

ERASING SIN

By Rabbi David Algaze

“And you will return to Hashem your G-d...For this commandment that I command you today—it is not hidden from you and it is not distant...Rather the matter is very near to you—in your mouth and your heart—to perform it.” (Devarim 30: 2 and 11-13)

What is this commandment to which this verse makes reference? Ramban, Seforno and the Baal Haturim all suggest that the mitzvah is to perform Repentance (teshuvah). It is rather strange that the concept of repair should be a commandment. What if a person does not sin? How would he be able to perform this mitzvah? The answer is that it is impossible that a human being would never falter, never err, never go astray even at a minimal rate. The nature of human beings is to be prone to mistakes. Their decision-making, often without being able to see all the variables, is in itself a source of multiple errors. Added to this is the essence of the human nature—both physical and corruptible. Thus, the Torah anticipates that people would eventually sin and it offers the way to repair.

In fact, the Rabbis extolled the baal teshuvah, the person who returns from his evil path, as superior to the righteous who may have never sinned. Maimonides explains that without teshuvah the very existence of Judaism would be in peril. “It is impossible that a man will not sin and err, whether he is misled by his reason or by a bad attribute such as anger or lust. Should a person believe that the error may not be repaired, he would then persist in his mistaken path and could even exacerbate his rebelliousness since he feels there is no solution.” (Guide, III, chapter 36) Thus, the essence of teshuvah is a method for the survival of mankind itself. Creation needs the idea of teshuvah to survive. Forgiveness is not an act of generosity; it is a principle of survival for the world, especially a moral one.

Teshuvah is not a phenomenon that can be understood in the world of nature. Man is a complex creation, having two sides to his being. On the one hand, Man is connected to the natural order and partakes of all the aspects of the physical world. The accidents, defects, growth and decay that accompany all the natural order are present in Man as well. On the other hand, Man is a spiritual being, endowed with powers that transcend nature and are absent in the physical realm.

Due to his being part of nature, Man suffers the consequences of his actions as all physical creatures do. If someone puts his hand in a hot oven, his hand will suffer burns. His burn would last even if the person regretted his action and decided he would not do it again. The

burn would still be there and whatever damage to the skin could be permanent. Similarly, when a person sins we would expect that the perpetrator would suffer the consequences of his deed and that the damage to his person would be indelible. The Maharal actually writes that from a rational perspective, there should not be possible for teshuva (repentance) to exist.

The Rabbis describe this in a very graphic manner. “They asked Wisdom, ‘What should be the punishment of a sinner?’ to which Wisdom answered, ‘Evil will pursue them.’ They asked the prophets and prophecy answered, ‘The soul that sins shall die.’ They asked G-d and He replied, ‘Let him do teshuva and he shall be forgiven.’” (Jerusalem Talmud, Makkot 2:6). From a natural perspective, errors committed would leave a permanent imprint and would precipitate inevitable consequences. Teshuva, on the other hand, transcends the laws of the physical world and operates according to a very different set of laws.

In the physical world, we also find corrections and repairs. A wound may be healed, a broken tool can be put together again and so on. However, any repair does not return the object to the condition it was before it broke. A refurbished piece of equipment never functions as well as the one that never broke. On the other hand, when a person does teshuva, he returns to the condition he was before he sinned. It is as if the person never sinned, his errors are erased entirely. As the prophet Isaiah describes it, “I shall erase your sins as the clouds dissipate in the air.” (44:22). Rav Filber explains that a cloud obscures the light of the sky and the sun is not visible, but when the clouds go away the light returns as before, as if the light had never been absent. The sinner who sincerely repents is seen by G-d as someone who is totally innocent, as if he never sinned.

The power of teshuvah is so great that the Rabbis say that the “gates of repentance never close.” (Echa Rabbati 3) G-d is always waiting for His children to return, to repent, to begin the process of repairing their lives and correcting their mistakes. G-d never despairs or gives up: He always waits for us. Even if you suspect that your actions are so egregious that forgiveness is unattainable, you must not give in to despair. The road to repair is always available and the Master of the Universe, Who created the Repair as part of Creation, is always there, with an outstretched hand, to assist those who begin the path of return. The Day of Judgment does not come to frighten us; it comes to remind us that Forgiveness is very near to each one of us, in our mouth—by confessing—and in our heart, when we deeply wish to repair our ways and return to our Father.