

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 1:18

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Ninth Principle of Teshuva: OVERCOMING YOUR PHYSICAL CRAVINGS

Sometimes the sensitive soul feels like a child of two conflicting parents who always disappoints one of them, no matter what he does. For indeed, if we indulge ourselves we seem to satisfy our body and disappoint our soul, while if we deny ourselves we seem to satisfy our soul but disappoint our body. So what's a person in search of spiritual excellence to do?

The truth of the matter is that the Torah teaches us how to satisfy both at the same time, by channelling our physical drives into spirituality.

But we'd do well to recall that Rabbeinu Yonah is speaking of individuals who had lapsed into spiritual mediocrity and over-emphasized the physical. People who'd thus have to bend over backward in the other direction in order to achieve teshuva (to return to G-d).

Rabbeinu Yonah points out that we're driven by our desires. And that once one of them takes hold of our heart, the rest of us follows suit. That's a daunting thought, as far as sins are concerned. Since they evoke images of being overtaken by things against our will. After all, as Rabbeinu Yonah himself puts it, at the time we're "drawn away by the chords of desire".

But it also offers us hope. Because if we can be pulled and pulled by untoward impulses, we can allow ourselves to be pulled and pulled by *righteous* impulses. Since the same mechanism is at play. So in short, we can indulge a desire for spiritual excellence, too, if we allow it to take hold of our heart.

And that will allow for what Rabbeinu Yonah refers to as the "triumph" of overcoming your baser desires. After all, who doesn't beam with joy and feel triumphant when he or she manages to stick to an exercise regimen, for example, or a diet, and thus conquers a self-destructive pattern? The righteous enjoy an elation when they conquer a spiritually self-destructive pattern that touches upon many of the same feelings-- and more.

We're then told of some other advantages to overcoming our physical cravings, aside from the sense of triumph.

The first: Rabbeinu Yonah points out that it's our cravings that separate us from others. After all (to use a common enough example), if I really want one thing, and you really want its opposite, we're on different wave-lengths, and there's a certain tension between us. But if you or I don't particularly

care one way or the other-- that is, if we'd each conquered our personal cravings-- we're in synch.

The second : If I've mastered one untoward craving and another one comes my way, I can always legitimately convince myself that if I overcame the first one, I could certainly overcome the second. After all-- I have a track record!

And the third: When you overcome and lose your taste for old self-destructive cravings you prove just how legitimate and true your search for spiritual excellence is. Since you'd turned your back on the very things that distracted you from G-d and threw you into spiritual mediocrity. And you'd set your sights on triumphant teshuva instead.

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