



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Ha'azinu 5771

By Guy Izhak Austrian

September 11, 2010

*Parshat Ha'azinu* will be read this year on Shabbat Shuvah, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—the period known as the Ten Days of Teshuvah (return and repentance). As we try to figure out whether and how to do teshuvah, whether and how to pray during the High Holy Days, we may well wonder if it matters. Is there anybody listening? And will it make a difference to us or to the world?

A midrash on our parshah reflects this doubt with a remarkably ambivalent meditation on God's attention:

The Holy Blessed One at times appears, and at times does not appear;  
at times hears, and at times does not want to hear;  
at times responds, and at times does not respond;  
at times may be addressed, and at times may not be addressed;  
at times may be found, and at times may not be found;  
at times is near, and at times is not near.<sup>1</sup>

This midrash speaks so plainly, reflects so candidly our human experience that God doesn't always seem to be there, doesn't always seem interested. Diseases go unhealed; children starve in silence; the cruel impose their will and the greedy consume more than their share. At times, it seems that human beings suffer alone.

But then the midrash turns toward a poignant sense of possibility, imagining that God searches for us hopefully, even longingly, on Rosh Hashanah and the days that follow:

Thus says the Holy Blessed One to Israel: ... if you have done teshuvah before Me wholeheartedly, then I will receive you and judge you toward merit, for the gates of the heavens are open and I will hear your prayers, for I am watching from the windows, looking through the openings ... Thus Isaiah says: "Seek the Lord while God can be found" (55:6)—this is the Ten Days of Teshuvah, when God is present among you.

While the midrash initially states that during most of the year God may not always be reached, this second section states that during the Ten Days of Teshuvah God is indeed available. We might ask: Is God's presence during the Ten Days guaranteed, making it the opportune moment to do teshuvah? Or is teshuvah the prerequisite for bringing about God's presence—and with it more Divinity, compassion and justice—into our world?

The midrash suggests a response: During opportune times such as the Ten Days, God is especially willing and waiting for our teshuvah—turning our way, peeking through the cracks in the barriers between us and the Source of Life. Our return to God will bring God pouring in toward us. In the midrash's portrayal, God's presence during the Ten Days is latent, vibrant with potential, but it takes our teshuvah to fully activate and manifest that presence.

<sup>1</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma, Ha'azinu 4.*

It's our responsibility, then, to do teshuvah even without, or before we feel, God's presence—even starting from our lonely, unsure, doubtful state of mind. Only our own actions, our own teshuvah, can erase those doubts by bringing God into our lives, because to truly do teshuvah for the harm we cause each other and the world would be to stop doing the harm, so that repair can begin.<sup>2</sup> In our doing so, Divinity, compassion and justice will be able to flourish freely.

Yet if repairing the world is *our* responsibility, then why call on God at all? Perhaps it expresses our feeling that it's too overwhelming a task for us to accomplish by ourselves. Our appeal to a force beyond us, more powerful than us, lets us acknowledge our own inadequacy and our need for help—just as God needs our teshuvah to fully manifest the Divine presence.

The haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah therefore begins, “Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai Eloheicha,” typically translated: “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God.”<sup>3</sup> But the word *ad*, meaning “to,” can be read with different vowels as *eid*, “witness.” Read as such, the verse can be understood in two ways: either “Do teshuvah, Israel, for you are the witness to the Lord your God,” or “Do teshuvah, Israel, for the Lord your God is witness.”

When the Jewish people return and repent, a powerful mutual encounter occurs between Israel and God, in which each sees and recognizes the presence of the other. The tradition teaches that now, in the days before Yom Kippur, we have an especially potent opportunity to ensure God's presence and to assist the emergence of Divinity in and into our world—among, between and within us human beings. “All God's ways are justice,” says the Torah in *Parshat Ha'azinu*.<sup>4</sup> God waits for us to walk those ways, so that God may walk with us, and we may find our way into the Book of Life.



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<sup>2</sup> Maimonides, *Laws of Teshuvah* 2:1, states that the test of complete teshuvah is to re-encounter a situation in which one had sinned and then to decide not to repeat it.

<sup>3</sup> Hosea 14:2.

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 32:4.

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