

Date: 20 Kislev 5786 (December 10, 2025)

Torah Portion: Vayeshev

Topic: First in Penitence

Genesis 37:29 records: *“Reuben returned to the pit.”* This brief statement reveals a significant narrative detail—Reuben was absent when his brothers sold Yosef (Joseph) into slavery. Earlier verses (vv. 22–24) describe Reuben’s attempt to save Yosef by persuading the others to throw him into a pit rather than kill him. But by verses 25–28, when the brothers sell Yosef to the Ishmaelites, Reuben is no longer present.

The **Midrash** addresses this absence, asking: *Where was Reuben during the sale?* **Rabbi Eliezer** explains that Reuben had withdrawn to engage in repentance—wearing sackcloth and fasting for his earlier misstep in interfering with his father’s marital arrangements (Gen. 35:22). Upon returning, he looked into the pit, only to find Yosef gone—hence the verse: *“Reuben returned to the pit.”*

The Midrash goes further, describing Elohim’s response to Reuben’s act of repentance: *“No one before you has sinned before Me and repented on their own. You are the first to initiate repentance. By your life, one of your descendants will one day also be the first to initiate repentance.”* This descendant is identified as **Hosea**, who begins his prophecy with the call: *“Return, Israel, to the Lord your Elohim”* (Hos. 14:2).

The Hebrew word **וָיָשָׁב** (**va-yashov**)—“he returned”—can also be read as a form of **תְּשׁוּבָה** (**teshuvah**), meaning “repentance” or “returning to Elohim.” This linguistic connection supports the Midrashic view that Reuben’s return was not merely physical but spiritual, indicating a turning back to Elohim.

While **Adam** and **Cain** also repented, they did so only after being cursed or punished by Elohim. Their repentance was reactive. Reuben, by contrast, took initiative, repenting **before** punishment or public shame. This distinction elevates his repentance to a unique status. However, the Talmud (Bava Kamma 92a; Makkot 11b) suggests that **Reuben repented only after being influenced by Yehudah’s confession** in the Tamar episode (Gen. 38). This seems to contradict the claim that Reuben was the first to repent. To resolve this, **Tosafot** explains that Yehudah’s repentance was **public**, while Reuben’s was **private**—and preceded it. The Midrash thus maintains Reuben’s primacy in the chronology of repentance.

The prophet **Hosea** is identified as a descendant of Reuben through his father, **Be’eri** (Hos. 1:1). In **1 Chronicles 5:6**, a man named **Be’erah**, a descendant of Reuben, is listed. The Sages equate Be’erah and Be’eri, establishing Hosea’s tribal lineage. Yet Hosea was not the first prophet to speak about repentance. Even **Moshe (Moses)** urges Israel to return to Elohim (Deut. 4:30, 30:2). Indeed, these verses serve as the basis for the mitzvah (commandment) of teshuvah.

So what makes Hosea unique? According to the **Midrash**, Hosea was the first to **emphasize the spiritual depth and power** of repentance. He publicized its ability to elevate the penitent, as described in **Yoma 86a–b**, where repentance is said to transform intentional sins into unintentional ones and to rise before the Throne of Glory. Hosea’s prophetic role, therefore, is not about introducing the concept of repentance, but about unveiling its **transformative and redemptive potential**. This prophetic insight validates Rabbi Eliezer’s explanation of Reuben’s absence.

Reuben’s anguish in Genesis 37:30—*“Where can I go?”*—suggests a deeper moral crisis. According to **Shabbat 55b**, Reuben did not sin in a literal or intentional way when he moved his father’s bed after Rachel’s death. He acted out of concern for his mother, Leah, believing she deserved precedence over Rachel’s maidservant, Bilhah. However, Reuben acted impulsively and failed to consider Ya’akov’s reasons. Because of the elevated standards expected of the righteous, his act was considered sinful, despite his noble intention.

At the time, Reuben could not have imagined his actions might interfere with the future of Israel. However, once Yosef disappeared, Reuben feared that the sacred number of **twelve tribes**—which, according to **Berakhot 60a**, Leah already understood to be Elohim’s plan—was now in jeopardy. Reuben began to fear that his interference in Bilhah’s position might have prevented the birth of a future tribe. If Yosef were dead, there would no longer be twelve sons, and perhaps it was Reuben’s earlier action that had blocked the birth of Yosef’s replacement. This realization intensified his remorse and renewed his repentance.

Importantly, Reuben had no part in Yosef's sale and did not intend to prevent any future birth. Yosef was still alive. Yet Reuben's willingness to take moral responsibility for **potential consequences** that stemmed from an earlier action—however unintentional—marked a **new ethical standard** in repentance.

Reuben's example establishes a new category of teshuvah: repentance for actions that **may lead** to harm, even if that harm has not yet occurred. According to the Midrash, Elohim praises Reuben for repenting *before the full consequences of his mistake had unfolded*.

It is in this spirit that his descendant, **Hosea**, later proclaims: "*Return, Israel, to the Lord your Elohim, for you have stumbled through your iniquity*" (Hos. 14:2). Hosea does not say, "for you have sinned," but rather "you have stumbled"—highlighting sins that arise not from malice, but from **moral missteps**, misjudgments, or consequences that spiral beyond one's intent. Hosea's message anticipates the danger of unintended escalation. A person may not intend evil, but a quarrel, resentment, or careless word can lead to serious consequences—perhaps even violence. Proverbs 25:8 warns: "*Do not be quick to enter into conflict, for you do not know what will happen when your fellow shames you.*" The repentance Hosea calls for is not only for clear transgressions, but for the **chain reactions of harm** that may begin with minor failings.

The **Kotzker Rebbe** offers an additional layer of insight. He interprets Hosea's call—"Return, Israel, to the Lord your Elohim"—as a plea to repent **even for actions done with good intentions**. One may act *for the sake of heaven*, yet still miscalculate and cause harm. This too requires repentance. Reuben acted to honor his mother—a righteous motive—but when he saw the broader consequences, he repented. Hosea's message, following in Reuben's footsteps, is that even the most well-meaning actions must be examined with humility and, if necessary, repented for.

Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer offers yet another interpretation. He compares repentance to seeking forgiveness from a revered scholar. The shame involved might prevent a person from approaching. But if the scholar sends a message that he will accept an apology, the process becomes easier. In this metaphor, **Hosea is the messenger**. Elohim sent him to **invite repentance**, reducing the barrier of shame. In the merit of Reuben's self-motivated repentance, his descendant Hosea was chosen to help others find their way back to Elohim.

In conclusion, Reuben is the first biblical figure to engage in **proactive, private repentance**—not in response to punishment, but out of internal moral awareness. His repentance sets a precedent for:

- Owning responsibility for unintended consequences
- Acknowledging mistakes made with good intentions
- Returning to Elohim even when no one else demands it

His descendant **Hosea** inherits this spiritual legacy, becoming the first prophet to **articulate the profound spiritual dimensions of teshuvah**—not just as an obligation, but as a path to transformation. Through Hosea, the door to repentance is opened wider, revealing not only its accessibility, but also its power to reshape the human soul and restore one's relationship with Elohim.

Shalom.