

# CHAPTER 7, LAW 7 - G-D'S CUE CARD

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

*How lofty is teshuva (repentance). Yesterday this one was separated from the L-rd, G-d of Israel, as it is stated, '...your sins had separated between you and your G-d' (Isaiah 59:2). He would cry and not be answered, as it is stated, 'Even when you increase prayer I do not hear' (ibid., 1:15). He would do good deeds and they would tear them up before him, as it is stated, 'Who asked for this from your hands, to trample My [Temple] courtyard?' (1:12) "Oh that there would be one among you who would close the [Temple's] doors and not light up My altar for naught. I have no desire for you,' says the L-rd of hosts, 'and an offering I will not be pleased with from your hands' (Malachi 1:10). 'Your burnt offerings add to your peace offerings and eat meat' (Jeremiah 7:21; meaning, rather than offering burnt offerings which are burnt entirely, offer them as peace offerings so you can eat most of them. In other words, G-d doesn't care for them anyway so you might as well at least enjoy the meat.)*

*Today, however, [the same person] cleaves to the Divine Presence, as it is stated, 'And you, who cleave to the L-rd your G-d [are all alive today]' (Deuteronomy 4:4). He cries out and is answered immediately, as it is stated, 'And it will be before they call out I shall answer' (Isaiah 65:24). He does good deeds and they accept them gently and joyfully, as it is stated, 'for G-d has already accepted your deeds' (Koheles / Ecclesiastes 9:7). And not only that, but they (viz., the angels of the heavenly court) desire them, as it is stated, 'And it will be pleasing to G-d the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem, as in the days of old and as the earlier years' (Malachi 3:4).*

This week's law builds on a theme we've spent some time discussing already, yet one so significant it deserves further mention. Teshuva (repentance) at its core is really a very fast process. A person can transform himself from being despised by G-d to being beloved by Him in the course of a single day. Yesterday, the Rambam writes, G-d hated everything about you. Even the little bit of good you do He'll tear up in your face. G-d has no interest in the "good deeds" of someone He basic can't stand. They're more an affront than an appeasement. If someone's behavior 99% of the day makes it evidently clear he doesn't care a fig for G-d, G-d will hardly be interested in the few good deeds he does. "What, you think you're going to **bribe** Me? You're going to buy some pardons, do a few nice acts which you know every bit as well as I are no indication you give a damn about Me?"

It is true that G-d's justice is absolute and our every act is rewarded or punished appropriately. Even the mitzvos (good deeds) of an unrepentant sinner will be rewarded on some level. But there's reward and there's reward. G-d will most likely pay back such a person in this world only -- the only

world he seemed to care about. And further, G-d will most certainly not present such a person with opportunities to perform mitzvos. In the verses the Rambam quoted, G-d told the sinful outright that He does not so much as want their mitzvos. Don't waste your time. The needy won't find his door, opportunities will not knock, and the few good deeds such a person does do will be begrudgingly rewarded on the physical plane alone.

As the Rambam continues, however, such a person can transform himself quickly, almost immediately. How so? Simply by finding out who he really is. If we look deeply enough inside ourselves, we will find that our true essence is a beautiful soul -- which wants nothing other than spirituality and closeness to G-d. Teshuva at its core is simply becoming in touch with our inner selves, discovering and identifying with who we truly are.

And once we do this, our relationship with G-d will likewise change. If I know about myself that I'm someone who cares about G-d, who wants to do what's right, and who wants to make amends for my past mistakes, G-d will adore me. I will be His precious servant. He will anxiously await my every good deed. He will root for me and gently give me opportunities to improve. If I want a relationship with G-d, He will be there for me -- instantly. But as always, it depends on me and only me to take that critical first step.

All of this raises a very basic question. Doesn't G-d love us all? Is it really true that G-d despises a person who is a sinner and detests even his good deeds? But don't we all possess precious souls? Doesn't the Mishna state, "Beloved is man for he is created in the image of G-d" (Pirkei Avos [3:18](#))? The Talmud likewise states that when the Egyptians were drowning in the Red Sea the angels wanted to sing their daily praises and G-d quieted them: "The works of My hand are drowning in the sea, and you are singing song before Me?!" (Sanhedrin 39b). G-d did not rejoice even when His worst enemies were meeting their well-deserved fate.

Along the same lines, there are just mounds upon mounds of verses we can quote. Psalms 145:9: "G-d is good to all, and His mercy is on all His works." Malachi 1:2: "I have loved them, says the L-rd." Jeremiah 31:2: "With an everlasting love I have loved them." I could spend the rest of this class doing nothing other than quoting more such verses -- as well as basically the entire Song of Songs. Most of what Scripture and the Sages tell us about G-d is that He has an eternal, unremitting love for Israel even at times when our behavior badly lapses. I'll top this off with a quote I've heard in the name of a great Chassidic Rebbe -- I can't recall which one (I actually usually can't) -- who wished he could have as much love for the greatest saint as G-d has for the most vile sinner. If so, how are we to understand G-d's "hatred" of the sinners? Is it to be taken literally?

The answer is that G-d does not hate any of us per se. Our default position is to be loved by G-d, whether we are perfect or far from it. What G-d **does** do, however, is react to how we view ourselves. If we see ourselves as good people -- if we become in tune with our inner souls -- then G-d will love us in kind. We are precious souls which have much in common with our G-d -- even if

we have many faults we must atone for.

If, however, we identify with our outer selves and do not see ourselves as the good souls we are -- or really as souls at all, G-d will see us likewise. G-d gets His cues from our own self-perception. If we ignore our souls, then we're a bunch of smart animals, of homo sapiens. And why **should** G-d love us? What makes us stand apart from the rest of creation? Our greater intelligence? Our higher IQ's? At most such a person will merit Psalms 145:9 which we quoted above -- "and His mercy is on all His works" -- although even that is a discussion among the commentators because a sinner is inferior to a hound which does no sins. But the closeness of being a precious soul in the image of G-d? That is reserved for those who recognize themselves as precious souls to begin with.

This principle is not only the key to understanding repentance but to understanding G-d's relationship with mankind altogether. G-d's relationship with us depends far more on our own self-perception than on our deeds. We can sin, but so long as we still see ourselves as precious souls -- just ones which have slipped -- G-d will still love us. R. Berel Wein uses the example of King David to illustrate. David sinned grievously to G-d with Bathsheba (see II Samuel 11). Although the Talmud (Shabbos 56a) makes it clear that technically David did not sin -- as it was standard practice then and since for Jewish soldiers to divorce their wives before departing for war lest they disappear in battle, David's act was far beneath him. Yet you can sin and still be close to G-d -- so long as your perception is not harmed. If you see yourself as the soul you really are, your relationship can be as strong as ever. Repenting to G-d you must certainly do, but a relationship with Him you can have as soon as you are ready. It is usually we who stand in the way of that -- not G-d.

Needless to say, there is certainly a limit to this. If a person sins all the time, he cannot honestly claim he still sees himself as a soul, and that he really feels close to G-d on the inside. If such a person really were a soul, he certainly listens to his body a heck of a lot of the time. There is only so long such a charade can go on. At a point, your actions speak louder than your words, and G-d will not be swayed by your imagined closeness to Him.

The flip side of this is equally significant. Say a person does virtually no sins. He grew up in the right circles and scrupulously adheres to his strictly religious upbringing. Such a person may have no sins separating behind him and G-d -- no Bathsheba-type barrier he must surmount. Yet that is no assurance of closeness to G-d. If you do everything right but do it out of a sense of religious obligation, peer pressure, nostalgia, or any other external reason, not even thinking of the G-d who commanded it, it is hardly an expression of your closeness to G-d. G-d may have nothing **against** you, so to speak -- it's not that you did anything wrong, but will G-d see you as His precious and beloved servant? It's hard to believe.

I will close by restating this week's message in a slightly different way. Our relationship with G-d is almost exclusively in our own hands. It does not depend on our actions or our track record -- although of course a G-d of absolute justice is not going to simply gloss over our faults either.

Rather, it depends on our attitude, on how we see ourselves. If we identify with our souls, if we know in our hearts that we are people who want closeness to G-d, He will be there for us, faults or not. If we want Him, He will respond. If, however, we do not make G-d a part of our lives, He too will respond in kind -- regardless of how good or bad our actions happen to be. For as so many things in life, our very relationship with G-d is in our own hands. G-d loves us and is waiting for us. But it's our souls He loves. And only we can determine if our souls are who we truly are.

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