

A CLEAN SLATE

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And now, Israel, what does HaShem your G-d ask of you, but that you fear HaShem your G-d, to go in all His ways and to love Him..." [Eikev 10:12]

In the Talmud, our Sages ask, "is fear of Heaven such a small thing?" And their answer is, yes, to Moshe it was a small matter. They use a parable: if your friend asks to borrow a large amount of money, and you have it, then it seems like a little thing -- whereas if someone asks you for even a small amount, but you don't have it, then to you it seems large. "However," the *Oznaim L'Torah* asks, "Moshe gave the Torah to us! If it isn't a small thing to us, then how can Moshe speak to us as if it is?"

There is, however, another way to look at this passage. Moshe has just described how the Nation of Israel sinned with the Golden Calf, causing the destruction of the First Tablets and -- had Moshe not intervened -- their own destruction as well. *Rashi*, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, says that this verse is coming to teach us that *"even though you have done all this, His mercy and His love are still upon you, and with all of the sins which you have done before Him, this is all He asks."*

According to the *Medrash*, the language of "and now" is used to denote returning to G-d. The *Oznaim L'Torah* explains that *"What happened, happened. 'And now' let us start anew, like a newborn child -- and that which you sinned before, let it not be remembered or considered, or even come to mind, if from this day forward you will fear HaShem your G-d, to go in his ways and to love him."*

Sometimes we do bad things. Things we really and truly regret -- and we feel guilty. Sometimes, we even feel worthless. We wonder, "how can I go to pray? Will He listen to me? Who am I to ask for my needs?" The verse is telling us that this is not what G-d wants! He wants us to admit our errors, "mend our ways," and go forward. When a person sins against his neighbor, he must return anything he stole, and ask forgiveness from that person. And when a person sins against G-d, he must ask His forgiveness. But then, it is also important to be able to move on, and not to become burdened by one's own inadequacy to the point where one is unable to continue working on living a G-dly life.

As a Chassidic Rebbe once put it: our Evil Inclination doesn't even want the sins that we do. What it wants is the despair that can overtake us when we do them. The despair can be more harmful than the sin itself.

Rabbeinu Yona, in his *Foundations of Repentance*, puts this as follows: *"A person who has transgressed and sinned, and comes to take refuge beneath the wings of the Divine Presence, and to*

enter into the paths of return... On that day, let him cast aside all the sins which he has done, and let him make himself as if he were born that day, without merit or fault, and this day is the beginning of his actions... For he may think, 'how can I be so proud and return, when I have committed all sorts of sins innumerable times? How can I come before Him again, embarrassed like a thief caught in the act?'... Let him not think this way... Just let him think that this is the way of our Creator, Blessed be He, Whose hand is outstretched to receive those who return..."

So indeed, this all that G-d asks: that you return to Him, admit your error, and that you go forward with the desire to serve and love G-d. And that's all!

Good Shabbos!

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