THE DOORS TO TESHUVA NEVER FULLY CLOSE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Hashem appeared in the Tent, in a cloud pillar, and the cloud pillar stood at the entrance of the Tent. Hashem said to Moshe, "Behold you will lie with your forefathers; this nation will arise and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land, in whose midst he comes. They will abandon Me, and break the covenant I have sealed with them. My anger will blaze against them on that day. I will forsake them. I will conceal My face from them, and they will be consumed. Many bad things and troubles will befall them. On that day, they will say, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these troubles have befallen me?' And I will [further] conceal my face from them on that day... (31: 16-18)

Aside from their ominous undertone, the above verses are troublesome for another reason: It seems that at some point the nation recognizes its wrongdoings, and acknowledges it has strayed from Hashem. "On that day, they will say, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these troubles have befallen me?'" Instead of reconciliation, their words seem to distance them even further: "And I will conceal my face from them on that day..." The concept of teshuva, the validity of repentance, is reinforced numerous times in the Torah, most notably at the beginning of this week's double-parsha: "It will be, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you, and you will take it to heart, amidst all the nations Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you. You will return to Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice..." (30:1-2) The Torah goes on to promise that Hashem will accept our teshuva, bring us back to our Land, once again make us prosperous, etc. Yet here Hashem is angered by our attempt at acknowledgement—one of the crucial facets of repentance.

In the introduction to his treatise on teshuva, Sha'arei Teshuva, Rabbeinu Yona writes: "One of the great kindnesses Hashem, blessed is He, did with His creations was to prepare a way for them to elevate themselves from their misdeeds, and escape the trap of sin. To raise themselves from the depths, and remove His anger from them: He taught them to return to Him if they sin... And even if they have sinned gravely and continuously, and rebelled against Hashem, He never closes the doors of teshuva on them... as it is written, (Yirmiyah 3:22), "Return, wayward children..."

It is strange that Rabbeinu Yona uses this verse to prove that, "He never closes the doors of teshuva." The famous teacher of Rabbi Meir, Elisha ben Avuyah, also known as Acheir, abandoned the Torah. Rabbi Meir was devastated by losing his Rebbe, and having to see him in such a sorry state; he exhausted himself in his efforts to convince him to repent. During one of his attempts, Acheir told him, "What do you want? You want me to repent? Forget it. I already heard a heavenly voice, from

'behind the curtain,' announce, 'Return, wayward children—except Acheir.'" (Chagiga 15a)

The Gemara would not record Acheir's retort were it not true. This presents us with two difficulties: 1) Rabbeinu Yona's assertion that it is a basic tenet of teshuva that the possibility to repent can not be revoked. 2) The verse that Rabbeinu Yona quotes in proof that "it's never too late" is the very same verse Acheir heard telling him not to bother.

Imagine a rebbe (teacher) who has been blessed with the world's-most- difficult talmid (student). The rebbe is a fantastic rebbe with endless (okay almost endless) patience, and has put up with a ridiculous amount of disruption, audacity, and outright chutzpah. There have been punishments, threats, reward programs; all for naught. The rebbe sees not only a difficult talmid; his classroom is falling apart. He realizes that if he doesn't put his foot down now, he will lose all control, the inmates will run the asylum, and there is no chance that anyone will learn anything more this year.

After a particularly difficult episode, he pulls what he hopes is his trump card. "That's it," he says, his voice shaking with indignation. "That is the last time you are going to ruin this for everyone. Mark my word: You have 0 chances. If you disturb, disrupt, or misbehave again, today, tomorrow, or next week, you're out. I've never kicked a talmid out of yeshiva before, but if you can't control yourself, you don't deserve to be here anymore."

The classroom was silent. Not one boy doubted the rebbe meant it seriously; not even the troublemaker. And it was clear to them, and perhaps even to him, that he was right. He had already been given far too many chances; there had to be and end-of-the-line somewhere, and now they knew where it was.

Amazingly, there was a change. Class-clown suddenly knew how to behave. He sat quietly, tried his best to listen, and refused to disturb in any way. This went on for the better part of a week. Good things though often come to an end, and at some point his model behaviour began to deteriorate, at first slightly, but then more rapidly. The kids sensed things would soon come to an edge. It was clear that Mr. Difficult was soon going to be back to his disruptive self.

Something or another finally got under the rebbe's skin. He had not forgotten his threat. "Out!" He bellowed. "Get out of my classroom, and don't come back. Find yourself another yeshiva; you're not welcome here any more." The kid started walking out of the classroom. "Where are you going? Don't just leave. Take your books, your Gemara, your jacket, your yo-yo, your sling-shot—everything. I meant what I said; I can't help you. You can't come back."

The next morning, to the class' great surprise, there he was outside the building with a Gemara in his hands. The speculation was his father had threatened the menahel (principal) and they were letting him come back. But when the yeshiva doors opened, he did not enter. This was even stranger.

The same thing played itself out the following day. There he was, with a Gemara, but he didn't enter the building—he didn't even try—and he didn't talk to anyone. On the third day, someone happened

to notice movement by the classroom window, and nonchalantly strolled over to get a better look. Yes. There he was, sitting directly below the window, with a Gemara, listening intently to the rebbe's shiur (lecture). Word spreads quickly in a classroom, and soon all the kids were in on the secret.

The rebbe noticed that everyone was finding excuses to stroll past the window. Curious, he discreetly walked by himself. Not letting on, the rebbe got a peak at what everyone else was looking at. He let things be, and went on teaching.

This went on for about a week. Every day the rebbe would check, and there he was, listening intently, without even momentarily removing his gaze from the page they were studying. It was astonishing. No longer able to resist, he waited until the class emptied out one recess, went to the window, and called the boy over. "What are you doing here? You probably think I'm going to take pity on you and let you back in the class."

"No."

"So then what are you doing here—what are you trying to accomplish?"

"I am just trying to understand the Gemara. After you threw me out, I did a lot of thinking, and I realized how foolish I had been. Too bad for me that it's too late—I know you can't let me back in class. Well you can kick me out of class, and rightly so, but you can't stop me from learning Torah. So I decided I'd learn Torah even if I'm not in class."

"My son," the rebbe said, tears welling in his eyes, "nothing you could have argued would have convinced me to let you come back. But instead of arguing, you have touched my soul with your pure desire to study Torah. It's never too late; come back in class."

"On that day, they will say, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these troubles have befallen me?'" They will despair. They will say in their hearts, "We deserve no better; there is nothing more to be done. We have been thrown out of our Land, and cast from before Hashem. We lost our chance."

In a sense, they are right. "My anger will blaze against them on that day. I will forsake them. I will conceal My face from them." Hashem, as it were, wants nothing to do with them. He has tossed them away. Yet they might have done like the small boy. They might have stood themselves quietly in a corner, opened a siddur, and poured their hearts out to Hashem. "Hashem can refuse to listen to our prayers. But that doesn't stop us from praying and repenting. As long as He allows our neshamos (souls) to remain in our bodies, we may use our life-breath to pray and praise Hashem."

In truth, teshuva can never be rejected, even when a heavenly voice says otherwise. This would have been the correct response, for them and for Acheir [Agra D'pirka]. In absence of it, there can only be further distance. "And I will conceal my face from them on that day..." Or as the Agra D'pirka puts it, paraphrasing a Gemara (Pesachim 86b), "Everything the Boss says to do you should listen, except if He says, "Leave."

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