

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 1 INTRODUCTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We begin our exciting journey together through the classics of Mussar [ethical development] literature... in search of spiritual excellence.

Our first work is "The Gates of Repentance", by the great and holy Rabbeinu Yonah. From here, with G-d's help alone and in the process of time, we will go to Bachya Ibn Pakudah's "The Duties of the Heart", Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's "The Path of the Just", and Rambam's "Eight Chapters".

Rabbeinu Yonah wrote "The Gates of Repentance" (Shaarei Tshuvah) around the year 1250. It's comprised of four "gates", which we'll present now in an abbreviated form.

The first gate presents us with Rabbeinu Yonah's 20 principles of teshuva, which we'll offer one at a time.

First a quick aside. Though teshuva is usually translated as "repentance" or "penitence", we won't be translating the term at all. Both because neither translation does the term "teshuva" justice, and also because our explanation of what teshuva is will soon be offered, and we'll find ourselves getting used to the word teshuva soon enough. We resorted to the title "The Gates of Repentance" rather than "The Gates of Tshuvah", by the way, for the sake of those who might want to look into the work and not know what teshuva is.

The second gate focuses upon the six instances in which you're likely to be inspired to do teshuva.

The third gate offers us the ten categories of mitzvos it would do us well to understand, if we're going to serve G-d deeply and knowledgeably (as well as a lot more).

And the fourth gate discusses the idea of Divine "atonement" or ultimate forgiveness.

Rabbeinu Yonah wrote no formal introduction to "The Gates of Repentance," but it becomes clear that the first 9 paragraphs of the first gate serve that purpose. We'll introduce those paragraphs as we go along, one at a time and point by point. But for now I'd like to present my understanding of the "introduction" thematically.

It becomes clear that while these first 9 paragraphs offer so much, they make one over-arching point that will help us understand just what teshuva is all about after all. For this "introduction" focuses upon G-d and our relationship to Him.

The very first paragraph mentions the fact that when we do teshuva, G-d fosters a spirit of purity

within us that enables us to **love Him** to a degree ordinarily out of our reach. And at the very end of this "introduction" (para. 9) we're told that the greater degree of your teshuva, **the closer to G-d you get**.

Rabbeinu Yonah has thus "framed" what we take to be his introduction with the ultimate theme of "The Gates of Repentance" and the meaning of teshuvah itself -- drawing close to G-d. For when we sin, we draw away from G-d, so to speak (for one could never truly draw away from G-d). But when we do teshuva, we return to Him (the Hebrew word for teshuva itself means "return"), we return everything to its rightful place in our relationship to Him and in the world. And we return our soul to the purer, clearer spiritual position it occupied before that sin was committed.

And we thus draw closer yet to G-d, the way a couple who'd somehow hurt each other's feelings, then apologized and made amends, would then find themselves even closer than before after the fact.

May Rabbeinu Yonah's message inspire us all to draw closer to G-d ourselves.

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