

CHAPTER 7, LAW 4 - VOICES IN OUR HEAD

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

One who has repented (lit., 'a master of repentance') should not imagine that he is distant from the high level of the righteous because of the transgressions and sins that he did. The matter is not so. Rather, he is beloved and precious before the Creator -- as if he had never sinned before. Not only that, but his reward is great, for he has tasted sin and separated from it, conquering his evil inclination. The Sages said, 'The place that repenters stand [before G-d in the World to Come], wholly righteous people cannot stand.' Meaning, their level is greater than the level of those who never sinned before since they have conquered their evil inclinations more than they.

The Rambam in this law makes a very beautiful point which as we'll see, is very relevant to the overall theme of this chapter.

Before we look at the Rambam's point itself, I'd like to make a brief observation regarding how he presents it. The Rambam does not simply make his statement -- that one who repents is greater than one who has never sinned (quoting from Talmud Brachos 34b). Rather, he presents it by rejecting the alternative, by saying, "Don't think that you, the repenter, are worse on account of your past. For no, as a matter of fact you are even greater..."

The Rambam appears to recognize that people do not tend to think this way, that the repentant sinner is anything better than a come-from-behind impersonator of the truly devout -- the uppity nouveau frum rather than the real old money. He therefore makes a point of refuting such a notion. The Rambam, who as we know generally spares very few words, is almost giving such people a pep talk: Don't be down on yourselves. Don't feel that since you've sinned before, you're always a little bit despicable in G-d's eyes. Don't feel that with the baggage you're carrying you'll never catch up to the truly great. Rather, here's what the Sages had to say about you: You will lead the way in the World to Come. You're not worse; you're greater -- regardless of the condescending attitude others may have towards you. In fact, the Sages stand in awe before the likes you, who have done what they themselves have never done.

I once attended a graduation ceremony for newly-ordained rabbis from a ba'al teshuva yeshiva (rabbinical college for people who hail from irreligious homes, and who began their Torah study as adults with little or no background). One of the speakers at the event, who is one of great rabbis of this generation, said with awe and admiration that he saw these young men grow and develop faster than he himself had ever grown in any period of his life. Such people have taken enormous strides. To reject their pasts and pick themselves up from almost nothing, to overcome their past

temptations and discard them all for the sake of G-d: Such are a very special class of people. They may not always receive their due recognition in this world -- and they may in fact trail their contemporaries in accumulated knowledge and never shake off the appearance of the advanced beginner. Yet when G-d's final tallying take place in the True World, they will take the place they truly deserve. And a lot of folks may well be in for a surprise.

Let us now look at the Rambam's statement itself. He really makes two points. The first is that such a person's sins are forgotten by G-d -- "as if he had never sinned before." Thus, the repenter should not feel he is still sinful. Teshuva (repentance) erases our past mistakes entirely. It is as if they never occurred.

Secondly, the Rambam continues, such people are actually superior to those who have never sinned. People innocent to the ways and temptations of this world have a much easier time resisting sin. They never developed an appetite for wicked behavior; sins exert no great pull over them. Repenters, by contrast, have been there and done that. Their evil inclinations do not need break any new ground with them -- but merely remind them of their past thrills, tickling them with fantasies they only remember too well. And if such people resist that urge, they are clearly greater than those who have never fallen before.

Of course, it should be stated that the repenter who might resist sin but still spends his time reminiscing about the "good old days," or who allows himself to fantasize about those sins he no longer commits, is not necessarily superior to one who has never sinned before. **If** he can truly reject his past sinfulness, put it out of mind and reject it -- in fact cringe at the memory of his past follies -- he has achieved more than the one who has never sinned. But in honesty, that requires a long and arduous journey. One who has merely reached the first step -- who refrains from doing **acts** of sin but who hasn't really progressed far from his earlier self, may in truth have a great way to go to surpass the truly righteous.

I would imagine that of the two points the Rambam makes, the first is much easier to accept. If the Torah promises that G-d forgives our regretted past mistakes, we can rest assured that they are no longer on our tab. We do not have to feel G-d deplores us on account of them. Those sins are history.

The second point, however, I believe is psychologically much more difficult to accept. The one who used to sin but now resists is greater than one who never sinned before because he has greater temptations he must overcome. Although the point sounds valid, it's a little hard to believe that such a person is really higher. I'll bet Rabbi X doesn't lust after the same wicked behaviors I've become accustomed to. I'm so much more filthy, so much closer to evil than he. Sure, I'm resisting it, but it's impossible to feel I'm really on his level. He wouldn't -- and doesn't -- even **dream of** the nasty stuff I used to be involved in.

Well, first of all, you hardly know what's in Rabbi X's head, and how pure you **imagine** him to be is

hardly grounds for being so down on yourself. The vast majority of us really are human. Your evil inclination might get more graphic with you because of your past experiences, but no one is beyond human temptation. As we all know too well (and hear on the news too often), pious outer appearances are hardly an indication of how great and pure a person truly is within.

However, there is something to consider here -- and it ties right in to the theme of this chapter. As we've explained, Chapter 7 -- which seems to reintroduce teshuva anew -- is not discussing teshuva as an obligation to G-d, but as our own path to self-fulfillment. We also explained that fulfillment really revolves around an issue more basic than the particular good and bad deeds I have done. It's really a question of what kind of person I am. Have I developed myself into a person who appreciates goodness and spirituality? Am I deep down really a holy person, who wants G-d and His Torah rather than my own smallness and selfishness? Will I have something in common with G-d when my soul returns to heaven? Teshuva is about connecting myself to who I really am, to not just be a good person somewhere deep down within me, but to be fulfilled and true to myself through and through.

And this is where the repenter can really become down on himself. Say such a person has rejected his past and begins serving G-d properly. But now he wants to ask himself the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question: Who is he **really**? Is he really a spiritual person? Has he really outgrown his past and become close to G-d? Or do those fantasies which still haunt his subconscious prove that his sins are really still a part of him -- a part of who **he** is? Has he accomplished the repentance of Chapter 7?

And such a person may become profoundly saddened by that question. How can he pretend he is now a godly person if he is still hounded by memories of his past? Who is he? Well, isn't he **really** the sum total of his thoughts? Isn't he composed of all those little voices he hears inside his head? Sure, he may be behaving outwardly and even attempting to quell such bad thoughts as they come. But aren't his thoughts **him**? Can he really be just as holy as the truly pious if he is still plagued by such nasty fantasies? Would G-d really want a relationship with someone as confused and racked with lewd thoughts as he?

And this is where the Talmud steps in with another bombshell. Those nasty thoughts that you don't want but cannot fully quell are not who you are -- because that's not who you **really** are. Your evil inclination may be attempting to drag you down with memories of your past. But that is not you. Sure, nobody is perfect and thoughts and fantasies are a part of every human being's makeup. But thoughts which unwittingly enter my mind are not **me**. They are just thoughts. And so long as I don't spend my time enjoying them, they do not define who I am.

The Talmud states that under almost all circumstances, G-d does not punish us for the bad thoughts we had which accompanied our sins (Kiddushin 39b). For there are thoughts and there are thoughts. There are thoughts which describe who **I** am, which I allow to entire my psyche and become a part

of my essence. And there are thoughts which really come from without, which tickle me, even plague me, with fantasies of actions I would never commit, but which are really not **me**. And when we truly ask ourselves who we are G-d will know which thoughts contributed to our true essence. We cannot control that which pops into our minds, but we most certainly can be selective regarding which thoughts we dwell upon and which ones we really choose to make our own. And ultimately, that decision process determines, in the eyes of G-d, just who we truly are.

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