

NO EXCUSE NOT TO 'DO TESHUVAH'

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 385, Fasting On Rosh Hashana. Good Shabbos!

No Excuse Not To "Do Teshuvah"

According to the standard ordering of weekly Torah readings, Nitzavim is always read before Rosh HaShanah. Despite the fact that our current order of parshiyos (readings) is not necessarily the way that it was always practiced, there could be no more appropriate parsha to read at precisely this time of year. Nitzavim contains the following series of pasukim [verses]:

"For this mitzvah that I am prescribing to you today is not too wondrous for you, it is not too distant. It is not in Heaven that you should say 'Who shall go up to Heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it?' It is not over the sea so that you should say 'Who will cross the sea and get it for us, so that we will be able to hear it and keep it?' It is something that is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it." [Devorim 30:11-14]

There is a difference of opinion among the early commentators as to which Mitzvah the Torah is referring to in this pasuk [verse]. According to the Ramba"n (1194-1270) and others who follow his opinion, the Torah is referring to the mitzvah of Teshuvah [Repentance, Return to G-d]. Teshuvah is the Commandment that is "within our capacity and within our reach to fulfill".

The Sforno (1470-1550) writes as follows concerning this verse: "It is not too wondrous for you" - that you would require prophets. "It is not too distant" - that you would require distant wise men of the generation to explain to you that which is necessary to accomplish it, even while you are still in exile".

A person should not think, "In these times, I am incapable of doing Teshuvah. Had I lived in the times of the prophets who could have directly told me exactly what I was doing wrong - then I could have repented properly. Unfortunately, I live in a period of history when there are no prophets." To counteract such thoughts the Torah assures us "It is not in Heaven" - implying that we do not need

prophetic words from heaven to allow us to do Teshuva. This is no excuse.

Likewise, we can not argue "If I had a real Maggid Mussar [expounder of homiletic lessons of chastisement] then I might be inspired to repent. If the Chofetz Chaim or the Vilna Gaon were here and would tell me to do Teshuvah, I would do it!" To counteract such thoughts the Torah informs us "It is not across the Sea". This, too, is no excuse.

"For the matter is very near. It is within your mouth and your heart to do it." We do not need prophets or wise men. It is all up to us. This pasuk is a double-edged sword. Teshuvah is easy. It is accessible. But, on the other hand, it is all up to us. We have no external excuses to fall back upon.

Perhaps this is hinted at in the famous Gemara [Avodah Zarah 17a] regarding Eleazar ben Durdaya. When the woman of ill repute told Eleazar ben Durdaya that he would never be able to repent, he pleaded "Heaven and Earth request mercy for me." They responded that they could not help him. He invoked the aid of the stars and of the sea and was given the same answer. The Gemara says he put his head between his knees and he expired on the spot as a result of intense remorse and repentance. What is the symbolism of placing his head between his knees? This was the ultimate acknowledgment that his repentance was dependent upon himself alone.

We can not wait for others to do Teshuvah for us, and we can not blame others for our failure to do Teshuvah. It is not because our parents raised us poorly. It is not because our environment was bad. There are no excuses! The ability to do Teshuvah is within our own mouths and hearts.

Kesiva V'Chasima Tova! May you be Inscribed and Sealed in the Book of Life!

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#385). The halachic topics dealt with in the portion of Nitzavim in the Commuter Chavrusah Series are the following:

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