

TESHUVAH: CHANGES

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah

The Torah explains how "This mitzvah that I command you today - it is not hidden from you and it is not distant...Rather, the matter is very close to you - in your mouth and in your heart - so that you can keep it. (Devarim 30:11-14). The Ramban interprets "this mitzvah" as a reference to Teshuvah, "Repentance" and the need to return back to G-d. The ability to do teshuvah lies within man's reach.

Teshuvah, repentance is a marvellous and miraculous phenomenon.

It utterly defies the laws of nature. One would have logically assumed that bygones are just that - bygones. And it would be psychologically unhealthy to repeatedly agonize about the question: "what if?" Leave it alone! It has happened. Live with it. Move on! Time-machines belong to the genre of science fiction. Why not just focus on the future and forget about the past.

But no.

While the concepts of wisdom, prophecy and Torah expectedly dictate that a sinner be punished, as per the rules of culpability for human action, G-d asks that the sinner repent and immediately be atoned and absolved of his iniquities (Yerushalmi, Makos 2:7).

In-other-words, the past is not the fête a complète. It is not fixed and unalterable. Remarkably, repentance has that creepy, supernatural thread to it. Here standing in the present, one is able to change the actions of the past. That is absolutely incredible!

The Talmud states "Teshuvah is so great that deliberate transgressions are treated as inadvertent ones where repentance is out of fear... Teshuvah is so great that deliberate transgressions are treated as meritorious where repentance is out of love" (Yoma 86b).

Teshuvah is, indeed, an otherworldly concept: its creation predates the universe (Pesachim 54a) and it operates according to the exceptional kindness of G-d Who is not bound by the laws of existence and the letter of the law that demands justice. G-d explicitly explains how he does not want the death of the wicked, but for them to repent and live (Yechzekel 18:31-32).

Moreover, G-d greatly yearns for man to return. Israel is exhorted "Return O Israel to Hashem your G-d" (Hoshea 14:2). He asks for the sinner to re- establish a lifeline to G-d the Source of all Life.

Amazingly, G-d does not even hold a grudge against this person for his treacherous and disloyal behavior. On the contrary, he even considers this as if man is actually 'doing' Him a favour! (Yoma 86).

Teshuvah, from the word shov, "to return" is what repentance is all about. It is the "return" to the right path in the service of G-d, "return" to the inner self and the divine soul within man, and the "return" to being who you really are.

This, of course, is with the realization that one has earlier lost the plot and wandered from the right path. Teshuvah is where man reaffirms his connection to G-d. He is back on route to where he belongs.

No holes are barred for the penitent in his journey homewards. He has a direct line to the Heavenly Throne (Pesikta Rabbosai 44). His teshuvah is equated with ascending to Jerusalem, building the Temple and sacrificing an offering on the altar (Vayikra 7:2). The Gates of Repentance are always open to him (Devarim Rabbah 2). Indeed, the position he will occupy in the Heavenly realm is incomparable (Berachos 34b).

Teshuvah is a tantalizing prospect. It is an "offer" that man pathetically ignores at his peril.

But, like all "offers", this is the small print. Teshuvah is accompanied with one small caveat.

And that is: Teshuvah is only possible within this world, in the world of the living, where man is in a state of flux.

Here he can alter the past and charter where he goes from here. But this is contingent upon a teshuvah that is the genuine article. It has to be with sincerity. With heartfelt regret and deep remorse. It has to be with a complete break from any earlier sinful modes of behaviour. And with a full commitment for the future to live a life in the loyal service of G-d.

May we all merit to have our repentance accepted by G-d.

Wishing all readers and all our Jewish brethren to be sealed in a healthy, peaceful life in the coming year! Amen! The course is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of SET IN STONE (2004: Targum) about the meaning of mitzvah observance and PEOPLE OF THE BOOK (2007: Targum) about the biblical personalities. A London-based writer and educator, he learned at the Gateshead and Mir Yeshivas, holds a Bachelor of Science (Honors) business degree from London's City University, and is a Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.