

For this mitzvah... it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. (30:11)

The *Ramban* writes that “this *mitzvah*” refers to the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*, repentance. The sinner conjures up a wealth of lame excuses for not repenting. For the most part, the primary hurdle is believing that one can successfully navigate the *teshuvah* process and return to pre-sin status – both in the eyes of the community and in the eyes of the sinner. The offender has convinced himself that he has gone too far, offended too many, hurt so many close family and friends, so why bother?

We are at the gates of *Rosh Hashanah*, and each and every one of us has his own *pekel*, bundle, of *aveiros*, sins, which we have pushed to the back burner. Perhaps now would be an appropriate time to rethink our excuses. *Teshuvah* means return, through which we return to Hashem. Every sin distances us from Hashem. The process of *teshuvah* is our about-face; we turn around and face Hashem. We are not any closer than we were before, but at least we have altered our direction. **Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl**, offers a simple, but compelling, analogy.

In Russia, a common city ordinance requires each homeowner to be responsible for cleaning the snow off the sidewalk in front of his home. As in most cities, inspectors do not walk around checking every home. When they spot check and find a homeowner in noncompliance, they present him with a hefty ticket/fine. One such homeowner ignored the code and, for some time, he was able to get away with it, because the inspectors rarely came to his block. This time, the inspector walked up and down the block, checking each person’s sidewalk. As soon as they saw him coming, every homeowner quickly grabbed his broom/shovel and started to clean the sidewalk. One homeowner was not impressed. He continued reading his paper until the inspector came by and slapped him with a large fine. “Why are you singling me out? No one else on the block has removed his snow. Why me?” he asked indignantly.

The inspector agreed, “You are correct. Their sidewalks are also snow covered. They, at least, are out there with a shovel, going through the motions. You – are doing nothing!”

The *Mashgiach* cries out to us: “At least pick up the shovel to do something! Attempt to remove the ‘snow’ from your heart!”

Horav Shabsi Yudelevitz, zl, the venerable *Maggid* of Yerushalayim, relates that he once spoke to a group of Jews who were on the fringe with regard to religious observance. Everyone seemed interested, and they all walked away with a more positive feeling about themselves. Many set goals for a return to stronger and more consistent observance. One young man just sat there, bored and disinterested. *Rav* Shabsi felt that he did not make it to first base with him. Thus, he was shocked when, a number of years later, a bearded man bedecked in the full garb of a *Yeshivah* man approached him and asked, “Does the *Maggid* recognize me?”

“No, I do not,” Rav Shabsi replied.

“I am that student that attended the class many years ago,” he said. “I know I appear quite different than I did that day. It took some time, but I finally came to my senses.”

“At what point did you decide to alter your course of living, and become an observant Jew?” Rav Shabsi asked.

He replied, “We say in *Krias Shema*, ‘And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart’ (*Devarim* 6:6). Hashem commands us to apply the inspirational words upon the heart. Why not inside the heart? The answer is that it is impossible for us alone to penetrate the heart. We can place the inspiration above the heart and pray for *siyata diShmaya*, Divine assistance, that it ultimately penetrates. I heard every word that the *Maggid* said, but it just lay stagnant, waiting for the *shaas ha'kosheir*, appropriate time or incident, which would allow it to enter my heart.

“That time came during the *Yom Kippur* War. I was a tank soldier. We were hit, and the rest of my crew was gone. I was alone in a smoldering powder keg which would blow at any moment. Understandably, my life passed before me. Even that fateful lecture which the *Maggid* had given came back to me. Alas, it was too late. I had forfeited my life – both here and in the World to Come. One cannot present himself at the Gates of *Gan Eden* empty-handed.

“Suddenly, I noticed a hole at the bottom of the tank where one of the shells had penetrated. I saw my way out. The rest is history. The shell that had penetrated the tank’s skin was the impetus for my heart to open up and allow the words of *mussar*, rebuke, to enter.”

For someone who repents with sincerity, it is a giant undertaking. I underscore the word “sincerity,” since it takes extraordinary effort to embrace a life that either one has never had or had shunned, due to an incident that had occurred or as the result of an individual who made him his punching bag. Some dysfunctional individuals love to take out their personal problems on the weak people around them. This is usually after they have done so to the members of their immediate family, who have nowhere to go, but suffer in silence. Regardless of the reason, this person has returned. He is here, and we must do everything to welcome him back. A complete change is, at best, very difficult. It seems like such a long, difficult road, but, when one realizes the reward in store for him, it smoothes out the bumps.

Horav Yoel Alkarif, Shlita, quotes a lesson he heard from *Horav Yaakov Edelstein, Shlita*. One day, a non-practicing Jew passed away at the age of eighty-six. The man had merited a long, healthy life. He was not one of Rav Edelstein’s closest students; he was not even *frum*, observant. Yet, Rav Edelstein was asked to attend his funeral – and deliver the eulogy! He did! It was an amazingly powerful eulogy, because it imparted a powerful verity concerning the significance of *teshuvah*. This man had lived in *Eretz Yisrael* during the Second World War. The British sought young, strong men to serve as soldiers to repel the German war machine from reaching the Holy Land. The

deceased was a hardy soul, physically fit, the perfect specimen for the British. He volunteered, because he wanted to see the Germans defeated. After a short training period, he entered into the British navy to patrol the waters around *Eretz Yisrael*.

It is very difficult to defeat a submarine due to its ability to approach with stealth. By the time the radar picks up the submarine's presence, the battleship is already in the target zone of the submarine's torpedoes. This is exactly what happened when the young recruit, together with a full shipload of sailors, was attacked by a German torpedo. A direct hit decimated the British ship, immediately sending half of the sailors to an early grave.

The deceased happened to be at the other end of the ship when the torpedo exploded. He jumped and began to swim. Being very strong, he swam and rested, swam and rested in the frigid water for three days. On the third day, as he sensed his strength waning, he raised his eyes Heavenward and cried, "Master of the world, if You allow me to live, I promise that I will never again light up a cigarette on *Shabbos*." A few minutes later, a British search plane that was scouring the sea looking for survivors, found him. He was spared to live another sixty years!

Rav Yaakov Edelstein went to the funeral. He delivered a moving eulogy, paying tribute to the deceased for his steadfast commitment in keeping his word. The deceased lived in Ramat HaSharon in a neighborhood inhabited by Polish émigrés who had survived the war. They were not *frum*. Well – neither was the deceased, but he did not smoke on *Shabbos*! In fact, every *motzoei Shabbos*, he would go outside, look up at the sky and search for three stars. When they appeared, he lit up!

Rav Edelstein said the following: "Before us lies a man who did not observe *Shabbos*. He neither put on *Tallis* and *Tefillin*, nor did he *daven*. He did everything else on *Shabbos*, cooking, driving, etc. He simply did not smoke on *Shabbos*. Why? Because he gave his word! He promised Hashem that, if he survived, he would no longer smoke on *Shabbos*! For this, he received sixty years of life, a wife, children, a legacy, a future! All of this was the result of changing one aspect of his behavior. Can anyone imagine the value of a Jew who rises above his desires, who is willing to affect even a small change in his life?"

Now, multiply this one change by many. We have an overwhelming amount of merit. Yes, it is difficult to change completely. That is why some opt not to change at all! We see from here that every change, every alteration, is life altering. What better time to change than a week before *Rosh Hashanah*?