

SUBMIT, ADMIT, AND FIX IT!

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And it will be, when he hears the words of this curse, that he will bless himself in his heart, saying, 'I will have peace, for I am ruled by my own heart,' in order to satisfy his thirsts." [29:18]

Last year at this time, I spoke about how frightening these words are. Anyone, as my teacher Rabbi Asher Rubenstein pointed out, can fall into the trap of complacency. One who decides to follow his own heart, rather than attempting to improve and better fulfill his obligations, falls under a curse!

But of course, we must examine the opposite side as well - simply admitting our defects, recognizing that our actions have been inadequate, is a major step forward. Maimonides and the Sha'arei Teshuvah, outlining the necessary steps for return to G-d, both begin with admitting error. This is the prerequisite for the entire process.

Several months ago, I started home from the office unusually late - and my lateness was foremost in my mind. I took a shortcut down a rural road in Owings Mills, which at one point is just the sort of road "intended" to be driven at 50 mph (that's about 80 kph), but which the powers that be have posted at 30 mph instead. Owings Mills' Finest are well-aware of both the posted speed, and the speed which the road seems to encourage in most drivers.

As soon as I saw the brake lights go red on the large car parked off to the side, I knew those lights were meant for me. By the time the flashers began rotating, I was already pulling off just ahead of him. Why make him follow me down the road? And when he walked over, leaned down, and said, "I pulled you over because you were doing 50 mph in a 30 mph zone," I looked at my speedometer and said "I'm sure that's exactly what I was doing." I mean, what else was I going to say? I told him that I had come out of work late, just around the corner (this was maybe 300 yards (meters) from my office), and had not been paying attention.

Some three minutes (three extremely long minutes, as you might well imagine) later, the officer returned - with a warning. After receiving it, I had the chutzpah to ask why he had given me that rather than a well-deserved, \$85, four-point, insurance-raising ticket.

His answer? "You were polite, and you admitted you were wrong. The guys who argue with me will get a ticket every time."

It's such an obvious lesson! The first thing we must do is: admit we were wrong! How can we correct our actions if we don't recognize first that... they aren't correct already? Now, admittedly, not every police officer works this way. But he was right - I **have** been more careful since. Maybe I learned my lesson without the punishment. And here in the parsha, G-d is telling us that He created the world this way, and made this part of human nature. Admit you are wrong, He tells us, and you are already on the road to recovery.

Have you ever heard someone say, "I'm a good Jew?" This expression bothers me no end. If one is ready to say publicly, "I'm good," it means "I no longer need to improve." It has been my pleasure to meet some **extremely** "good Jews," models of kindness, consideration, charity, and prayer and learning as well. And I've never heard one of them ever using this expression on him- or herself. "I'm **trying**" they say, and this sends an entirely different message.

Our very first obligation is to realize that sometimes we aren't so good, after all. This isn't negative, it's a huge step in the right direction. Because now that we realize something is broken... we know something needs to be fixed!

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