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by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

CAN I COME HOME?

PARSHAS HA'AZINU – YOM KIPPUR

This past week I saw a similar story recorded in two different places. I am taking that as a sign from Hashem to share the story with you. Although the story is not true, it relates a very important message especially before Yom Kippur.

Jack was riding on an Amtrack train. Right before the train doors closed, Joseph, a young man walked in. Joseph had a disheveled appearance and looked very agitated. Jack asked him if something was bothering him. Joseph said no. An hour later Jack asked him again, and again, Joseph said no. An hour later, Jack asked him again. This time, Joseph agreed to tell Jack his story. Joseph had spent most of his high school years cutting school. He didn't even socialize with friends. Most of the time, Joseph stayed in his room playing with electronics. At some point, he walked out on his parents. He invented something and became a millionaire at age 18. Later, he got married, rented an apartment in Manhattan, and had a child. Joseph had nothing to do with his parents. He ignored them and even hung up the phone when they tried to call him. Once, a man approached Joseph with a business opportunity. The man told Joseph that this opportunity would make Joseph so rich that he would never have to work for the rest of his life. Joseph was excited about the idea and gave the man all his money. Joseph never saw the man again. He lost all of his money. Eventually, Joseph's wife could not manage without having any income. She took the baby and left Joseph. Soon after, Joseph was evicted from his apartment. He had to live on food scraps that he found outside restaurants. Joseph became very

"Cause us to return, our Father, to Your Torah and bring us near, our King, to Your service; and bring us back in whole-hearted repentance before You. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who desires penitence." (Siddur)

depressed. One day, as he was sitting on a bench, a man sat down next to him. For some reason Joseph told his story to this man. The man told Joseph that he had no choice but to contact the only people who truly loved him, whom he could always count on, his parents.

Joseph told the man that he hadn't spoken to his parents in years. He said that he had even hung up the phone when his parents had tried calling him. The fellow on the bench told Joseph that he had no choice. Joseph was too terrified to call his parents, so he wrote them a letter. He wrote that he was desperate. He was tired, hungry, and lonely. He wanted to return home. He didn't know if his parents still loved him. He didn't know if his parents would accept him back. So, he asked his parents to give him a sign. The train would be passing a certain apple tree near his house. He said that if his parents were willing to welcome him back home, they should tie a white towel around a branch of that tree. If Joseph would see the towel, then he would return home. If he would not see it, then he would understand that his parents were still very upset at him and would not welcome him home. Joseph then mailed the letter. Joseph told Jack that he was on the way to his hometown and he was very nervous to see if his parents had tied a white towel around the tree. As the train came closer to his hometown, Joseph was too nervous to look. He asked Jack to please

look and when the apple tree came into view he should see if there was indeed a white towel tied on its branch. Jack looked and excitedly drew Josph's attention to the window. Joseph saw the tree. There were white towels tied around every branch on that tree!! Joseph's parents were lovingly willing to accept him with open arms! All those towels on the tree showed Joseph that his parents could not wait for him to come home!

We are in the middle of Aseres Yemai Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. During these days Hashem is extra close to us. Hashem eagerly and passionately awaits our *teshuvah*, our

repentance. Hashem is our loving Father! No matter how far we have strayed and no matter how much we have sinned, Hashem wants us back!

Rabbi Yissocher Frand (Torah.org) points out that every day in *Shmone Esrei*, we say a bracha about Teshuvah. We are asking Hashem to help us repent and return to Him. The bracha ends with the words "Blessed are You, Hashem, Who **DESIRES REPENTANCE!**" It does not mean that Hashem will merely accept our repentance. It means that Hashem WANTS our repentance! Hashem's desire for us to come back is so enormous that if we make even a minimal effort, Hashem will be waiting to take us back!

The time is now! Hashem is especially close to us! Hashem loves us so much and is excitedly waiting for us to return to Him. Even if one had sinned terribly, Hashem is waiting for him to return! We should take advantage of this time of special closeness to Hashem! Let's admit our sins to Hashem. Let's feel regret, and let's determine that we will never repeat those sins!

We should find one small deed to improve upon!

May we all be sealed for a long, good life of peace, health, nachas, and all blessings!!

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Rabbi Yaakov Finestone is the director of JEP Queens. For almost 50 years JEP Queens has been in the forefront of kiruv. JEP has changed the lives of thousands of Jewish children enrolled in public schools and kiruv schools. Many are shomrei Torah and mitzvos today because of JEP.

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