

Shabbat Shuva

The *Shabbat* that falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called Shabbat Shuva (*Shabbat T'Shuvah*), the *Shabbat* of Returning or of Repentance or of Giving an Answer.

According to Jewish thought, without the possibility of repentance the world could not exist, because – as our common experience makes all too clear – man stumbles more than he strides. If there were no possibility of wiping the slate clean, man could have no hope of rising above his frequent sins. They would always remain to condemn him, never allowing him to escape inevitability of judgment and punishment. For this reason *T'shuvah* had to be created before the universe, for Adonai would not create a world that was doomed from its inception (see *Revelation* 13:8 and *Nedarim* 39b). In Jewish tradition the possibility of repentance always exists – in fact, it must exist – and it is uniquely acceptable during the ten days of awe. During this period, *Elohim* waits – anxiously and expectantly, as it were – for the Jewish people and the Jewish person to return to His embrace. He is more responsive at this time, He assists those groping for His closeness, and He regards our failure to respond to this opportunity as transgression of an uncommon magnitude.

This week's *Torah* Portion is *VaYelech* (Deut. 31:1-30), which means, “*He went.*” Moses continues to deliver his last message to our people, and they are all still standing in front of the Jordan as they listen:

Chazak! Be Courageous!

¹Then Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. ²He said to them, “I am 120 years old today. I am no longer able to go out and come in. Adonai has said to me, ‘You are not to cross over this Jordan.’ ³Adonai your God—He will cross over before you. He will destroy these nations from before you, and you will dispossess them. Joshua will cross over before you, just as Adonai has promised. ⁴“Adonai will do to them just as He did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when He destroyed them. ⁵Adonai will give them over to you, and you are to do to them according to all the mitzvot that I commanded you. ⁶***Chazak! Be courageous!*** Do not be afraid or tremble before them. For Adonai your God—He is the One who goes with you. He will not fail you or abandon you.” ⁷Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong! Be courageous! For you are to go with this people into the land Adonai has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you are to enable them to inherit it. ⁸Adonai—He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you. He will not fail you or abandon you. Do not fear or be discouraged.”

Public Torah Readings

⁹Moses wrote down this *Torah* and gave it to the kohanim, the sons of Levi who carry the Ark of the Covenant of Adonai, and to all the elders of Israel. ¹⁰Then Moses commanded them saying, “At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of cancelling debts, during the feast of Sukkot, ¹¹when all Israel comes to appear before Adonai your God in the place He chooses, you are to read this *Torah* before them in their hearing. ¹²Gather the people—the men and women and little ones, and the outsider within your town gates—so they may hear and so they may learn, and they will fear Adonai your God and take care to do all the words of this *Torah*. ¹³So their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear Adonai your God—all the days you live on the land you are about to cross over the Jordan to possess.” ¹⁴Then Adonai said to Moses, “Behold, your time to die is near. Call Joshua, and present yourselves at the Tent of Meeting, and I will commission him.” Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves at the Tent of Meeting. ¹⁵Adonai appeared in the Tent in a pillar of cloud, and the pillar of cloud stood over the opening of the Tent. ¹⁶Adonai said to Moses, “Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise up and prostitute themselves with the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will abandon Me and break My covenant that I cut with them. ¹⁷Then My anger will flare against them on that day, and I will abandon them and hide My face from them. So they will be devoured, and many evils and troubles will come on them. They will say on that day, ‘Isn’t it because our God is not among us that these evils have come on us?’ ¹⁸I will surely hide My face on that day because of all the evil they have done, for they have turned to other gods. (Deut. 31:1-18)

Have you ever wondered which is the last of the 613 mitzvot in the *Torah*? It is Deut. 31:19: “⁹Now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to Bnei-Yisrael—put it in their mouth, so that this song may be a witness for Me

against Bnei-Yisrael.” or the 15th positive *mitzvah* listed in *Sefer HaMitzvot*. This is absolutely important based on the law of first and last mention. (In review: the first and last mention of a principle in Scripture carries with it additional meaning or significance, and we should therefore pay close attention to it). The sages derive from this verse that every Jew is commanded to write a *Torah* scroll, a commandment that can be fulfilled according to the Rabbis, “by writing a single letter of a complete scroll, because the lack of even one letter renders a scroll invalid. The writing or correcting of a single letter is tantamount to completing the entire scroll” (Rambam, *Sefer Torah* 7:1). According to some Rabbis the purchase of books expounding on the *Torah* (e.g., a *Chumash* or *Tanach*) constitutes a fulfillment of this *mitzvah*: “According to the 18th-century commentator Rabbi Abraham Danzig, a Jew’s obligation was to own, and not necessarily write, sacred books for studying. As printed books became more readily available, the gap between the cost of writing a *Torah* scroll and printed Jewish sacred texts would only grow, and thus this *mitzvah* came to be understood as encouragement for studying *Torah*, as opposed to the more narrow understanding of writing one” (<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mitzvah-to-write-a-torah-scroll/>). The climax of the entire series of *mitzvot* (613 of them) is to record and know *Adonai*’s commands, so that they can be fulfilled and passed on to succeeding generations.

Adonai commanded Moshe and Joshua to write the *Torah* and to teach it to the people, and to place the scroll inside the Ark. Times would come when the masses would forsake the *Torah* and be drawn after the cultures of the surrounding societies, but that written *Torah* would remain as a constant reminder of Israel’s roots and the unchanging focus of its devotion.

²⁰“For when I bring them to the land flowing with milk and honey that I swore to their fathers, and they eat and are satisfied and grow fat—then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and they will spurn Me and break My covenant. ²¹Now when many evils and troubles have come on them, this song will confront them as a witness; for it will not be forgotten from the mouth of their descendants. For I know the intention they are devising this day, even before I bring them into the land that I swore.” ²²That day Moses wrote this song and taught it to Bnei-Yisrael. ²³Then he commissioned Joshua son of Nun and said, “*Chazak! Be courageous!* For you will bring Bnei-Yisrael into the land I swore to them—and I will be with you.” ²⁴Now when Moses had finished writing the words of this *Torah* on a scroll, right to the end... ²⁵Moses commanded the Levites, carriers of the Ark of the Covenant of *Adonai* saying, ²⁶“Take this scroll of the *Torah*, and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant of *Adonai* your God. It will remain there as a witness against you, ²⁷for I know your rebellion and your stiff neck. Indeed, while I am still alive with you today, you have been rebellious against *Adonai*—how much more then after my death? ²⁸Gather to me all the elders of your tribes and your officials, so that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them. ²⁹For I know that after my death you will certainly act corruptly and turn aside from the way I have commanded you. So evil will fall upon you in the latter days, because you will do what is evil in the sight of *Adonai*, provoking Him to anger by the work of your hands.” ³⁰Moses spoke in the hearing of the whole community of Israel the words of this song, right to the end.” (Deut. 31:20-30)

Adonai commanded us to consider our ways and repent. This is serious and it involved the entire nation as they stood in front of the River Jordan. The Promised Land was on the other side and they were about to enter into it. As a congregation, we are also standing today in front of the Promised Land. It is time that we do what our ancestors practiced and face the reality of our shortcomings and our sins. I challenge us as a congregation to get our affairs right with one another individually and as a congregation. Shabbat Shalom!