

FEAR AND LOVE [YONAH 3:5-10]

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

All repentance is motivated by something. The repentance of the men of Nineveh was caused by fear. The details of the narrative make this fact quite clear; in addition, the episode of the sailors' repentance that parallels that of Nineveh, is explicit, "And the men feared the L-rd greatly and they offered sacrifices to the L-rd and made vows (1, 16)".

The repentance of Nineveh, however, unlike that of the sailors is characterized as arising out of belief, "The men of Nineveh believed in G- d, they called a fast and put on sack, from the youngest to the oldest"(3,5). "The psychological link between fear and belief is highlighted in "the people feared the L-rd and they believed in the L-rd and Moses, his servant (JPS commentary to Yonah 3,5 from Exodus 14,31)". Last week we spoke of the conversion experience and how essentially unstable it often is. A freshly minted belief can be a powerful motivator to sacrifice one's deepest aspirations and principles and to accept a whole new set of convictions, but often they do not last. This kind of repentance may be followed by the long, hard work of self- examination and progressive inner change, or, it may eventuate in angry rebellion and return to the old lifestyle. Not surprisingly, most of the book of Exodus is an account of the frequent backsliding of the Children of Israel, despite that they feared and believed. This kind of repentance demands a walling of major aspects of one's personality and forcible improverishment of the self. It is better than nothing but it is far from ideal. The Rabbis called it Repentance through Fear.

The sailors and men of Nineveh embody this kind of repentance, an abrupt change of course but not necessarily of heart, before the power of G-d. At the same time it stays invariably focused on another kind of repentance - that of the prophet Yonah. This man, Yonah, is not afraid of G-d; he will not be bowed by His power and might. Yet, on the other hand, his heart is open to learning from events and circumstances that befall him. Yonah struggles with one of the two great questions of moral philosophy, not why the good suffer, but with why the wicked prosper. Unlike Job, whose problem was the Quality of Justice, Yonah cannot abide the Quality of Mercy. In his view, the world should be run by Justice; the sinner must die and take the sin away with him; there must not be second chances and there must be zero tolerance for evil. Needless to say, he does not preach repentance to Nineveh, for he does not accept the very concept of repentance. His confidence in this rigid morality is shaken by G-d's tolerance of his own rebellion; even by His Mercy in sending him a miraculous salvation within the belly of the fish, and so he succumbs and goes to Nineveh. But, he is not yet fully convinced. Yonah must yet undergo more revelations and again experience G-d's personal kindness to him. Eventually he learns, and what one learns never leaves him. This

kind of repentance is as solid as a rock and our Sages referred to it as Repentance through Love. Love here means noble motivations as opposed to fear for one's survival and terror of punishment.

The central distinction between Repentance through Fear and Repentance through Love is that the latter is integrative rather than fragmenting. Nothing needs to be walled off or renounced; for the past is what led one to the new knowledge and thus the past is redeemed and reaffirmed.

Consider two boys who grow up in most unfortunate circumstances, in a neighborhood where all young men join gangs. As they rise and gain status within the gang, they realize the dangers and the essential immorality of their lifestyles. They see all their friends end up dead or in jail and finally they both leave. One makes a clean break, signs up with the Army, and after finishing his term of enlistment, moves to a farm. He will never return to the old neighborhood lest he be sucked back up into his previous life. He has made a clean break with his previous life and must unquestionably be commended. Yet, how much has he lost! He has resolutely and decisively renounced his former friends, his parents, schoolmates, upbringing, and memories. Is there any doubt that his move, while necessary and commendable, has made him poorer and caused him deep inner injury?! His friend, chooses differently. He, inspired by his new conviction, goes back to the old neighborhood, as, let's say, an addiction counselor. He builds a social service organization. He uses his intimate knowledge of criminal culture and its distribution networks and patterns of association, to preach a gospel of communal renewal. He turns the sordid past into an inspiring future - for it was his past that enabled him now to accomplish all this. He did not give up his past; he made it the basis and foundation for new gains.

Repentance through Love turns sins into assets, for if not for the sins there would not have been assets.

"Reish Lakish said: Great is repentance, for intentional sins become for a penitent as if they were not intentional, as it says: Return Israel to your G-d for you have stumbled in your crime (Hosea 14.). Crime refers to intentional sin and yet it is called "stumbling". Is this really so? Did not Reish Lakish say, "Great is repentance, for it turns sins into merits, as it says, "When the wicked returns from his sin...he shall live (in the sense of "prosper") (Ezekiel 33.)". No problem - this statement is about repentance through love and this one is regarding repentance from fear (Yoma 86b)".

This specifically Jewish understanding of repentance determined how the Jerusalem Talmud (but not the Babylonian Talmud) understood Nineveh's repentance (We will soon address the actual texts). Other faiths teach that repentance is a painful sacrifice and a pushing away of the past is an inevitable part of universal battle with evil. One who sinned must reject and disavow the sin. This dualistic vision of good and evil is foreign to classic Jewish belief. Judaism, as a faith that reaches toward absolute unity of G-d, tends to teach integration and unification of all disparate phenomena of the physical and spiritual world. All multiplicity ultimately stems for the One, on some high level even evil. This does not justify evil but it does point out that theoretically it serves the purposes of

the good. Jewish thought in majority sees even sin as something that can serve greater good and as an entity that can be redeemed, integrated and harnessed toward something greater. It may be surmised that this awareness stands behind the Jerusalem Talmud ascribing this view of repentance to the Jewish prophet Yonah and the alternate understanding of repentance, as denial, rejection and renunciation, to the Gentile inhabitants of Nineveh.

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