

**Parshat Nitzavim:
Time Under Tension
Rabba Sara Hurwitz - President and Co-Founder**

Parshat Nitzavim, Chapter 30 opens with at least seven references to the word *shuv*, meaning return.

Return to God, and then God will return to you.

וּשְׁבֹתָ עַד-יְהי אֱלֹהֶיךָ

And then in verse 11:

Surely, this mitzvah - commandment - which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם
לֹא-נִפְלְאוֹת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הוּא:

Ramban asks: "What does this mitzvah refer to? To teshuva."

But change is a process. And so is the process of teshuva, of repentance.

Teshuva becomes our focus, beginning in earnest in Elul as we hear the shofar compelling us to reflect on who we are and what we want to change. But the concept of teshuva -- knowing how to and what to change -- can be overwhelming. Rav Kook's beautiful work, *Orot Hateshuvah*, translated as the *Song of Teshuva*, offers us a teshuva road map.

In chapter 2, Rav Kook writes:

Regarding its length of time, teshuvah may be divided into two types: **sudden teshuvah** (*teshuva pitomit*) and **gradual teshuvah** (*teshuva d'ragit*).

Teshuva pitomit -- sudden teshuva -- comes upon us like lightning, like an illuminating flash that enters the soul. A moment of complete clarity. One minute you are blind, in the dark about what you need to do to change or even that there was a problem in the first place and then, suddenly, it hits you -- a clear vision and a pathway forward. It's the kind of change that we know just from our gut, our intuition that we must change. It's that moment of clarity when you realize that a tough relationship must come to an end, or that a new job opportunity is actually the right fit. That your bad habit must come to an end. It's reaching the breaking point and making a conscious decision that it's time to change.

The truth is that this kind of sudden awareness can be treacherous, often with unexpected results. It's the sudden teshuva of Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordai (Avodah Zara 17a), about whom we are told that he spent his whole life engaged with vice -- there was not a prostitute that he

did not visit. Until one day, while with the most beautiful women in the world, he has a *teshuva pitomit* moment. She chastises him that he would never be able to repent and he realizes that he must change. The story ends with Rabbi Eleazar putting his head between his knees and crying, asking for forgiveness. Immediately his soul departs -- he dies -- and the *bat kol*, a heavenly decree, proclaims: "*Rabbi Eleazar b. Dordai is destined for the life of the world to come!*".

Rabbi Eleazar acquired *olam haba*. He did teshuva, but perhaps this large, heroic, and almost intuitive fast teshuva, comes up short. It is not enough.

Slow teshuva has to be paired with the second type of Rav Kook's teshuva. Of *teshuva d'ragit* -- of gradual repentance.

This kind of change happens slowly over a period of time. It's taking that knowledge of wanting to change and then doing the hard, plodding work of achieving it. This kind of teshuva may even go unnoticed for a time, as the incremental nature of it may not be obvious at first. But over time this kind of teshuva results in lasting change.

Both types of teshuva, an emotional flash of clarity and a slow gradual process, are necessary to achieve lasting change.

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kaneman's two systems of how we process information, how we are wired to make decisions resonates with Rav Kook's two processes of teshuva. Daniel's book, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (page 13), describes the intuitive, quick almost gut decisions that people make. Fast thinking (which he calls System 1), the concept that our brains are primed to make immediate, even emotional assumptions, is similar to Rav Kook's *teshuva pitomit*. However, to make good decisions in life, System 2 must also become activated - that's our strategic, slow, deliberate, and step by step ability to process information over time -- Rav Kook's *teshuvah d'ragit*.

It's the interplay of the two systems, the two forms of teshuva that help us change.

Each person, in his or her own way, must have that conscious awakening where they decide something must change. And then the work of change begins. I find this framing helpful as I consider the change I want to make in my own life and in the world at large. As I listen to the powerful shofar blasts during this Rosh Hashana, I will be thinking about my own process of teshuva. The fast, quick truas: *tu-tu-tu-tu-tu* will awaken within me the things I know I must change. I will seek clarity and allow that lighting rod to awaken my soul and help me decide to



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act. And then, the slower drawn out sounds of the shevarim: *tu, tu, tu* will remind me of the gradual work that is necessary to get there.

May this year bring deep cathartic awakenings, quick and necessary resolutions, and the patience and fortitude to slowly and gradually make that change an everlasting and impactful one.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz is Co-Founder and President of Yeshivat Maharat, and also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. She completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, and was ordained by Rabbi Avi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. Rabba Hurwitz has received numerous awards, including being named as one of the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. She is also a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.