

SHABBOS SHUVAH

Reversing the Chain Reaction

The spirit of the Shabbos that separates Yom Kippur from Rosh Hashanah is captured in the opening words of the *haftorah*. "*Shuvah Yisrael!*" cries the prophet Hosea. "Return, O Israel, to G-d your Lord, for you have stumbled in your sinfulness." This Shabbos signals the last call for repentance for our shortcomings of the bygone year, and therefore, we call it Shabbos Shuvah, the Shabbos of Return.

But a very important question presents itself: How far do we have to come back in order to have "returned"? Must we reach the ultimate levels of perfection? The thought can be discouraging, but the prophecy of Hosea reassures us.

Return, O Israel, to G-d your Lord. The Midrash infers from these words that we can consider ourselves to have returned once we feel that G-d is our Lord. When a person sins, he also jeopardizes his relationship with his Creator, and now he must repair that relationship.

We can easily relate to this concept by its parallel in the realm of friendship. If a person is disloyal to his friend, he damages the friendship. A certain coolness develops, and this coolness pushes the friends even further apart. A chain reaction begins. The friendship declines, and an even greater estrangement results - until the two former friends become like strangers to each other. The act of disloyalty in itself may not have been serious enough to warrant the demise of the friendship, but it set into motion the process of destruction.

Fortunately, however, the chain reaction works in the reverse as well. If the disloyal person makes an effort to be particularly thoughtful to his wronged friend, good feelings will be engendered. These good feelings will draw them closer and stimulate more acts of mutual kindness - until the two estranged people are suddenly friends again.

This process also applies to our relationship with G-d, but with a slight difference. G-d never becomes estranged from us. His Hand is always outstretched to His wayward children. But we sometimes become estranged from Him. When we commit a sinful act we drive a wedge into our relationship with G-d. The guilt and embarrassment we feel creates a sense of distance from G-d, and in this state of estrangement we may find it easier to commit more sinful acts, which create even greater estrangement - until we may suddenly find ourselves, Heaven forbid, disconnected from G-d. But we can reverse

this process. Step by step, we can draw ourselves closer to G-d and reestablish the spiritual attachment that our souls so desperately crave.

How do we know when we have succeeded? When we have not only acknowledged G-d's mastery of the world but also feel he is our personal Lord, when we truly feel a deep relationship of Lord and cherished servant, then we know that we have truly "returned."

But how specifically are we to accomplish this? Once again, the words of prophet hold the key.

For you have stumbled in your sinfulness. We must not be discouraged. We must not think of ourselves as evil people for having sinned. We must realize that we are essentially good people who have unfortunately "stumbled" along the way. We have been led astray by our impulses and desires, and we never deliberately intended to jeopardize our priceless relationship with our Creator. We must forgive ourselves, so to speak, and then we can begin the mending process.

As we prepare for Yom Kippur, let us open our hearts to the encouraging words of the prophet. Let us turn away from the destructive distractions that life places in our paths and focus on what is precious and important. Let us mend our relationships with our friends and families - and above all, with our Creator.