

For this commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from and it is not distant... rather, the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to perform it. (30: 11,14)

This *mitzvah*? To which *mitzvah* is the Torah referring? What *mitzvah* might we think is distant, inaccessible to the average person? *Rashi* implies that the Torah refers to the *mitzvah* of *limud haTorah*, Torah study. Many people err in thinking that Torah erudition is beyond them – almost impossible to master. While it is true that Torah knowledge has no limit, nonetheless, through constant diligent study, one can achieve a high degree of Torah scholarship. Torah is Divinely authored, thus making it impossible for the human mind to grasp its profundities without Divine intervention. When Hashem sees that a Jew puts forth effort, He assists him accordingly. We are responsible to make the first move.

Ramban contends that the *mitzvah* to which the Torah refers is the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*, translated as repentance, but actually meaning “return.” A Jew who repents returns to his source. As *Sforno* adds, one does not require the exhortation of a prophet or Torah giants that are distant from him. Regardless of one’s location, *teshuvah* is something he – and only he – can perform. As *Ramban* writes: *B’ficha u’bilevavcha*, “In your mouth and in your heart”; you must articulate and detail your sins and the sins of your fathers (*viduy*, confession) and accept within your heart to continue upon the new path which you have selected today.

Teshuvah occupies a central place in Judaism. Each penitent has his own individual mode of return; he is, likewise, distinct from others in his motive for repentance and its unique form of expression. In other words, the process of return (as in every journey) involves varied approaches. *Teshuvah* is based upon the premise that all human beings, however different from one another in culture, outlook and personality, all share the common belief that they have the power to effect inward change. Penitents all hail from varied backgrounds. Some have never been exposed to Torah Judaism. Others at one point had been quite observant – until something happened to turn them off. Some were weak; others were abandoned or abused and placed the onus of guilt on religion – rather than on their tormentors. Everyone can change his life and, thus, alter its direction. Two essentials are required: the renunciation of a regretted past (*viduy*); the adoption of a better path to be followed into the future.

Nothing happens overnight. *Teshuvah* is a process. Some, regrettably, follow a proclivity to commence the journey, to begin the process, but forever remain enroute without ever reaching a definitive destination. To paraphrase a noted scholar: “The perpetuation of the transitory state leads to aimlessness and a confused self-image.” The *baal teshuvah* retains an identity of penitent, when, in fact, he should be a normal, committed, observant Jew - as if this is how he had been raised from birth. When the transition becomes a life-long process, the person lives in a state of

inner conflict. The undertaking no longer has a theological or moral meaning, because the long term goal of embracing Judaism in its totality has been lost due to the many personal and psychological dilemmas that the individual is confronting. He loses sight of the big picture, as he wastes himself on the nitty gritty and refuses to continue forward and upward until his personal issues have been resolved. Once the spiritual awakening has occurred, his goal has been established. His affirmation of this goal is his decision to realize his total commitment to Judaism. Vacillating, making excuses for a lack of total commitment, is a sign of inner conflict and a lack of absolute commitment. While there is no doubt that crises will occur along the way, these are challenges which can be surmounted if one's commitment is real. Thus, they are considered to constitute a minor setback. If, however, these crises turn into full-fledged stumbling blocks, accompanied by extreme self-doubt, then his vulnerability is an indication of his feeble commitment.

The Torah's implication that *teshuvah* is "easy," that all one has to do is "confess and accept," seems to disregard the agony that a *baal teshuvah* endures in: (first) making the decision; and (second) maintaining his commitment. *Teshuvah* is far from trivial. It is a powerful, life-altering decision, with which the penitent certainly does not trifle. What, then, is the meaning of: "Rather, the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to perform it"?

Horav Moshe Reis, Shlita, observes that the Torah never guarantees that the going will be easy; rather, the Torah attests only to its "nearness" to us. One does not need heroic or miraculous means – or to travel across the world – to commence the *teshuvah* journey. All one has to do is to manifest a willingness and desire to transition his life, and he is on the road to *teshuvah*. No one claims that it will be easy. It is all up to him: *Im ein ani li – mee li*; "If I will not be for myself – who will be for me" (*Pirkei Avos* 1:14) *Rabbeinu Yonah (Shaarei Teshuvah* 2:26) explains: "If a man does not self-awaken, nothing (else) will arouse him." It is up to each individual to make his own decision and to follow up by commencing the process.

The *Baalei Mussar*, Ethicists, explain that while the road to *teshuvah* is long and demanding, the first step is relatively easy. Due to its simplicity no one has the excuse, "I cannot do it." Once he begins his journey, he will receive Divine assistance. [It goes without saying that he receives moral, physical and material support along the way through the agency of caring individuals whose love for Judaism and its people is boundless.]

The first step on the road to return is the acknowledgement that something is amiss, that he has sinned, that all is not good. The one who declares, "I have done no wrong" or "it is not my fault", and other absolving excuses, has no hope for *teshuvah*. The *Chafetz Chaim* presents it in a practical manner. Reuven borrows a large sum of money from Shimon, to be paid back in a certain amount of time. The time arrives, and Reuven tells Shimon that he has suffered a number of reversals and is presently unable to repay his debt. Shimon will not be happy, but he will be understanding and might even forgive part of the debt or establish a payment plan. If, however, when Shimon comes to claim his loan, Reuven declares, "I owe you nothing!" one can be certain

that Shimon will leave no stone unturned until he collects every penny that is owed to him.

Rav Reis applies this thought to explain *Chazal's* (*Yoma 9b*) distinction between the sins of the generation that lost the first *Bais Hamikdash* and that of the generation of the second *Bais Hamikdash*. They say that the lot of the first generation was far better than that of the second generation. During the First Temple, the people were guilty of committing the three cardinal sins of idol worship, adultery and murder. Nonetheless, their exile lasted but seventy years. During this period, the Second Temple was built. The second generation's exile continues to this very day. Why? Because their sin was not revealed. It was the sin of *sinaas chinam*, unwarranted hatred of fellow Jews. The "sin was not revealed" means they did not acknowledge their behavior as being sinful. One can always have some excuse to hate, to place the onus of guilt on someone else, thereby absolving oneself. Since they did not (in their opinion) sin, they had no reason to repent. Therefore, we still have no *Bais Hamikdash*. When there is no sin, there can be no *teshuvah*, and without *teshuvah*, Hashem will not give us back the *Bais Hamikdash*!

Anyone can repent; that is the easy part. Acknowledging wrongdoing, accepting the fact that one has sinned, requires strength of character, which is not as simple.