

CIRCUMSTANTIAL REPENTANCE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The month of Elul, the last month in the Jewish calendar year, is swiftly coming to a close. During Elul, our Sages have told us, we are supposed to concentrate on introspection, repentance, and improvement. In that way, come the High Holidays, on which our fate for the coming year is determined, we are more likely to be judged favorably and thereby receive a favorable verdict.

In the Torah portion of Netzavim, we read what can happen to a person that forgets Hashem. The parsha begins "And Moshe called to all Yisrael, and said to them, You have seen all that Hashem did before your eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land; the great trials which your eyes have seen, the signs, and those great miracles . . . Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turns away this day from Hashem our G-d, to go and serve the gods of these nations . . . Hashem will not spare him, but then the anger of Hashem and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and Hashem shall blot out his name from under heaven."

However, this person is not doomed forever. Repentance is possible. The parsha continues "And it shall come to pass, when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you . . . And (you) shall return to Hashem your G-d, and shall obey his voice according to all that I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul . . . And Hashem your G-d will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you above your fathers . . . And you shall return and obey the voice of Hashem , and do all his commandments which I command you this day . . . And Hashem your G-d will make you abundantly prosperous in every work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your land, for good; for Hashem will again rejoice over you for good, as he rejoiced over your fathers."

The Chasam Sofer finds the chronology of events interesting. From the verses, it appears that the nation of Israel was told by Moshe that after they sin and are exiled from the land of Israel, they will do "teshuva," they will repent. Hashem will then bring them back to the land of Israel. They will repent and obey all the mitzvos, commandments. Hashem will make them prosperous, and then He will rejoice over the nation. Why, the Chasam Sofer asks, do the people have to repent twice: according to the verses, they repent while in exile, and then once back in the land of Israel, they repent again. Furthermore, why is it that we only find Hashem being happy with the second repentance, and not the first?

The Chasam Sofer explains that the answer lies with an understanding of the essence of a true repentance. Repentance is not merely regretting one's misdeeds. It is not only making a commitment to stay on the right track. To repent, one has to understand that when he sinned, there were specific circumstances that led to that "event." It involved the location where the sin took place, individual powers, drives, weaknesses and desires. Having full regret and accomplishing a complete process of repentance means that a person has arrived at a state where, if presented with the same circumstances when he had previously sinned, he will overcome any obstacle and not sin. The same powers and drives that were used to sin will be channeled towards the service of Hashem. This repentance shows that a true transformation has taken place.

There is an adage that in effect says "there are no atheists in the foxholes." In times of trouble, people turn to G-d and ask for help. People make commitments to improve if only Hashem will help them. According to the verses, the nation of Israel would be exiled, and while in a state of exile, will repent. Clearly, this repentance cannot be the "true" repentance that the Chasam Sofer described. The nation was not in same prosperous state that they had been prior to exile, nor were they in the holy land of Israel. Yet, G-d, in His infinite mercy, will see that the people are working towards true repentance, and He will accept these overtures. Furthermore, according to the verses, Hashem will give the nation an opportunity to prove themselves, and achieve true repentance. He will bring them back to the land of Israel and make them prosperous, as they had been when they sinned. The verses then tell us that the nation returns to Hashem - again - but this time it is with a complete and true repentance. It is at this point that Hashem is happy and rejoices, as the verses conclude.

Hashem clearly desires our repentance. As we see from this portion of Parshas Netzavim, Hashem is willing to facilitate our achieving a complete repentance - assuming we take the first steps. While the first steps are often the hardest, we need to take comfort in the fact that Hashem is there with us to help us along once we get started. During this time of Elul, when repentance, teshuva, should constantly be on our minds, we should remember that Hashem is there with us, to help us, encourage us, and support us. However, we have to make the first move, and for that there is no better time than the present.

K'siva V'Chasima Tova!

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