

BUT I SAID I'M SORRY!

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The date was Tisha B'av 2449, almost 3,311 years ago. The Bnai Yisroel were poised to enter the land of Israel. Their entrance would have been from the Negev, and a single mountain, the Mountain of the Amorite, stood as the final barrier between them and the southern border of Israel. The Spies returned from their mission and their negative report succeeded in eroding the nation's fragile trust in G-d.

Following the incident of the Miraglim - Spies, Moshe, invoked the special formula of G-d's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy and beseeched G-d to forgive the Bnai Yisroel and not destroy them. G-d relented from His original intent of destroying the nation, but decreed that the Jews would have to remain in the desert another 38 years, during which all the men twenty years and older would die.

Following G-d's decree that the Jews would have to stay in the desert a total of forty years, the Torah records (14:40) that a number of Jews attempted to enter Israel without G-d's permission. Moshe begged them not to do so; however, they ignored Moshe, and hoping to avoid a clash with the Amorites who occupied that immediate area, they attempted to traverse the Mountain of the Amorites (elev. 3,300') and enter Eretz Yisroel. In the end, they walked into an ambush set by the Canaanites and were defeated.

Considering the fact that Moshe had accomplished a reduction in G-d's original punishment, and that G-d was clearly still angry at the Bnai Yisroel for their loss of faith in Him, why did these men ignore Moshe's advice and G-d's decree and attempt to enter Eretz Yisroel without His permission?

The Eleventh Principle of Faith, (the Ani Maamins) states as follows: "I believe with complete faith that the Creator, Blessed is His Name, rewards with good those who observe His commandments, and punishes those who violate His commandments." This means that for every one of our actions there is a consequence. If we follow the dictates of G-d's law, we will be rewarded. If we go against G-d's commandments, we will be punished.

How do we reconcile Teshuva - repentance with the inevitability of punishment? Is the intent of the Eleventh Principle that punishment is only when there is no repentance, but if there is Teshuva then punishment is suspended? Or, is the goal of Teshuva different and more expansive than merely avoiding punishment, and in fact, may have no effect at all on the inevitability of punishment?

Considering that G-d Himself is the source of the greatest good and benefit, it makes sense that

punishment and reward should be a matter of closeness or distance to that source of goodness. Therefore, punishment should be defined as any consequence that either distances us from G-d, or creates a set of circumstances that cloud our awareness of G-d's manifest presence. Reward should be defined as any consequence that brings us closer to G-d, or creates a set of circumstances that increase our awareness of G-d's manifest presence.

Most people labor under the hopeful misconception that saying, "I'm sorry, " is sufficient to avoid punishment. This was never the intent of Teshuva. The goal of repentance, as the term Teshuva - to return implies, is to reestablish in the aftermath of having sinned (which creates a distance between us and G-d) a closeness with G-d or with the person who we had harmed or offended. Therefore, it is important for us to differentiate between reward and punishment and the sometimes inevitability of consequence.

Reward and punishment are byproducts of our relationship with G-d. Consequence is the direct reaction that every action sets in motion. For example; if a person is negligent and breaks his neighbor's window, what should he do? Clearly, the individual must pay for the damaged window and should also say he's sorry for the damage. The payment is for the damages to his neighbor's property, and the apology is to compensate for any inconvenience or assumed or real insult. It doesn't make sense that the apology alone should suffice. Regardless of the social implications, proper restitution must be made for the damaged property. It also doesn't make sense to assume that monetary remuneration is sufficient to rebuild the neighborly relationship. Apologies, reassurances, and appropriate measures to avoid the same thing reoccurring must also be extended.

In the case of the Miraglim, the balance between Teshuva and inevitable consequence was more complex. On the one hand, Teshuva and G-d's forgiveness was essential for reestablishing the nation's relationship with G-d. On the other hand, the damage to the soul of the nation had to be repaired. A simple, "We're sorry, " wouldn't suffice. The closeness with G-d was reestablished the moment that G-d said to Moshe (14:20) I will grant forgiveness as you have requested. However, there was still significant damage that needed repair. (14:21) and as G-d's glory fills all the world, I will punish all the people who saw My glory and the miracles that I did in Egypt and the desert, but still tried to test me these ten times by not obeying Me. G-d's decree that all the men over twenty years of age would die in the desert was the inevitable consequence to the Sin of the Spies. No amount of saying "We're sorry" could suffice - restitution had to be made.

The Sin of the Miraglim indicated how ill prepared the Jews were to occupy Eretz Yisroel. The goal of the "consequence" was to correct that deficiency and prepare the nation to occupy the land. Therefore, the nation's punishment was not immediate. Only the actual spies were punished right away. The goal of the 38 years of being in the desert was to rebuild the nation's trust in G-d so that they would never again question G-d's ability to care for them.

The generation that would occupy the land would be responsible to interface with Eretz Yisroel and spread the awareness of G-d to the rest of the world. The Sin of the Spies caused a limiting of G-d's "glory" - meaning, the awareness of G-d's absolute control over every facet of the universe. The report of the Spies caused the Jews to question whether G-d could fulfill His promise. Would He be able to best the 31 kings of Canaan? Therefore, that generation could not be the ones to occupy the land and build a kingdom on an unshakable foundation of faith and trust in G-d. However, during the 40 years in the desert they would model for the new generation, that would occupy Eretz Yisroel, how they must behave. In the end, every individual directly impacted by the Sin of the Miraglim became more aware of G-d's manifest presence and control. In the end, the punishment and the consequence resulted in greater "good."

Accepting the difference between punishment and inevitable consequence isn't easy. Most of us would like to make our past failings simply disappear, and hope that our saying, "I'm sorry" is sufficient. In truth, as we all know, the more intimate the relationship the more complex the Teshuva. How often do we want to make it all go away with a heartfelt apology only to be confronted by our "victims" reluctance or inability to let go of the past? How often does the attempted apology turn into righteous indignation and further offense, hurt, and distance? Unfortunately, it is our unwarranted expectation that the apology should suffice which gets us into trouble. We need to accept that some hurts don't simply disappear with an apology. We must accept that certain behaviors carry inevitable consequences that are beyond our immediate control. This was the mistake of the group of Jews who attempted to enter Eretz Yisroel after the sin of the Miraglim. They heard the terrible decree of G-d and wanted to make it all go away with their heartfelt Teshuva and apology. They wanted to believe that if they would show G-d how much they wanted to occupy Eretz Yisroel, G-d would relent and forgive the past. However, they refused to take into account that the Sin of the Spies caused inevitable consequence that wouldn't go away just because they had said they were sorry.

It is incumbent upon us all to accept the full spectrum of consequences that our actions set in motion. Some of them are satisfied with a simple apology; others demand greater effort and time. However, one thing is absolutely certain. Every action results in a consequence of reward or punishment. It is our choice to work within the framework of G-d's justice and utilize every opportunity, whether seemingly a reward or a punishment, to be closer to G-d and those who we are supposed to love.

Copyright © 1999 by [Rabbi Aron Tendler](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
