

TO THE "SEAT OF MERCY"

by Rabbi Label Lam

Here's a true story worth repeating. It reminds us that Teshuva, what the world calls repentance, is not just a verb. It's a destination! It's also a relationship!

It was after Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur night, the holiest time of the year, two years ago. One of the congregants, tugged on my Kittle insisting he had a story he needed to tell. The story begins fifteen years earlier in a New York area suburb. This man tells me his daughter was getting engaged in Florida and so he and his daughters and other family members traveled with him to celebrate. Only his wife remained back home to care for the grandchildren. While they were away, a knock came to the door and three men with hoods brandishing weapons forced their way into the house. They threatened his wife and pushed her around and made her open the safe from which they took all her jewelry and many thousands of dollars-worth of valuables. Afterward they handcuffed her to the banister. They left and were never caught.

That's not the end of the story though. Why, I wondered was he telling me this now? Fifteen years later, between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, just a few days earlier, his wife received a mysterious call. There on the other end of the phone was a Rabbi and another gentleman that had an urgent message he needed to convey. Who was it? It was none other than one of the three invaders from that terrible day fifteen years earlier. The Rabbi explained that although he was a young man, he suffered a stroke and he's begging for forgiveness. He gets on the phone and begins with one word, all he can muster to speak, "Mechila!" (forgiveness).

They wife answers him, "It's you! I should call the police on you! Where's the money? Where's my jewelry? Where are the other two bums?" All he can answer is his pathetic refrain, "Mechila!" She berated him, "What is this, some kind of word game!? You say "Mechila" and I say "Forgiven!" and suddenly all's well?! No! I refuse to play!" She understandably denied him what he sought. (At this point in his story I began to realize that I know who this fellow is. I had visited him in jail for almost eight years. He had been a guest in my house many times. I had heard that he had had a stroke subsequently. I was certain that it was him!)

She called up her daughter, who is a therapist, to ask her what she should have done and her daughter boldly recommended that she confront him. Amazingly, a meeting was set up. There she saw the poor- pathetic fellow face to face and she gave him the lecture of his life as she described

in rich detail the sheer terror of the incident as it unfolded and the emotional scars that she has born since. In the middle of her rant he burst into a torrent of tears and pleaded repeatedly, "Mechila!" At that moment her heart turned around and she told him, "I feel so sorry for you! Look at you! You've suffered so much! You lost your health. You're so broken! Not only am I willing to forgive you now but I want to give you a Brocho! May HASHEM grant you a complete-recovery!"

It's hard to know who displayed greater nobility. He for the asking or her for the granting of forgiveness! In any case we see how a sincere Teshuvah can move one, anyone from the dreaded "seat of judgment" **to the "seat of mercy"**. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.