

The Secret of Teshuva

By Rabbi Boruch Leff

Selichos is upon us.

As *Rosh Hashanah* is but ten or so days away, and as we begin reciting *selichos* this *motza'ei Shabbos*, and as the *Elul teshuva* process beckons us to become more intensely involved, the following approach to repentance and a return to Hashem and to our true selves will be extremely helpful. The approach is based on a shiur given by Rabbi Doniel Balsam of Baltimore.

The *posuk* says in *Parshas Nitzavim* (30:11), “*kee hamitzvah hazos asher Anochi meztavcha hayom, lo nifleis hee mimcha velo rechoka hee,*” the *mitzvah* that Hashem commands you today is not wondrous for you to fulfill, nor is it too distant. Rather (30:14), “*kee karov eilecha hadavar meod,*” the *mitzvah* is very close to you and it is fairly easy to accomplish. While *Rashi* understands that the *posukim* here are discussing the entirety of Torah, the *Ramban* states that the *mitzvah* referred to here is *teshuva* and the Torah seems to be telling us that to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *teshuva* is easy. Yet, our own experience clearly shows that doing *teshuva* is not easy at all. How many times do we resolve to improve and how many times do our plans end in failure? All too often and dare we say, all too regularly.

So what then does *Hashem Yisborach* mean when He tells us here that doing *teshuva* is not difficult at all?

The truth is that the Torah doesn't exactly say that doing *teshuva* is easy. What it does say is that *teshuva* is close to us. What's the difference? It's easy to drive 100 mph and get quickly to your destination when you have an open road all to yourself and yet it's extremely difficult to drive even 5 mph and get to your destination when you are stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. You might be very close to your destination in terms of distance, but you are very far in terms of ability to get there. Something being close and something being easy are two different things. *Teshuva* is close to us, it is something that is always available, we can do it at any given time, and it is possible that we can do it in but a few moments of sincere regret. But we know that it is not easy at all. It takes hard work. *Teshuva* is close and well within our reach but *teshuva* is also challenging.

Regretful thoughts are impactful, and the *gemara* (*Kiddushin* 49b) takes such thoughts very seriously as to view a formerly wicked person as righteous. Thus, if a man says to a woman, “*harei at mekudeshes lee al menas she'ani tzadik,*” stating that he offers her marriage, *kiddushin*, on the condition that he is a righteous person (probably because she wouldn't marry him otherwise), even if he is a well-known wicked person, we take his words seriously and it is a *safek kiddushin*, a questionable marriage. She would require a divorce, a *get*, in order to re-marry. We consider that perhaps he repented in his heart during those moments and is now truly a *tzadik*. We see clearly how *teshuva* is close to us and can occur in a very swift amount of time. As *Chazal* say in *Avoda Zara 17a*, it is

possible for a person to acquire his portion in the world to come in but a moment, *yeish konah olamo b'shaah achas*. *Teshuva* is demanding but always within our reach.

Kayin sinned greatly in killing his brother, *Hevel*. Yet *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* reached out to him to help and inspire him to do *teshuva*. Still, *Kayin* found the *teshuva* process extremely difficult and he said to *Hashem*, "My sin is too great to bear!" (*Bereishis* 4:13) While *Rashi* says that *Kayin* was saying something very brazen and *chutzpadik* to *Hashem*, asking Him why He couldn't just bear his sin and overlook it, the *Ramban* explains that *Kayin* was actually confessing and saying *viduy* as part of a *teshuva* process. But *Kayin* failed in his *teshuva*, as will become clear.

Kayin continues to say (*Bereishis* 4:14), "*U'mi'Panecha e'saseir*, From before Your face, I shall be hidden," and the *Ramban* says that *Kayin* felt that his sin was so severe that he could no longer stand before *Hashem*. He understood the gravity of his sin and felt so disconnected from *Hashem*, so distant from goodness that repentance seemed impossible. Instead, he would walk away from *Hashem* and 'hide.' As the *posuk* says (*Bereishis* 4:16), "*Kayin* went away from before *Hashem*," and the *Ramban* there comments that this lasted for the rest of *Kayin's* life. He always felt unworthy and never could accept the fact that his *teshuva* would wipe away his sin.

This was *Kayin's* major error and we must learn the lesson well so as not to repeat his colossal mistake. *Dovid Hamelech* also sinned greatly with *Batsheva* but he performed a full *teshuva* and remained close to *Hashem* throughout his life. What did *Dovid* know that *Kayin* didn't?

The answer is that *Dovid* knew the secret of *teshuva* as expressed by *Rabeinu Yona*. At the end of most editions of *sefer Shaarei Teshuvah*, there is a short essay, also written by *Rabeinu Yona*, which summarizes the process of *teshuva* in 'quick form.' The essay is entitled *Yesod Hateshuva*, "The Foundation of Repentance," in many editions, but if you look in earlier editions the true title given is *Sod Hateshuva*, "The Secret of *Teshuva*."

What exactly is the secret of *teshuva*? The basic idea is that we have to categorically believe that when we repent, we really, truly receive a clean slate from *Hashem Yisborach* and that He completely forgives us. We have to believe that *Hashem* means what He says in accepting our repentance, and we must eliminate the guilt we have from our previous transgressions. We have to "throw our sins into the river," as is the custom of *Tashlich* on *Rosh Hashanah*, and in doing so allow ourselves to become anew. We have to give ourselves a chance to be different, growing closer to *Hashem* as *Dovid Hamelech* did and avoiding the overly passionate guilt that *Kayin* experienced.

B'ezras Hashem, we will continue on this theme, next week.

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