

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 3:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We hereby begin the third, next-to-last gate of "The Gates of Repentance". Whereas the first gate focused on the process of teshuva (returning to G-d), and the second one offered insight into the six instances in which we're likely to be moved to teshuva, this gate offers some of the things we indeed need to do teshuva for. That's to say, it's a list of many of the things we trip over or slack-off on.

Neither space nor our intentions for this series allows us to cite each and every halacha discussed in this gate. So we'll focus instead upon the ones that **specifically** touch upon spiritual growth. We'd all be wise to delve into the full list of mitzvahs cited here, in the original, though. Since there's not a single one that **doesn't** touch upon spiritual growth, in fact. It's just that some of them touch upon it more manifestly than others. And those are the ones we'll be discussing in this forum.

First, though, Rabbeinu Yonah warns us to take heed to just how serious the consequences can be for our lapses into spiritual mediocrity. For while some such lapses are rather inconsequential, others "approach Heaven, they're so extreme", and yet others are "so deplorable that they're equivalent to many great sins". Those are the kinds of things we do that threaten our personhood; that make us ugly in the eyes of G-d and humanity. Needless to say, we'd need to know if we were guilty of those kinds of things.

Don't think that only touches on murder, pillage, torture, and the like. In fact it touches-- sad to say-- on far more pedestrian wickedness. For who among us sensitive to his or her own heart isn't aware of having done or said things that have demeaned and soiled his or her soul?

As such, there's reason for nearly all of us to be taken-aback by our ways, humbled, and embarrassed.

Don't misunderstand-- most of us are good and kind, amiable and benign. But even the best of hearts has its soiled corner. And realizing that helps us cleanse ourselves as well as attain spiritual excellence.

Rabbeinu Yonah's next point is that most of us simply aren't aware of the relative worth of our actions. And we think one thing or another is basically OK; another perhaps "isn't so nice"; yet another is out and out "bad", etc. But we're often wrong. Simply because our readings of those things are often rooted in what's good for us-- rather than in ultimate, spiritual truth.

But because the sensitive soul might grow discouraged at this point and want to give up, Rabbeinu Yonah assures us all that we can indeed change our ways-- once we can differentiate between what's truly right and wrong.

For it's not enough to merely want to change and strive for spiritual excellence. We have to know just what to do and to avoid. For a heart-felt commitment to be good or even pious is meaningless if the circumstances and conditions for becoming that aren't known. It would be little different than a nine year old's declaration that he's sure he'd want to be an architect when he grew up-- if he ever knew what an architect did!

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