assume it's because they were the ones that had emotional impact and convey the essence of what happened. The rest is up to the reader to imagine.

And of course, it helped that so much of what I was trying to say was hard to talk about. It kept me from getting wordy!

That minimalism works well to convey a sense of "being there". This is particularly true of Ovadya's memories of Birkenau. It's as if he never really left the place.

Ovadya's writing conveys what it's like to live with traumatic memory, with its odd juxtapositions of past and future. That sense comes through in the very language that he uses to describe his experience. He dips into memory and suddenly "was" gives way to "is", "there" becomes "here".

This experience affected the telling of my own side of the story too: my "conventional" experiences growing up in Texas often take on a dreamlike quality, while Ovadya's recollections of life in Saloniki and Birkenau are fragmentary, but vivid and concrete. I guess to Ovadya, Texas — and Israel too — are fairytale places, and my life is a fairytale life!

So that leads to the obvious question: the book's chapters alternate between Ovadya's first-person narrative and your own story told in third person. Why is it Ovadya's part that's in first person, considering that it's your name on the cover?

Well, I did feel at first that the name on the cover should be Ovadya's and not mine. However, a book-publicist friend pointed out that I had already established something of a reputation as a writer, and said I shouldn't squander that.

Still, in a sense Ovadya really is the book's main author, even if I did the actual writing. Not only is the main narrative voice his; but also, it's his desperate compulsion to bear witness that drives the story. In *Returning*, Yael struggles with the aftermath of trauma — the flashbacks, the need to tell, and the difficulty of evading memory. But Ovadya struggles with deeper issues: is there meaning in a world where God appears to champion evil? "Omnipotence and malice are a frightening combination!" He doesn't ask how we should live in such a world; he questions whether it is worth living at all.

And of course it's Ovadya who is trying to come to terms with his role as a part of the mechanism the Germans created to bring about the destruction of his people.

The issue of names seems to run a lot deeper than whose name is on the cover. One of the themes of *Returning* is the way our self-identification changes our view of the world — particularly Ovadya's struggle with his own name.

Ovadya does indeed have a very conflicted relationship with his name, partly because of its meaning — "Ovadya" means "servant of God" in Hebrew — and partly because it connects him with his life before he and his family were taken away from their home in Saloniki and sent to Auschwitz. His real name reminds him too strongly of all he has lost — physically, emotionally, and morally.

Instead, as we meet him he refers to himself only as "Alex", the generic nickname he acquired in Birkenau. "Alex" has no past, no future, and — at least in his own self-perception — very little real value. When pressed to use his real name, he refuses. "For a long time I have not dreamed of using that name," he says. "It is like a beautiful garment, which I can't wear because I'm too worn down to fit into it and too filthy to avoid soiling it."

Ovadya's initial refusal to use his given name shows us how trauma and guilt alienate us from ourselves. "One who became a slave to the Germans can't use a name that means 'Servant of God'," he says. But of course, the only way he can get out of that slavery is to reclaim his name — the goal becomes the very means to achieve it. Reclaiming his name is part of his journey back to the better part of himself: a true journey of T'shuvah, the process of repentance, which — translated literally from Hebrew — means "returning".

***Returning* doesn't seem to fit comfortably into any particular genre. It reads like literary fiction, but it's a true story. So how would you categorize the book?**

I'm not sure I have an answer to that one — no single genre quite fits. Ovadya's story is told exactly as he remembers it; the conversations and correspondence related in the book actually happened. Masha's and Rav Ish-Shalom's words are their own; and while Don adamantly denies ever having been "insufferably smug", believe me— he was.

Although telling my own part of the story as a coherent narrative required me to take a few liberties with time, combine a minor character or two, and of course leave out a lot of people and events that played some part, I've stayed close enough to the actual course of events that my first inclination was to classify *Returning* quite firmly as a non-fiction memoir.

There's one problem, though: The whole issue of how I became entangled with Ovadya's memories is something I have no real explanation for, and it obviously doesn't fit into any of our conventional understandings of how the world works. Some people are going to have a hard time accepting this aspect of *Returning* as true, and ultimately it's not important that they do so. The historical events Ovadya lived through are well documented, and happened as he remembers them; and the challenges he faced — and faces — are real ones. If it's easier for someone to read *Returning* as historical fiction, that's fine; just remember that Ovadya's story is true, even if it's difficult to understand how he came to be able to tell it.

However we classify *Returning*, it's a story of recovery from trauma, of guilt and atonement, of the preservation of memory.... But most of all, it's a story of God-wrestling in the timeless tradition of Jacob's wrestling match with an un-named and un-namable entity on the banks of the Yabbok River. We've all crossed that river at one time or another, and most of us have wished we had some way to name what we faced there. But, like Jacob's opponent, the apparition vanishes in the light of reason, leaving us both wounded and blessed... and forever changed.

For Ovadya, this God-wrestling involved taking his case to a rabbi to judge. That search for justice and atonement was Ovadya's path to healing. Telling his story was mine.

More about *Returning*

Returning
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Returning is the story of one soul's journey of Teshuvah. Along the way, it explores the dilemmas faced by the Jewish Sonderkommando in Birkenau: When does death become a moral obligation? What is the nature of responsibility when all choice is taken from us? How can we accept the unacceptable, and still be who we were? These questions may never fully be answered, but we ignore them at our peril.

Based on a true story, *Returning* is a haunting exploration of trauma and healing, and of how memory shapes our identities. In exploring the consequences of the choices we make in a choiceless time, this compelling story shows the power of the human spirit to transcend even its own destruction. It will leave you changed forever.

Critical acclaim

This dazzling epic about memory, and collective memory, integrates fiction with memoir in deeply original and ambitious ways.

— *Wasthington Independent Review of Books*

Intriguing! At times dark and haunting, at times lyrical and introspective, Returning resonates long after "the end"!

— Dan Sofer, author of the *Dry Bones Society* trilogy

Returning is a compelling, puzzling, remarkably honest story of a Jew's sins against his people and his tradition, and of his search for forgiveness and restoration.

— Bill Tammeus, *Faith Matters*

From the horrors of the Birkenau crematoria and the dilemmas of survival that are forever etched in our hearts, to the profound dialogues of Talmudic debate, the author reaches from the past to the present—challenging us to examine ourselves as Jews, and our relation to G-d in a world gone mad.

— Chaya Rosen, Founder, Art and Writings of Destruction and Repair

Returning is a must-read for those wishing to embark on a profound, painful, but ultimately hopeful journey into the human soul.

— Yael Unterman, author of *Nehama Leibowitz, Teacher* and *Bible Scholar and The Hidden of Things: Twelve Stories of Love & Longing*

About the Author

Yael Shahar was born in the United States and moved to Israel when she was 18. After an adventurous and unattributable career in security and intelligence, Yael divides her time between writing and learning Talmud with anyone who will sit still long enough. She is an entertaining and sought-after public speaker, and lectures both in Israel and abroad.