

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 4:5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

This final section of the chapter is something of a departure. Rather than delving further yet into the different reaches of the human heart to lead it to the service of G-d, it explores the makeup of teshuvah, repentance -- the yearning of the soul to eradicate its sins and turn toward G-d after having shunned Him.

But it's in fact a very fitting end to this chapter that breaks us down into spiritual types, in that its point is that each one of us -- no matter how whole or broken -- needs to set self apart in the end and address G-d straight from the heart, and to rectify what has gone wrong.

Ramchal raises the issue of teshuvah in a novel way, though. He asks, if, as we explained, G-d is so exacting with sins and sinners that no one "could be accounted righteous before his Creator" as pointed out above; and if even the likes of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, David, and others of that ilk couldn't help but dread his fate, then where in heaven's name is G-d's mercy?

His answer is that G-d's mercy is manifest in His having granted us teshuvah. "Return to Me, says the L-rd of Hosts, and I will return to you" (Zechariah 1:3) G-d enjoins us. And He assures us that "(When) you seek the L-rd your G-d" after having disregarded Him, "you will find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul For, G-d your L- r d is a merciful God; He will not let you loose or destroy you" (Deuteronomy 4:29, 31).

For, the truth be known, as Ramchal puts it, "according to the strict letter of the law, a sinner should be punished immediately upon the performance of a sin, and the punishment itself should be meted out with great anger, as we would expect in the case of one who rebels against the word of the Creator". Would anyone expect to get away scot-free after having slapped the king, for example, or after cursing the queen to her face? A true believer would feel he had somehow affronted G-d Himself to that degree by disregarding His wishes, and that he couldn't hope for forgiveness.

But G-d has done us a great favor by granting us an "out" indeed -- teshuvah. For at bottom teshuvah is based on your no longer being willing to sin in ways you had before. And given that our wills are our essences -- for, what am I if I haven't a will of my own that propels me forward from day to day -- then it follows that no longer being willing to commit a particular sin again is a fundamental change of self; a critical, very personal, and a vital metamorphosis.

As Ramchal words it, "by the very fact that the penitent recognizes his sin, acknowledges it, reflects upon his wrongful actions, repents, ... sincerely wishes he had never done that thing, is terribly

pained in his heart that he had ever done such a thing, decides to abandon it, and runs away from it -
- ... he is forgiven".

So, recognize your spiritual station, which is to say, know if you truly yearn for G-d in your heart and go on with that with ever-new commitment with the help of the trait of caution. Or know if you crave honor and status instead, or if what you really hope for is to steer clear of harm in the end, and channel that -- with the help of caution -- into the service of G-d that is everyone's ultimate goal.

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