

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

If it weren't possible, we wouldn't be told it was. I'm talking about Hashem's wondrous gift to us called teshuva repentance.

We get caught up and tangled in all kinds of sordid messes; we slide and tumble far from where we belong. Yet Hashem, in His great love for us, gives us the amazing ability to repair what we have destroyed.

This gift is so huge that we can't even grasp its enormity. In fact, the word teshuva is used so often we tend to forget what a vast concept it is. Without its colossal power, we would be lost. Our future would be one of despair, for no man alive can withstand the daily onslaughts aimed at our souls. We slip and fall, yet Hashem allows us to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and set ourselves back on course. Teshuva is the ultimate compassionate gift that allows us to hope and aspire for the future.

Throughout history we have been told of great feats of teshuva so that we humble folk could learn that repentance is possible and that Hashem will truly help us. In our times, we have witnessed thousands of Yidden who, though raised without Torah, were inspired by this message and have come close to Hashem. Even more, we have seen the most Torah-loyal Yidden come to the realization that a great lesson can be learned from these Jews and that every one of us must reach higher and find our true place. In these materialistic times, where everything is weighed and measured by its material worth, we have become conscious of how shallow such a worldview is and how invigorating a spiritual life can be.

In the annals of our long history, there can be no greater example of true repentance than King David. He was so close to Hashem, yet he tempted fate, fell, and through Hashem's love was able to return. And he did all this in the full glare of his people and all future generations.

Obviously, we can't even begin to understand David's greatness, who he was or how high he stood; we are so far from his level. Yet he left his words and his example for us to learn from them.

The fifty-first kapitel of Tehillim was written by King David when he sought to do teshuva over the episode of Batsheva. We are told in the Midrash Shocher Tov, "Whoever wishes to repent should scrutinize the deeds of David." Let us read King David's words and absorb his lessons so that we, too, can begin to do teshuva and return to where our souls long to be.

Grant me a reprieve, God, because of Your kindness; according to Your abundant compassion, wipe away my deliberate sins. Here David set out the basic essentials that make up the process of teshuva. First and foremost, the entire concept exists only because of Hashem's remarkable kindness. It can't be said enough times the whole concept of teshuva stands on the edifice that is Hashem's mercy.

If we stop to think about it, we humans have done everything our ingenuity can conjure up to disobey Hashem's will. Every generation has sought new and varied ways to defy the will of our Creator, yet He seeks our return with love and gives us the ability to actualize this return.

Thoroughly cleanse my soul of my sin, and purify me from my sinful act. With this verse, David is asking for two distinct kindnesses. Washing away a sin means having its surface grime removed. But then there is the deeper gash, the wound that corrupts the soul. David asks that this be purified as well, so that his entire being can become complete and wholesome.

For I am aware of my offenses, and my sin is constantly on my conscience. One of the most difficult steps on the way to teshuva is the recognition that one has transgressed. There are so many excuses a person can make up for himself, so many reasoned debates he can hold within the precincts of his mind. As the Kotzker Rebbe was wont to say, he could bring the whole world to do teshuva if only people would not lie to themselves.

King David tells us that one must recognize a sin for what it is and then go a step further and keep that recognition in one's mind forever. Sudden moments of remorse, when you admit that you have lapsed, are not enough. Once you've admitted your wrongdoing, you cannot go back.

For You desire that [people speak] truth in the recesses of their souls; You have taught me wisdom deep within my heart. Chassidim speak of the pintele Yid, the spark of Godliness that burns within each of us. It is where the flame of Yiddishkeit is always alight. No matter how far one has wandered, that flame is still there. David says that this may be buried in one's inner heart, beneath layer upon layer of grime. No matter it is there, flickering forever.

Sprinkle on me with a hyssop stalk so that I will be purified. Wash me so that I will be whiter than snow. With these words, David indicates that sin is like leprosy in that it eats away at a person. He begs Hashem to purify him in the same way a person suffering from a leprous condition was purified.

Sin is a sign of arrogance on our part. When we transgress, we momentarily forget our true role as Hashem's children and go off chasing our own phantom wishes. The leprosy spoken of here does not refer to a medical condition. It is the result of the spiritual malady of sin's arrogance, and David brings this poignantly to our attention.

David asks that Hashem purify him from his sins to the point that he is "whiter than snow." Snow is often cited as an example of purity. Judaism teaches that snow originates from under Hashem's glorious throne, and thus signifies a state of unsullied wholesomeness.

Let me hear tidings of gladness and happiness. Let this body, which You have crushed, rejoice. Some

people would say that having a good time is real rejoicing. Loud music or wild dancing, they want to believe, shows happiness. Nothing could be further from the truth. Such entertainment is a diversion, a way of blocking out feelings of emptiness. True joy is felt by the soul, and our soul is happiest when we feel the connection to our Creator. When we feel separated, we are actually "crushed" by despair. David cries out for his return to authentic happiness.

Create for me an unsullied heart, God, and renew within me a steadfast spirit. Here is the crux of the matter. We ask Hashem to create a new heart for us, one unblemished by our transgressions. Only through Hashem's miraculous curative balm can we can recover completely from past misdeeds.

Do not cast me away from You, and do not take away from me Divine inspiration. When we sin, we distance ourselves from Hashem. This corrupts our ability to see things as they are. Everything we encounter is subverted to serve our own purposes, and we no longer know right from wrong. David sees this as a gaping void.

Restore to me the joy of seeing my salvation come from You, and bestow upon me Divine inspiration [to sing Your praises]. David pleads with Hashem to allow him to reconnect to his Source. He wants to feel Hashem's guiding hand in every detail of his life, just as he once did, before he fell. More, he wants to regain the exquisite closeness of Divine inspiration, so that he can again sing Hashem's praises with a full heart.

It can happen. We can find our way back. Hashem will return us to him if only we ask wholeheartedly, for His generosity of spirit transcends human limits, and He seeks only our good.

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