

THE PATH TO FOLLOW



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REPENTANCE IS IN ITSELF A TRIAL

(FROM RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, "All the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines stopped up and filled them with earth" (Genesis 26:15).

This is surprising. Nothing is worth more to people than the benefits of a well that satisfies thirst. How did the Philistines have the heart to stop up the wells that Abraham's servants had dug for their survival?

A person who repents should not think that this repentance is enough to solve all his problems, or that now he will have an easy life and all the doors that were previously closed to him will be opened. The Sages tell us, "The Gates of Tears are never closed" (Berachot 32b) and "The Gates of Repentance are always open" (Eicha Rabba 3). The Gates of Tears and Repentance are open, but it does not necessarily follow that all the gates of Heaven are open and that it will now be easy for the one who has repented to mend all his ways. Reality proves that, on the contrary, when someone repents, it is just then that he must confront all sorts of trials. Sometimes these are so difficult and bitter that he risks falling even lower than he was before having taken the first step in returning to G-d.

Everyone should realize that the goal of the Satan is to capture and trap in his net the one who repents, otherwise that person represents a loss to the Satan. He therefore tempts him with all sorts of difficult ordeals – hardships dealing with his wages, his household, attacks from those around him, or personal isolation – to the extent that he actually feels that doors are being closed before him. With superhuman obstinacy, the devil tries to sap and shatter his will.

Sometimes, it is even G-d Himself Who puts a man to the test. This is in order to wash away his past sins and make him experience His love, as it is written: "So as to afflict you, to test you, to know what is in your heart, whether you would observe His commandments or not" (Deuteronomy 8:2). Despite everything, a man's love for G-d should not depend on a reward, but rather it

should be a love that "is not dependent upon a specific consideration" (Perkei Avoth 5:16).

Based on what we have said, when someone repents and begins to mend his ways, he confronts a first test, namely the decision to not repeat his past sins. This occurs until, as the Rambam writes, "the Knower of all that is hidden testifies about him that he will never return to that sin again" (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2). In addition, many doors will begin to close for him after he has repented, and therefore the very fact that he has repented constitutes one of his most difficult trials, for he must be particularly careful to insure that his repentance is sincere, like a selfless love.

We must raise another question. Concerning Abraham it is stated, "The souls they made in Haran" (Genesis 12:5), which our Sages explain as follows: "Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women" (Bereshith Rabba 39:21; 84:2). We must therefore ask ourselves what became of all these souls that Abraham and Sarah converted. Since the Torah does not mention them afterwards, did they disappear? This is quite surprising.

All the people that they converted disappeared as if they had never existed because their repentance was performed out of self-interest. These people thought that by attaching themselves to G-d, all the doors of Heaven would be opened before them and all their undertakings would succeed without problems, even faultlessly. They did not think that repentance is but a beginning and that they must continue to progress despite difficulties and accept Heaven's yoke every instant without flinching, doing so until they have proved that they will not repeat their past sins. One must realize that it is the Satan who places these difficulties before them and who will not rest until he has caught them in his net. Without permanent effort, it is impossible for a person to succeed. Attaining a position in the World to Come demands a great deal of effort, and this is not achieved without difficulty.

The people who converted in Abraham's time enjoyed great benefits while Abraham was still alive, yet when hardships began after his death, they were incapable of overcoming them. Their repentance was motivated by reward; their love was selfish. This is why they failed when confronted by numerous problems and why they ended up by returning to their previous lifestyles. They reverted back because they did not manage to overcome the trials of time. They preferred an unfettered life, one without problems, for they did not understand the primary meaning of the test of repentance.

During Abraham's time these people lived well, but after his death this comfortable lifestyle turned into pain and suffering. They therefore turned against Abraham's ways because he had led them to repent, which was now the cause of their suffering. These are the Philistines concerning whom it is said that they stopped up the wells that Abraham had dug (Zohar III:302b), the wells of living waters of Torah (which is compared to water – Bava Kama 17a), and which is called "life" (Avoth D'Rabbi Nathan 34:10), for they abandoned the yoke of their conversion. It is possible that they plugged these wells in order to erase all memory of Abraham, the one who had converted them.

Such is the gratitude of the wicked, as reflected in the statement: "Cursed are the wicked, for even the good that they do is defective" (Bereshith Rabba 89:9). Righteous men guide them along the right path and protect them, yet the wicked repay them evil for good. When they confront difficulties, they stop up the wells of living water, renounce the Torah – which is called a well (Berachot 56b), as it is written: "Well that the princes dug" (Numbers 21:18) – and they forget the kindnesses they have received, paying them back with evil.

Everyone should realize that not only is repentance an essential trial, but that life itself and its demands constitute one great and difficult test. Trials not only confront the one who repents; every Jew is continually tested at every occasion. Someone who during his entire life gives his goods to the poor, who supports those who study Torah (like the tribe of Issachar, who supported the tribe of Zebulun – Vayikra Rabba 25:2), and who gives a tenth of his wages to charity may all of sudden see fortune turn against him, resulting in a loss of all his possessions. Someone such as this may rightfully turn to G-d and say, "It is written, 'You shall surely tithe' [Deuteronomy 14:22] and 'Tithe and you shall be rich' [Shabbat 119a]. Yet I have given great amounts of my money to help the needy, I supported those who study Torah, and I was kind over and over, yet I still lost all my possessions! If such is the case, what became of Your promise?"

It is certainly true that losing all one's possessions is a severe ordeal, but one must overcome it because the pain that it causes can lead to giving up hope (G-d forbid). A person must accept this decree, for "the L-RD has given, and the L-RD has taken away. Blessed be the Name of the L-RD" (Job 1:21) and he should say, "You are just in all that has come upon us." He should strive to be, at every possible moment, one concerning whom it is said, "Who is wise? He who foresees events" (Tamid 32a). This means that as soon as he becomes richer, he should realize that this wealth is not his. Rather it belongs to G-d, as it is written: "For everything is from You, and from Your hand have we given to You" (I Chronicles 29:14), for it is He Who gives and it is in His power to take back. If He bestows riches, and if He has decided to withhold them, no doubt it is for a reason. It is possible that G-d has deprived him of his wealth in order to make him endure a hardship proportional to the greatness of his soul, this being so as to purify him and bestow more merit upon him. Or perhaps G-d has deprived him of his possessions well before he abuses them, for G-d has anticipated and seen that in the long run he would abuse his wealth. It is also possible that He deprived him of his wealth for having, at one time or another, shamed a man of Torah, something that the Sages speak of: "Whoever scorns a man of Torah has no remedy for the harm he has caused" (Shabbat 119a). It is even possible that G-d made him rich at first so that he could correct some character fault, and now that he has corrected it, this wealth has been taken away from him.

The test of riches or poverty is one of the most difficult. King Solomon prayed, "Give me neither poverty nor wealth" (Proverbs 30:8), these two things being capable of leading a man to despair or stopping up the wells of the Torah. In other words, they can lead a man to rebel and revolt. One must grow stronger through these hardships, in the sense of the verse: "Do not throw a stone into the well from which you drank" (Bava Kama 92b). One must not deny one's good deeds. On the contrary, one must realize that everything stems from G-d and that "we must bless G-d for the bad that occurs to us just as we thank Him for the good," for we do not know how things will end up (Berachot 54a). The one who accepts this fact will continue to follow the right path, as it is written: "In order that you may walk in the way of the good and keep the paths of the righteous" (Proverbs 2:20). May G-d come to our aid.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM RABBI TZVI HIRSCH – THE CHACHAM TZVI

In 5408 (1648) the fate of Israel became darkened with clouds and shrouded in heavy fog. That hated enemy, Bogdan Chmielnicki and his hordes of Cossacks, attacked Jewish communities throughout Poland and Lithuania, massacring tens of thousands of Jewish men, women, and children. The city of Vilna also drank from the cup of woe. The Cossacks invaded it and brought terrible carnage upon its inhabitants. The city was overtaken with terror and many took to flight, among them being the Gaon Rabbi Ephraim Hacoen (author of Sha'ar Ephraim), who was the head of the Beit Din of Vilna, along with his son-in-law the Gaon Rabbi Yaakov Ashkenazi and his young wife. They crossed the border and settled in the province of Mehrin.

Nevertheless, many hardships awaited them while on route. In his haste, Rabbi Yaakov became separated from his father-in-law and wife, and he fell into the hands of the murderous Cossacks. One of them raised his sword over him and was preparing to kill him, when at that last minute he had pity and said, "Get up and flee from here to save your life." Fearing that he would fall into the hands of other murderers, he hid himself during the day among the dead for about a week. During the night he got up and gathered plants that he ate to stay alive. In the end, the murderers left the place and Rabbi Yaakov began to wander in search of his wife and her father.

Now during the time that he was lying among the dead, some people who knew him passed by and saw him by chance. Thinking that he was dead, they went and testified before his father-in-law that they had seen Rabbi Yaakov's body. The Gaon Rabbi Heschel allowed Rabbi Yaakov's wife to remarry, which was clearly permitted in such a case, since the Torah states, "According to two witnesses or according to three witnesses shall a matter be confirmed" (Deuteronomy 19:15). Yet the young woman was not to be consoled, and she turned a deaf ear to all marriage proposals. After six months, Rabbi Yaakov made it back to his father-in-law, which appeared like a miracle to him. By the merit of his young wife Nechama's righteousness, they then had a splendid son whom was named Tzvi Hirsch, known as the Chacham Tzvi. The Gaon and Tzaddik Rabbi Yossef Eliyahu Henkin always recounted this story in order to clearly illustrate just how careful one should be before allowing an agunah to remarry.

Thus Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch, the son of Rabbi Yaakov Ashkenazi, was born in Mehrin in 5420 (1660). From his early years, he demonstrated his considerable talents and ardently yearned to study Torah. He studied with his father, and also in the yeshiva of his grandfather Rabbi Ephraim Hacoen. When he grew up, he was sent to study with Sephardim scholars, remaining in the Beit Midrash of Rabbi Eliyahu Kobo in Salonique for two years. There he learned Sephardic customs and practices, which he knew perfectly well, as well as their language. He greatly loved Sephardic Judaism and its practices, to the point that he insisted on being called "Chacham" (which Sephardim used in place of the word "Rav"). After several years of study and travel he returned to his father in Ubin, and there he married the daughter of one of the city's residents. However he did not enjoy peace for long, for in 5446 (1686), when the city of Ubin was attacked, a cannonball ripped through his home and killed his young wife and their little girl. Rabbi Tzvi fled to Sarajevo, where the community appointed him as Rav. From there he went to Berlin, where he married the daughter of Rabbi Meshulam Zalman Neumark, the leader of the Jewish communities of Altona, Hamburg, and Vendsbek.

He settled in Altona and there, in the great Beit Midrash that he founded, he taught Torah for 18 years. He became known throughout the land as the greatest of his generation, and people addressed Halachic questions to him

from neighboring as well as distant countries. When his father-in-law died, Rabbi Tzvi was named as Rav in his place over the three aforementioned communities. During that time, Altona's Rav was the Gaon Rabbi Moshe of Rottenburg. These two Gaonim decided that, in alternating with one another, they should each take on this responsibility for a period of six months.

However, because of a conflict that erupted between him and his colleague over a question of a chicken in which a heart was not found (which the Chacham Tzvi permitted, believing that it was impossible for any creature not to have a heart, whereas Rabbi Moshe forbid it), he decided to resign and return to the Beit Midrash.

News of this development spread, and the Jewish community of Amsterdam invited the Chacham Tzvi to take on the important position of Rav of Amsterdam. He was accorded great honor when he arrived, and he was given a salary of 2,500 Dutch gold coins. He also enjoyed the respect of the city's Sephardic community. It was there in Amsterdam that he printed his book of responsum entitled She'elot Uteshuvoth Chiddushim U'Beurim, a work that gained him great renown in the rabbinic world.

Concerning the Chacham Tzvi, the scholars of his generation remarked that he was as humble as Hillel and as uncompromising as Shammai.

The following story testifies of his humility:

The Rav of Frankfurt-am-Main, Rabbi Avraham Breuda (the author of the Talmudic commentary entitled Eshel Avraham) married off his son to the daughter of a wealthy scholar in Hamburg. When he traveled to Hamburg to attend the wedding, the city's Rav held a great feast in his honor and invited all the Torah greats of the surrounding communities. Except for Rabbi Tzvi (who could not be present because he was still in mourning for his father), all those invited to the feast were in attendance. Yet Rabbi Avraham became angry and held a grudge against him. After the wedding, Rabbi Tzvi (who was accompanied by his two students) went to welcome the Rav of Frankfurt. Rabbi Avraham received him cordially, but then he asked: "Why have you not shown up until now?"

Rabbi Tzvi excused himself and told him that he was in the 12 months of mourning for his father.

"And yet," Rabbi Avraham responded, "you could have sent your students and told them to transmit your greetings!"

"I don't have any students," Rabbi Tzvi replied.

"And who are these here with you?" asked Rabbi Avraham.

"These," Rabbi Tzvi said, "are my friends."

Yet where his humility was, we also find his resolve and obduracy. He loved the poor and hated corruption; he pursued justice and defended all those who were persecuted. He fought against rich and influent people and stood on the side of the poor and the oppressed. His obduracy forced him to leave Amsterdam, a city that he greatly loved. After traveling as far as England and passing through numerous Jewish communities in Germany and Poland, he was invited to take the important rabbinic position in Lvov and its province. Yet he did not benefit long from this, for he died on the first day of Iyar in the year 5478 (1718) at the age of 58. His book of responsum was published under the name of Chacham Tzvi, and he became famous as much for his questions as for his answers.

Many years have passed since the death of the Chacham Tzvi, but to our day his name is still evoked with reverence throughout the Diaspora.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK REMOVE ANGER FROM YOUR HEART AND EVIL FROM YOUR FLESH

Rabbi Chaim of Kossov, author of the Torah work entitled *Torat Chaim*, related that he once traveled to a town to perform a certain mitzvah there. While on route, he stayed in a village and readied himself to spend the night with a local Jew. The latter was very happy to be able to host him, and he prepared a bed for Rav, who then retired for the night. After midnight the Rav heard someone reciting the blessing for Torah study with great concentration. He then heard him beginning to study Gemara. When daylight broke and there was enough light to make out shapes, the Rabbi saw a blind old man lying in a bed and studying with great devotion. The old man said that he was the father of the Rav's host, and that for 20 years he had separated himself from all worldly things and was occupied exclusively with Torah study and serving G-d. He had not the slightest contact with anyone, and he wanted nothing other than Torah. He lived with his son, who took care of all his needs, and was completely free to devote himself to serving G-d. The Rabbi, who then realized that he was in the presence of a man of great spiritual stature, asked that he enter into a firm pact with him, such that whoever would die first would come back in a dream and tell the other how he was judged in Heaven. He accepted, and they agreed to their pact.

Some years later the blind man died. He kept his promise and came to Rabbi Chaim in a dream. He told him the following: "When my soul rose to Heaven, there was a great problem among the Heavenly host. When they brought me into the Celestial Court and began to examine my case, they realized that during the last 20 years of my life I was spiritually elevated and pure, and as a result I had atoned for my sins, to the last trace of impure thoughts, to the extent that I was clean of all sin and filled with Torah and mitzvot. Then all of a sudden an angel dressed in black cried out, 'You wish to grant Gan Eden to this man? Yet he has scorned the Torah in public and has still not repented!'"

The angled explained what he meant in detail.

When he was younger, the man had taught young boys in a village far from where he lived. He stayed there all winter long and returned to his hometown for Passover, where he was known and honored as a Talmid Chacham. Once he went to Synagogue to pray on Shabbat, but when he was given the fourth Aliya his heart was filled with anger. He waited until the end of the service and went to express his irritation to the Gabbai. "To someone as honored as myself you give only the fourth Aliya? Someone of my status should get the sixth, or the Maftir!"

In Heaven the verdict was immediately pronounced, and the deceased was given the choice of either (1) Coming back in another incarnation to repair this sin; or (2) Suffering three minutes of shame in Heaven. Naturally, he chose the second penalty.

All of a sudden, the gates of Gan Eden were opened and an angel came to bring him to where he was to be put to shame

before all the Tzaddikim in Heaven: "See this putrid drop – he had the insolence to say that the fourth Aliya was not enough for him."

When Rabbi Chaim would relate this story, he would finish by saying: "Know that the Holy One, blessed be He, had pity on that great man, lessening his punishment so that he did not feel too much shame. Otherwise, he would not have been able to withstand it any longer, and he would have asked to return on earth rather than to suffer this shame, be it only for a minute more. From this we learn what harm we do to ourselves by anger and stubbornness.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

Esau said to Isaac, "Has he called his name Jacob because he supplanted me these two times?" (Genesis 27:36). Note that the root of the word Jacob («83) means both "heel" and "to supplant." Simply stated, Jacob did not "call" himself by this name. It was his father who called him this. Esau should have said, "Have you called his name Jacob?" Why the inaccurate expression?

To understand, let us illustrate with a parable:

A poor man from a good family had relatives in a far off land that he had never seen. The leaders in his city wrote this man a letter of recommendation, signed by them, to certify that he, Yossef ben Shimon, was in fact a member of that lineage and family. While one route, he met another poor man by the name of Todros, and they traveled on together from that point. Come one night, Todros stole the letter of recommendation and treacherously made his way to the family in question. They gave him a great deal of money, and he tried to sneak out as quickly as possible before his former companion could make it there. As it turned out, Yossef arrived just in time to see Todros leaving the house of his relatives. Understanding what had happened, Yossef grabbed hold of Todros to bring him before a judge. "But what did I do?" protested the thief. "I'll give you back your letter. You can go see your relatives as much as you want!"

"Miserable wretch!" the hapless Yossef said as he began to cry. "If you had not lied – if you had told them that your name is Todros, the name that your father gave you – I would have gone and given them the letter that certifies that I am in fact Yossef ben Shimon, their relative. But now that you presented yourself to them by using my name, and because you took the money that belonged to me, I have no other recourse!"

The interpretation is as follows:

The parable depicts the idea behind Esau's complaint. Jacob came treacherously in saying, "It is I, Esau your firstborn" (Genesis 27:19). When Esau found out about it, he let out a great cry and exclaimed, "Has he called his name Jacob?" (v.36). When he presented himself before you, Isaac, if he had said that he was Jacob, you would certainly not have given him the blessings that were destined for me. That is why he deceived you in claiming that he was called Esau, and his plan worked! Thus "Has he [Jacob] called his name Jacob?" No! In fact, Jacob called himself by Esau's name, which is why "he supplanted me these two times."