

# THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 2:1

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

## **The First Instance: WHEN YOU'RE OVERRUN BY TROUBLES**

We're almost reticent to discuss personal trials and tribulations, since they hurt so and don't easily lend themselves to rational explanations when they're fresh upon us and pressing. But we pray that no one among us is suffering now; and that we can all be nourished enough by the sort of sage insight Rabbeinu Yonah offers us here to somehow take it with us and draw from it when we're indeed troubled. May G-d protect us all from travails, nonetheless.

"If you find yourself suffering," Rabbeinu Yonah starts this section off with, then "take it to heart". He isn't telling us to be frightened and take troubles as ominous signs of impending doom. He's telling us to take ourselves off to the side when we find ourselves mired in troubles, and to reflect for a moment about why this might be happening to us.

In fact, the very first thing most of us say when we're overtaken by problems is, "Why is this happening to me? What did I ever do to deserve this". Which means to say that we try to figure out how we brought this upon ourselves, just as Rabbeinu Yonah suggests we do. But then someone inevitably comes along to pooh-pooh it, and to offer a more "rational" explanation for our troubles. "You shouldn't have eaten all those...", they might say if we'd sudden become ill; or maybe, "You made terrible investments", if we'd lost a lot of money; or "You didn't work hard enough", if we'd been fired. And to be sure, there are certainly patterns of behavior that directly affect our lives that can't be denied.

But we're being counseled to look more deeply into our souls at those points. And to determine what it was we did \*on another plane\* to set off the terrible avalanche of cause and effect we're caught in.

For in point of fact we and G-d collaborate with each other in this world. We could even be said to "dance" together in partnership, if you will. For both He and we determine the movements and steps of our lives. But not the way most of us think we do.

We don't dance with G-d on a manifest level, where it might be thought for example that if we work hard He'll match that move with one of His own, and see to it that we succeed. We dance with Him on a spiritual level. Which means to say that when we do something to further our spiritual stature, He follows through on that gesture and actually furthers our spiritual stature. Whereas when we lapse into spiritual mediocrity, He allows us that move and accompanies us there, too. For G-d has

seen to it that our spiritual life effects our material life on all levels. So when we suffer on the material plane it's a consequence of the fact that we'd done something "insufferable" (untoward) on the spiritual plane.

What we're to do then, once we realize all that, is to return to G-d and do teshuva by changing our ways in the world. And rather than see that as a calculated, "Machiavellian" move we'd make to undo our troubles, G-d will instead be touched by our pain and express His bountiful love toward us. Because rather than having closed our eyes to our own input into our misfortune, we'd have taken responsibility for it. (Let it not go unsaid, though, that we suffer for many subtle and indecipherable reasons that may not clearly follow a tit-for-tat pattern. But there isn't the space to expand upon all the many variations on this theme.)

There's another side to personal suffering as well, as Rabbeinu Yonah offers. It's based on what we'll refer to as the "inoculation paradigm". As we all know, children are inoculated with benign doses of certain dread diseases in order to build up antibodies to a full-blown case of that disease in the future. In much the same way (touching upon some very deep Kabbalistic principles beyond the scope of this discussion), suffering in this world acts to fend off spiritual maladies down the road. There's a lot to be said about this as well, but we won't.

And as we indicated above, suffering also moves us to teshuva, which is a reward onto itself. Since by definition that draws us closer to G-d. In fact, many stories have been told of various sensitive souls who missed their pain and anguish when they'd recovered. Since they were no longer moved to pray with such depth and heart-felt emotion as they'd been able to before.

Rabbeinu Yonah then counsels us to "hope that this all-consuming anguish would at least be the darkness that brings on the light", in his words, when we're in the thick of it. That is, that whatever sorrows we're going through now will be the storm before the quiet (rather than the proverbial "quiet before the storm"). And that we will indeed eventually come to understand the great favor it had done us (either in the here and now, or in the ultimate future), the way someone who'd suffered a heart attack and done so much better later on would be grateful for all that his heart attack had done for him, by teaching him to slow down his pace, spend more time with his family, eat more healthily, pursue spiritual excellence, and the like.

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