

REPENTANCE AND CHANGING HISTORY

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

This time of the year, the month of Elul, is one dedicated to preparation for the upcoming High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A primary focus of this month is "Teshuva," "repentance." We are to spend time thinking about what we did over the past year. We must recognize those aspects of our being which are in need of improvement, in which we have not measured up to required standards. We then must express regret for our shortcomings and sins, and resolve not to stray again. Without repentance, we have no case to bring before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah as why we should be blessed during the coming year.

Repentance, R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato writes (Mesilas Yesharim 4), is a creation of G-d's kindness. If a person steals, the item has been taken. That action cannot be reversed. Time cannot be rolled back to erase that transgression. What if we regret that action? What if we wish with our entire heart that our action of thievery had never occurred, that we never violated the trust of our G-d and fellow man? What if we undertake to repair, to whatever extent we can, the damage we wrought? G-d acts above the letter of the law with us. He accepts our repentance, and we are forgiven. Our transgression can be erased. This, Rav Luzzato writes, is G-d's mercy in action.

The Talmud (Kiddushin 40b) discusses the effects one's deeds may have. It states "Even if an individual is perfectly righteous his whole life but rebels at the end, he destroys his former good deeds . . . Said Resh Lakish, this means he regretted his former good deeds."

From this passage, it appears that a person's regret for his good deeds has the ability to uproot and destroy the good deeds that he did. That being the case, asked R' Elchanan Wasserman, why is it that a person's regret for his bad deeds does not have the ability to eradicate them? Why is it that this elimination of bad deeds, as Rav Luzzato writes, only occurs out of the grace of G-d and not as a matter of fact, as by the annulment of good deeds?

Rav Luzzato, in his work Derech Hashem (I: 4), explains that there are two aspects to each of G-d's commandments. The execution of each commandment carries with it a spiritual effect. Different commandments effect different areas of our spirituality in a positive fashion. Because of the spiritual benefits that are part and parcel of obeying the commandments, it is worthwhile for an individual to perform these commandments even if not obligated to do so. It is for this reason that our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov kept the commandments found in the Torah, even though they had not yet received the commandments. They appreciated the growth in spirituality that came with the performance of each Mitzvah, and therefore obeyed the dictates found in the Torah.

However, there is another and more basic aspect to the commandments. They are, simply put, commandments. Once Hashem has commanded us to do Mitzvos, to obey His word, we must do so. When we faithfully carry out His ordinances, He rewards us.

These same two aspects exist within the prohibitions, Aveiros, which Hashem has set forth. Each time we transgress the word of G-d, we not only disobey Him, but we negatively effect our spiritual being.

Rav Wasserman explains that these two parts to each commandment are effected differently by repentance. Rav Luzzato, when he wrote in Mesilas Yesharim that the regret that is integral to repentance cannot wipe away our sins, was correct. While it is true that G-d can forgive us for acts of rebellion against Him, He does not have to repair our damaged spirituality. We inflicted that wound upon ourselves, and the letter of the law would dictate that He has no obligatory part to play in rectifying the situation. The damage has been done, and that action is history. However, out of mercy, He wipes away the sin in its entirety. He heals our souls from the injuries that we have carelessly inflicted it with. He returns our soul to its state before the commission of the sin, in effect erasing history. This is truly a kindness.

When a person regrets his good deeds, as the Talmud discusses, he can not erase the good he has done for his soul. That remains with him always. However, as the person now regrets that he obeyed the words of G-d, the reward that the individual might have gotten for his obedience is forfeited. In that regard, his good deeds are truly lost.

When we repent before Rosh Hashanah, we should keep in mind these two specific aspects of each Mitzvah and Aveirah, positive commandment and prohibition. We must regret that we have rebelled against G-d. We must regret that we have caused immeasurable damage to our spiritual fiber. The Chofetz Chaim told Rav Wasserman that G-d only "erases" the sins upon repentance when the repentance is done out of love of G-d. The individual profoundly appreciates all that G-d has done for him and, with that perspective, realizes the gravity and foolishness of his sins. However, if one repents out of fear of punishment and not love of G-d, Hashem will forgive him for the rebellious act, but will not erase the negative effect the sin left upon the person's soul. We have the opportunity now to rectify the spiritual damage we wrought over the past year. It is an opportunity that we can not miss. Our lives depend on it.