

"And Reuven returned to the pit, and behold, Yosef was not in the pit!" (37:30)

From where was Reuven "returning"? *Chazal* teach us that he was engaged in fasting and praying for the sin of exchanging the beds. In accepting his *teshuvah*, Hashem said to him, "*Never from the beginning of Creation has there been an individual who has sinned and expiated his sin via the medium of teshuvah. You began by performing teshuvah first. By your life, your grandson will also stand before Klal Yisrael and admonish them to perform teshuvah first.*" This refers to Hoshe'a Ha'Navi whose words, "*Shuvah Yisrael,*" serve as the clarion call for *teshuvah*.

The commentators ask the obvious question: Was Reuven really the first person to repent? Did not *Adam Ha'Rishon* and Kayin also perform *teshuvah*? What was unique about Reuven's *teshuvah* that affords it such significance? We may also question why Reuven took so long to decide upon performing *teshuvah*. **Horav Tzvi Yehudah, zl**, the *Rav* of Stavisin, explains that indeed Reuven was not the one who originated the concept of *teshuvah*. He was preceded by Adam and Kayin. Reuven, nonetheless, taught us an important lesson in *hilchos teshuvah*.

As a Jew embarks upon performing a *mitzvah*, he should first explore whether everything in his personal spiritual life is in order. If he finds shortcomings in his relationship with Hashem, he should repent and mend his ways before he undertakes to perform a new *mitzvah*. Only then is he assured that the *mitzvah* which he performs will emanate from a heart that is the essence of spiritual integrity. This idea is derived from Reuven. He was about to perform the *mitzvah* of *hatzolas nefashos*, to save a life, to rescue his brother Yosef from death in a pit. First, he was required to purify himself with *viddui*, confession, fasting and remorse. After he had completed his own penance, he was now prepared to carry out the *mitzvah*.

This is the meaning of Hashem's statement to Reuven, "You began by performing *teshuvah* first." Prior to performing the *mitzvah* of rescuing Yosef, Reuven first repented and purified himself. Rewarding Reuven's initiative, his grandson called out to *Bnei Yisrael* to cleanse themselves through *teshuvah* before offering their supplication. What avail is a *mitzvah* performed by one who still wallows in his spiritual filth?