

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Dovid *ben* Chayim *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Acceptance of Repentance

PARSHAS EIKEV 5778

Torah literature is replete with exhortations to do *teshuvah* (repentance); and there are countless teachings of Chazal lauding this wondrous institution bequeathed to us from Hashem. One example out of many is the Medrash’s statement: “(Regarding) the gates of prayer – sometimes they are open, sometimes they are locked. But when it comes to the gates of repentance – these are always open” (*Devarim Rabbah 2:12*).

Exceptions?

However, it almost appears as if there are certain exceptions to this rule. Perhaps most prominent among these is illustrated by the tragic narrative of Elisha ben Avuyah. He was the Tannaitic sage who went astray, to the point that he became known simply as “*Acher*” – the “Other.” The Gemara (*Chagigah 15a*) relates how he once ventured into the spiritual realm and heard a Heavenly voice quoting a Biblical verse: “*Shuvu banim shovavim* – Return, O wayward children” (*Yirmiyahu 3:14*). However, the Heavenly voice appended a comment to this citation: “*chutz mei’Acher* – except for Acher.” Upon hearing this, he indeed abandoned everything.

This story is somewhat difficult to comprehend on a number of levels. The most obvious question perhaps is how to reconcile it with what we know about the benevolent option of repentance, as cited above from the Medrash. Isn’t *teshuvah* open to all? Or are there individuals for whom the “gates of repentance” are indeed locked?

The Chafetz Chayim explains that, of course, repentance is always an option for everyone, as intimated quite often by Chazal. Regarding the Heavenly pronouncement overheard by Acher, the Chafetz Chayim draws a significant distinction. Heaven was not telling Acher that he could not perform *teshuvah* – only that he would not be privy to the special help and encouragement Hashem offers to most other people. When it comes to the remainder of Klal Yisrael, Hashem, as it were, actively “courts” their return to Him. Thus, He exhorts: “*Shuvu banim shovavim* – Return, O wayward children.” Acher’s sins had mounted to the extent that he forfeited this additional aspect of Divine assistance and encouragement to return. But if he would have aroused himself and expended his own efforts, his repentance would certainly have been accepted (*Chafetz Chayim al HaTorah, parshas Va’eira*).

A similar idea appears in the Mishnah, which likewise seems to outline another “exception”; as it states (*Yoma 8:9*):

הַאֲמֵר אֶחָטָא וְאָשׁוּב... אִין מְסַפִּיקִין בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה.

“(Regarding) one who says: ‘I will sin, and then I will repent for it...’ – he is not granted the ability to perform *teshuvah*.”

This refers to an individual who thought he could “beat the system” by sinning and “getting away with it.” That is, he thought he could gain the pleasure of transgression and still avoid

the harmful consequences by repenting afterward. And so the Mishnah informs him that his plans are flawed and slated to fail, for he will not be given the ability to do *teshuvah*. But even here, the sacred volume *Tanya* explains that this person is not completely *barred* from repentance. He is merely in a state whereby לְעִשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה בְּיָדוֹ מְסֻפֵּיקִין בְּיָדוֹ – he will not be afforded the usual Heavenly assistance that buoys a “regular” sinner and aids him in the endeavor of *teshuvah*. If he does muster up his own strength and truly strives to repent of his own accord, then even his repentance will be accepted.

The Exception to Listening

The B’nei Yissaschar (in his volume *Igra D’pirka*) addresses the matter of Acher’s ordeal in a similar fashion. By way of introduction, he raises an issue with a verse in this week’s *parshah*, which states: וְהִנֵּה אִם־שָׁכַחְתָּ תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת ד’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ... הַעֲדַתִּי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲבַדְתָּ אֶת־בְּדוּן... עֵקֶב – “And it shall be, if you forget Hashem your G-d... I hereby testify against you this day that you shall go completely lost... in consequence for not listening to the voice of Hashem, your G-d” (*Devarim 8:19,20*). He quotes an axiom of interpretation that states that the usage of the term “*V’hayah* – And it shall be” indicates a fortunate and happy circumstance. But this is quite puzzling in this instance; what happiness is there in forgetting Hashem and refusing to hearken to His voice?

In explanation, he cites a well-known dictum of Chazal regarding a guest’s conduct in the home of his host. The Gemara states: “Whatever the host tells you, you should do; except if he orders you to leave” (*Pesachim 86b*). The Shelah Hakaddosh understands this teaching as actually alluding to a Yid’s relationship with Hashem, the “Host.” Any mitzvah that He commands, one should follow – with one exception. The one command that indeed should be ignored is if Hashem orders a person to “leave” and not enter before His Presence. This is what occurred with Acher; Hashem’s true will was for him to ignore this injunction and insist instead on returning to Him.

And so, the B’nei Yissaschar perceives this idea as alluded to in the *pesukim* from our *parshah*. When is “not listening” to Hashem considered a positive development? In an instance similar to the case of Acher. As we have seen from the Shelah, Hashem’s will was that Acher should disregard the Heavenly voice and strive to repent despite its pronouncement. Thus, even if a person feels that his repentance is undesired and would perhaps be rejected, he must ignore such sentiments and still return to Hashem. In such an instance, it will indeed be a happy event if he fulfills the words of the *passuk* literally: עֵקֶב לֹא – “So that you should not listen to the voice of Hashem your G-d” (which you perceive as instructing you not to return).

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