4. Regret out of fear

We are analyzing a text from the book Menorat haMaor by Rabbi Isaac Abohab. This text describes the seven possible levels of repentance, from highest to lowest. Let us clarify that this text does not refer to offenses made towards other people (stealing, offending, cheating, etc.) where in addition to repentance we must ask for forgiveness, restore, compensate, etc., but rather religious offenses, when we do the opposite of what God expects from us.

We already saw the three highest levels of the Teshuba. We will now explore the fourth level: repentance that takes place when we realize the consequences of our bad actions. As we previously explained, the highest level of Teshuba is when repentance is born spontaneously from self-reflection, when we finally understand that what we were doing is wrong in and of itself; when regret comes from the awakening of our own conscience, or from a renewed desire of reconciliation with our Creator. Repentance at this level reflects our love of God (□□□□□ □□□□□).

Rabbi Abohab explains that the fourth level of Teshuba occurs, for example, when a teacher or a friend who knows us personally or a Rabbi in one of his sermons warns us directly about the negative consequences of our actions. Our regret is awaken by an external stimulus and by the fear of the consequences.

Menorat haMaor brings an example of this fourth level of Teshuba. The case of the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh. Back in the year 780 before the common era, HaShem revealed himself to the prophet Yona ben Amitai and told him that he should go to a non-Jewish Assyrian city, which had more than 120,000 inhabitants (at that time this high number of inhabitants was very unusual) to warn the inhabitants that the city would be destroyed by their multiple offenses towards God and toward their peers.

We are not going to analyze all the details of this fascinating story. But very briefly: after a failed escape and

attempting suicide, Yona arrives in the great Assyrian metropolis and warns the citizens that the city will be destroyed in 40 days. Unexpectedly, the inhabitants of Nineveh listened to Yona's rebuke, they were scared of the Divine punishment and repented. HaShem suspended His decree and spared the city.

Now we will take a look at two details of this story.

1. The Sages of the Talmud praised the way this repentance took place. The people of Nineveh not only dedicated themselves to praying and fasting but also, and mainly, they modified their behavior. The abandonment of our bad habits and our wrong conduct is the final evidence and the highest goal of the Teshuba process. The Sages valued this message of the story of Yona so much that they incorporated it as the official reading of the Haftara on Yom Kippur in the afternoon prayer (Mincha). Indicating what is expected of a Yehudi when Yom Kippur ends: a real and positive change in behavior, and not just fasting, or making empty resolutions or promises to change. We also learn that HaShem is willing to forgive and "cancel" the punishment when our repentance results in an improvement of our behavior.

2. But while the fact that the inhabitants of Nineveh believed in the message of the prophet Yona is highly commendable (something that unfortunately did not always happen with our own people…), from the point of view of motivation – that is, how their Teshuba began– this type of repentance is considered of an inferior level, since the ultimate reason for it was self-preservation, i.e., fear of God's retribution. In any case, repentance for fear of Divine punishment, although it is not considered as the ideal form or repentance, is accepted by HaShem. Because as we clearly see in the book of Yona, God listens to the prayers of the inhabitants of Nineveh forgives them and spares the city.