



HAFTARAT SHABBAT SHUVA To Walk or to Stumble

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone
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On this dramatic Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, as we read the impassioned pleas of the prophet Hoshea for repentance, one verse in particular stands out for its enduring relevance to every generation: “He who is wise will fathom these words; the insightful will grasp them, for the ways of the Lord are just, and the righteous will walk in them, but sinners will stumble over them” (Hosea 14:10). These are the words of the prophet after he denounces the Israelites for putting their trust in foreign powers rather than in God. They point to an unsettling truth: the same path can lead either to faithfulness or to failure, depending upon how one walks it.

On the surface, this idea is puzzling: What does it mean to “stumble” over God’s ways?

The Sages offer two approaches. The first, formulated by the Targum Yonatan and cited by Rashi, is straightforward: The evil stumble “because “they did not follow” God’s ways at all. In this interpretation, stumbling means ignoring God’s commandments and evading responsibility.

A second approach suggests that “God’s ways” themselves can become a stumbling block. The Talmud in Bava Batra (89b) describes one who assiduously studies the halakhot governing fraud - not to act with integrity, but to learn how to exploit customers or deceive business partners. This possibility drives Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai to declare: “Woe to me if I teach these halakhot, and woe unto me if I do not!” If he teaches them, swindlers may refine their methods; if he does not, they may exploit ignorance, unchecked.

This line of thought—that Torah itself can be misused—is expressed even more sharply elsewhere. The Talmud (Yoma 72b) teaches: “If one is deserving, the Torah becomes a potion [“sam”] of life for him. If one is not deserving, the Torah becomes a potion [“sam”] of death.” Torah is not merely information. It is a force that amplifies the moral direction of the one engaged in it. When approached with integrity, it refines and elevates. But when distorted—whether through self-interest, cynicism, moral blindness or rationalization—it can become weaponized, becoming a means for justifying precisely what it seeks to prevent.

This danger is not theoretical nor confined to any particular era, community, or controversy. In every generation, people are tempted to enlist the language, laws, and values of Judaism in the service of behavior that the Torah clearly does not condone, and even outright forbids. We can invoke peace to excuse passivity, zeal to license cruelty, modesty to control others, communal loyalty to suppress uncomfortable truths. We may rely on halakhic technicalities to obscure



dishonesty, or even turn Torah study itself into an excuse to evade responsibilities that the Torah itself demands.

The rationalizations vary, but the underlying pattern remains the same. Too often, we emphasize the teachings that affirm what we already wish to believe, while muting those that demand sacrifice, courage, accountability, or change. We may become exacting about ritual while remaining careless about character; fiercely protective of sacred institutions while becoming indifferent to the people they are meant to serve. In such moments, we do not simply depart from God's ways. We stumble over them, transforming the path itself into an obstacle.

Hoshea's warning is addressed to each of us. The line between "the righteous who walk" and "the sinners who stumble" does not run neatly between communities, or between the religious and the secular. It runs through every human heart. Each of us is capable of turning partial truths into complete justifications. Each of us must constantly ask ourselves whether the Torah is refining our conscience, or merely furnishing it with more sophisticated arguments.

The question, then, is not only whether we study Torah and observe its commandments, but how that study and observance shape us. Do they make us more honest, more responsible, more compassionate, and more attuned to the needs of others? Do they deepen our commitment to God, to Am Yisrael, and to the dignity of every human being created in God's image—or do they provide us with the language to explain why less should be expected of us?

The beit midrash must remain a place of integrity and spiritual growth. A true study house is one in which self-justification is challenged, not perfected, and from which we emerge prepared to engage with society according to God's wishes.

This awareness should deepen rather than diminish the perennial mitzvah of loving our fellow Jews, with all of their imperfections. Yet love does not demand silence in the face of distortion, just as criticism does not permit us to cast others away. We must be able to speak honestly about religious misuse and the communal fracture, while also continuing to support one another with empathy and care. Even those who "stumble over the ways of God" remain our brothers and sisters. On Yom Kippur, we stand together and declare: "In the yeshiva on high, in the yeshiva below, we permit praying with transgressors."

We pray together not because transgression is trivial, but because repentance is communal, because no one stands beyond the possibility of return. All of us need the Torah to be a potion of life.

The question of Shabbat Shuva is therefore not simply whether Torah is in our hands, but what we do with it—and what it, in turn, makes of us?