

## Reuven returned to the pit. (37:29)

Where was Reuven (that he had to “return”)? Rabbi Eliezer (*Midrash*) says, “Reuven was occupied with fasting; he was dressed in sackcloth as penitence for changing the placement of his father’s bed. Hashem (in accepting Reuven’s repentance) said to him, ‘From the beginning of time, there has not been anyone who had transgressed and repented. You are the first one. As reward, your descendant will stand and declare/exhort the people to return/repent.’” This is a reference to the *Navi Hoshea*, a descendant of Reuven, who proclaimed, *Shuvu Yisrael ad Hashem Elokecha*, “Return *Yisrael* to Hashem, your G-d.” This *Midrash* begs elucidation. Was Reuven the first to repent? What about Kayin, who repented? Furthermore, *Chazal* teach that Adam *HaRishon* also repented. Why is Reuven singled out as the first penitent when, in fact, two others preceded him?

The commentators, each in his own inimitable manner, distinguish between the varied approaches to *teshuvah* manifest by Adam, Kayin and Reuven. The *Brisker Rav, zl*, offers a novel understanding of Reuven’s *teshuvah*. Reuven was about to perform the *mitzvah* of *hatzolas nefashos*, saving his brother’s life. This was no ordinary *mitzvah* (not that any *mitzvah* may be called “ordinary”). Saving a life is saving a world; he was saving all future generations that would descend from Yosef. Reuven wanted to be sure that this *mitzvah* was executed *b’shleimus*, complete perfection. People often perform *mitzvos* assuming that they are doing something special, wonderful and great, when, in fact, the end result of this *mitzvah* is far from laudatory. Thus, to ensure that there would be no errors, Reuven wanted to purge himself of any vestige of sin.

This form of *teshuvah* is unlike any *teshuvah* previously performed. This was not *teshuvah* to expunge a previous sin; rather, this was *teshuvah* prior to a *mitzvah*, for the express purpose of perfecting the upcoming *mitzvah*. This is the meaning of Hashem’s declaration to Reuven, *Atah posachta liteshuvah techilah*, “You ‘opened’ with repentance ‘first.’ Prior to you, no one had thought of repenting before carrying out a *mitzvah*. You taught the world that if one wants to perfect the performance of a *mitzvah*, he must first be pristine, cleansed of sin. This can only be done through prophylactic *teshuvah*. This is the meaning of Hoshea’s proclamation *Shuvah Yisrael ad Hashem Elokecha*, “Before you go approach Hashem, ie; perform a *mitzvah*, repent, so that your *mitzvah* will be complete and perfect.” Pouring wine from a filthy pitcher is clearly not the same as pouring from a pitcher that is pristine of all dirt. Should *mitzvah* performance be any different?

Perhaps we can offer an alternative explanation for Reuven receiving the accolade of “first repenter.” While he was preceded in repentance by Adam and Kayin, Reuven’s *teshuvah* was unique, so that it earned him the distinction of being the first to repent. Adam and Kayin repented their defined sin. Reuven’s sin was not defined. The Torah writes, *Vayeilech Reuven, vayishkav es Leah*, “Reuven went and lay with Leah” (*Bereishis* 35:22). Actually, what had transpired was quite different. Following Rachel *Imeinu*’s death, Yaakov *Avinu* established his primary residence in Bilhah’s tent. Reuven considered this an affront to his mother, Leah *Imeinu*. In order to defend his mother’s honor, he took the initiative to move his father’s bed to Leah’s tent. The Torah implies

Reuven's act was an egregious sin, when, in fact, it was a grave error motivated by impetuosity and righteous indignation over what he perceived to be his mother's shame. Nonetheless, our great leaders are held to a higher, more exacting standard – one that transforms an error into a grievous sin.

Having said this, we may now view Reuven's *teshuvah* in a different light. He did not simply repent his indiscretion, his error in judgment. Reuven repented the grievous sin as described by the Torah. His *teshuvah* was above and beyond the pale of his sin, because he understood how his error would be viewed in a perspective consistent with his lofty spiritual plateau. His was not the average *teshuvah*. His repentance set a standard which raised the barometer of *teshuvah* to a higher bar. Veritably, that is the way it should be, since the effect and repercussion of a sin is not a "one size fits all" phenomenon.