

Reuven returned to the pit. (37:29)

Chazal (*Midrash Rabbah* 24:19) ask: “Where was Reuven that he had to return?” One opinion in the *Midrash* contends that he was occupied with his sackcloth and his fasting as part of his penance in repenting for the deed concerning Bilhah (when he rearranged his father’s bed).

Chazal record Hashem’s response to Reuven’s *teshuvah*, repentance: Hashem said, “No man has heretofore sinned before Me and repented. You are the first to take the initiative with regard to repentance. By your life, your descendant (*Hoshea HaNavi*) will one day rise and take the initiative with regard to repentance. (As it says: *Shuvah Yisrael ad Hashem Elokecha*, “Return *Yisrael* unto Hashem your G-d” (*Hoshea* 14:2).

The question is obvious: Reuven was not the first one to inaugurate *teshuvah*. Adam *HaRishon* repented for one hundred and thirty years for his role in the *cheit Eitz HaDaas*, sin of eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

Kayin also repented. Reuven was certainly not the first to repent. *Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita*, explains that, in fact, Reuven’s “sin” was actually not viewed as such. Indeed, his position as one of the twelve tribes who comprise *Klal Yisrael* was not diminished in any manner. Nonetheless, Reuven did not accept the notion that he had not sinned. He disregarded the intensity (or lack thereof) of the sin and chose to repent regardless. He conjectured that any sin, regardless of its gravity, still represents a rebellion against Hashem. (*Rabbeinu Yonah* writes: “One should not look at the size of the sin, but rather, at its enormity, because of before Whom he has sinned” *Shaarei Teshuvah*.) Sin is viewed as a breach of trust, an insurrection against the Almighty. Does it really matter how large or how small the insurrection is? Reuven was *mechadesh*, originated, this *nekudah*, point. A sin is a *meridah*, rebellion, against Hashem. Size, intensity, and aforethought do not matter. Rebellion against Hashem requires repentance. This is what his descendant Hoshea taught *Klal Yisrael*: “Return, *Yisrael*, to Hashem, your G-d.” We must acknowledge that Hashem is our G-d and He supervises everything that we do. As such, every infraction is an act of sedition, which must be expunged via repentance.

Teshuvah is “time sensitive,” because we do not know how much time Heaven has allotted us. In the following *pasuk*, when Reuven returns and notices, to his chagrin, that Yosef is gone, he becomes greatly perturbed: *Ha’yeled einenu v’anah ani ba*; “The boy is gone! And I, where can I go?” (Ibid. 37:30) This *pasuk* has been used as a metaphor concerning our own youth, when we were young and strong, living unrestrained as if we did not have a care in the world. When we age and ultimately confront our mortality, with what will we stand before the Heavenly Tribunal? If our “youth” is missing, because we had not been spiritually productive, we will appear before Hashem with very little to show for our early years. While errors in judgment may occur during our developing years, being unrepentant concerning those errors transforms them from youthful errors into sinful infractions. This is where a good friend comes to the rescue, rebuking with love, subtly pointing out errors which are actually miscreant behavior, but can still be repaired if the person owns up to his actions and makes amends.

A friend listens, but does not necessarily agree if he notes deficient behavior. *Horav Shimon Schwab, zl*, quotes *Horav Michel Forschlager, zl*, who defines friendship as a confidant to whom one can relate all of his secrets, even if they concern activities that were less than complimentary. A friend is one with whom he can share his errors, sins, misgivings, secure that his friend will neither embarrass him, nor divulge and betray his secrets. On the contrary, the friend will listen, rebuke, assist and support his return to good graces.

Rav Schwab related (*Rav Schwab on Chumash*) how his father, *Rav Yehudah Leib Schwab* of Frankfurt-am-Mein, had a friend who fell prey to desire and committed a shameful act. This was not an error in judgment; it was downright sin in its most despicable form. The sinner was ashamed, and, as a result, he remanded himself to his home. *Rav Schwab's* father and two of his closest friends felt that they had a moral obligation to rescue their friend from self-pity and depression by encouraging him to repent and repair his grievous sin. They split the cost of a one-way ticket on an ocean liner which was leaving for the United States. They went to his house and presented themselves at his door. When he saw them, he was shocked that they stood with their backs to him. "Due to the shameful act which you committed, we have chosen not to look at your face. However, we are still friends, and, as such, we cannot ignore our feelings of intense friendship and responsibility to you. We have, therefore, decided to purchase a one-way ticket to America for you. It is our fervent hope that you will come to your senses, repent your ways and return to Hashem's good graces. Start your life over again, so that you can once again live without shame."

Those friends provided the impetus to save their good friend and his future family. This led to the man leading a respectable, good, observant life. His friends were not willing to ignore his misdeed, and they knew that, without *teshuvah*, he would leave this world emotionally and spiritually flawed. They were friends who cared. This is how caring friends act.