

For this mitzvah... it is not hidden and it is not distant... it is not in Heaven... nor is it across the sea... rather, the matter is very close to you. (30:11-14)

The *Ramban* interprets “this *mitzvah*” as a reference to the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*, popularly called repentance. The word *teshuvah* is thrown about very much at this time of year. It is especially appropriate on this last *Shabbos* of the year to focus on its meaning and necessary impact on our lives. The word repentance is a powerful word and truly does not define the essence of *teshuvah*. The process of *teshuvah* is the process of return. Thus, a *baal teshuvah* is not simply a “born again”-- repentant -- person, but rather, someone who is returning – either to his original state; or to the state in which he should be.

Many people wonder, “How can I be worthy of doing *teshuvah*? How can I become a *baal teshuvah*, knowing the difficulties that lie ahead?” **Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl**, answers that a person should neither lose himself, nor give up before he even starts. Every slight change for the better, every reversal from the path he is presently following, connotes a step toward *teshuvah*. To make up one’s mind to change completely is difficult and dangerous.

The *Rambam*’s vernacular in explaining the *mitzvah*/process of *teshuvah* is very exact: “He who sins should leave his bad ways, remove it from his mind, and make a serious commitment in his heart not to return to the *aveiros*, sins, that he had committed in the past.” Interestingly, the *Rambam* does not say that the sinner should “leave his sin,” but rather, he says, “He should leave his bad ways.” What is the *Rambam* teaching us about *teshuvah*? **The Alter, zl, m’Novarodok**, quotes the *Talmud Kiddushin* 20a in which *Chazal* teach that one who performs the same *aveirah* more than twice is already viewing this activity as something which is permissible. The stigma surrounding this sinful act has dissipated. He is no longer acting outside of his comfort zone. The first time one acts against the Torah, he is troubled. It bothers him. He is hurt. If *chas v’shalom*, Heaven forbid, any one of us would consume unkosher food, we would be devastated – the first time. We would be heartbroken, miserable, trying to find the deepest hole in which to bury ourselves. After we have done the dastardly act a number of times, the shame vanishes, the pain dissipates, the hurt is no longer.

The *Alter* explains that a person, at times, will commit an *aveirah*, but it remains a singular occurrence. It is not something that he is used to doing. To refrain from doing it again is to “abandon one’s sin.” This is much different than “abandoning one’s ways.” “Abandoning one’s ways” means that this activity is already part of his “ways.” It has become his way of life. He has already decided that the path of sin is something with which he can be comfortable. To perform *teshuvah* means to begin the process – to turn around, to change direction. One has a long journey until he reaches his destination, but, unless he changes his course, he will never reach his destination. One who is walking slowly, carefully, trudging along a path which is ten miles long, will reach the end of the road, as long as he sticks to the path. If he is going the wrong way, however,

regardless of his speed, he will never reach his destination.

Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, tells the story of Reb Moshe Friedman, an intrepid member of the Yerushalayim community some ninety years ago. He helped establish the *Batei Brodie*. It was during the 1920's that the first cars were introduced to Yerushalayim. While the automobile has today become a way of life, in those days it was hardly accessible to the majority of the observant community. Many of these early settlers lived in abject poverty. Truth be told, they really had nowhere to go. Thus, for the most part, the automobile was a source of transportation for those who were not mainstream Orthodox.

The first time *Reb* Moshe saw a Jew driving a car on *Shabbos*, he went out and began to sing, "*Shabbos, Shabbos*." The sight of this pious Jew walking around singing, "*Shabbos, Shabbos*," whenever he saw a Jew driving on *Shabbos*, was, at best, interesting. Someone approached him and asked, "Rabbi Friedman, he (the driver) does not hear you. Why do you keep singing, '*Shabbos, Shabbos*'?"

Rabbi Friedman replied, "My dear friend, you are mistaken. I am not singing, '*Shabbos, Shabbos*,' because of him. I am singing, '*Shabbos, Shabbos*,' for myself. I want to hear the words, '*Shabbos, Shabbos*,' because, once I see *chillul Shabbos, Shabbos* desecration, it sadly becomes less of an outrage to me. When a person is *mechallel Shabbos* once, it hurts him greatly. Once he repeats this behavior, however, it no longer hurts him. It has become his lifestyle."

The *pasuk* implies that the *mitzvah* which, according to *Ramban*, is a reference to *teshuvah*, "is not hidden, nor is it far; it is not in the Heaven, nor is it in the sea; rather, it is very close to you." The geographic analogy must be clarified to say that an object for which one is searching is not in Tel Aviv, but rather, in Bnei Brak, is understandable. The distances are reasonable, and erring between them is not unusual. If, however, one were to say that it is not in Tel Aviv, but rather, in Alaska, that would be highly irregular. These areas are too far apart. One neither makes such a mistake, nor is this a normal manner of speech. *Horav Moshe Aharon Stern* explains this *pasuk*, applying to it a well-known episode in the *Talmud Avodah Zarah 17a*.

The *Talmud* tells the story of Elazar *ben Durdaya*, who was an individual who had plunged to the nadir of depravity. His reputation as a sinner was so well-known that he quite possibly had reached the position of greatest sinner of his generation. There was not an *aveirah* of which he was aware that he did not transgress. He acted with impunity. He did it all. The *Talmud* relates that one time he was in the process of committing a sin, when a Heavenly Voice declared, "If you do this, you will be lost forever. You will never be able to perform *teshuvah*."

When Elazar *ben Durdaya* heard that he was lost, he immediately halted his activity and stopped doing the *aveirah*. He went to a valley that was situated between two mountains, and he spoke to the mountains, "Mountains and foothills, ask for mercy on my behalf." (Exactly what this means and the significance of mountains and foothills is beyond the scope of this thesis. In any event, he

was seeking their help in returning.) They replied, “Before we can ask for mercy for you, we must first ask for mercy for ourselves.” Hearing this, *Rav* Elazar turned to the Heavens and earth and asked them to intercede on his behalf. They, too, shared the same feelings as the mountains and foothills. They had to address their own deficiencies before they could pray on behalf of others.

Rav Elazar received similar responses from the sun and moon and later from the stars and constellations. When he saw that he had nowhere to turn, no one could help him, he cried out, “The matter depends solely on me.” He then put his head between his knees and began to cry bitterly. He cried incessantly until his *neshamah*, soul, left him. As soon as he died, a Heavenly Voice declared, “(*Rav*) Elazar *ben* Durdaya is destined for life in *Olam Habba*, the World to Come.”

Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* heard the *Bas Kol*, Heavenly Voice, and immediately conferred the title “*Rav*” on Elazar *ben* Durdaya. Imagine going from being the greatest sinner of the generation to being granted the title *Rav* from *Rebbi HaKadosh!* *Rebbi* began to cry, “Some people earn their *Olam Habba* in the course of a few years; some earn it in one moment.” There are people who live a full life, eighty, ninety years, and, by their actions and devotion, warrant and earn a place in *Olam Habba*. There is also that individual, who earns it in the space of a few moments.

Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, asks why did *Rebbi* cry? Does it matter how long it takes to achieve *Olam Habba*? The bottom line is that one made it; he has achieved the ultimate reward. *Rav* Elya explains that *Rebbi* was concerned with the waste of time that is characteristic of some people’s lives. If a person can become a *ben Olam Habba* in one hour, how much time is wasted to become a *ben Olam Habba* when a person has to spend a lifetime of eighty, ninety years to earn the same reward!

Employing the lesson implied by the episode of *Rav* Elazar *ben* Durdaya, we are now able to give meaning to the geographical discrepancy of our *pasuk*. *Rav* Elazar *ben* Durdaya came to his senses and realized that, unless he did *teshuvah*, all would be lost. It was the last straw. It was now or never. Wherever he turned, the answer was no. This is what is meant by, *Im ein ani li – mi li?* “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” It was up to him – no one else could do it. He sincerely wanted to return, to repent, to seek atonement for all the wrong that he had committed. He cried his heart out, putting his heart and soul into the endeavor, until he became a *baal teshuvah*. His sincere *teshuvah* was accepted. What is the explanation of all this?

The *Mashgiach* puts it succinctly. If a person wants others to help him become a *baal teshuvah*, it will be very difficult and distant from reality. This is much like saying that the *teshuvah* is in the heavens or the deepest oceans. It is a stretch to reach. If a person makes a serious decision to return, however, knowing fully well that it is all up to him and no one else-- if he realizes that the entire matter is dependent upon him, so that if he wants to change, he will be able to change -- then there is hope of achieving success. It is that “easy.” One must have the initiative and resolve to see it through and stop relying on everyone else for support. He can only succeed if he does *teshuvah*.