



In his address to *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe declares, "It shall be, when all these things come upon you – the blessing and curse which I have placed before you – you shall return unto your heart...and you shall return unto the Lord your God and heed His voice..." (30:1-2). Nachmanides, in his Torah commentary, interprets these verses as introducing the obligation of *teshuva* (repentance); in his view, it is here where the Torah demands that an incident of sin must be followed by a sincere, heartfelt process of repentance and return.

Maimonides, by contrast, in his *Hilkhot Teshuva* (7:5), explains this passage differently:

All the prophets – all of them – commanded [us] with regard to repentance, and Israel is redeemed only through repentance. And the Torah has already promised that Israel will ultimately perform *teshuva* at the end of their exile, and they will [then] be immediately redeemed, as it says, "It shall be, when all these things come upon you – the blessing and curse which I have placed before you – you shall return unto your heart...and you shall return unto the Lord your God...and the Lord your God shall restore your exile..."

According to Maimonides, Moshe here presents not an obligation, but a promise, a guarantee that "Israel will ultimately perform *teshuva* at the end of their exile" which will render them worthy of redemption. We are assured that regardless of how far we stray from the path of authentic faith and observance, at some point *Am Yisrael* will return to their spiritual roots and recommit themselves to the Torah that they had forsaken.

Underlying this reading of the verse is the theory that claims, in Maimonides' words, "Israel is redeemed only through repentance." Moshe's promise of Israel's ultimate repentance is necessary because of the indispensability of repentance to the process of redemption. Since our nation's return from exile hinges on our return from sin, God's promise of redemption necessitates a promise that *Am Yisrael* will one day repent.

In truth, this issue is subject to a debate between two *Tanna'im*, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, as recorded in *Masekhet Sanhedrin* (97b-98a). Maimonides appears to follow the position of Rabbi Eliezer, who held that the Jewish people cannot be redeemed without repenting. This ruling, however, surprised a number of later writers, who noted that *Halakha* generally does not follow Rabbi Eliezer's positions in his disputes with other scholars. Why did Maimonides deviate from the standard principles of halakhic decision-making, and accept the view of Rabbi Eliezer?

This question led some scholars – including Rabbi Zev Gold, in his work *Nivei Zahav* – to the conclusion that Maimonides in fact did not rule in accordance with Rabbi Eliezer's position. The Talmud records that in response to Rabbi Eliezer's view, Rabbi Yehoshua insisted that redemption is possible even in the absence of *Benei Yisrael's*

repentance. He claims that should the Jewish people's spiritual decline reach the point where they can no longer repent, God will "appoint over them a king like Haman" whose threats and persecution will naturally lead them to repent. It thus emerges that Rabbi Yehoshua, too, acknowledges the indispensability of repentance within the process of the nation's redemption. His disagreement with Rabbi Eliezer relates to the point of whether this repentance must originate from *Am Yisrael's* own initiative. Whereas Rabbi Eliezer hinges the Jewish people's redemption on their self-motivated process of repentance, Rabbi Yehoshua maintains that God will, if necessary, intervene to awaken *Am Yisrael* to *teshuva*. Accordingly, Maimonides' ruling that "Israel is redeemed only through repentance" is consistent with even the position of Rabbi Yehoshua.

Indeed, in this section in Parashat Nitzavim, which Maimonides interprets as God's promise of Israel's ultimate repentance, Moshe foresees, "The Lord your God shall circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, the love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul" (30:6). Moshe speaks of God intervening to help inspire His people to repent and return, to become deserving once again of living in their homeland and restoring their former glory. The Torah's promise is thus not merely that Israel will never reach the point at which repentance becomes unattainable, but also that God Himself will, if necessary, orchestrate events in order to arouse the people's hearts to *teshuva*, to ensure the ultimate fulfillment of our spiritual destiny. Even if we are obstinately unwilling to recommit ourselves to Torah belief and practice, God will intervene and guarantee that this process will indeed unfold, and that the Jewish people will be once and for all deserving of the final redemption.