

Vayelech and Shabbat Shuva: The World Has a Heart

Dear Friends,

The Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is called “Shabbat Shuva”, because it occurs during the ten days of T’shuva. In English these are called Days of Repentance, but that is an unfortunate translation. T’shuva (תשובה) means to return, from the word “shuv”.

The Parasha this week is called “Vayelech”, which means “to go forth”. So it is both a Shabbat of going forth, and of returning... It seems that this quandary accurately reflects the core movement of our lives - coming and going, leaving and returning.

The Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig said that the word “T’shuva” appears only in the Hebrew language, and does not translate to any other. This, he explains, is evidence that the journey or movement it describes is a uniquely Jewish one.

Of course, it begs the question - where are we coming from and to where or to what are we returning?

To the womb? Perhaps. But can we return there?

To childhood? Possible. But is that a place we would like to return to?

To our parents’ home? I doubt it. Do we really want to return to our crib?

This week’s Haftorah supplies an answer of sorts, but one that does not help us understand the mystery of return: **“Return, Israel, to the Lord your God.”** (Hoshea 14: 2)

Nu, is it all clear now? Not in the least. What does returning to God mean? And where is He to be found?

Modern discourse suggests various new and contemporary answers to the question, the most popular of which is “return to ourselves.” But what does this mean? Where are “ourselves” to be found?

In a wonderful article (in Hebrew) about the philosophy of Rabbi Nachman written by Rabbi Elisha Tzur, he quotes the following:

A person... is in search of his path in life, eager to find meaning, a reason for all that befalls him, and relief for his pain and anguish. He wants to know how he can live better, how he can resolve the contradictions, find openings for new meaning, for understanding, and to feel whole... But the depths of nature - the primordial state of all things, their very essence, before they took physical shape... that is beyond

man's reach. So the deepest question that baffles us is the question of our core existence... as long as it is not understood... every direction in which life develops is destined to fail... every human answer to the question of life will be in vain. And since our answers do not address the root of the issues, they are all destined to fail. The root, the essence of life - and therefore life itself - is beyond human comprehension, and will always remain unclear. This sensation will forever envelop all of life and all of human endeavours... and despair and fear of failure lurk in its wake. Everything is liable to fail, to get lost, to die... even he who looks deeply and seeks to know and to listen... will only meet oblivion... and the death that envelops all of life. (This is a partial translation of an article from the book entitled, "The World has a Heart", published in 2011.)

The article traces Rabbi Nachman's search for that solid source; the spring from which everything pours forth; the root that nourishes and quenches the thirst of the entire universe, from which all of existence flows, and to where it all returns.

In religious terms, this root, this heart of the world is called God, or YHVH. In Particle Physics it is called "Boson Higgs" after the man who developed the theory, or "The God Particle", which is the more popular name given to it by the scientists who work in the field in Switzerland.

Rabbi Nachman said of this God Particle: The World has a Heart.

Science will yet discover that the God Particle, discovered in 2012, earning Professor Higgs a Nobel prize in physics, is NOT the root of existence, because its root is hidden from human eyes and brains. It will never be possible to truly encapsulate it. The Greeks believed that the atom is the basis of existence, then scientists discovered the proton and the electron. Later they discovered the quark, and now it is the God Particle.

But just like Rabbi Nachman, science will never stop searching for the heart of the world, which is why this Shabbat is Shabbat Shuva, marking eternal human longing for the essence of life.

There is something within us that remembers the essence from which we all came ("Vayelech"), from which we were all created, and which continues to constitute who we are - every cell and molecule in our bodies - and to which we will return at the end of our lives. Not only human beings spring forth from this source; everything - all flora, fauna, and inanimate objects - come from this same existential source, and will return to it.

The truth is that there is no need to wait for the end of our lives in order to return to the root of our existence. The God Particle, the root of existence, is not waiting for us at the end of our journey. It is here all the time! Or, as Moshe told Bnei Yisrael in last week's Parasha: "It is very close to you" (D'varim 30: 14). Without it, there can be no-thing.

The challenge, which causes human beings misery, is that this root, this God Particle that we so long for, "has no figure or body", in the words of Maimonides. While this "particle" - this heart, this root - is the source of all that is, it, itself is not a physical particle, and therefore will never be "discovered" - in the Particle Accelerator in Switzerland, or anywhere else for that matter.

Moshe is exactly 120 years old in this week's parasha. His birthday - the day on which he came forth out of infinity - is also the day of his death - the day on which he will return from the finite world back to infinity. Don't worry, Moshe's leavetaking is spread over several parashot. We have three more weeks together before Moshe departs and we **return** to the start of the story.

This Shabbat, Shabbat Shuva, we are invited to remember that at any moment we can return to the source of life, we can dip for a moment in the eternal "fountain of youth", recharge our life's energy, and then return to our daily tasks.

Because - as Rabbi Nachman said - the world has a heart, and we go back and forth between the heart of the world to its external layers, and back again, throughout our lives, until 120.

As for the "how" - the art of returning and recharging - well, that is the essence of the religious/spiritual path, and it requires daily inner work.

Shana Tova, Chatima Tova, a good heart, and Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha