

A HUNDRED BUCKS VS. REGRETS

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the double parsha of Nitzavim and Va'yelch. Being that it is the last week before Rosh Hashana, it is quite fitting that the parsha of t'shuva [repentance] is found in our reading.

"Because this mitzva [commandment] that I am commanding you today is not hidden from you nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens... It is not across the ocean... Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and your heart to do.[30:11-14]"

The Kli Yakar, among other commentators, explains that these passukim [verses] are referring to the mitzvah of t'shuva [repentance].

How does the sequence of these passukim pertain to t'shuva?

The Talmud [Yuma 86B] teaches that proper repentance is when one encounters the same situation with the same people in the same place and yet resists the temptation which he succumbed to previously. If so, the Kli Yakar explains, one might mistakenly think that if he sinned during a trip across the ocean, the only way to rectify that sin is by again crossing the ocean in order to encounter that same scenario. The passuk addresses that misconception by teaching that t'shuva is in fact very close to you. It's right by your mouth--it's sufficient to verbalize and confess the sin in prayer. It's right by your heart--it's sufficient to regret that which was done.

Even though our mouths and hearts are very close, it's not always so easy to honestly feel regret over things that we have or haven't done...

I was studying with a boy who had returned for a second year. By now he is committed to mitzvah observance, although that certainly was not the case when he first came to the Yeshiva. As we began to discuss Rosh Hashana, he expressed to me that he was having major difficulty with this whole t'shuva idea. How can I regret what I did during my high school years? I didn't know much about Judaism and I cared even less but I made some great friends and I had a blast! Am I supposed to regret not wearing t'fillin? I didn't appreciate the importance and beauty of t'fillin so it only made sense that I didn't wear them. Now that I know, I have been wearing them and I plan to continue wearing them, but I don't regret not having worn them. Isn't the fact that I'm doing it now good enough? Doesn't that show that I'm accepting that this is the right thing to do? Do I really have to regret not having done something that made no sense to me at the time?

I asked him what he thought. He responded that someone had tried to answer him in the following

way: Imagine that at a time in your life you were very insensitive to other people's sensitivities. You said things to them that deeply insulted them. You spoke in a way that really offended them. At the time you had no clue that you weren't being the perfect gentleman but a few years later you also developed those sensitivities. Looking back you wouldn't simply say that I acted according to what I then knew and I couldn't have been expected to have acted differently. Even though at the time you didn't know any better, now, with your newly developed sensitivities, you'd empathize with what you had put them through and you'd regret having acted in the way that you did.

He then explained that he didn't like that answer since it only really covered things done between man and man. However, G-d, who knows exactly where each person is coming from and where he's presently at, should not have gotten insulted if we messed up in regard to Him. He should understand and accept that now, as we gained an understanding in Judaism, we've changed our ways. So for not wearing t'fillin, there should be no regrets necessary...

Seeing this wasn't going to be easy I tried a different angle. Let's say, theoretically speaking of course, one used drugs heavily during a certain time in his life. In the neighborhood he was in, with the friends he'd hang with, his involvement was perfectly understandable. However, years later when he cleaned up his act and tried to get on with his life, he found that he had irreparably 'fried' about a quarter of his brain. During that care-free time in his life he had harmed himself eternally. Granted, then he didn't know any better but now that he does, wouldn't he regret his previous actions?

I was pretty happy with that but this guy was one tough customer. He countered that according to that he can see how one can regret it but not how one is obligated to. In the example that I gave, the person sees the harm that was done and he therefore regrets. However, when it comes to mitzvos, although we might learn that one causes himself eternal damage or deprives himself of the gratification of a spiritual level that had been within his grasp, we don't really see it tangibly in front of us. Therefore, how can he be obligated to regret not having worn his t'fillin?

I explained that we're obligated to study about the importance of mitzvos and to realize that their other-worldly repercussions are much more powerful than any harm we could imagine. "Too intangible to obligate me to regret," he maintained.

I tried one last salvo. Let's say that some crazy long-lost uncle approaches you and says: You're not going to believe this but I've been filming you since the day you turned thirteen. I've got it all on videotape. No, don't worry, I'm not going to show it to your mom, but I am going to give you a hundred dollars for every day that you put on t'fillin. Honestly, I asked him, would you then regret the days that you missed?

Yes, he conceded, then I'd feel some regret.

Maybe, just maybe, I said to him, our t'shuva and regret needs to be that, in our minds, the mitzvos we've missed out on aren't worth a hundred bucks...

I don't know Rabbi, maybe...

Like I said, one tough customer.

Good Shabbos,

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