

דבר תורה (Sermon) for נשא (Nasso)
 Saturday June 12, 2005
 "Relating to Yourself and Others"

The third Aliyah of today's reading speaks about a person who sins:

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה כִּי יַעֲשֶׂוּ מִכָּל חַטֹּאת הָאָדָם לְמַעַל מֵעַל בְּה' וְאָשְׁמָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ
 הַהוּא:

Say to the people of Israel: "A man or woman who does any of the human sins, thus being unfaithful to the LORD, that soul is guilty."

Num. 5:6

The next verse tells us how a person can remedy this sin, this act of unfaithfulness to God:

וְהִתְוֹדוּ אֶת חַטֹּאתֵם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ וְהָשִׁיב אֶת אֲשָׁמוֹ בְּרֹאשׁוֹ וְחָמִישְׁתּוֹ יִסֹּף עָלָיו וְנָתַן לְאִשְׁרֵי אֲשָׁם
 לוֹ:

They shall confess their sins that they did, and shall return the [amount of] the sin, adding one fifth upon it, and give it to the one whom s/he wronged.

Reading the verse, one can easily get confused. In the first verse, it seems that the Torah is referring to a ritual sin, referring to a sin that represents unfaithfulness to God. But in the second verse, there seems to be some human being to whom the person is paying restitution? What's going on?

The answer is simple. In fact, this passage refers to a person who wronged another person financially. It tells us that the person can repent from the violation by admitting guilt, and repaying the loss, plus a penalty. So, what's this about acting unfaithfully towards God? The plain meaning of this verse is likely that the unfaithfulness is that the person's crime involved giving a false oath, which is an act of sacrilege (this reading is based on the probable association of these verses and Leviticus 5:20-26). But I'd like to suggest a different understanding: that any act against another person, anything that we do that hurts another human being, is a sacrilege itself. We are all God's creations, and the fortunate recipients of God's Torah. Therefore, any act we do - good or bad - reflects on our relationship with **הוא הקדוש ברוך הוא** (the Holy One, Blessed is He). Thus, any time we injure someone else, any time we treat someone unfairly, it reflects not only on us, but it also speaks negatively of the God who created us. It says something about how we understand our relationship with God, God's purpose for putting us on this Earth, and giving us God's Torah. In Hebrew parlance, it is a **חלול השם** (*chillul hashem*), a desecration of God. Similarly, every good deed we do - every time we help out a friend in need, give charity, or speak kindly, our behavior reflects positively not only on us, but on our relationship with God. We confirm the true purpose for God putting us on Earth. It is a **קדוש השם** (*kiddush hashem*), a sanctification of God. Thus, both our good deeds and our sins, reflect our relationship with God.

The way a person makes recompense in these verses is also interesting. We are told that even before making financial restitution, the person must confess their wrongdoing. Why? Shouldn't it be enough just to pay back the loss? An answer to that question is suggested by the

word for the confession. The Torah uses the word "וְהִתְוַדַּוּ," (*vehitvadu*) which is in the reflexive התפעל (*hithpael*) form. This means that on some levels, the confession is something that one does to, or for, oneself. And this makes sense. Oftentimes, when we do something wrong, our minds have a wonderful way of justifying what we did wrong. One who takes money from others, may figure that the other didn't really need the money, or perhaps the money was misbegotten in the first place. One who steals from the government or cheats on taxes - well, all the more so the government doesn't need the money. But our ability to justify also goes into the religious realm. Perhaps we don't observe the Sabbath as we could, or should. Or perhaps not keep kosher, or attend synagogue as often as we could. Justifications abound. Perhaps it's too difficult. Perhaps we figure "well, I've never done it before . . . this is who I am . . . I'm a once a week Jew, or a once a year Jew," whatever it is. We hardly take the time to admit that we could do better. This is why confession is so important. Because the first step to improving our lives is really and truly admitting to ourselves that we have done wrong, and that we are capable of better.

Putting these ideas together, we learn something very interesting. As much as our actions - good and bad - reflect on our relationship with God, our actions also reflect our relationship with ourselves. It speaks to who we are, and who we think we should be. When we help someone in need, for instance, it shows that we understand our purpose in life. That we understand that we are realizing God's design for us. That we have accepted that God asks us to do good deeds. But it also reflects on our relationship with ourselves - it shows that we know what we are capable of. That we expect ourselves to do the right thing, and that we do it. On the other hand, when we sin - for instance when we fail to live up to as much of the Jewish way of living as we are capable- it shows that we haven't found our ultimate closeness with our creator. But it also shows that we haven't yet come to truly realize our own potential. This is where confession becomes so important. For each of us to continue our journey towards becoming as good of people as we can be, as good of Jews as we can be, we have to first admit to ourselves, that we are capable of better. We have to review our lives, admit where we have strayed, and realize, that we can indeed do better in the future

May God enlighten our relationships - our relationship with others, our relationship with God, and our relationship with ourselves. May we continually grow in our understanding of who we are, and who we are capable of being. May our fortune be a life of love of Torah and mitzvot. A life of self respect and the dignity of knowing of what we can achieve, and the courage and conviction to fulfill that potential. Amen.