

Shabbat Shuvah 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Krupnick 9/19/2015

It is, as mentioned, this week's Haftarah that gives this Shabbos its special name. It is called, "Shabbat Shuva", the Shabbat of Return. The words "Shuvah", Return" and "T'shuvah" Repentance are obviously related, and I'd like to take a few minutes to explain the way in which the two are connected.

The other night I was watching a small part of the presidential debates and one of the candidates mentioned our prison system. It's a significant societal challenge for the United States, and it is also a good way of understanding what T'Shuvah is all about. Both in raw numbers and by percentage of the population, the United States has the most prisoners of any developed country in the world, and it has the largest total prison population of any nation. Nearly 2 million inmates sat behind bars in federal, state, and county prisons and jails around the country as of December 31, 2014. In the federal prisons, more than half of those sentenced to stints of a year or longer are still there for drug crimes. In states including Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, and Georgia, at least 1 percent of male residents are in prison. And a vastly greater number of Americans - 1 in 31 according to 2009 Pew figures - are under U.S. corrections custody either through parole, probation, or incarceration. Most stunningly, one in three Americans have a criminal record, according to estimates. Press this link and read the following articles [here](#) and [here](#).

One in three Americans have an arrest record! And the harsh reality is that once a person has a record, it is very, very difficult to get a job. But some employers are trying to reverse that trend. Mark Peters, CEO of Butterball Farms, Inc., a national supplier of specialty butters, regularly hires former prisoners and says companies should consider giving these workers a chance. While many employers remain skeptical about hiring ex-offenders he and others extol the benefits of adding these members to a company's workforce. The First Reason is that they'll be looking out for you since you looked out for them. Since most people who have spent time in prison find it difficult to get jobs and re-enter society, they'll likely be extremely grateful and loyal to any employer who gives them a chance.

"There's plenty of people I can hire that don't care if they work for me or the guy down the street," said Peters. "I'd rather have somebody who's really engaged and helping my organization be successful. So if I help someone else be successful, they're a lot more interested in helping me be successful." The second reason is that the training they received in prison may be transferable to the new job. Many people who spend time behind bars are able to receive vocational training and participate in certification programs for GEDs and college degrees, which can help prepare them for employment and provide valuable skills that transfer across fields. It might also mean they are familiar with discipline and hard work. Finally, it is proven that these workers will stay with you longer. People who have been incarcerated greatly value their jobs when they get hired, according to the Travis County Offender Workforce Development Program in Texas. Their website says, "The ex-offenders in our program have demonstrated a commitment to leading an honest and responsible life. Finding employment is not easy for them--once hired they are not likely to quit--they are highly motivated to become long-term employees."

With so many people getting out of prison or carrying a record, I believe that American companies need to reexamine their hiring policies in light of Jewish Law T'shuvah. Scholars of Jewish Law point out that halacha is guided by Guilt, not by Shame. Guilt attaches to the act, while Shame attaches to the person. In a shame system, the person who does something wrong is marked, it is a stain on their character, and it's very hard to shake. Shame cultures brand inmates, just as murderers were branded on the face in Revolutionary War times here in our country. But Judaism is a Guilt Culture. With Guilt what is wrong is the Deed, not the person. In Jewish Law, the person who has committed a crime still retains his or her fundamental worth. The soul remains pure. It is the act that has to be put right.

Therefore, in Torah when a person has committed a wrong and needs to be punished, the Torah says, "**When the guilty one deserves to be flogged, he may be given up to 40 lashes but no more, lest he be flogged to excess and your brother be degraded before your eyes.**" First of all, you cannot make a person subhuman through punishment. You can't degrade them as a human being. But the Mishna takes it a step further and highlights the word - *ACHEE-CHA* "**YOUR BROTHER.**" The Talmud interprets this to mean that once a person is punished for the crime, he once again becomes, "Your Brother." Once he has paid his price he is once again accepted as a member in good standing of Am Yisrael.

What lies behind all of this is the power of T'Shuvah, of Repentance. We are able, says our tradition, to return to life as it was after we repent, after we do what is necessary to make it right. We can return (Shuvah) to our original state of being through repentance (T'Shuvah). And that is a powerful lesson, both for a country where one in three have an arrest record, and for a People who want to be able to do what is right to make up for their shortcoming and sins this time of year. T'shuvah establishes that we need not feel endlessly condemned by the mistakes of our past. When you repent you show you can change. The future is not predestined. We can make it different from what it might have been. T'shuvah liberates us from the past.

This is Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat that reminds us, in the midst of these 10 Days, that Return to a Better Self is possible, and that while employers might be slow to hire ex-cons, Gd never tires of taking back the repentant and putting us back to work making a world a better place.