

THE TIES THAT BIND

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

You will return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice

Meshech Chochmah: This is a beautiful thought – upbeat, optimistic, chipper. But can it stand up to scrutiny? Returning to Hashem after some fling with transgression takes free-willed determination. Free-choice is what we are all about. How can Hashem guarantee a return, when we have the ability to make choices in quite a different direction?

Chazal^[2] speak of a number of different ways of looking at the sinner. When Wisdom is asked about the fate of the sinner, it replies that the sinner must die. So long as a person has not rejected his own sin, logic dictates that he loses both his standing as a beloved child in the eyes of G-d, as well as his lease on life. A person ought to be able to claim the latter only so long as he does not get in the way of Hashem's plan for the universe. Every *aveirah* slows down that plan.

The Torah is next to be consulted. It opines more liberally. Let the sinner bring a *korban* and find atonement. This implies that even the sinner preserves enough of his standing before Hashem that He continues to care for him. Not only does He care, but He provides a modality of return to his former greatness, through the *avodah* of *korbanos*. Such offerings are accepted even from a repeat offender of some mitzvah of the Torah.

Then HKBH Himself is asked. He responds that the sinner should do *teshuvah*. This is far broader a solution than the previous two. It applies even to transgressors of any of the three cardinal sins of Judaism – sins so severe that the offender is seen as the equivalent of rejecting Torah in its entirety. Nonetheless, this sinner is urged to repent, and restore himself despite the seriousness of his offense.

In our *pasuk*, we learn that this *teshuvah* is so close at hand, that the return of the many is a given – despite our freedom to choose. The key is the verse before, which speaks of “you will take it to your heart.” Vouchsafed to the heart of a Jew is a commodity that will lead straight to a return to Hashem. In the Jewish heart he will find a love for the Jewish people. That love guarantees an eventual return to Hashem! When a Jew is in touch with the love of his people that became part of his nature at Sinai, he will connect with his spiritual roots. By returning to his people, a Jew will certainly return as well to the G-d of that people.

Why Jews Are Know-It-Alls^[3]

For this commandment...it is not hidden from you and it is not distant...Rather, the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and your heart – to perform it.

Meshech Chochmah: Hashem created everything with exquisite wisdom. It is a truism that what we need the most is plentifully available. As we move away from absolute necessity, items become less abundant, and require us to invest more time and effort to acquire them.

A newborn cannot survive without nutrition. HKBH provides its mother with a perfectly matched food for him. We can survive an even shorter while without air, which is available for the asking. We can go longer without water, but it is still available, although it takes greater effort to make it available constantly. Bread is even less pressing, and takes many more steps to produce. Shelter is even harder to come by. So are discretionary food items like meat. Luxury items are in shorter supply, and much more difficult to gain. Being less important, they are less plentiful. (Alas, the more people partake of luxury items, the more reliant they become on them. Man's acquired tastes turn him into a slave to these tastes and fads, forcing him to work ever harder to achieve his "needs," while he could have acquired his natural needs with much less effort.)

The pattern carries over to other areas. Man's body is hard-wired to respond without thinking to the situations that require a reaction. He can avoid danger because he feels pain, and because the body produces the quick flight reaction to the harm it senses.

And so it is in the realms of ideas and personality characteristics – the things that make us human. What we need most is the most available. We find it easy to promote justice and to despise miscarriages of it. We identify with Hillel's maxim, "Whatever is distasteful to you, do not inflict on your fellow." When we free ourselves of lusts and self-interest that blind our *sechel*, we find a hatred of injustice and a love for good engraved on our hearts. (For this reason, when a person dies and is freed from all earthly desires, his *neshamah* recoils from all the evil he inflicted upon it in his lifetime!)

This persists in intellectual areas as well. Certain truths belong to all of us, and we discover them without effort. We realize that the whole is greater than a part; that something cannot be both a triangle and a quadrilateral.

In our grasp of the spiritual, Hashem has placed some basics firmly within reach. The existence of G-d, His role as the ultimate Source of all existence – these ideas are hard-wired in the *sechel* of a person whose thinking has not become twisted and warped.

This is what Ben Azai meant^[4] by pointing to "This is the book of the story of Man"^[5] as the greatest principle in the Torah. When Man is closest to his roots, and untainted by his desires and faulty premises, he can look into himself and find within a veritable book full of instruction in seeking justice and rejecting injustice.

Something similar takes place in the Jewish *neshamah*. There, when the soul is unadulterated by desires and wants, a Jew finds a burning love for Hashem, and alacrity to honor Him. This translates into a receptivity to all the many mitzvos that demonstrate love for Hashem. And this stands behind Chazal's treatment of Iyov's words,^[6] "I see G-d from my flesh." When I can distance myself from the influence of some lesser urges, says Iyov, I can reach into myself and find there etched into my being a love for Hashem and willingness to serve Him.

1. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Devarim 30:2 .
2. Yalkut Yechezkel 358. A similar – but not entirely identical – development is in Yerushalmi Makos 2:6 .
3. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Devarim 30:11-14 .
4. Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:4 .
5. Bereishis 5:1 .
6. Iyov 19:26 .