

Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house. (20:8)

Chazal (*Sotah* 44a) cite two opinions concerning the fearful and fainthearted soldier who must return home from the battlefield, lest his distress demoralize the other soldiers. Rabbi Akiva is of the opinion that the Torah is referring to the cowardly person, who, after the *Kohen's* assurances of Hashem's support in the battlefield, is still overwhelmed with apprehension. He will have a negative effect on others. Let him go home and relax – if he can. His faith in Hashem is, at best, weak, and thus, not deserving of a miracle that he survive the battle. Rabbi Yosi HaGlili contends that the declaration was directed towards one whose fear and faintheartedness were the result of his sinful behavior, which he felt made him unworthy of Hashem's favor for a safe return from the battlefield. It is necessary to underscore that we are not necessarily talking about one who performs an egregious sin, but even the individual who spoke between *Yishtabach* and *Yotzer Ohr*, parts of *tefillas Shacharis* during which speaking is prohibited. This person is obviously extremely meticulous in his *mitzvah* observance, so that any infraction, however slight, will arouse a sense of obsessive fear of unworthiness. Such a person should return home before his anxiety takes its toll on others.

In his commentary to 20:3, discussing the *Kohen's* declaration: *Shema Yisrael*, "Hear O' *Yisrael*," *Rashi* comments, "Even if there is no merit in you but the recitation of *Shema Yisrael*, you are worthy that Hashem should save you." Apparently, this soldier did not have to be concerned about his sinful behavior. Why is he so anxious? The *Kotzker Rebbe, zl*, offers an insightful explanation that goes to the core of what we may term as spiritual anxiety which affects one who has repented from a behavior or a life of sin.

Yarei v'rach ha'leivav applies to the one who is fearful, fainthearted, and (we may add) depressed over his past, his life of sin which presaged his present repentant state. The despondency that overwhelms him preoccupies his life, making him vulnerable to feelings of a lack of trust in himself to survive the battle. He thinks that Hashem will ignore his *teshuvah* and instead focus on his objectionable past. One who mistrusts himself has no business in battle.

Part of the struggles of a *baal teshuvah*, penitent, is to blot out his previous life. When one repents, his life has new meaning, his future filled with hope and purpose. The flip side is that the more one sees his bright future, the more it contrasts with his sordid past. He becomes distracted and often must exert enormous effort to overcome the many temptations that sabotage the *baal teshuvah's* return. His friends from the past do not understand how he could be a "traitor," turning his back on them and all they are doing. He fears returning to old haunts, lest he fall into the abyss from which he has painfully extricated himself.

The *baal teshuvah* often forgets that *teshuvah* leads to atonement and absolution, ushering in a new life, a rebirth for the sinner. He is no longer the person that he had been. Nonetheless, the

baal teshuvah must navigate between a leap of disengagement from the past and the arduous process of rectification. The transition does not just happen, it requires time, patience and extreme effort, during which he is open to the fearfulness and faintheartedness that envelop the Jewish soldier.

I feel we should address another aspect of *teshuvah*. The *Kotzker* was wont to say, "There is nothing so whole as a broken heart." Many experiences in life attempt to break us. Illness, loneliness, the death of someone we love, rejection, insecurity and family dynamics gone awry. Such experiences, while very challenging, can also transform us into better, emotionally stronger people. As a result of our personal vicissitudes, over which we have triumphed, we are now able to show greater empathy and concern for others. A beautiful thought that I heard, "When we acknowledge our own brokenness, we enter a realm in which we are measured, not by perfection, but by our willingness to repair ourselves and others." We are no longer judgmental, but we are empathic.

I read an article by a Jewish chaplain who had worked at a hospice administering to the end-of-life emotional needs of its patients. He relates the story of Maggie whom he had come to know during those long, pain-filled days that marked the last weeks of her life. Maggie was constantly surrounded by her three childhood best friends. One day, the chaplain, impressed by their closeness to Maggie, asked what had kept them together all of these years. One of the friends sighed and said, "We are so close because, many years ago, she broke our hearts."

Apparently, the friends had been inseparable since elementary school. It was during their senior year in high school that Maggie suffered a spiritual slide which nearly destroyed her life. Paralyzed by shame and despondency, Maggie was unable to speak to her friends. She withdrew into her own miserable world and completely severed her relationship with them. Although terribly hurt, the three friends refused to let her drop out like that. They kept calling her constantly, until she finally opened up to them, allowing them to rebuild their past relationship.

As they healed their broken relationship, they became closer, their devotion to one another stronger. It was their awareness of Maggie's heartbreak and brokenness that provided them with the impetus to build a strong relationship that would last a lifetime. The healing of the past brokenness makes us stronger, as we temper the edges of fractures and create a new entity which may not be as pretty and whole as the original, but definitely much stronger. The healing of the past is the process of *teshuvah*. We look at the fissures in our spiritual life and make atonement, continually mending and strengthening our values and commitment. It does not happen overnight, and, during the transition, we might be fearful and fainthearted, but if we hang in there, remaining steadfast while ignoring the fear, we will emerge stronger, more focused and complete. "Nothing is as whole as a broken heart." This is true as long as one wants to mend that broken heart and make it whole.