

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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RETURN

I WAS WALKING AND PRAYING in downtown Jerusalem when I felt the Lord urging me to write this Teaching Letter on “Return.” Join me as we consider what it means to return. In the Bible, the word that is most often translated “return” is “*shuv*” (שׁוּב). It has many nuances and uses in Scripture, which we will consider. This word is used 1,117 times in Scripture!

Return—Restore—Turn—Repent

Shuv can mean return, restore, recompense, turn and again. Another form of the word, is *teshuvah*, which is generally translated repentance, as in a return to God after sin. Rabbi Hayim Halevy



Thousands of people gathered at the Western Wall to weep and to pray for the safe return of the kidnapped boys.

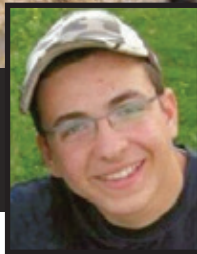
Photos by Ashernet

Donin says this, “The word *teshuvah* is often translated as repentance. The root of the word, however, means simply, returning. ‘Return O Israel unto the Lord your God’ (Hosea 14:2) is the essence of *teshuvah*, the key to atonement. A return to God is not just an acknowledgment of His existence, or simply saying ‘I believe in Him,’ *teshuvah* means nothing less than becoming a servant of the Lord, (an *eved hashem*). A servant is one who not only acknowledges that his master exists but one who submits to his rule and jurisdiction, who abides by the commands and requests of the master. Israel’s relationship to God is no less.”

Investigators at the site near Halhul where the boys' bodies were found in a shallow grave
Below, from left: Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Sha'ar and Naftali Frenkel



Photo by Ashernet



A Heartfelt Cry for the Return of Sons of Israel

Three young teenage boys were kidnapped in Israel in June. Eighteen days later, after an intense time of searching, their murdered bodies were found. It wasn't the first time in Israel; unfortunately kidnapping is one of the methods Hamas (a Palestinian terrorist organization) uses as leverage against Israel. The nation is deeply horrified and sorrowful when one of their children is captured. If and when they are returned to their families, elation reigns. I was here when Gilad Shalit was released after five years imprisonment and experienced the euphoria as Israel welcomed a son back—returned to his people. However, in the recent abduction, the nation is mourning because their sons did not return to their families.

At Bridges for Peace we joined with the people of Israel praying for the return of their sons. In the midst of the tragedy, we watched in awe as the parents of these boys placed their faith in God and encouraged the nation to pray. Prayer meetings were common as the people of Israel turned to God on behalf of three teenage boys. What a blessing to see thirty thousand people turn out for a prayer meeting at the Western Wall. Even more amazing were the tens of thousands who joined together in Tel Aviv (a much more secular city) to pray for their return.

It occurred to me that this situation illustrated two kinds of return: one is a physical return and the second is a spiritual return to God, to prayer, and to faith. Indeed in the Scriptures we see this word used in both ways.

The Return to Zion— A Physical Return

In many Bible passages, *shuv* is used to speak of God’s action in bringing the children of Judah and Israel back home to Israel—which is



Tens of thousand of people turned to God on behalf of the three teenage boys, with prayer meetings held at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv.



Photos by Ashernet



Rebecca Brimmer welcomes the *Bnei Menashe*, a group of new immigrants from India.

Photos by Shavet Israel



called *aliyah* in Hebrew. For example, “*And I will cause the captives of Judah and the captives of Israel to return (shuv), and will rebuild those places as at the first*” (Jer. 33:7).

This week, I had the privilege of welcoming a group of new immigrants from India at the airport, and going through the immigration process with them. Seven families were represented (43 people). I was invited because Bridges for Peace and our Christian supporters have been generously giving to make their *aliyah* and absorption into Israeli society a possibility. As I saw the children laughing, my heart was moved to realize that prophecy is being fulfilled. God is returning the Jewish people from all over the world to Israel in fulfillment of His prophetic word. The *Bnei Menashe* (sons of Manasseh) are especially significant as their forefathers went into captivity 2,700 years ago as part of the ten northern tribes. Only now, is this “lost tribe” being restored to their people.

The prophet Zephaniah speaks of the day when God will return the captives: “*At that time I will bring you back, even at the time I gather you; for I will give you fame and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I return (shuv) your captives before your eyes, says the LORD*” (Zeph. 3:20).

What an amazing God we serve! He keeps His promises even after 2,700 years. Today the fame of Israel is also growing in the world as Israeli innovations in the medical and computer field are changing the way the world lives and does business.



Prime Minister Netanyahu and his wife Sara grieve at the funeral of the three teens murdered by Hamas terrorists.

Photo by Ashernet

Return to God

In other passages *shuv* is used to remind God's people of their great need to return to Him. *"Now therefore," says the LORD, 'Turn (shuv) to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.' So rend your heart and not your garments; return (shuv) to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm"* (Joel 2:12–13).

This week, the people of Israel are mourning for the three teens who were viciously murdered. Thousands came to their funerals including Prime Minister Netanyahu and retiring President Shimon Peres. When

Jewish people mourn, they tear their garments—a vivid picture of the fact that their lives are torn in sorrow. In this passage God is using this very familiar reality of mourning to communicate the depth of sorrow His people should have in reaction to their sin. When we return to God, it should not be a light or trivial matter, but a soul-wrenching heart change.

The whole idea of *shuv* (return, repent etc.), is that you turn away from what you are doing and go back to what you know is right. It is not simply saying you are sorry. It is a real turning away from one thing and facing another—180 degrees in the opposite direction.

"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Repent, (shuv) turn (shuv) away from your idols, and turn (shuv) your faces away from all your abominations" (Ezek. 14:6). Three times in this one verse the prophet Ezekiel uses the same strong word (translated as repent, turn, turn). Another translation makes it even stronger, "Therefore tell the people of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Repent (shuv) and turn away (shuv) from your idols, and stop (shuv) all your detestable sins'" (Ezek. 14:6 NLT). God is calling His people to come back to Him. This is not an instance of God calling unbelievers to Himself! God is calling His covenant people, those who believe in Him, to turn back (again) to Him. In the book of Hosea, God refers to Israel as His unfaithful wife who He longs to restore to Himself. God's relationship with Israel is intimate. He had revealed Himself to



In the book of Hosea, God refers to Israel as His unfaithful wife who He longs to restore to Himself.

the children of Israel as to no other people. He met with them in power and fire at Mount Sinai. He gave them the Bible so they would know how He expected them to behave. The prophets are speaking to the people of God.

Although the Bible certainly calls and woos unbelievers to know God, accept Him and become part of the household of faith, this word is not for them. The idea of returning is to go back to what you know is right. It isn't possible to return to a place you have never been or to a relationship you have never experienced.

Peter's Sermon—Acts 3

The idea of returning to God is common throughout the *Tanakh* (Gen.–Mal.). It would not have come across as a foreign concept to the men of Israel who Peter addresses after the healing of the lame man. At one point in his sermon he says, “*Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*” (Acts 3:19 NASB). I am sure the Jewish listeners heard the word “*shuv*” and “*teshuvah*.” Dr. Marvin Wilson says, “In a style reminiscent of the ancient Hebrew prophets, he called upon his Jerusalem audience to ‘repent’. This term has a rich background in biblical Judaism...It suggests a spiritual about face. A person turns away from his sin and goes back to the living God of Israel...It is clear that Judaism has never understood



Gerard van Honthorst. "King David Playing the Harp"

When confronted by the Prophet Nathan concerning his sin with Bathsheba, David's response was true heartfelt repentance.

conversion to mean the abandoning of one's ancestral people and ancestral Jewish faith. Rather it was to become renewed and restored in God's forgiveness and love within that same community."

Psalm 51—David Repents of Sin

King David was a mighty king of Israel, a shepherd boy, a psalmist, and a man God refers to as a *"man after My own heart"* (Acts 13:22). Yet, he was also a flawed human, subject to temptation, who failed God and missed the mark of God's standard for righteous living. When confronted by the Prophet Nathan concerning his sin with Bathsheba, David's response was true heartfelt repentance. When we read Psalm 51 we can feel the depth of his heart, mourning over his sin. Now remember, David was a man who knew God. David had done great exploits as God helped him, including slaying Goliath. He was a worshipper who played on his harp and drove evil spirits away from Saul. David tried to live a life of integrity and righteousness. For example, he wouldn't touch God's anointed, Saul, even though Saul was trying to kill him. He was not a pagan. He was part of God's covenant with Israel. The prophet Samuel anointed him for service. He was God's choice to rule over Israel. When David repented of his sin he was not a

new convert coming to God for the first time, rather he was a son of the covenant returning to his God with a contrite heart.

In the middle of the Psalm 51, we find two verses that contain the word *shuv*.

“Restore (shuv) to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways and sinners will be converted (shuv) to You” (Ps. 51:12–13). This is the only time in the *Tanakh* that *shuv* is translated converted. I think that a better translation would be “sinners will return to You.” This fits the context of David, a son of the covenant, returning in repentance to His God. I believe that David realized that God could use his experience of sin and repentance to minister to others who have yielded to temptation and need to return to their God.

According to Rabbi Eckstein, “Judaism rests upon the fundamental proposition that Israel and God are eternally linked covenantally.” Certainly King David would have known that he was in covenant with the God of Israel. Our Jewish friends today tell us that within the sacrificial system there was never a sacrifice for deliberate sin. The only recourse was and is heart repentance. David understood that when he said, *“O LORD, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise. For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart—these O God, you will not despise”* (Ps. 51:15–17).

God’s Heart for His People to Return to Him

Yeshua (Jesus), taught by telling stories (parables) as was the custom of His day. The *Midrash* (early Jewish writings) contain many such stories. A *midrashic* story on our subject says, “A king’s son was at a distance of a hundreds’-day journey from his father. Said his friends to him, ‘Return to your father.’ He said to them, ‘I cannot. The way is too far.’ His father sent to him and said, ‘Go as far as you are able and I shall come the rest of the way to you.’ Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: ‘Return (*shuv*) unto Me, and I will return (*shuv*) unto you” (Mal. 3:7b).

One of the best known of Yeshua’s parables is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Perhaps we could also call it, the Parable of the Loving Father. The son, who had known the love of the father, and had been a son of the house, left to live a life of selfish indulgence, wasting his inheritance. When he came to the end of all his resources, living a miserable life, he returned to throw himself on his father’s mercy. “Perhaps,” he reasoned, “I can be a servant in my father’s house.” But, the Father responded wholeheartedly with loving extravagance and received



his lost son. I love this picture of the extravagant love of God for His wayward sons and daughters.

Both of these Jewish style story lessons (also called parables) communicate God's great desire for His children to return to His loving arms. It is His joy to welcome and forgive us when we repent and return to Him.

Repenting of Past Actions to our Jewish Friends

Often Christians will approach a Jewish person wanting to repent for the events of the Holocaust. They may become upset when a Jewish person doesn't freely give absolution. The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was once asked if he had ever publicly forgiven the Nazis for the atrocities they had committed during the Holocaust. He ended a long reply with these words, "The Nazis did not offend me. They offended the ones they shamelessly tortured and brutally murdered. I cannot forgive them. Let them seek forgiveness from the dead. It was they who were offended." That may sound hard to Christian ears, but it shouldn't be interpreted as an unforgiving spirit. Rather, it is part of Jewish thinking on the subject of repentance and forgiveness.

Rabbi Wayne Dosick in his book *Living Judaism* explained the Jewish way of forgiveness in a clear precise manner:

- Know your actions and their consequences.
- Know that you, and you alone, are responsible for your actions.
- Know that you, and you alone, must come before God in repentance, seeking forgiveness for transgressions of the *mitzvot* (deeds of righteousness).
- Offend God and you may go directly to God with your repentance.
- Offend another human being, and before you go to God—which you must eventually do, for God's ultimate forgiveness must be sought—you must go to the one you have offended.
- And remember: God will always listen to your plea—whatever transgressions you may have committed—when you come to God in honesty and in sincerity.

We are not responsible for the actions of the Nazis, or any others who persecuted the Jewish people. We are only responsible for our own actions. Rather than asking forgiveness for things you did not do, express your great sorrow, which will be gratefully received.

Yeshua also talked about the need to make things right with others. *"Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift"* (Matt. 5:23–24).



Adolf Hitler

Return, Oh Church, to Your First Love

As I have been praying about this subject, I believe that God is calling His children, His Church, to return to Him. Many in our churches today need to *shuv* (return to God in repentance). Sitting in our congregations are those who give into their lusts through pornography, fornication and adultery. God forgive us. Amongst us are those who pridefully point fingers in judgment and gossip instead of lovingly restoring those who have slipped. God forgive us. It is time for the Church of God to return to a purity of heart and mind. It is time for the Church of God to repent of our love of money, our love of power, and our love of position. It is time to humble ourselves before His throne with contrite hearts.

In the messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation are some important messages for us today about returning to God in repentance.

The Church at Ephesus

“Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent” (Rev. 2:4–5).

The Church at Sardis

“Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you do not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you”

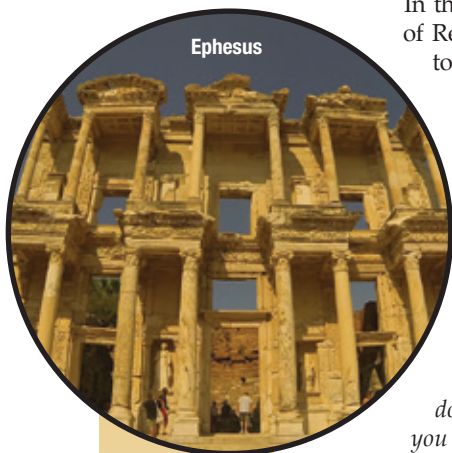
(Rev. 3:3).

The Church at Laodicea

“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked...as many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:15–17, 19).

Perilous Times

We are living in days that are ominous and many are succumbing to fear. None of us knows the exact future that we will encounter. Many try to prepare themselves for emergencies. They call them “preppers,” those who prepare. Good idea—but the best idea is to prepare by drawing closer to the Lord. Return to Him with all your heart. Only then will we be ready to face the future—whatever it holds. My father used to say that Jesus could come tonight so we



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should live our lives in a manner pleasing to Him, and we should buy life insurance! That reminds me of the saying of Rabbi Eliezer found in *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers). He said: “Repent one day before your death.” His disciples asked him, “Does then one know on what day he will die?” The Rabbi responded, “All the more reason he should repent today, lest he die tomorrow” (*Shabbat 153a*).

Yeshua told the Church at Philadelphia, “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the Temple of My God, and he shall go out no more” (Rev. 3:10–12a).

The prophet Hosea says of these days, “Afterward the children of Israel shall return (shuv) and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They shall fear the LORD and His goodness in the latter days” (Hosea 3:5).

Now is the time to repent and make things right with God.

Blessings from Israel,
Rev. Rebecca J. Brimmer,
International President and CEO

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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