

8 Tishrei, 5764 (Oct. 4, 2003) **Shabbat Shuvah: Sabbath of Returning** J. M. Terrett

Ha'Azinu! Give Ear!
Torah: **Deut. 32:1-52**
Haftarah: **2 Sam. 22:1-51**
Brit Chadashah: **Rom. 10:17-11:12**

Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, there are ten days which Jewish people have traditionally called the Ten Days of Repentance. It is believed that during this period, your life is on trial, to see what kind of year you deserve. In fear and trembling, observant traditional Jewish people examine their lives and try to bring them up to G-d's specifications. Such things as broken relationships, dishonesty, outstanding debts, and all personal baggage which could bring a negative judgment against the coming year is purged, so that at the concluding service of Yom Kippur, the truly penitent life would receive a favourable verdict for the coming year.

As Messianic Jews and Gentiles, we understand that there is no biblical basis for this superstitious practice. You cannot reserve an entire year of blessing, based on ten days worth of repentance. Repentance needs to be a lifestyle strategy, and a regular discipline which we exercise to keep ourselves in spiritual shape. I like to think of it as an internal alarm system which sounds whenever one of the two pillars of our faith is threatened. What we believe is the first pillar, and how we practice, or apply our faith is the other.

2 Peter 3:18 exhorts us to grow in both the grace and the knowledge of our L-rd. We need His grace as we integrate our faith into our lives, and we need knowledge of Him, to know what it is He wants us to accomplish. Repentance or returning in Hebrew keeps us focused on both of these aspects of our lives. Not just for ten days, once a year, but every day, as often as we need to be reminded to seek His Kingdom first, every day and in every circumstance of our pilgrimage to our Father's House.

Today, on the Sabbath of Return, I want to give you an annual reminder of the true nature of repentance, and give you an opportunity to consider the condition your condition is in. It is not possible in a single service to completely turn your life around, but it is possible to begin, or to renew a journey which is the calling of every believer, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

How is your faith doing? Do you have questions and doubts which need to be dealt with so that your knowledge of G-d's Son remains sweet, full and satisfying? How is your obedience, your spirituality doing? The first four commandments deal with how we relate to G-d, the fifth with our family and the last five with how we are to relate to each other. How are you relating your faith to your world? Let me use four really dirty words: compromise, defeat, discouragement and depression. Spiritual health is the product of obedience and only comes when we take control of our inner lives and defeat the three henchmen who are always waiting on the edges of our spirituality, ready to pounce: the flesh, the world and the adversary.

The Scriptures are full of passages which alert us to our personal struggle with spiritual reality (I John 2:15, 16; Gen. 4:7; Rom. 5:3-5; I P. 2:11, to name a few), and it is this struggle which is the focus of true repentance. I want to do a bit of review with you and then speak about a spiritual truth which should cause us to fear and tremble, all year long, and not just for ten days.

First to the review. Our adversary, and his two henchmen have only got three tricks up their sleeves, but we keep falling for them, day by day, and unfortunately, generation by generation. Here they are: temptation, condemnation and confusion. He spends considerable time trying to get us to violate our own conscience; to get into the habit of doing what we feel is wrong. Once this becomes a habit, we have moved out of the light and into the darkness, whether we are believers or not. Believers who walk in the darkness are sick, not dead, and need to avoid the second line of attack: condemnation.

Abigail Van Burin, Ann Landers sister once said that regrets are the cancer of life, and I agree with her. Remorse that chains us to the regular contemplation of failure is part of the negative cycle which prevents us from letting go of our sin and finding the cleansing strength to be healed and experience wholeness. I fail often. I fall short frequently. Sometimes yetzer ha-ra (the drive to do wrong) drives my heart and life, instead of yetzer ha-tov. But beating myself up and reminding myself of past failures is a form of carnal behaviour which only pretends to be spiritual.

Last week, during the Rosh Hashanah services, we read verses like Is. 43:25 and Micah 7:19, which are reflected in Brit Chadashah (I John 1:9; I Cor. 6:9-11). We need to know how to stop falling for the enemy's tricks, by learning how to walk in forgiveness and obedience. G-d knows how bad we've been and how bad we feel, and He knows that if we cannot be tempted into sinfulness, if we can be made to feel bad, then we are more likely to be bad.

But there is one more spiritual virus trying to infect our holiness: confusion. Eve fell for this, when the adversary asked her if G-d had really said not to taste of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Moral confusion and blurring the difference between right and wrong causes us to misunderstand the meaning of freedom and maturity. Our society tries to convince that being adult means that you have earned the right to make your own choices, no matter how disgusting and irresponsible they are.

Adult content should really indicate morally responsible material, not sexually explicit or violent behaviour of a criminal nature. Confusion teaches that it is wrong to pass judgment on anyone else's choices, or on anyone else's beliefs. Biblical spirituality firmly condemns all forms of immoral behaviour and idolatrous practice, and warns people about the Day of the L-rd when all mankind shall be judged according to truths which are revealed in the Bible. Not very politically correct, is it?

However, biblical spirituality does not stop there. It reaches out in compassion, and with forgiveness, hating the filth, but loving those who are filthy, not to teach them to accept their filth, but that they can be set free forever. We will never stop being sinners in this life, but the L-rd wants us to learn victory over our sinfulness in this life, and to walk

with Him in His Son, for this is the whole duty of man, d'or l'd'or (from generation to generation).

He gives us everything which we need to walk with Him, and when we walk in ways which displease Him, He shows us (2 P. 1:3, 4; Phil. 3:15). What He is teaching us, and how well we are learning, needs to be the focus of our spirituality and of our repentance, not the crippling devices of the adversary of our souls. We need to learn from failure, we need to return to unfinished business and to do our best to walk with Him according to His word in every circumstance of our lives (Rom. 12:18).

When this is not possible, or when we fall short, we need to return to the rock from which we were hewn, and to continue to rebuild our house on the rock of His Word, as we repeatedly take shelter under the wings of the Almighty. Not so as to become spiritual cowards, cowering and afraid of what life continues to throw at us, but as those who are convinced of the leading and protection of the L-rd (I Cor. 10:13), and of our privilege and duty to design reactions to the whatevers, so that our spirituality drives the direction of our lives.

Let me conclude with a double encouragement, which is also a warning. First of all, it is not wrong to have great ambitions and to want to become famous, successful or even rich. The love of money is indeed a root of all evil and sinful pride and carnal ambition continue to ravage the body of our L-rd, but only because believers abandon spirituality in the pursuit of their goals. Poverty and obscurity are not better than riches and fame. Creative, industrious people who invent, design and compose great things are not the enemy, spiritual compromise is.

You see, this life is only a journey, through which we are passing, towards our true home. We came naked and we shall leave naked, and there is only one thing we can take with us: the contents of our heart. In Matt. 6, Yeshua warns us to treasure spirituality in our hearts, because on that Great Day, G-d will crack open our hearts – the spiritual one, not the physical one, and let the contents spill out. What contents will spill out from your heart?

Professional and artistic successes are never the issue, only spirituality is. Who you are on the inside will come out in everything you do. I wish you all success in all that you undertake, but it is my prayer that this success will start in the deepest part of who you are in the L-rd, and flow out through your lives at work, at home when you lie down and when you rise up.

Shabbat Shuvah is all about returning to what really matters, and there are only two things which matter eternally for us: our faith and our spirituality. When we fall, and when we fail, we need to be forgiven and cleansed, so that we can learn to overcome and not wallow in our failures. We need to grow in grace, not in frustration. Our lives are a journey, a spiritual pilgrimage where G-d expects us to offer back all that we do and all that we are, so that His light in the Gospel, can shine through our lives, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

Repentance is not about feeling bad, nor is it about rehearsing failures and beating ourselves up. It is about spirituality and learning to defeat the negative, carnal forces of our adversary in our lives. It is about growing in knowledge and in grace and removing all and any barriers to spirituality, whenever and wherever we encounter them. As we prepare to observe Yom Kippur for another year, let me ask you a question I have already asked you: what condition is your condition in? How is your spirituality doing? What is G-d teaching you through all that is happening in your lives?

Your spirituality is the most important thing about you, and the only thing you can take to heaven with you. So instead of spending ten days, to try and persuade G-d to inscribe your for a good year, let us remind ourselves to spend every day seeking Him and walking with Him, until that great day when we shall cross into our Father's House forever. When we stumble and fall, when we win great victories, when we cry and when we laugh, we want to return to the true focus of our lives, our spirituality. May the L-rd, the G-d of Israel and of the nations, grant you repentance and teach you victory in every area of your lives in 5764. Let's pray.