

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 2:7

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We come now to the end of the second gate, which offered insight into the six instances in which we're likely to be moved to teshuva (to return to G-d). This entry draws upon a well-known dictum found in "Pirke Avot" ("The Ethics of the Fathers") which reads as follows.

"If I am not for myself," the great and holy sage Hillel asked, "then who will be? Yet even when I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" This multi-layered statement has been analyzed for millennia now, and it's pithiness has never failed to amaze and surprise. Rabbeinu Yonah has a rather unique approach to it, though, as we'll see.

Some of the best teachers of Mussar (the art and science of spiritual excellence) have moved their listeners and readers to tears-- and then some. Many a good soul has been so inspired by a master of the art that he or she has sat thunderstruck in silence and taken it upon him or herself to truly pursue piety and goodness.

Some people in such circumstances have said right there and then, "You know-- I'm going to do it! I'm going to stop being so selfish and self-absorbed, and...."

But days go by, reality beckons soon enough, old patterns kick in again, the well-intentioned person starts to feel like he's being taken-in by others, and all his resolve goes by the waysides.

As Rabbeinu Yonah understands it, "If I am not for myself, then who will be?" means to say this. If I don't take the great and noble Mussar-related things I heard or read recently to heart; if I don't apply them to specific instances in my life; if I don't try to hone my new-found grasp of things, expand on it, deepen in my being as a result of it all the time; and if I don't expect lapses (which is only normal), and learn to deal with them calmly and in an inspired way-- who else will?

That's to say, if I lean on inspired teachers and writers alone for my spiritual growth, and don't do the hard work "in the field", if you will, myself-- then what good would my original inspiration have been in the end?

After all, the aim of Mussar isn't inspiration per se; it's to gently nudge us along the path of spiritual excellence in our daily lives.

Rabbeinu Yonah explains the next part of the quote, "But even when I am for myself, what am I?" as follows. Even if I *do* follow through on the wisdom I will have gained from Mussar-- I can be sure that I'm not grasping it all. And that at best I'll only be partly successful despite my best efforts.

After all, "Who am I?"-- are you and I capable of truly realizing the depth of being that Mussar expounds upon? Aren't we all bound to err on the side of self-interest? Yet don't ever give up in despair, we're told. Because G-d Almighty certainly knows the stuff we're made of. And He's taken by the very effort we make itself!

"But there's only so much time in the day!" we might argue. "Who can concentrate on all this, aside from all the other things I have to do?" And we start to rattle off all the good reasons why we can't deepen our spirits and rectify our beings just yet.

As the quote continues, though, "And if not now, when?" That's to say, if you don't start off now, on one level or another, when will you ever?

When you finally earn enough at your job? When you save up enough to feel secure? When you have the free time?

But who among us is ever fully satisfied and secure enough to decide that "now's the time"? Hence we're sure to put it off forever.

Never forget, we're told, that the older you get and the longer you put off your dream of spiritual excellence, the more entrenched you become in untoward behavior, the less physical and mental acumen you have, the harder it becomes to grow and rethink things, and the less time you have to succeed.

At bottom it comes to this: open yourself to inspiration, accept the call for betterment as a personal challenge, grab onto the reins, and go!

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