

CHAPTER THREE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

One thing always comes up when working with those who choose to adopt a Torah lifestyle at a mature age. It isn't always the first thing said or even the second, and it may not be put into words, but only implied. Yet somewhere along the way, it definitely creeps in: "Rabbi, I feel so low. I lived a life so far from Torah. How can I pretend to be frum after having done the things I've done and seen the things I've seen?"

Alarm bells start ringing in my head whenever I hear this. This problem doesn't bother only those who come to Yiddishkeit late in life. Anyone turning away from a path that has not been spiritually fulfilling may find himself expressing such feelings.

You may wonder why such a cheshbon hanefesh sets off alarms in my mind? Listen again to the words, and then you will understand.

"I feel so low...." Notice what's happening here. The fact that a spiritually empty lifestyle gives a person cause to reflect is something to be grateful for. But I detect depression slipping in here, and that's a serious danger. The Karliner Rebbe (1740-1792) was wont to say, "Depression is not a sin but the sins depression brings about are greater than any sin on its own." When the fog of depression falls over one's heart, all growth in Torah is in jeopardy.

What can be done to prevent depression? After all, the previous path really was no good.

There isn't a general prescription for everyone. Each person needs to be approached as an individual. There is, however, one great source of comfort and understanding that can give everyone insight, and that is Tehillim. From its beginning, it tells how King David approached teshuva and how we can learn, in practical terms, the art of repentance from him. As we come to the third kapitel, imagine for a moment King David's situation. There are tzaros, and there are tzaros. The author of Tehillim can tell us a thing or two about such matters. We see King David being pursued by his own son, who wants to dethrone him. Worse, the majority of the populace supports the coup. Most depressing of all, much of this is due to David's own mistakes.

Things couldn't seem any darker. Yet we find him lifting up his voice to Hashem with great poignancy. He starts his prayer with the words, *A song by David*. A song always expresses joy. With these first words of the psalm, we can begin to understand how he could not only survive such a shock but also grow from it.

The holy Alshich wonders about this opening. How, he asks, it is possible for this particular kapitel to begin like this, considering the circumstances? He answers, in part, that David felt gratitude to Hashem for the anguish. Fleeing from his own son was a tremendously humiliating and aggravating experience, as any parent can imagine. But David hoped that his anguish would be accepted by Hashem as part payment for his sin. A comment by Rabbeinu Yona touches on this same point. He tells us that David's serene acceptance of the torment and agony at this time made him worthy of Divine protection. His acceptance was the first step in his teshuva, and it set up a feeling of positive spirituality in his heart. No man lives without blemish. When problems strike, the first reaction should be to look within one's own heart. Yes, David takes immediate action and runs for his life, but not without realizing that he has fallen in his own spirituality through his sin.

Notice, though, that this realization or acceptance does not lead to depression. David's acts are positive, and he does them all with a sense of hope.

Rav Shlomo Freifeld, zt"l, was an expert in giving encouragement to people in despair. One of his favorite lines was "Don't be strong. Be great." When life throws one of its curves at you, you can be strong, biting your tongue and bearing it stoically. That may get you through the hardship, but you haven't gained anything other than a sore tongue. On the other hand, if you choose to accept what was sent your way and work through it, if you stretch every sinew of your soul to learn from the adversity, you can achieve greatness.

David cries out in pain, *How numerous are my tormentors! The great rise up against me!* His ache is palpable, and still he sings because his faith in Hashem gives him the courage to turn adversity into a learning experience. "Yes, this painful reality came about through my own folly," he is saying, "but still I sing. I joyfully accept what is happening and in that state of joy pray for Hashem's support."

The Torah is replete with incidents of great people stumbling. As human beings, they are fallible, as are we all. Their stories carry a strong theme, one we should carry with us for life's rough spots: They were able to climb beyond their mistakes without succumbing to feelings of depression and hopelessness.

The Rebbe Reb Tzaddok HaCohen of Lublin (1823-1900) in his Kedushas Shabbos speaks about the redeeming virtue of sin: "After the terrible sin [when Adam and Chava partook of the Tree of Knowledge] brought darkness on all future generations by causing Hashem's decree of death on man, Adam nevertheless merited the light of Shabbos. This is the way of creation in the world first darkness and then light so that one may appreciate the superiority of light."

This is a startling statement. The Rav Tzaddok is telling us that when sin begets a reaction such as teshuva, which leaves one in a more exalted state than he was originally, the past misdeeds are seen as the stimulus for man's spiritual growth. As Rav Tzaddok continues, quoting the Gemara, "In the place where baalei teshuva stand, even completely righteous tzaddikim cannot stand" (Berachos 34b). This Gemara now takes on more than just an encouraging note. It teaches us that,

given the right circumstances, when a person decides to overcome past misdeeds, those mistakes become his redeeming virtues.

King David continues this kapitel by saying, *I lie down and sleep, awake yet again, for Hashem sustains me*. Having turned to Hashem with a positive inclination and repented his sin, David can even sleep securely. He has faith that Hashem will help him awake again spiritually as He has done in the past. For it is Hashem's will that we return to Him, and it is through His support that we survive.

There is no greater strength than accepting one's past misdeeds and turning away from them onto the path of righteousness. Despair, on the other hand, only leads to failure.

Obviously, this isn't always apparent at the beginning of one's trek through life, but that's what being great is all about. As the kapitel tells us at its end, *Deliverance belongs to Hashem. Your blessing be on Your people selah!* Our success is through Hashem's blessing. We are His people and as long as we revel in that knowledge we can be strengthened even when we make mistakes.

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