

Parshat Vayelech
Proactive and Reactive Love
Rabbi Alana Suskin - Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track
Class of 2020

In the first line of the haftarah for the normal reading for Vayelech, the prophet Isaiah says,
Seek God while God can be found, Call to God. דַּרְשׁוּ יְקוֹק בְּהִמְצְאוֹ קְרָאֵהוּ בְּהִיטְוֹ קְרוֹב:
while God is near

The Talmud (BT Rosh Hashana 18a) asks when is that time that God is near? These are the ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur.

This Shabbat, Shabbat Shuvah, we read a different haftarah, starting with a section from Hoshea which begins

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, For you שׁוּבוּהָ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ
have fallen because of your sin. (14:2) בְּעֵוְנְךָ: (יד:ב)

The theme is similar -turn back to God; do teshuva, repent - but the orientation is different than that of other years. The regular haftarah for Vayelech echoes the theme not simply of repentance, but of returning and seeking God with love. The Bach mentions in Orach Chaim 581:2 that we reach out to God in repentance in the 40 days starting from Rosh Chodesh - the new month day - of Elul, until Yom Kippur, and one's heart should seek the Beloved through repentance, and by doing so, the Beloved will perceive that repentance with love.

The two orientations to teshuvah are described by the 19th century Polish chassidic rebbe Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (the Sfat Emet) who comments with regard to Shabbat shuvah that:

Regarding the verse, 'Return us to You, God, and we shall return to You.'
(Lam. 5:21). These refer to the two types of repentance, from fear and from love...The point of these two kinds of teshuvah also parallel the verse 'Turn from evil and do good.' (Ps. 34:15) Turning from fear is 'turning from evil' ...but teshuvah from love is 'doing good...'

I want to suggest that there is another way to read these two kinds of teshuvah, "turning away from evil" and "doing good," one is reactive, and one is proactive. The first is "turning from evil," - this is what we usually think of as teshuvah: we must make right what we have done wrong, we ask forgiveness of our fellow human beings for the wrongs we have done them and make reparations for any injury we have done them; we ask God for forgiveness for transgressions against God. But the second is "and do good" -teshuvah me'ahava -from love. In this model, it is the actions we take with one another out of love to care for one another that triggers the love God showers on us in this month of repentance and personal change.

In [Tanna d'bei Eliahu 20](#) the midrash comments on the commandment to gather the people at the end of each cycle of seven years (*hak'heil*) in order to hear the reading of the Torah:

Lift up your hands towards God for the life of your infants who faint for hunger at every street corner. (Lam. 2:19) From here, one derives that a person should guard their children and the people of their household in order that not one of them commits a sin or does any kind of repulsive act. Hence it is said, *Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may ... observe faithfully every word of this Teaching.* (Deut. 31:12).

But what kind of wrongdoing? The midrash is directing us to understand that we are responsible for those hungry children on street corners - and all the vulnerable of our community. It continues by bringing parallel language to that which is found in our portion from the prophets:

Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children - those that suck the breasts; let the bridegroom go forth from his chamber and the bride out of her pavilion (Yoel 2:16) ...Just as a groom goes forth from his chamber and the bride out of her pavilion, so even a prince and a great sage, from this we learn that even one as wise as Moses our teacher and as pious as Aaron should not say, 'Since I am sitting comfortably in my own house, I won't feel any trouble,' but rather should go out and join with the people of the community in distress" (see [Taanit 11a](#))

Vayelech reminds us that teshuva is not simply an act of post hoc repair for the past, but is also a matter of love which requires us to be with all of the community, to feel its pain, and to act proactively out of love to build a fair and just society. We are each responsible for our individual harms; but we also are responsible for positive action, and that too, is a kind of teshuvah. We need both.



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