

THE TEN DAYS OF REPENTANCE: IDEAS FOR INSPIRATION

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The ten days from Rosh HaShana to Yom Kippur are called the "Aseres Y'mai Teshuva," The Ten Days of Repentance. During these days, we continue reciting the S'lichos (penitential prayers) and we continue to focus our prayers and thoughts on repentance. In the Torah portion of this week, Netzavim, the Torah tells us (Devarim 30: 11-14) *"Because this commandment which I have commanded you today, it is not hidden from you, and neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, so that you should say 'Who shall go up to heaven for us, and bring it to us, so that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you should say 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, so that we may hear it and do it?' But this matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it."* What is this matter that is near to us? Both the Ramban and S'forno explain that this matter is repentance. The commandment which is not hidden from us is that of repentance.

Rabbi Chayim Shmuelevitz is puzzled in that these verses do not appear to describe reality. If repentance is so near to us and not hidden from us, as the verse says, than why don't we find everyone repenting? Many people who sin definitely know that their actions are not proper, yet they do not desist from that behavior. If repentance is so near, why don't sinners chose the path of repentance?

Rabbi Shmuelevitz answers that the stumbling block for man is that he become accustomed and acclimated to his situation. Man will become so comfortable with his situation and level of observance that complacency will set in and the need to change for the better will never be realized. A person will become set in his ways, and not bother to change and repent, because the need is not seen. What is it that can get a person to snap out of the status quo? A snap into reality can best be accomplished with something startling, something surprising (see # 37 for a similar concept). The example Rabbi Shmuelevitz gives is that of a person who was not familiar with the concept of death. This person lived his life without knowing that all eventually comes to an end. One day, he suddenly sees someone die right in from of him. Wouldn't this person be so shaken that he would undoubtedly repent and change his ways?

Repentance is very near to us, and indeed it is within our grasp. However, we have to be aware that there is a need to change. We have to inspire ourselves to change. Only once we have overcome this hurdle can we start the process of repentance. One way of inspiring ourselves to start this process is to literally jump-start ourselves. We need a shock, something startling, to make us "wake up and smell the coffee."

Rabbi Shmuelewitz brings an example of this from a Medrash. The Medrash tell us that Yakum Ish Tzroros, a nephew of Rav Yosi ben Yo'ezer, was riding on a horse on Shabbos, leading his uncle, the great sage Rav Yosi, to his death by hanging. Yakum, in order to ridicule his Torah observant uncle, said to him "Look at the horse that my master gives me to ride upon, and look at the horse that your master gives you !" (meaning to say that Rav Yosi's devotion to G-d and the Torah was for naught, as here he was being led to his death). Rav Yosi answered back "If this (providing you with such a horse) is how G-d rewards those who go against him, even more so to those who obey his will." Yakum, perplexed by this response, asked back "Is there anyone who obeys the word of G-d more than you?" Rav Yosi replied "If this is what happens to those who obey the word of G-d, even more so to those who go against Him!"

The Medrash tells us that these words entered Yakum's heart like poison, and he ended up committing suicide out of despondency. Later on, when Rav Yosi was on his deathbed, he saw that Yakum preceded him to the Garden of Eden.

Rabbi Shmuelewitz notes that we see from here how to inspire repentance. Rav Yosi, by responding the way he did to his nephew's questions, was setting his nephew up for a "shock," for a jolt into reality. When the jolt came, it was so powerful that it caused Yakum to feel so bad about his past evils that the life he had led was of no meaning anymore. If we are able to create within ourselves a sense of wonderment, surprise, and shock, we can start down the road to complete repentance. If we are able to snap ourselves out of complacency and our self created status quo, we can reach that which is near to us - complete repentance and a return to G-d.