

First John 1:9 says that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all iniquity. This is both our greatest **spiritual reality** and is the place where our spirituality needs to **grow and develop**.

However, forgiveness and cleansing are not features of spiritual growth and maturity. They are the anti-virus program of our souls which both protects our lives against the infections of the world where we live and which bring us back to a place where we have cleared enough room in our hearts and lives to grow and renew, because we have space on the hard drive of our hearts to fill our lives with the treasures of G-d's Word.

All of us fall short of the high standards of G-d's Word and need His grace to empower us to rise above defeat and do battle with our hearts and lives until they shine with His light. However, if we spend our lives starting over, if we spend our lives being constantly defeated by the same problems, by the same works of the flesh, then, along with James, the brother of our L-rd, I would say we need to learn to move on from a faith which has no works, to works which demonstrate our faith. We need to learn to grow up and quit going around and around in circles.

How do we do this? I want to use three passages to illustrate what the Bible teaches about self control and I don't really like any of these passages, because they haunt me and never leave me alone. The first one is 2 Corin. 5:16, 17 and it is the one which troubles me the most.

You see, on the one hand it says that if we are in our Messiah, we are a new creature, for old things have passed away and all things have become new, and on the other it tells me not to know anyone, including the L-rd, according to the flesh any longer. Now what is the true nature of the change which occurred when I accepted the L-rd? Did I become a totally new creature, or am I still stuck with my old nature? What does it mean that all things have become new, if I am still stuck with my old nature and still have to battle with sin in my heart and life?

One of the greatest disappointments of my spiritual life is that when I accepted the L-rd 32 years ago, that all things did not become new in my heart. It is just as black and deceitful as it has ever been, and as a matter of fact it has been getting worse as the years go by. It seems that just as I develop the strength to overcome some of the inner spiritual turmoil which swirls in the depths of my heart, my flesh clones another virus to try and drag me back down into the darkness of sin and death. And I get so sick of it, I have often wished the L-rd would just kill me and take me home.

Oh wretched man that I am, who can deliver me from this cycle of sin and death? This brings me to the other side of my greatest disappointment of my spiritual life, for I am indeed a totally new creature and all things have indeed become new. Now, fear not, noble saints and learned sages, your rebbe has not gone nuts, he has always been nuts. When I say that I am both a totally new creature and am still the same old slime bag who accepted the L-rd at age 19, I do not need either therapy or medication – although a little of both would not hurt.

You see, each of us was born with the image of G-d firmly engraved on the deepest art of the hard drive of our hearts, and part of this marvellous spiritual reality really sucks. Why? Because this image of G-d is a splendid two edged sword which cuts deep into who I am and into the person I am becoming. This image means that I have two of the most dangerous spiritual gifts ever entrusted to man – Pandora's Box and the forbidden fruit in the garden are cousins. We all have free will and dignity.

This means we are free to choose how we respond to what is going on in our lives, and we will always reap the benefits of this choosing, sometimes for good and too often for bad. Sometimes

the hard drive of our hearts will lift us up into His glorious presence, as we pray, we study, we share and as we worship the glorious King of the Ages – as this week's Torah portions says – He is the King of Kings, the G-d of gods, and the great, mighty and awesome G-d who shows no favourites. Here comes the down side.

We can't live in His presence 24/7. We have to work, we have to shop, we have to cut the grass and we have to face the evil trio that rages through our hearts and lives: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, or put another way, the evil trio of spiritual oppression – the flesh, the world and the adversary. Yes, sometimes all of us are spiritually bi-polar – we go from the joy of His presence to bouts of temper, selfishness and greed. The same mouth that sings praises to the King, fills up with bitter water as we curse and defile, and yes, these things should not be. But too often they not are there, they are there abundantly.

Well what is the solution? Two more passages and I will close. You know that I object to a lot of the nonsense which passes for spirituality, both in the world and in the L-rd. Fashion and popular culture would have us try our best to be cool and develop our inner strength until we are so motivated that we can sell soap, cause we feel so good about who we are and we have activated that inexhaustible source of inner strength that is supposed to be found in each of us.

So we dress according to the rules of fashion and we set self development goals that are totally unreasonable and naïve, because most of us will never have the right body type to fit into those clothes which would be tight on a skeleton, and the dark side of our inner potential pulls us down from the heights and chains us to self defeating negative responses that turn into bad habits and prevents us from reaching even first base of our supposed great inner potential.

Let's look at the two last passages and weep - I Cor. 10:13 and Romans 5:3-5. G-d is active in the lives of all mankind, both believers and non-believers. He is drawing non-believers to Himself through His Son and He is calling believers to walk with Him as they encounter all those lovely ups and downs of our slow pilgrimage home to our Father's House. All of us harbour secret desires to be the greatest, the strongest, the smartest, and we think that setting great life goals and getting on with trying to reach them is the great calling we should apply all of our strength to. We are so wrong.

Our calling is the job G-d gives us to accomplish, whether we become famous, rich and powerful, or whether we push a broom until we retire. Not all of us will reach greatness and become Olympic athletes, Rhodes scholars or Wall Street giants, yet that is what most of us waste our time wishing for as we miss the greatest challenges of our short lives – learning to overcome temptations and to walk with G-d through the darkness of our hearts and lives. **Overcoming our flesh, which is what crucifying it means, and learning to ride the wild donkey of our desires, instead of being dragged down by them is the greatest spiritual challenge any of us will face, the Jew first and also to the Gentile.** How do we do it? Two things, not three this time.

First of all we need to learn to live within the limits and strengths which G-d has gifted and handicapped us with. I will never become a mechanic or a computer technician, and even though I love to work out, I will never become a world-class athlete. **I cannot change the limits of my potential and if I have to aspire to be the best, in order to be any good, I will spend my life being a real loser.** Say what? *A real loser is someone who doesn't see both their limitations and their potential, and spends their lives trying to break out of the limits which both of these personal realities place on our lives.*

We do not want to be good; we want to be the best. We do not want to achieve, we want to outperform every one else. We are like the highlanders of TV fame – there can only be one and we want to be that one. So we will crush the competition, and rise up to be the best, or die in the attempt. **Whenever we feel like this, it is time to change the channel of our hearts and stop strangling our lives with delusions of grandeur.**

Now I do not want all of you to stop aspiring to greatness, in whatever area of your lives you want to shine. That is not the point. Talent is irrelevant. At conference time, I battle with envy, when I hear about what other rabbis are up to and I feel like I must defend B'nai Chayim as the best darn shul this side of glory. This kind of competitiveness is so carnal and futile, that unless we grow out of it, we will suck our thumbs and frustrate ourselves and everyone around us for the rest of our lives. He is the best, we are called to be good.

There are famous people I love and others I dislike, because fame is so fickle and lots of celebrities are such schmucks that I wonder why somebody hasn't arrested them for being flagrant morons. Then I look in the mirror and grow suddenly silent and pensive, cause I want to start a new ministry at B'nai Chayim: Schmucks anonymous. Why? **It is not what we accomplish which is the measure of our spiritual maturity, it is how we deal with who we are and those nasty things which G-d allows to come into our lives.** Ouch, oh ouch, He made me say it.

Romans 5:3-5 describes the **true direction** of our lives, before G-d that is. He wants us to learn self control and what does that mean? To make sure that the **power pack** which drives our heart is spiritual and not carnal. To make sure that the **connections** flood our lives with light and not darkness and to make sure that when darkness pours into our hearts and lives, our **resource manager** shows us how to flush and come back to the place we wandered from until we learn not to stumble and fall, for this is the whole duty of man, and it sucks on steroids.

We need to rejoice in affliction until we learn perseverance, and persevere until we have victory, and then this victory becomes a door through which His love and His Spirit flows into our lives, whether we win the Noble Prize for great literature, or whether we just learn to quit smoking and drop 60 pounds. Whether we take the Gospel with great success to our people, or to other peoples at the end of the earth, or whether we just learn to curb our tongue and our temper and speak the truth in love. Ouch gadol, l'olam va'ed.

Self control is the most important feature of our true spirituality because the presence of it or the lack of it will determine both the kind of spirituality we practice in this life and the kind of reward we will receive when the truth really comes out. Yeah, I am talking to you

My kids have grown up and I am growing old. I am starting to ask myself what I have done with my life and I so want my kids to do great things with their lives. Now you all know about that wonderful t-shirt I want to have made: "the older I get, the better I was". So I vacillate between being so proud of the great and mighty deeds I have performed in five cultures and four languages on three continents, and that feeling of dread that the same problems I have been struggling with all my life are still there and more often than like to admit, they drag me down, hog tie me and beat me up. Oh when will I ever learn?

So, where is G-d in all of this? **Standing right next to me, and indwelling the depths of my darkness, holding my hand, washing my soul and bringing the same problems back again and again until I deal with them.** Some people run away from their problems, and some people live in enthusiastic denial.

Other people are trapped in a vicious cycle of blame and bitterness and rage inside and outside at the cruelty of life and the treachery of G-d. Say what? You heard me. Oh, if we could bring ourselves to admit it, we would rise up and confess that we are incurable annals retentive who think that life should bring us a rose garden, not an endless series of crosses and gas chambers. We look at other people and get bitter about the good life they have and the mediocre, boring life we are stuck with.

Instead of seeing the hand of G-d growing His image into its eternal shape through the crapp of our lives (it is after all the best fertilizer), we want Him to adopt our personal agenda and give us the carnal desires of our hearts. Let me close with a quote from a very wise atheist.

George Bernard Shaw said that there are two tragedies which can overtake a person: **not to realize** the desires of their heart, and **to realize** the desires of their heart. When we get what we want, we often find that it is not what we want, because our inner carnal man is insatiable, twisted and forever wanting more, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

So what is the point of this meditation? Let's all lower our expectations and glory in our boring, second class lives. Let's all quit fooling ourselves and learn to live as the losers we all know we really are. **No way, and oh yes, way.** Let's change our expectations and realize that **the only true losers in life have not learned to live in the peace and rest of who they know they will never be.** Our ambitions have to be crucified, if we want to want to walk with the King. And here I mean both our spiritual and our carnal desires.

Our lives will never turn out the way we expect, and rarely the way we would have hoped. Why? ***Cause there is something wrong with the way we hope and with our expectations.*** I Peter 2:11 says we are strangers and pilgrims, living this life as a journey to our Father's Home, and many of us want to be so in charge of the journey, that we turn back, or quit walking if we don't get the life we want, or do not become the person we really want to become.

So, mishpocah, want to you really want? What should you really do with your lives? Eccl. 12:13, 14 says we have a whole duty which forms the basis of our final judgment. We have to fear G-d and keep His commandments. Self control means we understand that our duty is to choose and to fight the good fight until we have that inner victory which is the only real true measure of who we really are in the L-rd.

Anything else is honestly truly boring and totally useless. I wish you all great success and I especially wish my children the best that life has to offer, but not in the way you would think. ***Big bank accounts, marvellous muscles and international fame are only temporary conditions of the eternal soul which dwells in the depths of each one of us.*** Self control either turns that soul into a shining beacon, or into a tormented spiritual midget, a carnal Gollum, chewing on the regrets of worthless ambitions, while the splendour of eternal life passes them by.

Are you cringing in a cave of regret, or are you walking in the light of G-d's victory and those glorious trials which suck so much I can taste them coming? Mishpocah, we only have so much time, and only have one life to live before that Awesome Day. **May the L-rd torment each of us, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, until we turn every victory and every defeat of our lives into a song of praise we gratefully offer back to Him, in this life and in the one which is to come.**

May the joys and trials of this life become the fuel for His love and His light and may ours be opened to see the true spiritual battles we are called to fight. That goes for the oldsters like me and the young'uns who still have all their hair and don't know nothing yet. Self control is faith in action.

Let's pray.