



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

“This Season’s *Leitmotif*: Return!”

We have all been brought up to believe in the importance of progress. For the past several centuries, the goal of philosophy, religion, culture, and certainly science has been to develop ideas and practices which advance humankind beyond its present state.

Poets have acclaimed the superiority of progress; one of them, Robert Browning, put it this way:

“Progress, man’s distinctive mark alone,
Not God’s, and not the beasts’: God
is, they are;

Man partly is, and wholly hopes to be.”

Browning is certainly not the only person who enthusiastically endorsed progress to the point of seeing it as the hallmark of humanity, and as that which sets him apart from and above the animal world, and even distinguishes him from the Almighty Himself.

So forceful has been the emphasis upon progress that any attempt to return to past ideas and methods is almost universally criticized as backward and primitive, and, at the very least, old-fashioned. The antonym for progress, regress, is a word with strong negative connotations. No one wants to be seen as a regressive.

At this time of the year, just before Rosh

Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, the theme of progress is definitely in the air. We all hope to progress to a better year, to a year of growth and development. Indeed, many synagogues conclude the old year and begin a new one with the refrain, “May this year and its curses be gone, and may a new year with its blessings begin!”

No one seems to wish that the coming year be one of status quo. Certainly, very few hope for a return to the past.

And yet, it is precisely “return” that our Torah promulgates, especially at this time of year.

This week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Nitza- vim*, contains the following passage (*Deuteronomy* 30:1-10). I provide a literal translation of some of the verbs, in accordance with their Hebrew root:

“When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse...And you take them to heart [literally, and you *return* them to your heart]...And you will *return* to the Lord your God, and you and your children will heed His command...Then the Lord your God will *return* your captivity...He will *return* you from all the nations...You will *return* and again heed the voice of Lord...For the Lord will *return* to delight in your well-being...Once you

return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.”

In the space of just several verses, the word “return” appears, in one form or another, at least seven times! It was in the writings of the great Nechama Leibowitz that I first learned the importance of a word that appears repetitiously in the course of a single text. We are to think, she wrote, of such a term as a *leitvort*, a leading word, a word which gives us a clue and leads us to the deeper meaning of the text at hand.

Even my limited familiarity with the German language was sufficient for me to draw the comparison between *leitvort*, a word that identifies the theme of an entire passage, and the word *leitmotif*, which is a thought or melody that pervades a literary work or a musical composition.

The ten days that begin on Rosh Hashanah and conclude on Yom Kippur are known as the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, which is usually translated as The Ten Days of Repentance. But *teshuvah* does not really mean repentance, and it certainly does not mean penitence, as it is frequently rendered. Rather, it means return.

The *leitmotif* of this entire season is the Torah’s call for us to engage in profound introspection and to return to a place which we have lost, forgotten, or abandoned. It is not progress that is demanded of us during the next several weeks; it is, oddly enough, regress.

It can legitimately be asked, return to what? I would like to provide an answer or two to that question, inspired by the book that I find so personally meaningful at this time of year. It is *The Lights of Teshuvah*, by

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.

Rav Kook emphasizes that over the course of time, we each develop as individuals, and in that process isolate and alienate ourselves from others, from our families, from the people of Israel. To return means to return from our self-centeredness to the collective, from the *prat*, or single unit, to the *klal*, or all-encompassing group. There can be no *teshuvah* unless the person reconnects with larger components of society. We all, in our heart of hearts, know the ways in which he has cut himself off from significant people in his life, and each of us knows how to reconnect to those individuals.

My experience as a psychotherapist has taught me that there is another destination to which it would pay for us to return. I speak of our childhood. As we mature and develop in life, we grow in many positive directions. But we also move away from our innocence, from our childish enthusiasm, from the hope and sense of potential that characterizes the young, but which older individuals eschew cynically.

People find it very rewarding to, if only in their imaginations, return to their youth and recapture some of the positive qualities that they left behind as they made their adult choices.

May the Torah learned
from this issue of Torah Tidbits
לעילוי נשמת

חנה בת משה ארליך ז"ל
on her 9th Yahrzeit - 28 Elul

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Finally, we all need to return the Almighty, to His Torah, and to His Land.

No matter how intense our worship of Him during the past year was, we can return to Him for an even stronger connection.

No matter how studiously we explored His Torah, we can return to even deeper levels of its impenetrable depth.

No matter how loyal our faithfulness to the land of Israel was, we can return to even greater loyalty and more courageous faith.

And no matter what our relationship was with others in our lives, we can draw upon our own inner sources of generosity and compassion and enhance those relationships in a spirit of genuine *teshuvah*, of returning to those others, and, in the process, to our truer selves. ■



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