

# THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 1:2

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

This week's paragraph of "The Gates of Repentance" cites a fascinating parable which reiterates just how great teshuva (returning to G-d) really is. After all, it serves as an "escape hatch" of sorts. Let's see how.

Our sages tell of a band of robbers who were thrown in prison by the king where they languished for a while till they dug an escape hatch and fled. One of them, though, decided not to escape. And when the jail keeper arrived and turned one way and caught sight of the escape hatch, then the other way and noticed the remaining prisoner, he said to him, "Fool! There's an escape hatch right before your eyes and you're not using it?" (Kohelet Rabbah 7:15)

Rabbeinu Yonah uses that story to make the point that we'd be fools not to take advantage of the "escape hatch" that teshuva is.

But let's examine this story a little more deeply.

Perhaps there's something to be said for the one remaining prisoner. After all, wasn't his an act of conscience? Isn't it likely to assume that he said to himself, "Sure I could escape with my friends, see my wife and kids again, and be a free man. But that would be wrong. After all, I stole, I was caught red-handed, I was wrong, and I deserve to be here! In fact, when the king himself hears of my altruism, he's bound to be pleased."

Rabbeinu Yonah's point, though, is apparently this.

When we're "spiritually mediocre" and we sin, we harm our own beings and others', and besmirch our reputations before G-d. Our own beings are harmed because we belittle our potential, others are harmed by what we've said or done to hurt or damage them, and our reputations are besmirched before G-d because He knows our spiritual potential and expects the very best of us.

Now, doing that sort of harm would seem to be a mortal error. It would only be logical to assume that anyone guilty of that would be landed into on the spot, excoriated, and left undone.

But no. There's always an "escape hatch". There's always the great and magnanimous second chance that is teshuva.

In fact, how many of us get a second chance in life, after all? Who wouldn't simply love to go back to the past to take back harmful words, to take an exam over again, to buy a certain stock, to ask an

important question of someone we trusted, etc., etc.? And yet G-d Almighty gives us all second chances \*on a very deep and holy level that's far removed from time and space\* to undo errors and make right what had been wrong. That metaphysical, transcendent escape hatch or second chance, which allows us to redo the past and alter the future, is teshuva.

With this all in mind we can better understand Rabbeinu Yonah's remarks that you'd pay a higher emotional, spiritual price by \*continuing\* to harm yourself and others, and \*not\* doing teshuva when you knew it was available to you.

After all, is there anything more audacious and mean-spirited than hurting someone, knowing you could easily make amends-- and not doing so?

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