



In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe continues his address to the people and makes some concluding comments regarding the *berit*, the covenant they have now formally established with God, whereby they accept the harsh consequences of disobeying the Torah. Moshe here issues a stern warning to anybody who might think he can somehow violate the terms of this covenant and still escape the consequences. Should such a person breach this agreement, Moshe warns, God will indeed visit harsh punishment upon him and his family.

In describing this person to whom he issues this warning, Moshe declares:

Lest there be among you a man or woman whose hearts turns away from the Lord our God... And when he hears the words of these sanctions, he fancies himself immune, saying, 'All shall be well with me though I follow my willful heart,' thereby adding the moist onto the dry. The Lord will not agree to forgive him...
(Devarim 29:18-19)

The phrase "thereby adding the moist onto the dry" has troubled many commentators. Rashi, based on the Aramaic translation of Onkelos, claims that "moist" refers to sins committed inadvertently, whereas "dry" connotes willful transgressions. A person who knowingly betrays God is held accountable for both the "moist" and the "dry" – for both his accidental violations as well as the sinful acts committed with rebellious intent.

Maimonides, however, offers a much different interpretation of this verse, amidst his discussion of the "ills of the soul" in the third chapter of his *Shemoneh Perakim* (the introduction to his commentary to Avot). In this chapter Maimonides asserts a parallel between the physical and spiritual ills from which people often suffer. A person suffering from a physical malady will very often be unaware of the proper diet and techniques for curing his disorder. That which might appear soothing, comforting or otherwise therapeutic is often discovered to exacerbate the problem, whereas foods that seem bitter and sickening actually help the body fight the illness. Correspondingly, spiritual disease affects a person in such a way that the individual is allured by spiritually harmful conduct, and the "remedies" for his ills seem purposeless or even counterproductive. Therefore, Maimonides exhorts, just as a sick patient must resort to the advice of medical experts in his quest for the restoration of good health, so must the spiritually ill consult the scholars for guidance with regard to the kind of conduct that could help improve their spiritual condition.

According to Maimonides, this verse in Parashat Nitzavim speaks of a person who is aware of his spiritual illness, and yet chooses to "follow his willful heart" rather than humbly accept the advice of the religious experts. Such a person "adds moist onto the dry" – meaning, he tries quenching his thirst, but in reality, he grows thirstier and thirstier. By following his own instincts and conceptions of what is beneficial and what is detrimental to his spiritual health, he actively helps the "illness" worsen and spread, to the point where *teshuvah* (repentance) is all but impossible. Hence, as Moshe warns, "The Lord will not agree to forgive him."

The word *teshuva* literally means "return." A person who seeks to perform *teshuva* must have some way of knowing to where he must return, which is the correct path that he must follow. According to Maimonides' interpretation of this verse, Moshe here admonishes that a person cannot decide with his own "willful heart," based on his own instincts and tendencies, which is the correct path to which he must return. Our "illnesses" are likely to mislead us into thinking that certain modes of conduct are spiritually beneficial, while in reality they are destructive. Maimonides warns us to exercise caution as we undergo this process of *teshuva*, of curing our spiritual ills, to ensure that we indeed put ourselves on the road to "recovery," to spiritual well-being, rather than falling prey to our misleading instincts.