

And you will return unto Hashem. (30:2)

Teshuvah means return. One returns to his source, his beginning, from where it all began, so that he can start over again and repair what requires restoration. This is not consistent with the objective of society, which focuses on the future, ignoring the past. What happened, happened. Forget about it. Move on. What society ignores is the dross which envelopes us. Unless we expunge it, it accompanies us wherever we go. Focus on “Why? “Where? How did it all start?” A pathologist searches for the sources, the etiology. *Teshuvah* is a pathology, searching for the beginning, “Why? How? Where did it all begin?” Once he has researched the source, the penitent has the opportunity to map out and begin his journey home.

A German Jew from the city of Danzig came to the saintly *Horav Pinchas Koritzer, zl*, to seek counsel concerning his daughter who had suddenly lost her eyesight. He had traveled to the greatest doctors, to no avail. No medical reason explained her sudden blindness. The holy *Rebbe* said, “She is unable to see, because her father does not see. Her illness has been passed on to her from the previous generation. The man looked at the *Rebbe* in surprise. “*Rebbe*, my eyesight is perfect. I do not even need glasses,” he said. The *Rebbe* explained, “One who is truly blind is the sinner. The *Navi Yeshayah* says, *Am iveir v’einayim yeish*; ‘The people are blind, though they have eyes’ (*Yeshayah* 43:8). The *Mishnah (Sotah 1:8)* teaches, ‘Shimshon followed his eyes, therefore, the Philistines pierced his eyes.’” The *Rebbe* concluded that the danger of vision loss was imminent to every member of his family who stared at him. Although the man had assimilated into western culture, he still remembered his Orthodox upbringing. He began to weep profusely, knowing quite well that the *Rebbe’s* admonishment was warranted. He promised to change his ways. Upon returning home, he changed his home to observe the laws of *kashrus*, and *Shabbos* observance became his family’s way of life. Shortly thereafter, his daughter’s eyesight returned.

The penitent must open his eyes and take a penetrating look into the contrast between who he had been and who he has become. The variance should impel him to search for a way to return, but, until he expunges the spiritual smut that envelops him, he will just carry it around. When he performs *teshuvah gemurah*, complete repentance, he can expect it to disappear. *Teshuvah* achieves something unlike no other purifying agent, as indicated by the following story.

A boy was having difficulty participating in class, mostly because he was almost never present. He was extremely wild and, as a result, he was “invited” by his *rebbe* to leave the classroom, since his unruliness was having a detrimental effect on everyone. His parents had tried everything, from different *rebbeim*, to transferring him to another school, to educational and psychological specialists, all to no avail. Finally, they were referred to a *rebbe* who claimed that he could help, but it would take time. How long? It would depend on their son. What did they have to lose? He had already hit rock bottom.

Their son arrived at the new *rebbe’s* office with a smirk on his face, manifesting his usual attitude. The *rebbe* sat him down and said, “As far as I am concerned, I will commence my teaching

obligation only when you decide that you are prepared to learn. In other words, you will have no learning until you decide that you are ready. At the end of each day that no learning occurs, I will bang a nail into my wall. The boy laughed at the offer. The next day, he showed up and smirked, paid his respects to the *rebbe*, whom he thought was strange (after all, what *rebbe* would not demand that his student learn?) and went along his merry way. At the end of the day, true to his word, the *rebbe* banged nail number one into the wall. This continued daily: no pressure; no learning; another nail. Week after week, the boy came to “school,” checked in, refused to learn, and earned another nail in the wall each day.

It took an entire year for the *rebbe* to wear the boy down. Everyone needs a challenge. When the parents/*rebbe* challenge a recalcitrant child, he will often rebel, fight back, actively or passively, but he will do something negative to demonstrate his reluctance to allow anyone to dominate him. This boy could not accept the fact that no one was challenging him. As he was about to celebrate his one-year anniversary of doing nothing, he took one long look at the nail-studded wall; all 365 nails were in perfect sequence, and the stark realization of one wasted year hit him squarely in the eyes. He broke down in tears. The amount of learning he could have achieved, the year of Torah that he had lost, began to penetrate his mind, his heart, his psyche. He wept and wept, and, when he was finished, he told the *rebbe*, “I am now ready to learn.”

The boy and the *rebbe* studied every day, all day, because the boy had to make up for all the time that he had needlessly wasted. At the end of every day, the *rebbe* took his claw hammer and yanked one nail out of the wall. This continued for an entire year, until all of the nails had been dislodged. It should have been a joyous first anniversary. After all, all the nails were gone. The boy took a look at the wall and, once again, as he had one year earlier, he began to cry. The *rebbe* looked at the scene and asked, “Why are you crying?” The boy looked up at his *rebbe* and, with great remorse, replied, “I am crying because now I have a wall with 365 holes in it.”

Every hole cannot be filled; the void remains once the nail is removed. Every blemish leaves a mark, a taint, a deformity. Not so with *teshuvah*. Not only does *teshuvah* remove the “nails,” but it also fills the holes; it builds a new wall. The *Mesillas Yesharim* writes (*Perek* 4), “Truthfully, how can a person repair what he has corrupted when the sin has already been committed? If someone has murdered his fellow or committed adultery, how can he remedy the matter? Can he remove the performed deed from existence? The Attribute of Mercy tempers the Attribute of Strict Justice, however, and it catalyzes a reversal: first by granting the sinner time to repent; second, by exacting a punishment that is not too severe; and finally by offering the opportunity for repentance, purely out of Hashem’s kindness.” *Teshuvah* fills the holes.