

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 1:28

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Nineteenth Principle of Teshuva: SHUNNING A SIN WHEN FACED WITH IT AND STILL FULLY CRAVING IT.

At bottom, Rabbeinu Yonah's point is this: if you come upon an opportunity to make the same mistake you'd made once before and you don't, then you would have shown that you have truly worked on yourself, and have proved to have mastered teshuva on one level. And he acknowledges how difficult that had to have been (as we'd all have to). But there's far more to it than that.

Nothing stirs the heart more than the future and the past. The future because it's full of promise and hope; the past because it's full of ourselves. While teshuva (returning to G-d) doesn't touch upon the future-- though it certainly affects it-- it surely touches upon the past, so we'll concentrate on that.

To the mind's eye, as well as somewhere deep in the heart of most people, the past is a miscellany of personal victories and defeats. To the soul in search of spiritual excellence, though, the past is a miscellany of *spiritual* victories and defeats-- a whirlwind of moments of growth and of regression.

When such souls recall their spiritual victories they sit satisfied for a while and thank G-d for their accomplishments. But when they recall their regressions they blush, engage in the several principles of teshuva we've cited already, and set out to never lapse again.

Sometimes, though, moments from the past simply reappear serendipitously. The same people emerge again somehow, the same opportunities avail themselves, and the same urges press upon us. And we're given the chance to start all over, from that moment on. Many simply wonder at the "deja vu" of it all and miss the chance to rewrite the script. Others, unfortunately, either repeat their errors or even compound them. But more sensitive souls would "seize the moment" and undo any errors they might have succumbed to the first time.

If they'd sinned that first time by embarrassing a friend in front of others, for example, simply because she was soft-hearted and too easily took barbs directed at her, the natural inclination would be to disparage her again. After all, if you seemed clever and bold the first time, you'd likely seem so again.

You'd have been thrust into a moment of existential reflection and possible metamorphoses. Should you relive the moment, and recapture the feeling of victory you'd experienced the first time? Or should you reshape the moment, abide by the realization of how insensitive you'd been, and accede

to what's right?

The sensitive soul would accede, thanks to the mining of his heart he'd gone through the first time, and his subsequent teshuva. His success then, the second time around, would go to prove the depth of his teshuva, and would be a great, great spiritual triumph.

Suppose, though, the situation *never* arose again, and you could never be sure you wouldn't lapse again under those same circumstances?

Rabbeinu Yonah tells us that if you'd deepened your relationship to G-d on a level referred to as "Fearing G-d"-- likened to an intense and awesome realization of the closeness of G-d each and every moment-- you'd be assumed in Heaven to be virtually *incapable* of committing that sin again; and you'd be credited with having faced the moment a second time, and having grown past the temptation to belittle your friend again.

You'd have proven yourself to be the true spiritual warrior who'd faced temptation, battled hard, and proved himself victorious. Which is to say, you'd have proven yourself to have been the sort of person who'd no longer lapse into spiritual mediocrity.

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