

# THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 1:1

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

We now begin our in-depth study of "The Gates of Repentance".

But first these few words. Let's never forget our goal, which is to achieve "spiritual excellence". Now, if we're ever to reach that goal, we'd need to be bothered by and dissatisfied with its diametric opposite, "spiritual mediocrity", better known as "sin". And we'd need to know what to do to either avoid it from the first -- or undo it by means of teshuva, "return to G-d." Keep that perspective in mind and you'll understand a lot of what's to follow in the spirit we believe it was meant. In point of fact, we're likely to return to this idea again and again in our readings. That having been said, let's proceed.

Rabbeinu Yonah's first point is that teshuva is a \*favor\* from G-d. The truth is, teshuva-- the ability to undo error and make things right again -- is something of an unfair advantage. After all, logic would seem to dictate that if I erred, I erred, and that's it. I'd need to accept my failings and go on.

But because He loves us so, G-d has favored us with the chance to do teshuva.

Rabbeinu Yonah then expands upon the nature of sin (i.e., instances of spiritual mediocrity), the effects they have on our beings, and how teshuva undoes all that. And he then points out just how generous G-d has been to us in ways that go beyond just providing us with teshuva itself.

We're taught that teshuva allows us to \*rise above our destructive acts\*. That teaches us two things. First, that sins are destructive acts. And in fact they're both self-destructive, and destructive to the relationship we'd had with the person we'd sinned against or with G-d. Second, it teaches us that teshuva nonetheless enables us to "rise above" all that, which is to say, to grow in the process.

Then we're told that teshuva enables us to \*avoid the traps we ourselves set\*. For we ourselves set many of the traps--i.e., harmful behavior patterns-- we fall into. Nonetheless, teshuva allows us to undo them, and to move beyond them.

Teshuva also gives us the chance to ward off the sort of \*personal devastation\* that results from spiritual mediocrity. What Rabbeinu Yonah is undoubtedly alluding to here is the sense of shame, bleakness, and hopelessness that often overtakes us when we do things that hurt others, or are spiritually destructive.

Finally, teshuva enables us to \*deflect G-d's anger\*. What that means to underscore is the fact that G-d is sometimes displeased or disappointed in us when we lapse into spiritual mediocrity, the way

a teacher might be displeased and disappointed with a student whom he'd had great faith in, and expected a lot in. For G-d certainly expects a lot of us, and we sometimes don't meet with His expectations. And though He certainly still loves us deeply, it's our very potential that seems to anger G-d, or disappoint Him. While it's our subsequent teshuva that restores his pride and faith in us.

Rabbeinu Yonah then goes on to point out how much more of a gift from G-d teshuva is, in fact. For not only has G-d provided us with the "out" that teshuva is, He has also \*taught us how\* to do it, He \*prods\* us in it, He \*never does away with the opportunity\* to do teshuva, even when we're defiant and resistant. And He even accepts it when it's offered for \*self-serving reasons\*.

And as we said last week, G-d also grants us the ability to achieve a deeper degree of \*love of Him\* we'd ever thought possible when we do teshuva. And He accomplishes that by \*circumcising our heart\*, which is to say, by sensitizing us so, that the thick crust of vanity and self-absorption that surrounds our hearts falls by the waysides.

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