

And you will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice, according to everything that I command you today. (30:2)

Ideal repentance is not motivated by fear, but by love, preceded by an intellectual appreciation of what a Torah way of life revolving around a profound belief in Hashem can do for a person. Unquestionably, *Teshuvah*, return/repentance, is a major step for anyone to undertake. This is, of course, especially true when one returns from a life of total assimilation and alienation. A word of warning, however, is in order: *Teshuvah* is much more than a step. It is a lifelong process that must continually grow as one's commitment becomes stronger and more concrete. All too often, people begin the process with great sincerity, but, for some reason become bogged down, never achieving total success. For the remainder of their lives, they are in a state of flux, questioning, postulating, wondering, "What if?" The *baal teshuvah*, penitent, must put his mind to rest and continue to move forward and upward. The alternative is very sad.

Horav Yisrael Meir Lau, Shlita, relates the story of a middle-aged fellow who appeared one day in the *bais ha'medrash* of Ponevez, where the then seventeen-year-old future Chief Rabbi was a student. It was the middle of second *sefer*, and *Rav Lau* went to the back of the *bais ha'medrash* to search for a *sefer* pertaining to the topic of the *Talmud* that he was studying. Standing there in a sense of awe and puzzlement was a man, in his forty's, wearing a light blue *kippah* that appeared "strange" on his head. Clearly, this fellow was not a "regular" in the *yeshivah* environment. The man just stared at the 350 young men who were fervently engaged in their Torah study. The dialogues and debates among the various *chavrusos*, study partners, and *chaburos*, groups, can be overwhelming and awe-inspiring to a first-time visitor to the exalted halls of Torah study.

"Can I help you? Are you looking for someone?" *Rav Lau* asked the man.

"I am looking for a Jewish teacher, someone who can teach Judaism," the man responded, somewhat "removed."

It was not unusual for people to visit the *yeshivah* occasionally in search of a tutor,

bar-mitzvah teacher, part-time *rebbe*. "How old is the child?" *Rav Lau* asked the man.

The fellow chuckled as he answered, "Forty-two years old."

When *Rav Lau* heard this reply, he understood that there was more to this man than his superficial appearance. He engaged him in conversation, asking about his background and from where he hailed.

"I am a forty-two year old carpenter from Ramat Gan. I have a wonderful wife and two loving children. I have a nice apartment and, by Israeli standards, make a decent living. My life is fine. The truth is, this is what is troubling me: Everything is fine, but I feel I am living without purpose, without goals and objectives. It is the same thing every day. There is no excitement in my life. No meaning.

"At first, I thought the answer could be found in religion. Religious Jews have a daily plan which guides them. They go to the synagogue twice daily. They seem to have purpose in their lives. They are focused, but I have no idea how it all began. Who decided that observant Jews should attend services in the synagogue, wear *Tallis* and *Tefillin*? You might say that a group of elderly scholars conversed and made these rules. Well, that does not turn me on. A group of elderly Jews – regardless of their brilliance, piety and virtue – does not impel me to observe. I need much more than that to convince me. For me to observe *Shabbos* and the Jewish dietary laws, I must be committed to G-d. I must know and believe that this is what G-d wants of me. Otherwise, I simply cannot undertake this obligation."

Rav Lau observed that such an individual, a true seeker of the Word of Hashem, is an anomaly. It was twelve years after the Holocaust, a decade after the War of Independence, a time when the last thing people were contemplating was a return to Hashem. *Teshuvah* was not uppermost in anyone's mind. If someone was an exception and interested in learning more about Judaism, it was incumbent that the young *yeshivah* student give it his all.

He began with the time-honored argument that our "history," the origin of our nation, is not based on conjecture and hyperbole, but on the reality of 600,000 men over the age of twenty-years old witnessing a Revelation that had been unprecedented and unparalleled in the annals of time. It was an argument that even an agnostic could not refute. This man wanted to believe. He just needed to get it all together and take that "small step" for himself. He left the *yeshivah*, saying that he had much to think about, and would get back to *Rav Lau*.

Weeks went by, and he had yet to return. Finally, after about six weeks, the man appeared once again at the *yeshivah* with the same perplexed countenance he had evinced the first time he came. "What happened?" *Rav Lau* asked him. "It has been a considerable amount of time since you were last here. Is everything all right?"

"Well," the fellow began, "I took what you said to heart. I went home and started reading, researching the history of the Jewish People. Evidently, the secularists have closed the door on our origins. It is almost as if they do not want us to study our roots. Thus, I decided to begin a life of observance, but I have encountered serious challenges: My wife thinks that I have lost my mind. My children do not know what to think anymore. Now, my wife has practically given me an ultimatum: either become "normal" again or she is leaving! What should I do? I cannot seem to convince her to accept this way of life!"

"This issue is beyond my purview. I am an unmarried student who has no experience in matters of family life. Perhaps you will join me and present the question to the *Rosh Yeshivah*," Rav Lau replied. The man acquiesced, and they went to the office of *Horav David Povarsky, zl*, to seek his sage counsel.

"Describe for me your last *Shabbos* at home," the *Rosh Yeshivah* said to the man. "The *Rosh Yeshivah* must take into consideration that it is still summertime. I told my family that we had already entered into the month of *Elul*, a time for spiritual advancement and introspection. Therefore, I was not about to use the services of a taxi to go to the beach on *Shabbos*. It just was not right. On the other hand, my wife continues to cook on *Shabbos*; the radio is blasting away its usual perversion; everything is as usual but with one exception – I do not drive to the beach on *Shabbos*."

Rav David smiled, "I, too, do not drive on *Shabbos*, nor do I go to the beach. Yet, my wife does not think that I am insane. Do you want to know why your wife thinks you are not normal? Because *Shabbos* cannot be divided. If your wife were to **know** and **see** that you are thoroughly committed to every aspect of Jewish observance, she would respect your decision and eventually go along with it. It is because you are acting like a hypocrite that she is turned off! Beach, no! Radio, yes! This is not *Shabbos* observance. If you want respect, you must show respect!"

The man understood the *Rosh Yeshivah's* advice quite well: One must either be all or nothing. *Teshuvah* is neither a game, nor a part-time vocation. It is not a feel-good experience for those who need to stroke their egos. One is either committed, or he is not!