



Teshuvah of the Heart

Returning to your first love...

The month of Elul (אֱלוּל) is sometimes called “the month of love and compassion” (based on the acronym formed from אֲנִי לְדוּדִי וְדוּדִי לִי / “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine,” Song 6:3). This poignant verse alludes to the mystery that God is our Heavenly Groom and we are His betrothed. God is the great Lover of our souls, and the greatest *mitzvah* of all is to keep faith in His covenant promise of love (Rom. 8:24). Our Beloved is coming! Yeshua will soon be here, chaverim. Don’t miss the Bridegroom’s call! Return to the passion of your first love (Rev. 2:4).



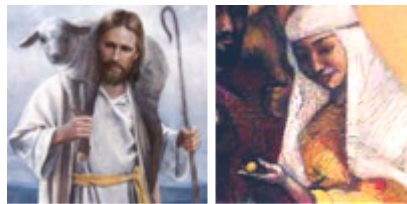
Yeshua illustrated the idea of teshuvah (i.e., תְּשׁוּבָה, “returning to God”) by telling the story of the “prodigal son” (Luke 15:11-32). After squandering his father’s inheritance, a wayward son decided to return home, full of shame and self-reproach. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” The father then ordered a celebratory meal in honor of his lost son’s homecoming. When his older brother objected, the father said, “We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”





This parable reveals that teshuvah ultimately means *returning* (*shuv*) to the compassionate arms of your Heavenly Father... God sees you while you are still “a long way off” (Rom. 5:8). He *runs to you* with affection when you first begin to turn your heart toward Him. Indeed, God’s compassion is so great that He willingly embraces the shame of your sins and then adorns you with “a fine robe, a ring, and sandals.” Your Heavenly Father even slaughters the “fatted calf” (Yeshua) so that a meal that celebrates your life may be served....

Why did Yeshua come? He was like the father in the parable who was actively looking for his lost son... He came to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Yeshua likened Himself to a shepherd who left his flock to search for one lost sheep, and after finding it, laid the sheep on his shoulders rejoicing (Luke 15:3-7). He also likened Himself to a woman who lost a coin but diligently searched for it. After she found it, she called together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the lost coin!’ (Luke 15:8-10).



Another image of how God “seeks and saves the lost” is revealed in the metaphor the strong man who rescues hostages. We were held captive by the power of the evil one, but God willingly left the glories of heaven to ransom us from captivity. “He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then His own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him” (Isa. 59:16). God then sent His Son to save the world from satan’s power (Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8). This is the good news of God’s salvation: “The Spirit of the Lord God (רוּחַ אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה) is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me (מָשַׁח יְהוָה) to bring news for the poor (לְבָשֵׁר עֲנִיִּים); he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted (נִשְׁבְּרֵי־לֵב), to proclaim to the captives: ‘liberty’ (לְשִׁבוּיִם דְּרוּר), and to the bound ones: ‘release’ from their chains; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor” (Isa. 61:1-2; Luke 4:18).

The Strong Man rescued us using a power that evil one could never comprehend, namely, the power of *sacrificial love*. Yeshua plundered the “strong man’s house” through the greater strength of God (Matt. 12:29). This is a power that evil cannot overcome. Yeshua emptied Himself (κενόω) by being clothed in human flesh to die for our sins on a cross (Isa. 53:2-5; Phil. 2:7). In a sense God’s “teshuvah” is the Life of His Son, since He turned to us, “looked upon our lowly estate,” and saved us from the hand of the oppressor of our souls... In all things - *even in teshuvah* - Yeshua has the preeminence (Col. 1:8).



What good is teshuvah without genuine hope? If we expect to be *rejected* or disapproved by God, it's unlikely we will take the *first* step toward "returning" to Him. Or if we believe we are *conditionally accepted*, we will "return" in a state of self-justification, like the older son in Yeshua's parable of the prodigal son. In that case we would need to keep a checklist within our minds of all the commandments we've kept. We would reckon our obedience as virtue or merit, and, if we felt any qualms about our service, we would feel *obliged* to perform extra mitzvot to allay our sense of guilt. Teshuvah would essentially mean preparing a legal defense, arguing that on the basis of our merits we *should* be accepted before God's Presence. Ultimately such "repentance" amounts to a *demand* that we be declared righteous, lovable, worthy, etc.

Yeshua's first words of public ministry were "Repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The word "repent" is *metanao* (μετανοέω), meaning "change your thinking," and the word "gospel" means "good news" (i.e., εὐαγγέλιον, from , ευ- "good," and ἄγγελος, "message"). We could translate the verse as: "Change your thinking and believe the message of God's *good will* toward you." The good news is that we are to be set free from the curse of the law and the futile efforts of seeking self-justification before Heaven... We no longer need to live in fear of God's *conditional* acceptance of us (and therefore of our conditional worth). As the Apostle Paul later preached: "Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which *you could not be freed* by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39).

The Jews had known about repentance (teshuvah) for a long time, of course. They understood the rituals and mitzvot that were required to "keep the law," and they even devised legal formulas for "making your defense" before the Almighty (i.e., the Kol Nidre service recited before Yom Kippur: "We exonerate ourselves for failing to keep our word..."). If Moses and the law could have saved us, we wouldn't need to be "declared righteous by God's grace through the redemption in Yeshua" (Rom. 3:24). We wouldn't need the Cross! All we'd need to do is work harder at repentance, perform additional mitzvot, earn merit before Heaven, and so on. But *clearly* Yeshua meant something other than this when He made the call to "repent."

The repentance Yeshua preached was *inextricably connected* with the "good news" that He (alone) is God's answer to the problem of our sin. Yeshua was born to die as the divinely appointed Sin-bearer of the world (Heb. 10:5-7). He came to earth and emptied himself (κενόω) of His regal glory and power in order to be the High Priest (הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדֹל) after the order of Malki-Tzedek (מַלְכִּי-צְדָק) and the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 5:6; 9:15; Psalm 110:4; 1 Tim. 2:5). He came to Jerusalem (Moriah) for the explicit *purpose* of suffering, dying, and being raised from the dead (Matt. 16:21; Luke 9:22).



Yeshua died not only for our forgiveness, but also to deliver us from “the law of sin and death” (תּוֹרַת הַחַטָּא וְהַמָּוֶת), i.e., the *power* that sin holds in our lives. He died to set us free so that we could become the beloved children of God (בְּנֵי-אֱלֹהִים). Yeshua surely was *not* calling people to become followers of the scribes and Pharisees, who were blind guides and hypocrites (Matt. 23:13-36). He did not want people to become slaves to rituals or religion. No, He called people to follow *Him*: “Take up your cross and follow Me.” Turn your thinking around! *Die to your religion*. Be comforted because there is good news from heaven! God’s unconditional acceptance is given to those who trust in the righteousness of Yeshua *in place of* any self-righteousness that might be gained by performing the “works of the law” (Gal. 2:16, Titus 3:5). Yeshua is “the goal of the law for righteousness” for all who believe (Rom. 10:4-13). *Wow*. Now *that’s* a message that requires a profound “change of mind” for a “Torah observant” Jew to accept. Dying to the religious project of attaining self-righteousness is to admit the need for radical deliverance from the law itself.

Yeshua’s message of salvation was rejected by the religious establishment of His day, just as it is likewise rejected by all other “karma-based” religions and philosophies that believe that “good deeds” are sufficient to earn you a place in heaven... After all, the religious Jews assumed they already understood the requirements for repentance and the means for finding “atonement” with God through the rituals and practices surrounding the High Holidays. Their religion was essentially a *meritocracy* based on the performance of “good works” (מַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים) that were thought to impart “zechut” and righteousness to the soul. But Yeshua explained to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous” that a person is not justified on the basis of their supposed good deeds or merits, but entirely by appealing to God’s compassion and mercy. It was the “despised” tax collector - not the “self-righteous” Pharisee - that left the Temple justified:

Two men went up to the Temple to pray; one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector over there. I fast twice a week and I give tithes of all that I possess (Amen).’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner (Amen).’



I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalts himself shall be humbled; but he that humbles himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:10-14).



During this season of teshuvah, we must always remember that the LORD is “for us” and not against us. He died *while* we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8). He is the Loving Strong Man who rescued us forever. Nothing can now separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:31-39). We are literally *saved* in this hope (Rom. 8:24). May it please the LORD to make us all like Abraham, who “did not misjudge (διακρίνω) the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God, because he was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (Rom. 4:20-21). Abraham “rejoiced to see Yeshua’s day” and believed: אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה-לוֹ תִּשְׁעָה / *Elohim yireh-lo haseh* - “God Himself will provide a lamb” (Gen. 22:8; John 8:56).

