

PERFECT MITZVOS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a day of unlimited potential. More than any other time of the year, each of us is offered the opportunity to "clean the slate" and start anew. *"If your sins are scarlet red, they will be white as snow; if they are red as crimson, they will be [white as] wool."* [Isaiah 1:18]

If a person takes advantage of this tremendous opportunity, the possibilities are endless. The Talmud says that a sincere penitent who truly reforms himself is even greater than a person who was completely righteous all along (Talmud Brachos 34).

The Dubner Maggid explained how this can be, with one of his classic parables:

A very scholarly young man, from a poor family living in a small village, was engaged to marry the daughter of a wealthy family living in a large city. The father of the bride willingly covered all of the wedding expenses, asking the father of the groom only to dress his son in a fine suit which a city-dweller might wear to his wedding. The second father did his absolute best to satisfy his soon-to-be "mechutan" [Hebrew for a person's child's spouse's father], commissioning the best tailor in the village and asking him to use the best material. The results were excellent.

Nonetheless, the groom was not destined to wear that suit; while traveling to the wedding, burglars made off with their luggage. His father and he arrived in the city wearing only their dusty overalls from the village. The father of the bride, given that there was no choice, immediately called in one of the city's finest tailors, and commissioned a rush order for new clothing for both father and son. These would arrive with time to spare, allowing the wedding to proceed without further incident.

The groom recognized, however, that his father was upset to the point of depression about the suit which he had ordered back in the village, the one item of value which the burglars had stolen. So this brilliant young man consoled his father as follows: "you know, it seems more appropriate that you should be delighted that my suit was stolen, rather than so upset. I am certain that even with all the effort that you made, my bride's father would never have been completely satisfied with a suit tailored in our small village. Even if he never said anything, I am sure he would have found defects. Now, however, our outfits will be entirely to his taste, created by a truly expert tailor! He'll be as happy as could be, and we'll both have new suits!"

Even the most righteous person remains human, and cannot perform a mitzvah in the most perfect way. Slipping concentration and delays are only a few of the "defects" which detract from our deeds. But concerning a sincere penitent who, through love of G-d, abandons his or her bad deeds and

turns to good, Reish Lakish says in the Talmud (Yuma 86b), "his deliberate crimes are reversed to merits" -- as if he had performed mitzvos! And those mitzvos, of course, are designed by G-d Himself, inserted into the record in place of the crimes committed. Something done by G-d, of course, is perfect!

Who would not like to have "perfect mitzvos," made by G-d Himself, on the boards? Only the truly repentant person has this opportunity.

As Reish Lakish explains there, different sorts of repentance have different effects -- one classic distinction being between a person who repents only because of fear of G-d, or even just fear of punishment, vs. the one who repents because he or she now recognizes the greatness of G-d and His Torah, loves G-d, and wants to behave in a godly way.

Rabbi Boruch Epstein says that this is the reason that this day is actually called "Yom Kippurim", "Atonements" in the plural. There are different sorts of atonement, for different sorts of repentance. Every one of us can, of course, aim for the highest!

Wishing you a meaningful fast, and a final sealing in the Book of Life for a good year,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken