

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 1:16

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Seventh Principle of Teshuva: SURRENDERING WHOLE HEARTEDLY AND BEING HUMBLE

Just as there's no surer, steadier free-fall into spiritual mediocrity than arrogance, there's no surer, steadier ascent to spiritual excellence than surrender and humility. And that's the thrust of this principle.

Rabbeinu Yonah says something astounding at the very outset. "Anyone aware of his Creator" he says, would realize just how self-demeaning it is to sin. The sensitive soul would be taken aback by that first phrase. For who among us could be said to be "aware of his Creator"?

Few of us. There are a number of reasons for that, but at bottom it comes to our being full of ourselves, and devoid of Him. After all, there are only so many voices a person can listen to at any one time in the inner din and clamor, before he or she has to decide which to focus on and which to ignore. Sadly enough, the voice we choose to focus on is our own, and the voice we choose to ignore is G-d's. Because we're full of and fully enamored with our selves.

As such, it would do us well to learn how to surrender whole heartedly to G-d and His voice in our being, and to be humble in His presence if we're ever to be aware of that presence.

And so we're taught here that the best way to learn how to surrender to G-d's voice and presence would be to do more in His service, and-- this is the hard part-- to not take credit for it.

But how does one ever do that? By serving G-d demurely rather than vaingloriously, from deep in the center-core of our beings.

Indeed, the righteous enjoy discreet and demure encounters with G-d in their hearts all the time. For it's there that they can enunciate to Him in low, hushed tones; where they can sigh, pray, or sit purposefully silent in His presence. And where they can whisper to G-d, catch Him off to the side, so to speak; and use private code words that only they and He know of.

They tell no one of these encounters, wouldn't dare brag of them, and await each chance to once again speak low, almost conspiratorially with G-d. For indeed, those moments are more precious to the righteous than all others. They're the moments when they can fully be themselves in G-d's presence.

Serving G-d in such a spirit is sure to foster whole hearted surrender, as well as closeness. And to lead to a deep and intuitive understanding of G-d's ways, as well as an incomparable knowledge of

Him. It also allows you to rid yourself of all the untoward traits you'd had that lead to spiritual mediocrity. After all, who'd dare reject G-d's ways after having come to know Him well, and after having shared his or her secrets with Him?

Rabbeinu Yonah refers to arrogance here as a "fertile field" of sin. He means to say that arrogance presents us with a fecund lot of opportunities to sin. After all, if I'm full of myself and awash in self-delight, as so many are, I'm replete with fodder for every desire I have in the world, and every hope of personal gain. But when I'm humble, there's nothing to nourish the deep need to fulfill, fulfill, fulfill that so many of us have. And the year's crop of sin comes up barren and dry.

His final point is that humility is best exhibited through deeds. And our next principle will delve into that at greater length. For now, though, the first thing to learn to do is to use our new-found humility (rooted in the aforementioned closeness with G-d) toward the art of overcoming anger.

Anger, a trait not to be denied, often lunges forward in ugly strength, and overtakes hearts, minds, and bodies. It sometimes seems a force within that haunts the inner being, and will not forgive. It's not the only such trait-- there are at least four or five more. But it's the firebrand of all hot self-assertion.

Rabbeinu Yonah sees it as something else, though. He sees anger as a miserable and horrid failure. And a challenge to foster a human strength not often spoken of outside the tents of the righteous: the ability to transcend one's nature.

In fact, the high and righteous skill of self-transcendence is utterly pooh-poohed by those on the outside. For after all, if self-transcendence is possible, baseness and sin wouldn't be all one could expect of a person. And spiritual mediocrity wouldn't be the norm. A such, one who's on the path toward spiritual excellence would need to learn the art of self-transcendence best exemplified by resisting anger if he or she is ever to engage in true teshuva (to return to G-d).

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