

# THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 1:5

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Let's begin with a review. As you may recall, we contend that the first 9 paragraphs of "The Gates of Repentance" serve as the book's introduction, and we've thus far gone through nearly half of them.

What we've come to understand is that teshuva is a fundamental, G-d-given means of drawing closer and closer to G-d after having overlooked His presence by sinning, rather than mere "penitence" as it's usually understood.

We've seen that teshuva enables us to achieve our potential for spiritual excellence and to transcend ourselves (1:1); that it provides a sort of metaphysical "escape hatch" we'd be foolish not to take advantage of (1:2); that only an emotionally oblivious and alienated soul would overlook the great opportunity to draw close to G-d that teshuva is (1:3); and that a sensitive soul would be so moved to regret and sorrow after realizing he or she'd lapsed into spiritual mediocrity, that he or she would sit stunned, and would expend a lot of time and energy on reviewing errors of judgement, as well as at finding ways to draw closer to G-d right there and then, rather than later (1:4).

Our paragraph now touches upon a second reason not to delay in our quest for spiritual excellence.

It's based on this. Everyone remembers being a small child with a sense of honesty, fairness, and decency, and doing everything "right". For one reason or another, though, there came a point when we decided to take a friend's treat from him, to cheat at a game, to lie to a teacher, etc. and we somehow "got away with it". We either didn't get caught, or no one reported us. And we felt powerful. "This is great!" we probably thought, "Why didn't anybody think of this before?", we said in all naivete.

We continued being good people otherwise, all in all, and maintained a sense of honesty, fairness and decency. But somehow or another, we kept on cheating in little ways (and getting away with it).

Suppose there came a point when we were caught on tape doing wrong, the tape was then shown to us and we thus came face to face with our cheating, and it proved not to be a pretty sight.

We'd be humbled, shocked. "Is that me?" we'd ask. "Do I do that?"

After a while, a healing sense of remorse would arise, and we'd take ourselves aside to ask how we'd ever come to that.

"It just seemed OK" we might say. "It just seemed perfectly acceptable-- something I just kind of do."

What it comes down to, at bottom, is an insight our sages offered which Rabbeinu Yonah cites at this point in our text. That once you repeat an untoward act once or twice it starts to seem "alright" to you, and you do it again and again with aplomb (see Kiddushin 40A).

You develop a harmful pattern, as so many of us do.

But a person striving for personal excellence would want to avoid that for any number of reasons, not the least of which is because it's simply wrong. But also because of the following principle cited by Rabbeinu Yonah as well, which is rather shocking to a sensitive soul.

It's that when you develop such a pattern and do the same wrongful thing again and again without giving a thought, the next time you start to do it, but you get waylaid and don't do it-- you're nonetheless considered guilty of it anyway!

Why? Because a pattern's been established, that's become the way you do things, and that's that. And even if you don't manage to do it, you might as well have!

Rabbeinu Yonah's point is, then, that the sort of person who'd strive for spiritual excellence would want to avoid such a moral rut. He or she would thus do everything to not repeat a misdeed, and would try as soon as possible to do teshuva for the first incidence.

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