

# POINT OF RETURN

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

This week's parsha, Bo, begins with Hashem commanding Moshe:

*"Come to Pharaoh, because I have made stubborn his heart..."*

Rashi notes that although Moshe is told to go to Pharaoh, the Torah does not make clear what the purpose of his visit is to be. It must be, Rashi concludes, that his visit was in order to warn Pharaoh about the impending plague of locusts.

Mefarshim question this. How could the purpose of Moshe's visit have been to warn Pharaoh? One warns someone about an impending danger that they are capable of avoiding. To warn him about an unavoidable, inevitable peril, serves no purpose. Pharaoh, at this point, had lost his free will. He could no longer repent - as Hashem Himself testifies, "I have made stubborn his heart." So what purpose could warning him possibly serve?

The Gemara (Chagiga 15a) tells the tragic story of Elisha ben Avuya - also known as "Acher" - who after many years as a renowned Torah scholar, lost his faith, and began to sin. One of Acher's greatest disciples had been the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Meir. The Talmud relates that even after his rebbe, Acher, had abandoned his Judaism, Rabbi Meir continued to visit him, partly in order to try to bring him back.

Once, Rabbi Meir said to his rebbe: "What is the meaning of that which is written (Iyov/Job 28:17), 'Gold and crystal cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged with golden vessels?'"

"This refers," said Acher, "to the words of Torah, which are as difficult to acquire as gold, and as easy to lose as crystal is to break!"

"No!" said Rabbi Meir, "your rebbe, Rabbi Akiva, did not explain it like that. Rather, he said, 'Just like vessels of gold and crystal, even if they broke, can always be fixed (even crystal can be reheated and re-formed) - so too, even the greatest Torah scholar, if he has done wrong, can still repent!' Rebbe," pleaded Rabbi Meir, "relent from your ways!"

"Impossible!" said Acher, "I can not return. For from behind the [heavenly] partition I have heard [the voice of G-d] proclaiming (Yirmiyahu/Jeremiah 3:14), 'Return, O wayward sons - except for Acher!' [Evidently, I am beyond repentance.]"

Even so, the Gemara relates, Rabbi Meir continued [unsuccessfully] to hound his rebbe, pleading with him to repent. Did Rabbi Meir not believe in Acher's heavenly voice? Can one indeed sin to the

point where he is "beyond teshuva?"

The short answer is: Yes, one can pervert his life so badly that the Gates of Teshuva are closed in his face. One can, so to speak, sin to the point of "no return." Indeed, this is precisely what occurred with Acher. The heavenly voice was proof that his teshuva was no longer acceptable.

Yet, asks Agra de-Pirka, what would have been if, after the initial shock of hearing the heavenly proclamation "Return, O wayward sons - except for Acher," Elisha would have said to himself: "So what! Perhaps they can prevent me from entering the Garden of Eden, but they can't stop me from trying to salvage my wretched life! I will do my best to repent. If my teshuva will not be accepted - so be it. At least I will know that I have not lived out my last days wallowing in the disgust of my own sin!" Would his teshuva indeed have been thrown in his face?

A rebbe has a very difficult student. Continued threats seem to be falling on deaf ears. He has already been suspended for a period, for a day, and for a week. Finally, in desperation, the rebbe gives him an ultimatum: "That's it," he says earnestly, "no more chances! Mark my words: The next time will be your last! If you misbehave one more time, we're through. I will never again let you back into my class." Soon afterward, the student pulls a prank. "Out!" hollers the rebbe, "and never come back again!"

What, I once asked my students, should the "wayward student" do? Should he 1) Plead with his rebbe for "one more chance"? 2) Leave the class and - obeying his rebbe's words - never come back. 3) Come back tomorrow (or next week) and plead for his rebbe's forgiveness?

It's hard to know for sure, but my students felt that to some extent the rebbe was really testing his student. Did he really care about remaining in yeshiva? Would he come back, or would he use his rebbe's harsh punishment as an excuse to leave the yeshiva forever - "After all, my rebbe told me never to come back!" At any rate, they decided, to make no attempt to placate his rebbe would be a major mistake.

This, explain sefarim, was Hashem's test of Acher. The voice he heard was very real. Indeed, having heard that fatal voice itself made repentance almost impossible. Yet the potential was still there. Elisha could have ignored the voice, and done what's right.

Pharaoh's heart had been hardened. He had sinned and done evil to the point that Hashem was no longer interested in his changing his mind. He had had his chance - now it was too late. Let him die in the abyss of his own sin. Yet Hashem still sends Moshe to warn him. The warning implies the potential - however remote - for repentance. Pharaoh could have mustered the last drops of goodness left within him, and heeded Moshe's warning. If he really wanted to, he could have battled against the odds, and won. [Nesivos Shalom]

Sometimes, the Acher/Pharaoh within us would have us believe that we too have "jumped off the deep end," that we have corrupted our lives and misguided ourselves to the point of no return. This

saddening thought must be ignored. We must rejoice in the realization that there is - no matter how convinced we may be otherwise - no "point of no return." Ultimately, it is the acceptance or denial of this thought that will guide our future paths, not the sin that brought us there in the first place.

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