

# THIS TIME, LET'S DO IT RIGHT

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"And you shall return to HaShem your G-d, and you shall listen to His voice, like all that I have commanded you today, you and your children, with all your hearts and with all your souls." [Deut. 30:2]*

This Torah reading, which discusses Return to G-d, is read annually on the last Shabbos of the year. It reminds us that the Ten Days of Return are approaching. We will soon celebrate Rosh HaShanah, the beginning of the new year, the Day of Judgement. Then, on the tenth of Tishrei, we will observe Yom Kippur, which we often translate as the Day of Repentance.

In Jewish thought, we don't like to talk about "repentance." The non-Jewish versions of sin and repentance are so pervasive that we cannot hear these words without imagining fire and brimstone. The Hebrew term "Teshuva" means \*return\*, as found in our verse: "and you shall return to HaShem your G-d." The idea of return is to go back home, to be the children of G-d we were created to be, and live up to our spiritual potential. Fire and brimstone have nothing to do with it!

The best form of return is not motivated by fear of G-d or fear of punishment. True return is motivated by love.

When we look at our parents and all they have done for us, we feel grateful. We love them. We want them to be proud of us, and we want to do the favors they ask of us.

The same should be true in the relationship with our Father in Heaven. It's not always easy to do what is morally right, but we know that He sees everything we do, and we want Him to be proud. This is return motivated by love.

How powerful is this return? Our Sages say that if a person's return is motivated by fear, then his or her deliberate transgressions are treated as if they were careless errors. But if one is motivated by love, then those same deliberate transgressions are converted into merits!

The Chassidic master, the Ba'al Shem Tov, offers a parable: if a person walks into a dark room and turns on the light, then the darkness disappears. To anyone who walks into the room afterwards, it is as if it were never dark at all.

Return, he says, is so powerful that it can transform a person in much the same way. Even a past filled with misdeeds can be turned to light.

For most of us, unfortunately, it is easy to think of some wrong we committed that we would rather not have done. The fact is that if we commit ourselves to returning to G-d, to trying to do what is right, we can wipe those transgressions away.

In order for this process to work, of course, it must be sincere. And the first thing which one must do is to stop misbehaving.

Maimonides, in his codification of Jewish Law, says (Hil. Teshuva 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!"

The Talmud in tractate Rosh HaShanah 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 of Return. Maimonides also says (Hil. Teshuva 2:6) that "even though return... is always beautiful, during the ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur it is exceptionally so, and is accepted immediately."

We now have a special opportunity, in the days that lie ahead, to make lasting changes in our lives. We can more easily throw off the weight of our past errors, and decide to do better in the future.

Let us take full advantage of the chance we are given to do it right, this time around!

Good Shabbos and L'Shana Tova,  
Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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