

PORTION	DATE	HEB DATE	TORAH	NEVIIM	RENEWED
Vayelech	5 Oct. 2019	6 Tishrei 5780	Deut. 31:1-30	Isa. Hos 14:1-9; Mic 7:18-20 Joel 2:157-27	Matt. 18:21-35

This week's Torah portion *Vayelech* has the shortest verses. Today is known as *Shabbat Shuvah* (שבת שובה, Shabbat of Return) or *Shabbat T'shuvah* (שבת תשובה, Shabbat of Repentance). It refers to the Shabbat that occurs during the Ten Days of Repentance. The name *Shabbat Shuvah* comes from the first word of the *Haftarah* that is read today, a combination of Hosea 14:2-10, Joel 2:11-217, and Micah 7:18-20, and literally means "Return!" It is alternately known as *Shabbat Teshuvah* owing to its being one of the *Aseret Y'may T'shuvah* (Ten Days of Repentance).

During these ten days, we cry out every day from our heart. We shed tears of resolve and endeavor to see ourselves, to each other, and the whole world differently. And we try to make every moment count. Since Shabbat itself is like a taste of real repentance all year round, this Shabbat, the Shabbat of Repentance is like the root of *teshuvah*.

Even though, this parashah is the shortest, the verses are packed with so much information. Moshe concludes his speech to the children of Yisrael (vs 1-6), blesses Joshua and gives over the leadership to him and advises him to be strong and courageous for Hashem is with him and will not forsake him (vs 7-8); Moshe instructs the people to gather together (v 10). This is a commandment for the entire nation to gather together in the Holy Temple every seven years during the festival of Sukkot at the conclusion of the Sabbatical year cycle, and there the King of Israel will read to them from the book of Devarim (v 11); Moshe finishes writing the Torah scroll which he entrusts to the Levites to keep in Sinai (vs 9); and, Hashem foretells that the people will eventually stray from Him (vs. 16-21). Moshe gather the entire nation to hear the song (Ch. 31), wherein he would call upon the heavens and earth to be witnesses (v. 21) that the Israelites were forewarned regarding their fate.

The last four Torah portions of Devarim were said by Moshe on the day of his death. As we approach Yom Kippur, we find ourselves reflecting upon our own transience and vulnerability. In a good way, a way that makes us feel deeply, how much we need Hashem and closeness to Him in our lives.

A major theme of our Torah portion is closeness to Hashem. He foretells that the people of Israel will turn away from their covenant with Him which will cause Him to hide His face from them. But He also promises that the words of the Torah shall not be forgotten from the mouths of their descendants. (vs. 16-21) These verses are informing us that when Hashem will visit His anger upon the children of Israel on account of their evil actions, they will claim that the misfortunes are befalling them because Hashem has abandoned them. At that time, the song of Moshe will bear testimony that these events are in fact punishment for their sinful behavior.

So, we are going to say, "Is it not because our Elohim is not in our midst that these evils have come upon us?" (v. 17) Next verse makes it clear, "And I shall certainly hide My face in that day, because of all the evil which they have done, for they shall turn to other mighty ones." (v. 18) Moshe is recording this prophecy of the future. It's telling us that when we stray from the covenant with Hashem, and commit evil, He will be angry. But we will say that the punishment is because Hashem abandoned us.

In this scenario, we abandoned Him. And rather than owning up our sins, we claim that He abandoned us! However, the children of Israel will confess that it's because Hashem is not found in their presence that these evils befell them. So, why do they say Hashem hid His face? The answer lies in verse 18, "And I will surely hide My face in that day for all the evil which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned unto other gods." In English, "surely" had been translated from the Hebrew words (הַסְתֵּר אֶסְתִּיר, *has-ter as-tir*) which literally means "surely, surely". Why the double expression of concealment, one concealment would be enough.

Let's read this verse again. "And I will surely hide My face in that day for all the evil which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned unto other gods." It is only because they say that He is not with me that it appears to them that He is hiding His face! This is the truth of the Torah and the deepest psychological insight into one's state of mind after committing the sin, after the fact.

You are feeling low, and hopeless, and far from Hashem because of your sin. So, the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) attacks you when you're down and in despair and says, "Give up! Hashem has abandoned you." But the truth is that your feeling that He has abandoned you and is hiding His face is nothing but an illusion and a concealment. And that is a true concealment. Hashem would never abandon you.

This verse really teaches us is to say that Hashem is not with me is the worst thing of all. And it is a double sin, a sin within a sin. The verse is foreshadowing that we will give up and say, "It is because Hashem is not with me", meaning it seems to them that Hashem is not there. And that is the worst punishment of all. However, there is nothing that can separate us from Hashem. It is all an illusion given by the *yetzer hara*.

Our lives are always fraught with tests, and the biggest one is the concealment. Baal Shem Tov told a parable about a king who wanted to test his son. So, he set up all sorts of obstacles to reach him, but they were all only illusions. Of all the tests, the concealment of Hashem in our lives is the worst illusion of all.

The holiest day of the year is coming up. Some believe that Yom Kippur is a day of sadness. We say, 'On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed' – this aspect lays very heavy on the people. Oy vey! The verdict is sealed! I'm a goner! They dwell on their sins, obsessing over them, fasting, 'afflicting ourselves' as the Torah instructs us, so they assume that it is supposed to be a day of suffering, that the goal is to suffer.

But absolutely nothing can be further from the truth. Yom Kippur is a day or rather, it should be a day of - intense inner turmoil, but it is nonetheless a day of joy. Because on this day the world is bathed in a great light of Divine love and forgiveness. This is the day that Moshe descended from Mount Sinai the second time, with the second set of tablets, and the message of forgiveness. That the first Yom Kippur was about forgiveness for the error of the golden calf. That means that Yom Kippur addresses the sins of our misconceptions about who Hashem is in our lives.

The sages teach us that in the days when the Holy Temple stood, Yom Kippur was acknowledged by all to be the happiest day of the year. On the day of the sealing of the judgment, the young girls used to dress in white and go out to the fields and dance. Because it was understood that this is the day when we are able to reaffirm our true selves and get our true relationship with Hashem. The forgiveness of Yom Kippur is a promise and a fact. Imagine having a fresh start. It is like pushing the delete button on all my mistakes as if they never happened.

It is written, “And this shall be for you a law forever: In the seventh new moon, on the tenth day of the new moon, you afflict your beings, and do no work, the native or the sojourner who sojourns among you. For on that day He makes atonement for you, to cleanse you, to be clean from all your sins before YHWH” (Vayikra 16:29-30)

The sages teach that Hashem is saying, “I’m just happy you’re home again.” And we say, “I will make it up to you. Just please heal my broken heart.” Repentance is not about guilt or rejection. It’s an affirmation of who I really am of who I know I could be and who I want to be from now on.

We became disconnected from our source, from the presence of Hashem in our lives because we did not believe in ourselves enough nor lived up to our own potential even though Hashem does. But we have to be willing to avail ourselves to this process of ‘cleansing’. It’s not, “I believe in Hashem.” It’s ‘I believe Hashem.’

And by not eating and by distancing ourselves from materialism we become totally in touch with our spiritual essence and have the clarity to recalibrate our priorities. We’re not eating not because we’re punishing ourselves, but because Yom Kippur is a different energy! Who could eat on such a day? Who needs food? It’s like we are eating manna that day, directly from heaven.

In our prayers on Yom Kippur, we recount the experience of the Holy Temple, as the nation stood in awe while the High Priest attended to the service and every individual knew in a tangible way that Hashem is so close and that I now I am truly ‘forgiven’ for my past mistakes and bad decisions, and I granted the opening to truly start over.

We learned that in the Holy Temple, everyone came for Yom Kippur, the whole nation stood together abreast, side to side, front to back, it was very crowded. But yet when the High Priest utter the holy name of Hashem which is only said on Yom Kippur, everyone would fully prostrate themselves and all the sudden there was ample room for everyone to do that. Hearing the name was enough to bring about this ‘miracle’, not that the walls expanded, but that everyone was in such awe and feeling such total connection and respect for each other that they made sure to make room for each other.

Yom Kippur is the *tikkun*, the fixing of society... First we have to forgive each other, and forgive ourselves, before we can expect our Father’s forgiveness...and as we judge others, so are we judged. That’s what it means to make room for everyone. At the end of the day on Yom Kippur as the sun is about to set, there is a special extra service, a fifth prayer service called Nei’lah...it means ‘closing’ and everybody thinks it is called that because this is your last chance to cry out to Hashem because the gates of Heaven are about to close. But the truth is this is the time when each of us is totally alone with Hashem and He speaks to each one of us and blesses us for the year...So I bless you with the best Yom Kippur and the best year ever.