

The Repentance Merry-Go-Round

by HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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OK, here we go again on the repentance (teshuva) merry-go-round. Weeeee! Isn't it fun! We get to play being overly pious. We boastfully (yet, humbly) repent before G-d swearing to never ever again repeat those awful things that we did all of the last year. We make a whole bunch of promises to Heaven saying that if G-d only grants us everything that our hearts desire (or at least a good part of that) then we'll be good and behave ourselves (at least until judgment time is over).

The High Holiday period has become for many the heights of religious hypocrisy, when everything on the outside is ever so right and yet at the same time everything on the inside is ever so wrong. But hey! Who cares, right? Being that everyone is so shallow today, only what's on the surface matters. So, no one really cares about G-d, about Heavenly responsibilities and about the reality of Divine judgment. And then, all through the year so many wonder why their prayers are not answered in the manner of their choosing.

Does it take a "rocket-scientist" to figure out that G-d hates hypocrisy? Does one need a PhD to figure out that sincere repentance must lead to actual physical and permanent changes. Repentance is not something that one does once, it is something that one must be doing always. Repentance simply means improving oneself. And if one is not improving oneself, then one is actually getting worse and not better. No one can stand still in the domain of morals and proper character. Every day there are trials and tests which define for us (and to the world) who we really are.

Every day we are tried and every day we make mistakes. This is only human, but what separates the human from the animal is that we human beings learn from our mistakes and cultivate an abhorrence for them never to return to them again. When we look back at something that we have done in the past (even the immediate past) and recognize that our chosen course of action lacked wisdom and harmed us, instead of helped us, we resolve to never again repeat such a foolish choice, but to instead choose something better. This is what makes us human and defines for us our moral character. (After reading this, I realized that even animals learn to correct their mistakes, therefore those humans who do not learn such are even less than animals).

How many of us live up to our human potential? How many of us really choose to think, to be objective, to self correct and to make our lives better? How many of us actually move forward in life and how many of us choose instead to complacently sit on our asses and do nothing? How many move forward and how many move backwards? The High Holidays are great, but one cannot just make believe to take a step forward and then, after the Holidays pass, allow oneself to slide back to where one was in the beginning. This is nothing other than the hypocrisy that G-d hates. Those who act this way solicit a Divine curse, not a blessing!

G-d demands of us honesty. Sometimes this is the hardest trait to acquire. It is not easy to look into the mirror and see who is actually there staring back at us, stripped of all the costumes, masks and pretenses. Integrity demands of us to not only be honest with others, but to also be honest with ourselves. For how can one stand before G-d, when one does not even know one's true self? If one's own identity is blurred in one's own mind, then who is there to stand before G-d in the first place?

One who knows him/herself can look in the mirror and see the face of the one staring back at them, whether or not that face bares the marks of moral integrity and good character or the scars of bad choices and a rotten or crooked personality. G-d sees our truth, not matter what we ourselves choose to see or not to see. G-d judges by what He sees, not by what we think we see or by what we think He sees.

We often delude ourselves into thinking ourselves religious and pious. That is why we become so religious during the High Holiday period. We are trying to convince ourselves that we are convincing G-d to bless us during the New Year. But alas, shallow is as shallow be. We see a lie while G-d sees the truth and all the while we expect, and even sometimes demand that G-d accept our lie as His truth. Such attempts, however unconscious, never go unnoticed by Heaven. G-d hates the hypocrisy and the hypocrite who lives it. But again, who listens and who cares?

Well, judgment is here, it is upon us now! We cannot escape it although we may ignore it. We can turn our eyes away and turn towards our religious piety and convince ourselves that we are most certainly worthy of G-d's blessings and that indeed we will receive them. Yet, by this time next year, you still will not have all the "goodies" on your prayer (shopping-cart) list. "G-d gimme this" and "G-d gimme that." Gimme, gimme gimme, gimme Your blessings, Your abundance, Your forgiveness, Your countenance and on and on the list goes, but it is always "give me this" or "give me that." Did you ever stop to question whether or not Heaven ever gets fed up with such greedy and demanding children?

When was the last time anyone prayed and said, "G-d I thank you for all that you give me, now what can I give You in return? How can I be a provider, just like You are?" Instead of focusing on receiving, focus instead on giving. What can you (we/I) give back to G-d in a meaningful way? This is the right question one should be looking to answer to during this High Holiday period.

It amazes me how the majority of people are so totally blind to the dangers that are surrounding us all at this most precarious of times. The majority have no idea how events happening right now in secret half way around the world will soon make a direct and personal impact on their lives. We live so blindly and do not see what is coming. Granted, we may not be able to change the course of human events, these are, after all, directed by Higher Hands, nonetheless, those same Higher Hands do also direct us personally. To where we will be directed when the time comes depends upon where we are at right now.

Are we in the right place to receive Divine Direction? Are our hearts and our minds open to listening to, to hearing and then following the Small Soft Voice within when it tells us to go here or there or to do this or that thing? The majority do not listen, they do not hear, nor do they care. They are far too interested in themselves and in looking good. They are far too selfish, only interested in feeling good, looking good and having a good time. Well then, so be it, Heaven says! Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you will die! But! This is not Heaven's choice! It is your own!

The repentance merry-go-round has got to stop! Real change, real re-direction must happen and it must happen now and continue to happen now and forever more. We have run out of time. This will soon become extremely evident. There will be no places to run, no places to flee to. Israel will not be an option, nor will anywhere else. The only safe haven now and forever more is this, "He who dwells in the concealment of the Most High will lodge in the shadow of the Almighty. I shall say of G-d [that He is] my shelter and my fortress, my L-rd in Whom I trust" (Psalm 91:1-2).

Act upon this now while the opportunity is still before us. Miss the opportunity and you will have no one to blame but yourself. Stay on the merry-go-round and it will eventually crash, with you on it, but do you care? If you do care, then get off it now!

Start getting real. Look out and see the real world around us and the one inside you and start making real changes now! There is still a small bit of time left and we can no longer afford to waste it. While the doors of teshuva (repentance) will always remain open, the narrow passage to act with wisdom and security is quickly closing.

We will all give account before Heaven Above for the choices we make. I pray that we make the right ones. May we all act in the right ways that get us inscribed in the "Book of Life," amen.

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