

TESHUVA MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE ROOT CAUSE OF SIN

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Parshios Netzavim & Vayeilech

Teshuva Must Take Into Account the Root Cause of Sin

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 781 - I'm the Baal Tokeah and Not You! Good Shabbos!

Note: This will be the final shiur until Sefer Bereishis. Have a K'siva V'chasima Tova & a Good Yom Tov!

In Parshas Vayeilech, HaShem informs Moshe that after his death the nation would eventually come to worship idolatry: "...This people will rise up and go astray after the foreign gods of the land... They will abandon Me and nullify My Covenant that I have made with them..." [Devarim 31:16-17]. The Almighty further tells Moshe that at that point He will become angry with the Jewish people and abandon them such that terrible things will befall them. The Almighty adds "...so that they will say in that day: Are not these evils come upon us because our G-d is not among us?" His reaction to this "repentance" will be "And I will surely hide My Face (v'Anochi haster aster Pannai) from them on that day.

This narrative bothers the commentaries. The Ramban asks: It would seem that the statement that the source of their terrible troubles is the fact that the L-rd is not in their midst should qualify as "regret" [charata] on their part, which is the first step toward repentance (teshuva). Why then, is G-d's reaction one of "hester Panim" - hiding His Face from us? The Ramban answers that the "teshuva" of "...because our G-d is not among us" is merely "lip service" -insincere words.

However, the Yeshuos Yakov suggests another answer. The Yeshuos Yakov points out that there is something fundamentally wrong with such a teshuva. When Klal Yisrael worshipped Avodah Zarah [idols], merely regretting that major offense was insufficient repentance. When a person sinks to the level that he is worshipping Avodah Zarah, it is more than just an overnight. Idolatry was the culmination of a long path full of sin, extending over a long time. When a person does Teshuva, he needs to not only look at the final result of his sins. He must ask himself what got him there in the first place. People do not just wake up one morning and decide, "I am going to worship Avodah Zarah today." The only way to correct such an end result is to examine how and where it started.

Only through such a process will the sinner be on guard to prevent such a thing from happening again in the future.

When, Heaven forbid, a husband is unfaithful to his wife and begins an affair with another woman, 99 percent of the time, it begins with something that is almost "innocent". It begins with prolonged conversations, with flirtations, with things that are hardly even sinful. This is how it always starts. If a person wants to repent for the ultimate sin of unfaithfulness, he cannot merely say "Al chet shechatanu lefanech b'gilui arayos" [For the sin I have committed before you regarding sexual immorality]. He must go back and look how it all started. He has to ask himself "How can I make sure that it will never happen again?"

According to Yeshuos Yakov, that is the problem with the "repentance" of Klal Yisrael in this pasuk. They are repenting for having worshipped idols. However, that was only the end result of their backsliding. Where did it begin? Without coming to grips with that issue, the repentance of "Behold G-d is not in our midst" is woefully lacking.

With this idea, we can understand a very difficult Gemara [Chulin 139b]. The Talmud asks, "Where is Esther alluded to in the Torah?" The Gemara cites the previously quoted pasuk from our parsha: "I shall surely hide (haster aster) My Face from them on that day." [Devorim 31:18]. Phonetically, the words "haster aster" relate to the name Esther. What does this Gemara mean?

The Gemara is referring to the fact that Esther told Mordechai that she was going to approach Achashverosh, but "fast for me, do not eat or drink for three days." Our Rabbis tell us that the request to have the people fast was so that they may correct the fact that they ate inappropriately at the feast of Achashverosh. Technically, there was nothing wrong with the fact that they ate at that feast. Presumably, the food served was kosher. However, the Medrash says that their intermixing with the Persians during that meal caused them ultimately to become involved in sexual immorality with them. Chazal prohibited Bishul Akum [food cooked by non-Jews] because when one socializes with people, he ends up marrying their daughters. That was exactly the situation that developed from participation in the royal feast. When Esther wanted to bring about teshuva for the terrible outcome of that meal, she knew that saying "no more sexual immorality" was insufficient. She had to attack the root of the problem - the eating at the meal. Therefore, to make "measure for measure" amends for that sin, she commanded, "do not eat or drink for three days".

Now we understand the Gemara in Chulin: Where is Esther alluded to in the Torah? In other words, where does the Torah allude to the idea demonstrated by Esther, that teshuva should not just focus on the result of the sin, but must focus on the cause of the sin? This is hinted at in the pasuk that says G-d will Hide his face (haster aster pannai) - because of the inadequate repentance which consisted merely of confession to the fact that "G-d is not in our midst," rather than a repentance that analyzed the root of their problem which led to idolatry in the first place.

Moshe Gives Forewarning - He Doesn't Want To Be Held Responsible

Rav Ruderman, zt"l, (founding Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel) used to cite an incident from Vilna that gives insight to a pasuk in this week's parsha.

There was a beautiful place in Vilna where all the wealthy people made their weddings. It happened that a poor shoemaker suddenly obtained a large sum of money. He decided that he too wanted to make the wedding of his daughter in this fancy place. One of the old-time wealthy individuals took great umbrage at the fact that this newly rich individual was making a wedding in the place classically reserved for Vilna's financially elite Jews. ("This schnorer is going to make a wedding in the same place where I married off my daughter? The nerve of him!")

At the wedding, as the shoemaker was walking his daughter down the aisle to the Chuppah, this wealthy person took off his shoe and showed the shoemaker the hole in the bottom of the sole of the shoe. He asked, "How much does it cost to patch this hole?" (He wanted to rub it into the shoemaker's face that he was still only a shoemaker and that he should not act like he was equal to the wealthy people in town.)

When Rav Yisrael Salanter (founder of the Mussar movement) heard about this incident, he said that the teachers of this Jew who humiliated the shoemaker - even if they were in the Garden of Eden already - would now have to atone for the fact that they had such a despicable student and give full accounting in Heaven for the inferior Torah education they gave this uncouth Jew.

Rav Ruderman used to say that this comment of Rav Yisrael Salanter is alluded to in what Moshe Rabbeinu is saying in this week's parsha: "For I know that after my death you will deal corruptly and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you..." [Devorim 31:29] What is the point of Moshe making this comment?

Moshe is saying this to proclaim ahead of time: Although they will stray from the correct path, it is not my fault! I tried to teach them better than they are acting. I did everything I could do for forty years. I tried to chastise them and teach them not to behave like this. Master of the Universe, do not hold me accountable for their actions. What more could I have done?

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