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by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

IT IS TIME TO TAKE THE OUTSTRETCHED HAND!

ROSH HASHANA

The **Rambam** says (Hilchos Teshuva 3:3) that just as a person's merits and sins are weighed at the time of his death, so, too, they are weighed on Rosh HaShanah. If one is found to be righteous, then his judgement is sealed for life. If one is found wicked, then his judgement is sealed for death. One who is a *beinoni*, one whose good and bad deeds are equal, has his verdict paused until Yom Kippur. If he repents then his verdict is sealed for life. If not, then his verdict is sealed for death.

Rav Mattisyahu Solomon zt"l, the *mashgiach ruchani*, the spiritual supervisor, of Beth Medrash Govoha says that the Rambam's source is the Talmud. The **Talmud** (Rosh Hashana 16B) brings the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan. Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan that three books are opened on Rosh HaShanah in front of Hashem. One book contains the names of wholly wicked people, one of wholly righteous people, and one of those people whose good and bad deeds are equally balanced. Totally righteous people are immediately written and sealed for life and totally wicked people are immediately written and sealed for death. Those people whose good and bad deeds are equally balanced have their judgment suspended from Rosh HaShana until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are written for life. If they do not merit, then they are written for death.

Some commentaries explain that the words of the Talmud "*If they merit, they are written for life*" means that if a *beinoni* does more mitzvos between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur then he can cause his merits to outway his sins and be judged for life. That is a logical explanation. But that is not how the Rambam explains it. The **Rambam** says that a *beinoni* only merits life if he does teshuva.

"If one is found righteous, his verdict is sealed for life. If one is found wicked, his verdict is sealed for death. A beinoni's verdict remains tentative until Yom Kippur. If he repents, his verdict is sealed for life. If not, his verdict is sealed for death."
(Hilchos Teshuva 3:3)

Rav Mattisyahu Solomon zt"l (sefer Matnas Chaim) asks why the Rambam feels that the only solution for a *beinoni* is to do teshuva while it is not enough if the *beinoni* would increase his merits by doing more mitzvos.

Rav Itzela Peterberger zt"l (Kochvei Ohr) says that if the *beinoni* doesn't do teshuva it is

a very serious sin. So much so, that it outweighs all the possible mitzvos and merits that the *beinoni* may do. Therefore, the Rambam says that the only hope for the *beinoni* is if he does teshuva!

Why is the sin of not doing teshuva so serious? Why does it outweigh all extra merits that are done?

The Torah says that when the Jews went to war, only the tzadikim went. Only those who were confident that they had no sins would go to battle. Yet, the Torah warns them that they should be very careful, "you should guard against any evil thing" (Devarim 23:10). The psukim continue to list some of the things about which they must be careful. Why do such righteous people have to be especially careful? **Rashi** says that the Satan specifically looks for accusations against people during times of danger.

Hashem strongly wants us to do teshuva. Hashem wants us to become closer to Him. On Yom Kippur we have an obligation to do teshuva! If one does not

repent at that time, then there is a serious accusation against him. Hashem comes especially close to us starting on Rosh Chodesh Ellul. Hashem is more attuned to listening to our tefillos and efforts to improve. As **Rabbeinu Yona** writes, Hashem opens the door for us to return to Him. Hashem is beckoning to us. How would it look if we would ignore Hashem and ignore that opportunity? It would seem as if we are telling Hashem that we don't want to come close to Him. Imagine if your father opens the door for you and says come, and you ignore him and turn away! The Satan accuses during time of danger. What time can be more dangerous than when we are waiting to see what our judgement will be? If we don't do teshuva then the Satan will say that we DON'T CARE to increase our fear of Heaven and come close to Hashem, even at this time!

If we don't do teshuva on Yom Kippur, then the sin is so severe that it outweighs any possible good deeds that we may do. That is why the Rambam says that the only hope for the *beinoni* is to repent.

The **Rambam** writes (Hilchos Teshuva 7:6), "How exalted is Repentance. Yesterday, he was separated from Hashem, the G-d of Israel... he cries out and is not answered...and today he clings to the Divine Presence... he cries out and is immediately answered." When a person repents, he becomes a

different person! Just yesterday, he was distant from Hashem, and today he is close to Him! Imagine a person waiting to be executed. When the guards come to fetch him, although he is there, they don't see him. All they see is a different person in his place. How happy he will be! Similarly, one who repents is a different person! He is not the same person who was destined to be punished!

We must take advantage of this opportunity to come closer to Hashem while "His arms are outstretched to bring us close"!

So, what do we do if we have done so many sins? How do we come closer to Hashem? **Rav Yisroel Salanter** zt"l says that we should pick 1 or 2 things to improve. They can even be small things. Once we do that, we are already considered as one who is doing teshuva!

We can each choose improvements that are very doable for us. Perhaps we can decide to stand still and concentrate when we say the *asher yatzar* prayer after we use the bathroom. Even if we only commit to concentrate one time during the day, it shows our determination to improve. We can commit to saying one other bracha with concentration. We can learn an extra 2 minutes a day. And, so on. We can each choose something very doable for us. That action shows Hashem that we are "taking His outstretched hand" to coe closer to Him!

May we all merit to be inscribed for a good year! For a *shana tova umesukah*!

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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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