

The Joy on the Other Side of Sin

How Shabbos returns a Jew to the self that failure could never erase

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The simchah of teshuvah is not the joy of having arrived. It is the joy of no longer travelling away.

BULLETIN TITLE

Shalosh Seudos Drush: The Joy on the Other Side of Sin

A public-edition transcript prepared for reading and reflection.

The Question After the Sin

Earlier on Shabbos Shuvah, we spoke about one of the most daring teachings in all of Chazal: through a complete teshuvah, the deliberate sins of a person can be transformed into merits. Not merely erased. Not merely covered over. Transformed. The place of failure itself can become the place from which a new light emerges.

That teaching is magnificent. But it leaves a very human question. What does it feel like while a person is still standing on this side of the transformation? What gives a Jew the courage to begin again before the record has been rewritten, before every habit has changed, before the damage has been repaired?

Most of us know the language of regret. We know the heaviness of looking back at a year and seeing words we should not have said, opportunities we did not seize, promises that lasted less time than we hoped. We know how easily regret can stop being about what we did and become a verdict about who we are.

That is where teshuvah becomes difficult. A person may believe that Hashem forgives, yet quietly wonder whether he still deserves to come close. He may know the door is open and still feel like an outsider standing on the threshold.

Shabbos Shuvah answers that fear. Its answer is not only that the door is open. Its answer is that, at the deepest level, the returning Jew was never an outsider at all.

The Prince Who Remembers His Father

The Alter Rebbe gives us the image that unlocks the joy of teshuvah. In Tanya, chapter 31, he describes a prince who has been taken captive. He has been far from the palace, forced into degradation, living among filth, working in a prison that contradicts everything he once knew himself to be.

Then comes the moment of release. The prince walks free and returns to the home of his father, the king.

Why is his joy so fierce? It is not because the captivity never happened. It happened. It marked him. He may still be wearing prison clothes. He may still carry the weakness and wounds of confinement. His joy comes from something deeper: the prison has lost the power to tell him who he is.

He was treated like a prisoner, but he never stopped being the king's son. His release does not create his identity. It reveals it.

The first truth of teshuvah is not: 'I have repaired everything.' It is: 'I still belong to the King.'

That is why teshuvah contains joy even before the work is complete. The simchah is not a celebration of the sin. It is not a denial of responsibility. It is the joy of direction - the discovery that I am no longer moving away from home.

The past must still be faced. Apologies must still be made. Habits must still be rebuilt. But those tasks are no longer the labour of a condemned prisoner trying to earn a new identity. They are the work of a child who has remembered his true identity and has begun to walk home.

Why Shabbos Makes Return Possible

This is where Shabbos enters the drush. Without Shabbos, we would have a beautiful teaching about teshuvah, but we would still be missing the experience that makes it believable.

During the week, the world asks us what we accomplished. Did we produce? Did we win? Did we keep our commitments? The weekday measures us by output, progress and performance. Those questions are necessary, but they are not the deepest questions.

Shabbos asks something else: Where do you belong?

On Shabbos, a Jew stops manufacturing an identity and receives one. We return to the shul, the table, the family, the songs and the words our people have carried for generations. We are not invited because the week was flawless. We are invited because it is Shabbos and we are Jews.

The Sfas Emes says this with extraordinary precision in his teaching for Shabbos Shuvah 5641:

זֶה עֵינֵן נִשְׁמָה יְתִירָה שִׁישׁ לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּשַּׁבָּת,
שֶׁהוּא כַח הַשּׁוֹרֵשׁ שֶׁאֵינוֹ תְלוּי בַּעֲבוּדַת הָאָדָם...
זֶה הַכַּח אֵינוֹ נֹאבֵד עַל יְדֵי הַחֲטָא, לְכֵן יִכּוּלִין לָשׁוּב בַּשַּׁבָּת קוֹדֵשׁ.

The additional soul of Shabbos is the power of our root - the part of a Jew that does not depend upon what he has accomplished. That power is not lost through sin. Therefore, says the Sfas Emes, a Jew can return on Shabbos.

This does not mean that actions do not matter. It means that beneath all our actions is a root that remains attached to Hashem. Sin can obscure it; sin can wound our awareness of it; sin can carry us very far from the life we ought to live. But sin cannot annul the deepest covenantal truth of a Jewish soul.

Shabbos gives that hidden root a voice. For one day, the noise of achievement becomes quiet enough for the neshamah to say: 'I am still here.'

And perhaps that is felt most powerfully now, at Shalosh Seudos. The light outside is fading. The week has not yet begun. The room is gentler than it was in the morning.

We sit with the chevra, sing melodies that do not need many words, and linger at the King's table. No one in the room had a perfect week. That is not why we are together. We are together because this is where our neshamah belongs.

At that hour, Shabbos does something that an argument cannot do. It lets the prisoner feel, if only for a moment, that he is still a prince.

Shabbos Shuvah: The Return Within the Return

The Lubavitcher Rebbe develops this point in a farbrengen on Shabbos Vayelech, 6 Tishrei 5749. The letters of Shabbos, he notes, can be read as tashuv - 'you shall return.' Shabbos itself is a movement of return: creation returns to its source, labour returns to rest, and the Jew returns from the scattered life of the week to the oneness beneath it.

Every Shabbos contains that return. Shabbos Shuvah concentrates it. This one Shabbos stands inside the Ten Days of Teshuvah and carries their whole movement toward Yom Kippur. It teaches us not only to repent on Shabbos, but to understand that Shabbos is itself a kind of teshuvah.

And the Rebbe stresses the joy of that movement. The prince leaving captivity is not joyful because prison was harmless. He is joyful because freedom is real. The broken heart that takes responsibility and the expansive joy that comes close to Hashem are not contradictions. The brokenness opens the door; the joy walks through it.

My failures may belong to my history, but they do not own my identity.

The Bridge

Sometimes it takes Shabbos to remind a Jew that he is still a prince. And sometimes a Jew must hold on to that identity for nine years in a Soviet prison, until the day he can finally walk home.

In 1974, a young mathematician named Anatoly Sharansky married Avital in Moscow. The Soviet authorities had granted Avital permission to leave for Israel, but the visa had an expiry date. The day after their wedding, she had to go. They believed Anatoly would soon receive permission to follow.

Instead, husband and wife were separated for twelve years.

Sharansky had become one of the leading voices of Soviet Jews who demanded the right to live openly as Jews and to emigrate to Israel. In 1977 he was arrested, accused of treason and espionage, and placed on trial in a proceeding designed to break him publicly.

At the end of the trial, he refused to give the court the submission it wanted. He said, in substance: To the court, I have nothing to say. To my wife and to the Jewish people, I say: Next year in Jerusalem.

He was sentenced to thirteen years. He would serve nine of them in prisons and labour camps - through cold, hunger, forced feeding, punishment cells and long stretches of solitary confinement.

Before their separation, Avital had given him a tiny black book of Tehillim. At first his Hebrew was limited. But the book became a physical link to his wife, his people and the God the Soviet system insisted had no claim on him. When the authorities confiscated it, Sharansky went on hunger strike until it was returned. The guards could control his food, his clothing, the temperature of his cell and the direction of his body. The Tehillim reminded him that they could not control the meaning of his life.

Then, on February 11, 1986, he was taken from prison without explanation. They dressed him in absurdly oversized civilian clothes and flew him toward East Germany. He did not know whether this was freedom, another interrogation or another psychological game.

At the Glienicke Bridge - the bridge between East and West that the world came to know as the Bridge of Spies - Sharansky learned that he was part of a prisoner exchange.

A Soviet officer gave him one final order: 'Walk straight.'

Sharansky did not walk straight. He zigzagged across the bridge.

It was a small gesture, almost comic. But after years in which the Soviet state had tried to command not only where he walked but who he was, the zigzag carried a magnificent declaration: You may have directed my body until this moment. You do not direct me anymore.

Notice where the act took place. He was not yet in Israel. He had not yet embraced Avital. He had not yet stood at the Kotel. He was still crossing the bridge. The destination had not been reached, but captivity had already lost its authority.

That is the simchah of teshuvah. Not the joy of having arrived. The joy of no longer travelling away.

Sharansky was flown to Israel and reunited with Avital after twelve years. His first words to her were wonderfully human: 'Sorry I'm a little late.' That night, he went to the Kotel. A crowd of jubilant Jews lifted him up and carried him. In his hands was the little book of Tehillim that had travelled with him through prison.

The Soviet Union had called him a traitor. Prison had assigned him a number. The Jewish people called him by his name and carried him home.

Stop Obeying the Prison

Each of us carries instructions from an old prison. They are rarely shouted by a Soviet guard. They arrive in our own voice:

'You have always been this way.'

'You tried before.'

'People like you do not change.'

'After what you did, closeness is no longer for you.'

'You are too late.'

Teshuvah begins when we stop obeying those instructions.

That does not mean walking without discipline. Sharansky's zigzag was not aimlessness. It was the first freely chosen step of a free man. In the same way, teshuvah is not a vague feeling that everything is fine. It is the recovery of freedom so that we can finally choose what is right.

What is one command from the prison that you are ready to disobey? Perhaps it is the command never to apologize first. Perhaps it is the claim that one more fixed time for Torah will never last. Perhaps it is the belief that your tefillah cannot become warm again, that a relationship cannot be repaired, or that a person of your age and history cannot begin anew.

Being late is not the same as being locked out.

Yom Kippur is approaching. We will confess with seriousness. We will name sins, beat our hearts and ask forgiveness. But Shabbos Shuvah prepares us to do that work without confusing guilt with identity. We can face what we did precisely because we are more than what we did.

The child who knows he has a home can admit that he wandered. The prince who remembers his father can finally remove the prison clothes. The Jew who has tasted Shabbos can enter Yom Kippur not as a stranger begging for admission, but as a child returning to the place where he has always belonged.

The Light After the Darkness

We began with the teaching that teshuvah can transform darkness into light. Now we can understand the inner experience of that transformation.

The light does not mean that the darkness was good. It means that darkness does not receive the final word. A prison can become the place where a person discovered that his soul could not be imprisoned. Distance can become the ache that taught him the value of home. Failure can become the point at which a borrowed identity collapsed and the deepest self reappeared.

That is why there can be joy on the other side of sin - and even, in a quiet way, at the first honest step away from it. The joy is the deepest truth of a child coming home.

Soon Shabbos will leave. The candles will be gone, the table cleared, and the weekday will again ask what we can accomplish. But if we have listened carefully, Shabbos will leave us with something the weekday cannot take away: the memory of who is doing the accomplishing.

We are not prisoners trying to earn the right to become princes. We are children of the King learning to live in a way that expresses who we already are.

The story does not end in the prison. It ends at home.

May this Shabbos give us the courage to stop walking as prisoners. May it return us to our root, to our chevra, to our Father and King. And may we cross the bridge into Yom Kippur with honest hearts and deep simchah - not because the journey is finished, but because we are finally walking home.

Sources and Further Reading

The sources below are supplied for readers who wish to study the teachings in their original settings. Translations and explanatory formulations in the essay are adapted for clarity.

1. Talmud Bavli, Yoma 86b. On teshuvah motivated by love and the transformation of deliberate sins into merits.
2. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Tanya, chapter 31. The joy of the king's son released from captivity and returned to his father's home.
3. Sfas Emes, Shabbos Shuvah 5641. The additional soul of Shabbos as the enduring root of a Jew, a power not lost through sin and therefore the basis of return on Shabbos.
4. Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, Shabbos Vayelech, 6 Tishrei 5749, Hisvaaduyos 5749, vol. 1, pp. 38-44. Shabbos as tashuv, the higher teshuvah of joy, and the preparation of Shabbos Shuvah for Yom Kippur.
5. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah 2:6. The unique closeness and availability of teshuvah during the Ten Days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
6. Natan Sharansky, Fear No Evil. Sharansky's memoir of arrest, imprisonment, Jewish identity and release.
7. The Jewish Agency for Israel, biography of Natan Sharansky; The National Library of Israel, 'The Little Book of Psalms That Survived the Soviet Gulag.' Supplementary historical accounts of his imprisonment, release and book of Tehillim.

For the bulletin

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