TESHUBA: What do people think before dying?

In his monumental book, Mishne Tora, Maimonides dedicates ten chapters to the subject of Teshuba (repentance). In the first four chapters Maimonides describes and explains the nature of the Mitzva of Teshuba and all the matters involved in the process of repentance. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 deal in length with the idea of freedom of choice and how it relates to responsibility and repentance. The eighth chapter is dedicated to explaining the Jewish view of the "world to come" or 'olam-habba, life after death. The ninth chapter clarifies the notion of punishment and reward for the observance of the Mitsvot. And in the last chapter Maimonides, perhaps the most profound, concludes that the highest way to serve HaShem is not out of fear of punishment or out of our desire to be rewarded materially, but out of our unconditional love for Him.

During the month of Elul, which is when we begin the process of Teshuba, we are studying some of Maimonides Halakhot on this subject.

Hilkhot Teshuba 1: 1:

"Regarding all the commandments of the Tora, when a person transgress a prohibition or when fails to perform a positive commandment… when he regrets….".

Normally, we think of Teshuba/repentance as regretting for our mistakes, flaws, misdeeds, etc. But according to this statement we also, or primarily, need to regret for the good things that we have not done! We are accountable not just for our actions but also for our inaction and idleness. For not having done all the good and right things we have the potential to do.

Like all rabbis, I've visited several times patients who knew they will die soon. If they are conscious and they feel that they want to talk to a rabbi in confidentiality, I've noticed that they would address a common subject: at the end of their life, people (normal people, not criminals, etc.) do not focus their regret on the mistakes they might have made. Rather, at those very holy moments, when their whole life lies in front

of them, people regret for the good things they should have done and they didn’t do. For the opportunities they’ve missed to make a change. At those moments, when they realize more than ever the preciousness of time, they regret to have invested so much time in the pursue of material efforts, or having cared so much about what others think of them, instead of giving more, helping more, sharing more, loving more and fighting for what is right do in the eyes of God. People regret having missed their full potential. The greater the person or the highest position or the power that person had, the bigger the feeling of frustration for missing so many opportunities to impact the life of others and improve his relationship with God.

Following this simple idea, Teshuba implies, first of all, the realization of our talents and the great potential we have to make positive changes, to give, to inspire and to come closer to God.

.