

I WANT TO COME HOME, BUT I DON'T KNOW IF DAD WILL LET ME IN

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Yom Kippur

I Want To Come Home, But I Don't Know If Dad Will Let Me In

I would like to share a thought about Yom Kippur. As Rav Dovid Kronglass used to say, this is the most important week of the year. We have a tremendous task in front of us and that is the work of repenting. We should always bear in mind one very important fact: how desperately the Ribono shel Olam wants us back.

Every day in Shmone Esrei, we recite a blessing about Teshuva. The blessing begins with the words "Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah, and bring us near, our King, to Your service, and influence us to return in perfect repentance before You." The blessing ends with the words "Blessed are You, Hashem, WHO DESIRES REPENTANCE (haRotzeh b'Tshuva)."

We recite these words so many times during the year that perhaps they lose their impact. However, haRotzeh b'Tshuva does not merely mean that the Almighty will accept our repentance. It means He WANTS our repentance. His desire for us to come back is so enormous that as long as we make even a minimal effort, He will be waiting there to take us back.

I recently read a short story from a Gentile author. The story is fictional but I believe it is very powerful and has a beautiful message that is directly related to the idea I just mentioned. The story encapsulates what it means when we say the Ribono shel Olam is a Rotzeh b'Tshuva.

In the story, there was a boy who finished high school and, as is quite typical of youth that age, he told his parents he wanted to discover and see the world. His father told him, "No, I want you to start college." The boy would not accept his father's advice: "I need to spread my wings a little and see what the rest of the world is like. I want to travel and see the rest of America."

The father told his son "If you leave, do not bother ever coming back. You can start college now or you can leave this house and keep on going because you will never be welcome in my house again." The boy decided to leave anyway.

He left his home in Maryland and began hitchhiking across America. He picked grapes in California and he did odd jobs here and odd jobs there just to keep himself going. As is often the case, after some time, the boy became homesick. He missed his parents. He missed home. He missed having a permanent roof over his head. He missed knowing where his next meal would come from. He started hitchhiking back to the east coast, which was his point of departure.

He got as far as Iowa, sat down on a curb somewhere and wrote a letter home: Dear Mom, I'm tired. I'm hungry. I'm lonely. I want to come home. But I don't know if Dad will let me home. Mom, you know the train track crosses our farm and near the farm is an apple tree. If Dad will let me in, I want you to tie a white towel around a branch of that tree. I will get on the train and I will look for the apple tree and check to see if there is a white towel wrapped around one of its branches. If Dad still feels the same way he did the day I left when he told me not to ever come home again, I understand that there will be no white towel there and I will know that I can't come home.

The boy made it back to the east coast, near Maryland, boarded a passenger train, and started heading towards home. As the train approached the farm, he became terribly nervous. Would there be a towel there or would there not be a towel? As the train came closer and closer, he turned to the fellow sitting next to him on the train and said, "I want you to do me a favor. We are going to pass a farm with an apple tree right near the tracks. I am going to close my eyes. Just tell me if there is a white towel wrapped around a branch on that tree. I am too nervous to look myself." He was so scared that the towel would not be there, he was afraid to even look directly at the tree!

He sat on the train with his eyes tightly shut and the train passed the farm and passed the tree. The boy said to the man sitting next to him, "What happened?" He said, "Son, there is a white towel around every branch on that tree." This said, in effect, that the father could not wait for the son to come home.

This, *l'havdil* (distinguishing between a trivial story and a weighty spiritual lesson), is a parable of what it means "HE DESIRES REPENTANCE". The Ribono shel Olam wants us back, passionately. Just like any father who may have had disagreements with his son, at the end of the day, "as a father has mercy on his children," how much more so in the case of the Mercy of our Father in Heaven, which knows no bounds. He certainly wants us back as much as any flesh and blood father would ever want his son back.

May we all merit to do a complete repentance and be sealed for a long good life of shalom, a year of redemption and salvation, and peace upon Israel.

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