

IMMEDIATE REPENTANCE, IMMEDIATE REDEMPTION

BEGIN WITH A GRIN

The KGB stormed into the home of the ninety year old man and discovered actual counter-revolutionary material, a recent copy of an American newspaper! They brought him straight to a judge, who called the man over and asked him quietly why he had the paper in his possession. The man explained that he couldn't read English, but when he saw somebody drop it in the trash he took it home since there was a shortage of toilet paper in Russia at that time. The judge told him that if he didn't want to spend his last days in jail he should make a public confession and say that he was truly sorry.

Having no choice, the man got up and announced, "I confess that I did a terrible thing and I'm really sorry as I now realize how my reckless behavior might have brought the great Soviet Union under the great Stalin to its knees."

NO CONFESSION WITHOUT REPENTANCE

Parshas Naso, aside from being the longest parsha in the Torah (176 pesukim!), includes one of the central mitzvos of the Torah. It is a mitzva about which entire books and long articles have been written. A mitzva that has been discussed throughout the generations, from the Rishonim to the Acharonim. It's a mitzva about which every beginner lecturer has what to say. It's the mitzva of teshuva!

From the words (5:7), "And they will confess the sins that they did," Rambam learns that there is a mitzva to "confess the sins that we've done before G-d and to say them along with teshuva."

The Rambam's style and wording seem surprising at first glance. It seems that he highlights the confession as the main part of the mitzva while the repenting he pushes off to the end, as though it's a detail or side issue. The Rambam's words are gold, precise; they can explain even most complicated halachos in Shas. His wording here requires an explanation.

There are those (Minchas Chinuch mitzva 364) who explain the Rambam in the sense that there really isn't a mitzva to do teshuva because, after all, the word "teshuva" is not mentioned in the verse. The mitzva that the Rambam is counting here is the mitzva to confess, and when does vidui need to be said? When doing teshuva!

In other words, there is no mitzva to do teshuva. If you want to, you do; if you don't, you don't. But the mitzva is, when you choose to do teshuva, you must say a verbal confession and then the teshuva is accepted.

There are others who explain that Rambam means that teshuva is a "general commandment," which means there is an obligation to do teshuva but what does it mean "to do teshuva"? The halachic definition of teshuva is not a prolonged fast or giving vast sums to tzedaka. Those are good things but that is not teshuva in halacha. Teshuva is also not rolling in the snow or sitting on an ant hill. In halacha, teshuva is stopping to sin and starting to do all the mitzvos. Thus, teshuva is nothing new; there is no commandment which we did not know of before. So just like there is no mitzva (in the 613) to do mitzvos and there is no mitzva not to do a sin, so too, there is no specific mitzva to do teshuva.

The only part of teshuva which we did not know of before, and which the Torah is saying now, is the verbal confession. That's a specific deed that is not included in another mitzva. Therefore, only saying vidui can be counted as a separate mitzva and this is why Rambam stresses the saying of the confession as the main thing, while teshuva is secondary, because in the count of mitzvos only verbal confession can be included and not the doing of teshuva!

Rabbi Yaakov Beirav, author of Kiryas Sefer and the teacher of the Beis Yosef, learns the Rambam completely

differently. According to him, teshuva and vidui are two parts of one mitzva. The teshuva is the inner and main part while the confession is the external, secondary part. Teshuva is the thought part of the mitzva while vidui is the verbal aspect. Therefore, in the count of the mitzvos we count the verbal (or deed) part of the mitzva and not the thought component, even though that is primary. We can see an example of this in another comprehensive mitzva, tefilla.

Tefilla is also comprised of two parts. There is the “service of the heart” aspect in which one engages in thought and contemplation of G-d, and we are commanded to express the emotions of the heart and our thoughts verbally. We need to say the words. It is this latter, secondary part that is counted in the enumeration of the mitzvos, because in the count of the mitzvos we include actions of speech and not (so much) the world of thought.

NO REDEMPTION WITHOUT REPENTANCE

Teshuva and Geula are deeply connected. Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 7:5) says “The Jewish people are not redeemed except with teshuva,” and (Sanhedrin 97b) “if Yisrael does teshuva, they are redeemed; if not, they are not redeemed.” Here too, the style and wording seem to demand an explanation. From the words it seems that in every instance and situation, the Jewish people need to repent to be redeemed. One of the rules of grammar in the wording of the Sages is that the use of the “... not ... except ...” phraseology means something absolute; that it is impossible without it. That means that even if the Jewish people has not a smidgen of sin, they must do teshuva to bring the Geula. Why?

Because the essence of Geula and the essence of teshuva is one thing. Geula comes to unite a Jew with the essence of G-d, and teshuva comes to restore a Jew to G-d’s essence. You don’t have one without the other! Geula comes to unite the created with the Creator; it comes to reveal the infinite G-d within our limited reality or, in other (perhaps more familiar) words, Geula will bring the Shechina down to the lowest realm. How can opposites be bridged? How can a limited creation be joined to the infinite Creator? The answer is: teshuva!

Teshuva removes a person from his egocentric sense of self and brings him to a different G-dly sense of self! Even a perfect tzaddik who never sinned is a created being; even an enormous Torah scholar, Chassid and oved Elokim is limited. When a Jew does teshuva he is basically announcing that “I am not the person who did ...” but another person altogether, a person whose life revolves around (in place of the “I”) the infinite G-dly reality!

That’s why even a perfect tzaddik must do teshuva in order to bring the Geula; otherwise, he will remain ... as a limited creation that is infinitely distant from the infinite G-dly reality.

TO CONCLUDE WITH A STORY

We will end with a chilling story about teshuva and its ability to transform a person into something else entirely.

700 years ago there lived a man in Spain, Rabbi Moshe ben Shem Tov de Leon, a great and famous kabbalist. In his town lived a Jew who was a great sinner who thought that teshuva wouldn’t help him.

One day of the Aseres Yimei Teshuva, the man met R’ Moshe de Leon and mockingly said to him, “Can teshuva help a willful sinner like me?”

“Nothing stands in the way of teshuva. As for you, only death can redeem you of your sins. If you commit to dying as an atonement for your sin, then your teshuva will be accepted on High.”

The man was profoundly affected by these words and he followed R’ Moshe to the beis medrash. R’ Moshe had the baal teshuva lie down on a bench. He ordered a bar of lead to be brought and melted in a vessel on the fire until it was liquefied. Then R’ Moshe covered his eyes with a handkerchief and said, “Say vidui for your sins.”

The man burst into tears and said the vidui brokenheartedly and with utter remorse.

“Do you accept upon yourself this horrible death?” asked the rav.

“Yes, as long as my sins are atoned,” said the baal teshuva.

“Then open your mouth and swallow this.”

The man opened his mouth and swallowed but ... it wasn't liquid lead but a spoonful of honey that the rav put in his mouth.

“G-d accepted your teshuva,” said R' Moshe and he promised the man that he would be with him in Gan Eden. Shortly after the passing of R' Moshe de Leon, the other man died. In his final moments he called out, “Clear the way for Rabbi Moshe de Leon. He has come to lead me to Gan Eden!”

Good Shabbos!