

REPENTANCE OR EXCUSE?

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!

"Because G-d Is No Longer In My Midst" - Repentance or Excuse?

Last week, we discussed the comment of the Sforno (1470-1550) on the verses "It is not in Heaven... It is not distant from you... For the matter is very near. It is in your mouths and hearts to do it." [Devorim 30:11-13]

The Sforno explained that we have no excuses regarding doing Teshuva, returning to G-d. We cannot blame our failure to properly repent on the lack of prophets (It is not in Heaven) nor on our distance from the great Sages of the past who could properly inspire us to do Teshuva. Repentance depends on our own initiative and action.

The Beis Av suggests that the same idea could explain a very difficult verse in Parshas VaYelech (this week's parsha). The pasuk says:

"I will then display anger against them and abandon them. I will hide My face from them and they will be (their enemies') prey. Beset by many evils and troubles they will say, 'It is because my G-d is no longer with me that these evils have befallen us.'" [Devorim 31:17]

The commentators discuss at length whether the reaction described in the verse is correct. Troubles have befallen us. Enemies surround us. We say that all this has happened because of the fact that G-d is no longer in our midst. Is this the proper thing to say, or not?

One could argue that this is Teshuva. We are recognizing that the reason why we are having a hard time is because G-d is not with us, because we are not deserving of His Presence.

But the very next verse does not seem to support this interpretation. The next pasuk begins "And I

will hide My Face on that day..." [31:18]. This implies that the reaction in the previous pasuk was inappropriate. On the contrary, it causes G-d to further hide His Presence from us.

What is wrong with that reaction? Is it not appropriate to acknowledge that the reason for the trouble was because G-d was not in our midst? The answer is, that this reaction is an excuse! The excuse is that he said that his reason for not doing Teshuvah was because he did not feel G-d's presence in his midst. "There is no prophet, I live in Galus [exile], and I have not been properly inspired by the wise men to repent." These are all excuses for not returning to G-d and correcting his actions!

The Torah emphasizes that this is no excuse. The lack of all these external sources of motivation should not matter. For it is within our own mouths and hearts to do it.

The Beis Av cites a frightening story involving the Kotzker Rebbe (1797-1859). Kotzk was not a "touchy feely" type of Chassidus. It was for the elite, not the masses. The Kotzker Rebbe is called "the fiery one from Kotzk" (haSaraf m'Kotzk). He did not pull any punches. He told it like it was.

On one Yom Kippur in Kutzk, the Rebbe announced to his Chassidim "I know what you all said to G-d in your personal prayers, and I know what He answered." Upon saying this, the Kotzker Rebbe walked out of the shul.

One of the Chassidim chased after the Rebbe and challenged "OK -- what did we say in our prayers?" The Rebbe told him "You said that if we did not have such economic worries we would be able to learn better and to serve G-d. You prayed that G-d should make it a little easier to earn money and if He would do that you would even be willing to settle for less money."

Off-hand, this was a legitimate request. This was not asking for wealth. They agreed to live humbly, but they just requested that their sustenance should come a bit easier.

The Chassid confirmed that this indeed was what he asked for. And he proceeded to inquire what the Rebbe was told in Heaven about this request. The Rebbe responded that the response in Heaven was "we are not interested in your learning, we are not interested in your service -- if you want it on your own terms." In other words - if what it takes for you to function spiritually is that it has to be easier, then "keep it!" No excuses! That is the way it is, and that is the way you must function, and if you do not like it - too bad!

As I said earlier, this is very harsh, and Kotzk was not a place for everybody. But the message is that we have to "play with the hand that is dealt us". It may not be easy and it may not be the way we would like it. The bottom line is that there are no excuses.

"G-d is not in my midst. But... if I had a prophet... If... I had a great teacher... If... I had proper role models... If I had the time... If I had the peace of mind..." All these excuses will not work! It is up to us. It is within our mouths and within our hearts to do it!

The Best Preparation For The Days of Awe: Try A Little Kindness

I once heard the following incident from Rabbi Kulefsky (zt"l) who personally observed it one Erev Rosh HaShannah when he was learning in Yeshivas Torah V'Daas.

Rav Shlomo Heiman (1893-1944) asked Rav Simcha Schustel and Rav Moshe Shisgal (who were two of the most outstanding students of the Yeshiva of that era) for a favor. He requested that they write L'Shanah Tova cards for him and mail them.

Rav Shlomo Heiman then told them, "and if you question - is there not anything better and more spiritual that we should be doing on the eve of Rosh HaShanah other than writing Shanah Tova cards - I have an answer for you. It may in fact not be so appropriate for me to write my own Shanah Tova cards today. However, if you will write the cards for me, then you will be doing me a great favor (Chessed) and what could be more important to do on Erev Rosh HaShanah than an act of kindness for someone else?"

In a similar vein, I heard a very poignant story from a disciple of the Klausenberger Rebbe (Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, zt"l 1905-1994), which involves his Rebbe. One year, right after the Holocaust, the Klausenberger Rebbe was preparing himself on Erev Yom Kippur. One can imagine the preparations that the Rebbe would engage himself in before the holy Day of Atonement. All of a sudden there was a knock on the door. A young girl came to him and said, "Rebbe, I do not have a father anymore. No one will be able to 'bless me' before Yom Kippur." The Rebbe took a cloth, placed it upon her head, and blessed her the way a father blesses his daughter on Erev Yom Kippur.

Five minutes later there was another knock on the door. It was another girl, again without a father, again with no one to 'bless her' before Yom Kippur, again with same request. Again the Rebbe went through the same routine. He took the cloth, he placed it upon her head, and he blessed her the way a father blesses his daughter.

This is what he did the entire Erev Yom Kippur until he blessed over eighty orphaned girls. This is the best preparation for Erev Yom Kippur. What could be a greater preparation for the High Holidays than to do a favor for another Jew?

Gemar Chasima Tova.

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