

'SIN... DON'T LAUGH!'

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

We find ourselves this week in the midst of the Ten Days of Repentance, the days from *Rosh HaShana* to *Yom Kippur*. An interesting idea - ten days for self-examination, reflection, and (we hope) self-improvement. But do we understand "repentance?"

The world today almost laughs at "sin" and "repentance." Almost? Let me rephrase that: the world does laugh at the whole idea of "sin." Part of that is denial - if I laugh at something, I don't have to take it seriously. Another part, however, comes from the non-Jewish conception of sin and repentance - which, because of the society we live in, has become quite pervasive in Jewish minds.

Many who no longer go to church describe confession as "going on Sunday to confess what we did Friday, and plan to do again on Tuesday." I don't know if that's accurate; I'm Jewish. I only know that this could not be further from the Jewish idea of repentance.

So instead of these terms, let us use "transgression" and "return," words which correspond more closely to a Jewish understanding of these concepts. Indeed, while we may translate "*Teshuva*" as repentance, it comes from the infinitive *LaShuv*: to return.

We know certain things to be right, and others to be wrong, and we cross the line. We go where we should not have gone - and in doing so, we move away from G-d. But in His great kindness, He leaves the door open for us to come back to Him, and restore our connection. That is the purpose of return - to come back to G-d.

If so, is it not obvious that *Teshuva* must happen in our hearts, and not in our mouths? Maimonides, in his codification of Jewish Law, says this explicitly (Hil. Tshuva 2:3): "One who confesses with words, but has not decided in his heart to abandon [his transgressions], is like a person who goes to a ritual bath while holding something unclean in his hand: immersion in the bath will not help him until he throws the item away!"

Repentance is an activity of the heart - a decision to change our behavior, and to abandon a path that has led us away from G-d instead of towards Him. And to make it easier for us, G-d gave us a certain time of year when He comes close to us, and invites us to go in the right direction. The Talmud in tractate *Rosh HaShana* says that the verse, "Seek out *HaShem* when He can be found, call upon Him when He is close" (Isaiah 55:6) refers to these Ten Days. Maimonides also says (2:6) that "Even though return and crying [over our errors] is always beautiful, during the ten days between

Rosh HaShana and *Yom Kippur* it is exceptionally so, and is accepted immediately" - and he refers us again to that same verse.

It is as if G-d is right here in the neighborhood, and all we need to do is drop in! It is that easy for us to use this time for a rebirth, for making new beginnings in the right direction. Should we wake up in two weeks, feeling as if He left without us? Let's take advantage of this time of year, and come away from the season feeling closer to G-d.

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