

# The Teshuvah Beyond Teshuvah

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## The Challenge of Teshuvah

Man's constant struggle for self-transformation, his never-ending battle for spiritual growth, takes him down a road which is at times as unsatisfying as it is ennobling. He grasps at the rungs of the ladder of moral elevation, striving to lift himself to a higher plateau of existence, guiding his travels by maps that chart the process of teshuvah, repentance. But even the most assiduous adherence leaves him plagued with self-doubts, with a gnawing dissatisfaction with his own endeavor. While his recognition and profound regret of his past misdeeds are manifest, and his commitment to circumvent the paths that had previously corrupted him is resolute, the exhaustiveness of his efforts does not grant him confidence as he approaches Yom Kippur. While the steps of teshuvah have been dutifully executed, the actual fulfillment of this mitzvah remains in question. Can one ever proclaim with security and surety in his accomplishment, that he has repented?

Perhaps it was these unsettling doubts that Rav Kook referred to when he included in the introduction to his *Orot HaTeshuvah* a description of teshuvah as "a divine commandment that is, on the one hand, the easiest to carry out, since a stirring of the heart toward penitence is a valid expression of penitence, and on the other hand, it is the most difficult to perform, since it has not yet been effectuated fully in the world and in life."<sup>3</sup> Unlike other commandments which take the form of a physical action or verbal recitation, the eyes and ears can bear no testimony to this mitzvah's fulfillment. In fact, it is precisely this intangible nature of teshuvah to which Rav Soloveitchik had attributed the Rambam's reluctance to list teshuvah as a mitzvah, choosing instead its verbally performable correlate, viduy, confession.<sup>4</sup>

## The Promise of Teshuva MeAhavah

With such a crucial essential of Judaism existing on a level imperceptible to our concretized perceptions, it is little wonder that the aspirant to spiritual heights is often tortured by an

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<sup>3</sup> Introduction to *Orot HaTeshuvah*, Translation by B. Bokser in *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, etc.*, Paulist Press, New York, 1978, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> See *Al HaTeshuvah*, chapter one.

uncomfortable insecurity. It is thus with this mindset that he approaches the tantalizing promise recorded in the Talmud<sup>5</sup>, a description of a concept possessed of both wondrous potential and esoteric elusiveness. There is a teshuvah beyond teshuvah, the Talmud tells us, a teshuvah capable of scaling heights light-years beyond our previous conceptions. While the potential for atonement in itself had sufficed to provide us with a grateful appreciation of G-d's mercy, we are now informed that an even greater acquisition lies within our grasp. There is a teshuvah which not only cleans away, but transforms, which not merely expiates but even effects a miraculous retroactive conversion.

We need not be satisfied with merely having our z'donot, intentional transgressions, graciously commuted in the eyes of Heaven to the status of sh'gagot, unwitting transgressions. We now know of a teshuvah with the capacity to turn our intentional misdeeds into zechuyot, merits. While previously we knew only of teshuvah miYirah, repentance motivated by fear, we are now introduced to the miraculous teshuvah meAhavah, repentance motivated by love.

The penitent understandably views this concept with ambivalence, at once exhilarated by its possibilities while simultaneously tortured by its distance. Where teshuvah in a complete sense was until now elusive, this glorious new variety seems to be unattainable. Teshuvah miYirah was, at the very least, described in procedure by the poskim and ba'alei musar; its basic components were to some extent known. Of teshuvah meAhavah, however, we know only the two words which comprise its name; not only security in its complete accomplishment, but even the basic instructions seem cloaked in mystery, our only concrete acquisition being an elegant phrase whose glorious promise is matched by its enigmatic cloak of conceptual secrecy.

The Minchat Chinuch<sup>6</sup> further whets our appetite by postulating additional qualities of teshuvah meAhavah. The Talmud (Yoma 85b) tells us that while we can always aspire to atonement, such an accomplishment is understandably not always automatic with the performance of the steps of teshuvah; rather, there is a concept known as the arba'ah chillukei kaparah, the four divisions of atonement. This concept mandates that while atonement is always possible and sometimes is effected by teshuvah alone, in the instances of more severe misdeeds teshuvah may require the assistance of Yom Kippur, of afflictions (yisurin), or even of death, to make the expiation complete. However, the Minchat Chinuch suggests that there is a shortcut; there is a greater teshuvah, a teshuvah that has the power to grant its adherents immediate atonement, circumventing the arba'ah chillukei kaparah. The identity of this higher teshuvah is, of course, teshuvah meAhavah.

The Minchat Chinuch proves this from a fascinating passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi.<sup>7</sup> The passage describes the concept of Prophecy being asked to identify the fate of the sinner. Prophecy responds that the sinner must die for his misdeeds. When G-d is asked, however, He answers that the sinner shall repent and he will be forgiven. It should be noted that while Prophecy prescribed death, apparently indicating that the transgression was of capital severity, G-d nonetheless stated that repentance would achieve atonement. As such a situation is

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<sup>5</sup> Yoma 86b.

<sup>6</sup> #364. See similarly, introduction of R. Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor to *Nachal Yitzchak*.

<sup>7</sup> *Masekhet Makkot*. 2:6. .

seemingly in contradiction to the arba'ah chillukei kaparah, which require more than simply repentance for a crime on the capital level, it must be that the teshuvah referred to is a qualitatively different teshuvah, one that can supersede the arba'ah chillukei kaparah, and that can only be teshuvah meAhavah.

Sealing our interest and fueling our ambition for an understanding of this concept is a comment by Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, the Netziv, in his commentary to Chumash.<sup>8</sup> Repentance that is motivated by a fear of punishment is in essence self-based, for it is propelled merely by a desire to save oneself the agonies of divine retribution. In contrast, when love serves as the impetus for teshuvah, the focus of attention is not the individual but rather G-d. This distinction imparts a towering advantage to the latter form of teshuvah.

Teshuvah miYirah, in its man-based structure, is by definition prey to the eternal doubts and skepticisms that cloud the human psyche and thus plague the confidence of the aspirant to this psychologically oriented mitzvah. Alternatively, teshuvah meAhavah, finding its foundations in connection to the Almighty, can offer its adherents something teshuvah miYirah never could: the confidence and security of a penitence that is lasting, that will endure beyond the incessant apprehensions of human intellect to transport the penitent to new heights of spiritual stature, armed with the conviction of concretized moral development.

With this final stroke our attention has been captured in totality by the yearning to apprehend this wondrous ideal. The fascinating potential of a capacity to transform transgressions into virtues, the inspiring promise of a teshuvah that can bypass the arba'ah chillukei kaparah, and lastly the mere possibility of that long-awaited confidence of spiritual acquisition have fused to create an irresistible ambition that now occupies the center of our interest. Of utmost concern, now, is some type of direction in the understanding of this glorious concept.

## Talmud Torah as Teshuvah

The challenge of some acharonim to a comment of the Ramban may prove relevant to our quest. "For this mitzvah", the Torah tells us<sup>9</sup>, 'is not too wondrous for you, nor is it far away..."

Commentators differ as to the identity of the "mitzvah" described in this verse. Many, primarily Rashi, see here a generic statement, encompassing the whole of Torah and mitzvot. Other commentators take a different approach, finding significance in the juxtaposition of this verse to a preceding verse which makes reference to an eventual repentance. This led the Ramban, joined by the Abravenel and the S'forno, to interpret this verse in a much more specific sense, its focus being not the corpus of Torah and mitzvot, but rather the mitzvah of teshuvah.

Many scholars, including notably R. Aharon Kotler, immediately sensed the difficulty with this explanation. Chazal (Eiruvim 55a) have already provided the meaning of this verse, maintaining that the intended mitzvah actually refers to the study of Torah. How, then, do the Ramban, Abravenel, and S'forno allow themselves a position contradictory to the opinion of Chazal?

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<sup>8</sup> *HaAmek Davar* to *Devarim* 30:10

<sup>9</sup> *Devarim* 30:11.

The Netziv, differing slightly from the Ramban and the others, wrote in his HaAmek Davar that the verse applies both to Talmud Torah and to Teshuvah. R. Aharon Kotler, however, along with other contemporary authorities, offered the following suggestion to allow the harmonious reconciliation of the Ramban's view with that of the Talmud: there are times when Talmud Torah and teshuvah can be one and the same action.

This concept sheds light on many earlier comments of the Mishnah, the Gemara, and the Medrash, as Rabbi Shlomo Wahrman points out in his She'arit Yosef.<sup>10</sup> For example, the Sifre to Parshat Ha'azinu, commenting on the phrase, "My 'lekach' shall drop as rain"<sup>11</sup>, explains that lekach can only mean the study of Torah, a significance it continues to carry in the book of Hoshea (14:3), where the verse advises "take (k'chu) with yourselves words and return to G-d," with "words" similarly being a reference to talmud Torah. This midrashic comment is on the surface surprising, as the intent of the "taking of words" in the verse in Hoshea would seem to also deal with teshuvah<sup>12</sup> rather than with talmud torah. However, with the illumination of the principle advanced above, the surprise falls away, and the flow of the verse in Hoshea, following the Midrash's comments, is easily understood.

<p><i>As valleys stretched out, as gardens by the river-side; as tents planted of the LORD, as cedars beside the waters</i>  <b>Bamidbar 24:6</b></p>	<p>כנחלים נטיו כגנת עלי נהר כאהלים נטע ה'  כארזים עלי מים:  <b>במדבר כד:ו</b></p>
<p><i>Just as rivers elevate a person from impurity to purity, so do tents elevate a person from a guilty status to one of merit.</i>  <b>Brachot 16a</b></p>	<p>מה נחלים מעלין את האדם מטומאה לטהרה אף  אהלים מעלין את האדם מכף חובה לכף זכות.  <b>ברכות טז.</b></p>

Rashi explains that the term "tents" in this usage refers to the batei midrashot, to the study halls, which serve "as a mikveh to purify Israel from all of their impurities." Once again, this text receives resounding clarity when taken with our principle of above.

Accepting talmud Torah as an instrument of teshuvah now leaves us with the task of defining its exact role within the teshuvah process. Certainly it stands apart from such well known components of teshuvah as recognition of sin, regretting the sin, and resolutions for the future. Perhaps, as Rabbi Wahrman and others, such as R. Yaakov Betzalel Zolty<sup>13</sup>, suggest, we have finally discovered the secret of our mysterious and glorious teshuvah meAhavah.

Again, there is ample precedent for this idea in earlier literature. The Midrash<sup>14</sup> identifies one who spends his time immersed in the study of the oral Torah, with all of its intricacies, difficulties and details, as one who is displaying a tremendous love of G-d. Rabbi Wahrman quotes Rabbi Nachman David Londinsky as making a relevant observation. The Rambam, in

<sup>10</sup> Vol. 4 #26.

<sup>11</sup> *Devarim* 32:2.

<sup>12</sup> An image concurred to by Rabbeinu Yonah, who defines "words" here as representing words of *vidui*, of confession.

<sup>13</sup> *Mishnat Ya'avetz*, O.C. 54.

<sup>14</sup> *Tanchuma, Parshat Noach*, 3.

Hilkhot Teshuvah (10:5), takes the time to expand briefly on the concept of Torah study for its own sake as opposed to study for alternative reasons, defining study for its own sake as a study driven by “a love of the Master of the world who commanded [study]”, and concludes with a statement of the importance of all types of study, in the hopes that the eventual result will be study for its own sake. It is odd that the Rambam, with his legendary precision of order and organization, would expand on this concept in Hilkhot Teshuvah, while in its apparently more appropriate home, Hilkhot Talmud Torah (3:5), he refers to it in a much terser manner.

Perhaps the depths of the Rambam’s intentions are now clear. In Hilkhot Talmud Torah, where the concern is merely the fulfillment of the mitzvah of Torah study, the Rambam felt no need to expand on the distinction between Torah for its own sake and other motivations for study because both effect a realization of the commandment of Torah study. However, the utilization of talmud Torah for the purposes of teshuvah requires more than mere fulfillment of the technical talmud Torah; it requires a study motivated by pure love. Therefore the Rambam deals with the distinction in Hilkhot Teshuvah, because it is there that the differentiation is crucial.

However, merely classifying teshuvah meAhavah as being realized through talmud Torah does not complete our investigation into the issue. A true understanding begs that we perceive the precise underpinnings of the procedure by which talmud Torah effects teshuvah. True and effective application mandates a deeper comprehension.

It would seem that the realms and scopes of teshuvah and talmud Torah intersect on two levels. The first stems from mutual goals, from the shared aspirations of the penitent and the scholar, of the hopeful climber of the spiritual ladder and the searcher of eternal truths.

Sin degrades and demeans, diminishes and stifles. Its perpetrator confronts his evil inclination and emerges a lesser being. This is true on a level not only moral and psychological, but metaphysical. The sinner has created a distance between himself and his Creator. His desire to transgress unhindered, without annoying pangs of conscience, was so great that he told himself G-d wasn’t watching and after a while he came to believe it. In reality, the sinner creates a void; the connection between man and G-d is indeed affected by sin.

But eventually the sinner comes to confront himself and he realizes the ugliness, the distaste of what he had created, and he awakens from his self-imposed slumber. He no longer desires the distance from G-d; he wants to elevate himself from the depths to which he had fallen. To paraphrase the midrash, he glimpses the light because of his darkness; his position from the bottom of the abyss propels his desire to scale the greatest heights. There is nothing he craves more than to bridge the gap he once welcomed.

He therefore extends his hand to grab the rung of the ladder; he plunges himself wholeheartedly into the methods of penitence, bitterly regretting his past, firmly committing to a brighter future. All the while his ultimate goal remains in sight: to approach the Heavenly Father he once spurned.

The goals of the scholar overlap substantially with those of the penitent. He, too, searches for proximity to G-d. He differs only in method. His travels take him not through the depths of a formerly misdirected soul but rather through the secrets of the universe as contained in the

revealed word of G-d known as the Torah. His focus is not his own errant past but rather the past of his people, revolving around the day his forebears stood at Mount Sinai. His path may differ substantially from that of the penitent, but his hopeful destination is very much the same.

As the penitent reaches out for G-d, the scholar joins him, and logically their paths converge. The penitent whose impetus to teshuvah is sincere love for G-d becomes the scholar, and talmud Torah becomes the most effective path to teshuvah. With the destruction of the Temple, the last vestige of the sacrificial order became the concept of “n’shalmah parim s’fateinu - our lips shall substitute for the bulls”<sup>15</sup> With the actual offering of sacrifices impossible, our learning about them would have to suffice. This laid the foundation for our current practice (a practice at least one Rishon considered a biblical obligation<sup>16</sup>) to recite the biblical and mishnaic passages related to sacrificial offerings daily. Indeed, the Talmud relates that this was advice that G-d himself had given to Abraham, who upon being told that the Jewish people would always be assured the Land of Israel as long as they offered sacrifices, questioned what would be after the destruction of the Temple.

This unique arrangement led to much rabbinical speculation as to possible applications in other areas. If one were trapped on a desert island, for example, and thus had no access to a shofar when Rosh Hashanah came around, could he discharge his obligation with learning the laws of shofar? If such is an effective substitution for the sacrificial order, why not for other commandments as well? Such speculation continued throughout the generations following the destruction of the Temple, into our own century when the Chofetz Chaim, writing in the introduction to his *Likutei Halakhot* on the laws of sacrifices, insisted that the concept was only applicable to sacrifices, with others disagreeing.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, it does beg an explanation; why should a distinction exist between the sacrificial order and other commandments? If learning about a sacrifice is an effective substitute, then why not in all areas? One is inclined to suggest that perhaps the truth is as follows. In reality, learning about a commandment is no substitute for its actual performance. However, the sacrifices were not ordinary commandments; they were the means of worship, the primary method of establishing an interaction between man and G-d. In later generations, only talmud Torah could approximate such a connection; it provided an alternate method not of fulfilling the commandment but of initiating the communication between man and his Creator that the Temple’s destruction had interrupted. This, then, is the nature of Torah study, the approaching of G-d through the intellect. It is this nature that makes it so gloriously compatible with teshuvah meAhavah.

There is, as mentioned above, a second level where Torah and teshuvah intersect, a more subtle, gradual level. The aspirant to penitence seeks to transform his character, to evolve his consciousness to a level of higher development. The penitent who is truly motivated by love is not interested merely in clearing his name but in effecting a true escalation of his being.

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<sup>15</sup> See *Menachot* 110a.

<sup>16</sup> See Rabbeinu Yonah to *Berakhot*, *Sa b’dapei haRif*, s.v. *lo hifsid*.

<sup>17</sup> A recent example being R. Ephraim Greenblatt in his *Resp. Riv’vot Ephraim* #613.

When one immerses himself in the study of Torah for its own sake, his constant contact with the holy cannot leave him untouched. The rigors of his intellect will surely refine the contours of his moral understanding, and the direction of his thinking will fine-tune the deeper elements of his personality. The quality of his religious understanding cannot help but hone the sensitivities of his spiritual perception. Again, the devotion to Torah study and the aspiration to refined character will necessarily coalesce.

## Teshuvah as Transformation

As described above, teshuvah miYirah has the ability to convert intentional misdeeds to the status of inadvertent transgressions. Teshuvah meAhavah supercedes that, possessing the power to transform intentional misdeeds into actual merits. Rav Soloveitchik has been quoted as explaining the distinction in the following manner: When one wishes to repent, to correct the errors of his past, there are two disparate approaches from which he may choose. He may possibly view the first part of his life as a mistake, as an unfortunate error he wishes to erase from the annals of human memory. He wishes to start anew from this point on; what happened until now shall never be mentioned again, and all focus should be on the future. This, explained the Rav, is teshuvah miYirah; I fear the ramifications of my past and I beg a separation from it. The wish is granted, the slate is cleaned; all of the past will be considered one big mistake, a sh'gagah, and there will be no accountability.

But there is another attitude also. There is an attitude which does not want to completely disregard the past, an attitude that recognizes the value of lessons learnt from past mistakes. There is an attitude grounded in ahavah, in love for G-d, that propels one with a desire not merely to avoid punishment but to do something positive with his life. He looks not merely for a clean slate, but for the opportunity to use his past misdeeds as a guiding light for the future. This penitent's past transgressions are not merely wiped clean, they even work in his benefit<sup>18</sup>.

This second attitude, the teshuvah meAhavah, cannot work on a purely emotional instinctive basis. It requires careful deliberation, mature insight into one's situation and a highly developed consciousness which are the products of intensive Torah study. For one to reach the level of sensitivity necessary to guide one's life along the principles of teshuvah meAhavah, Torah study is the only route.

*And Kayin left from G-d... he left happy... he met Adam Harishon, who asked him, "what was your judgment?" Kayin responded "I did teshuva and it was resolved". Adam hit his head, and said "such is the power of teshuva, and I did not know". Immediately he*

ויצא קין מלפני ה' ... רבי חמא בשם רבי חנינא בר רבי יצחק אמר יצא שמח ... פגע בו אדם הראשון א"ל מה נעשה בדינך, א"ל עשיתי תשובה ונתפשרתי, התחיל אדם הראשון מטפה על פניו, אמר כך היא כחה של תשובה ואני לא הייתי יודע מיד עמד אדה"ר ואמר (תהלים צב)

<sup>18</sup> R. Chaim Soloveichik (quoted by R. Boruch Ber Leibowitz, cited in *Chavatzelet HaSharon al haTorah, Bereishit*, p. 26) put a more technical spin on the ability of teshuvah to turn misdeed into merit: as teshuvah is a mitzvah, when it is fulfilled, the sin that necessitated it becomes *hekhsheh mitzvah*, and combines with the mitzvah itself. However, this logic would appear to apply to both types of teshuvah.

The meaning of this midrash is enigmatic: what is the connection between Shabbat and teshuvah? An intriguing explanation was offered by the Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht<sup>19</sup>. An earlier comment of the Midrash dealt with the perplexing language of one of the verses describing the creation of the world. At the very end of the process of creation, we are informed that G-d finished his work "on the seventh day," although we know that G-d also rested on that day. The Midrash offers a parable to explain: Imagine a carpenter slamming a hammer into a board, lifting his hammer and dropping it, lifting and dropping, over and over again. G-d's work before the seventh day is comparable to the lifting of the hammer, an active, purposeful movement; and his creation for the seventh day itself is compared to the passive, almost reflexive action of dropping the hammer.

The Beit HaLevi explains the relevance of this parable. On every day of the first six days, there was a totally new, publicly visible creation, comparable to the purposeful lifting of the hammer, the initiation of a new phase of movement. At the same time, however, there was another, less perceptible level of creation, the constant renewal of the previous day's creation; an accomplishment no less miraculous in essence but nonetheless one that goes unnoticed, similar to the carpenter's almost automatic dropping of the hammer. Thus, the relevance to Shabbat; on Shabbat, too, creation continued, but merely the renewal of creation, the subtle, imperceptible form.

Rav Goldvicht explained that this is the connection between Shabbat and teshuvah. Shabbat represents the subtle and imperceptible, the beneath the surface. Teshuvah is, in essence, a complete transformation of the soul; while externally, the body remains the same, and to the observer, there is no change, inwardly, a completely new human being is created. This total restructuring of the essence of a person is only attainable through the steady inculcation of spiritual values that comes with extended contact with Torah study.

The Talmud<sup>20</sup> states that Chilul Hashem, desecration of G-d's Name, is a crime so heinous that there can be no atonement for it in this world. Rabbenu Yonah, in his Sha'arei Teshuvah,<sup>21</sup> offers one hope: extended involvement in Torah study. R. Yitzchak Hutner<sup>22</sup> explains that when one desecrates G-d's Name, he lessens the severity with which he views his obligation in this world. Such a skewing of perspective can only be corrected by realigning one's sensitivities to the patterns of the Torah.

True ahavah, love, is limited by the mishnah in Pirkei Avot to an "ahavah she'ainah teluyah badavar", a love that is not connected to any factor. While this sounds beautiful, its logic is perplexing; one would think that every love is grounded in some quality or combination of qualities. The Yachin commentary explains that the love described in Pirkei Avot is an almost

<sup>19</sup> See *Assufat Ma'arakhot, Bereishit.1*, pp. 55-59.

<sup>20</sup> *Rosh HaShanah* 18a.

<sup>21</sup> *Sha'ar* 4, #16.

<sup>22</sup> *Pachad Yitzchak to Rosh HaShanah*, 30.



purely instinctual love, one that cannot be explained at all; it is similar to the love one would feel for a concept, or for an area of study.

To relate to Torah with such an ahavah is a truly laudable accomplishment. The Sochatchover Rebbe, the Avnei Nezer, in the famous introduction to his sefer Eglei Tal, wrote of those people who feel guilty when they feel joy in their Torah study, for they feel this detracts from the quality of the study for its own sake. The Avnei Nezer reassures these people that by no means should they feel guilty, for when one experiences true joy in his learning he has in actuality reached the highest level of “learning for its own sake.”

The aspiration, then, is to a sensitivity refined to the point where one feels an automatic identification, an instinctive love, with the values he encounters in his Torah study. The hope, then, is that teshuvah and talmud Torah will walk hand in hand, each enhancing the other and nourishing the other’s growth, providing the security of spiritual accomplishment as the impetus for a glorious future of ascendants on the ladder of spiritual and moral greatness.