

# THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 2:6

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

## **The Sixth Instance: WHEN YOU REALIZE HOW VULNERABLE AND MORTAL YOU ARE**

We come now to the last of the six instances in which you're likely to be moved to teshuva (to return to G-d). And it's when you realize you're mortal, and that your stay in the world will end at one point.

In order not to discourage and sadden us too much at the thought, though, Rabbeinu Yonah reminds us that will be the moment when we'll "greet G-d". The thought of that gladdens the heart of the righteous, and gives those of us in search of spiritual excellence hope.

In the process of speaking about life, death, and the real presence of G-d, Rabbeinu Yonah touches upon many ultimate issues of Jewish thought which we haven't the space to expand upon here. So we'll merely present his ideas, touch upon them only somewhat, then go on.

We're taught that we were sent to this world in the first place to keep G-d's charge, observe His mitzvot, "delve into Torah... improve our character", and to "achieve high levels of fear and love" of G-d. We'd do well, then, to keep our eyes on our target at all times and never waver if we hope to succeed in that, our life's mission.

The thought of death, then, serves as a prod-- a "wake-up call", if you will-- for us to stay on target, in fact. Because when one forgets the reality of death he tends to "think he has all the time and latitude he needs to accomplish what he needs to" to achieve spiritual excellence, when no one does.

Interestingly enough, Rabbeinu Yonah defines wrongdoers as individuals who only want to accede to their physical cravings. We're more likely to think of them as perhaps violent, cruel, or selfish misguided souls. Perhaps Rabbeinu Yonah's point is that the root of violence, cruelty, selfishness, and even of misguidance is indeed the terrible and overarching hunger and thirst those souls have for indulgence.

After all, one oftentimes has to push a lot of other people out of his way to get what he craves.

Such souls are depicted as "utterly severed from their Root", since they're so decidedly physical, and their "cravings are (so) incompatible with the service of G-d". As such, they're said to "plummet down to the ground, the site of all their cravings, when they die". Which means to say, they dwell in the lower reaches of the Afterlife after passing away, because that's what they most affiliated themselves with in life.

Rabbeinu Yonah does add, however, that it's oftentimes hard to discern who's indeed wrongful and who's righteous. "For there are wrongdoers whose deeds are hidden and go unnoticed" he point out. "And there are people who are secretly G-d-fearing". So the last word about who indeed is righteous and who's not is G-d's alone.

And we're reminded that we can always better ourselves while yet alive, if we determine that we're indeed wrongful. We can always come closer and closer yet to holiness and spiritual well-being. And always redirect our course toward closeness to G-d, the larger goal, by engaging in teshuva.

Perhaps the best impetus to do that in light of our mortality, Rabbeinu Yonah suggests, is to dwell upon three ideas (as enunciated in "Pirkei Avos" 3:1): that we're rooted in rank physicality while in this world, that the body is headed toward death and decay in the end-- and that we're all to account for our lives in the eyes of G-d Almighty once we'd have passed from this world.

As such, he warns us, it behooves us each to "hone our conscience and supply ourselves with enough virtues to return our spirit in purity to G-d, who gave it to us". And we do that by "scrutinizing our ways and deeds every day".

For in the end life will prove to be as long-lived as "the shadow of a passing bird..., a split second". For "even if you were to live for many years-- even two thousand," Rabbeinu Yonah adds, "eventually those years would come to an end, and would ultimately seem to have never been".

But take heart, for "the world of reward, on the other hand, is eternal".

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