7 LEVELS OF TESHUBA: Is It Ever Too Late to Repent? (#6)

חטאות נעורי ופשעי אל תזכר

כחסדך זכר לי אתה למען טובך ה

What happens when you repent of the sins of your youth? When, at the age of 70, one regrets what he or she did wrong when at 17? Is that an acceptable Teshuba? Is this late repentance credible and believable?

Let us not forget that “repentance” is divided into two areas: 1. What I might have done wrong to other people. 2. What I did wrong against God. This second category is the subject explained by Rabbi Abohab. It refers to abandoning Judaism, transgressing the principles of the Tora, moving away from God, etc.

Within the first category we could think of the case of a criminal who repents when he is already an old man. Of course regardless of how much value we give to this kind of repentance, it will always be better than the total absence of remorse. Recall, for example, that Adolf Eichman י”ש, died without regretting what he did. And Alois Brunner, another Nazi responsible for the deaths of more than 100,000 Jews, only regretted that he had not killed more Jews….

Sincere repentance, no matter how late it may be, always has value.

There are many cases and forms of repentance that might take place at an old age. For example, when an old man, who lived a wrong life, tells his son or daughter, “I do not want you to follow my path. What I did was wrong.” In this case, repentance, even thought it happens at an old age, might have reparative effects.

Or think of the case a famous actress that use to wear the most expensive furs when she was young. At one point, after many years of ostentation, she decided to devote the rest of her life to fight for animals rights. This reparative, though late and perhaps questionable repentance is not that easy to do.… think about the vulnerable you are because of what you have done throughout your life.

Let us now return to Rabbi Abohab and what he describes as the sixth level of repentance. Think of a Jewish person who lived all his life away from Tora observance and one day, when he is 55, 60 or 65 years old, begins to realize the importance of his Jewish identity. It takes a lot of courage to admit that one has lived "wrongly" for a few years, and it takes a lot of audacity to undo our ways of life at an advanced age. That is why we cannot underestimate the great merit that this kind of repentance has.

On the other hand, Rabbi Abohab explains, the ideal time to repent is while there is still the possibility of committing the same sin or the same error. That is the perfect time for the awakening of one's conscience which would lead a person to a change his or her behavior. Rabbi Abohab mentions the example of Maimonides and the Sages who say that the most noble repentance takes place when after sinning one is faced with the same opportunity to repeat the same transgression and in the same circumstances, but this time he refrains from doing the wrong thing, motivated exclusively by his conscience.

Maimonides gives the example of a man who became involved in a forbidden relationship. If he refrains from repeating his mistake because he is now afraid of being discovered, or because he no longer has the same age or desires as before, his repentance is acceptable, but it is not considered the ideal credible repentance.

I think that something similar could be said of what is very often read in the news about a public figure who was caught doing immoral things. These individuals often appear in front of the cameras and publicly express their regrets and apologize for what they have done. That act is definitely an act of repentance. However, it is far from being "ideal" in terms of its credibility and authenticity. Why? Because the whole process of repentance, remorse, and apology occurred as a result of having being caught, and not as a renewed call of one's conscience, while one can still continue to make the same mistake.

The ultimate test of repentance would take place if that man, faced with a similar opportunity, with the same possibilities, with the same energy, at the same age and with the same desire he had before, refrains now from repeating the transgression

due to his new understanding of reality, i.e., his renewed religious principles, his desire to come back to God, his resolve to change and be a better person.
That is a perfect Teshuba.