

Teshuvah and the Psychology of Change

Rabbi Alex Mondrow, PsyD

RIETS Class of 2002

Rebbe and Psychologist, Yeshivat Noam Middle School, Paramus, NJ

Psychologist, Bergen Psychology Group, LLC, Teaneck, NJ

Well over ten years ago, I attended a spiritual retreat for individuals, from varying Jewish backgrounds, recovering from various addictions. As a rabbinic observer, I was encouraged to attend as many meetings as I could to learn about the experiences of those suffering from these addictions. Toward the end of the retreat everyone attended “The Big Meeting.” At one point, the leaders of the meeting began a count down of how long each attendee had been clean or abstinent from his or her drug of choice. They began with a very high number: Who here has been clean for 20 years? The founder of the program got up and everyone cheered. They went down from there. Ten years?... Ten days?... One day? They then did something dramatic. They asked, “Who here has been clean for zero days?” One of the men who led our *tefilah* (services) that morning got up! He had used his drug of choice on the retreat itself. The crowd cheered.

I was impressed. It is wonderful to be supported by those who identify with your struggle. However, I reflected that, while he most certainly felt the impressive display of support and camaraderie, perhaps he also experienced a sense of epic failure. He was no longer clean. Whether he had been clean for 20 years or 20 minutes, he would have to start his journey of personal change all over again.

This story highlights one school of thought in the world of addiction and recovery. There is a question in addiction psychology as to how one should view recovery, and, as a corollary to that, at what point does one consider the recovered addict to have relapsed.¹⁰ One school of thought suggests that the only way to recover is through absolute abstinence. Treatment was successful, if and only if, the addict no longer uses drugs or alcohol. One incidence of drug or alcohol use is considered a relapse and the former addict has essentially become a failure. This is referred to as a **dichotomous** approach; it is yes or no, either/or.

Another approach, a **process** approach, however, suggests that, even if one has setbacks, one gauges success based on a continuum relative to how one was in the past. Perhaps, though not

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¹⁰ A discussion regarding these approaches can be found in DiClemente, C.C. (2003). *Addiction and change: How addictions develop and addicted people recover*. The Guilford Press: New York.

abstinent, the addict has experienced a reduced drug use or has made great improvements – psychological or otherwise - in his or her life due to *decreased* use. Certainly the goal is to eliminate any substance abuse or dependence, but success is not dichotomous; it is a process. This latter process approach found in the psychology of addiction as well as in the psychology of change will be crucial to our understanding of, and attempt to perform, *teshuvah* or repentance.

Generally speaking, there can be great benefit in the integration of Torah and psychology and this manifests itself in at least two ways. First, an understanding of psychology enhances one’s conceptual understanding of a behavior, religious or not. It can help one modify, increase and/or limit behaviors in a way that can benefit the individual. For example, an obsessive-compulsive behavior can easily be masked as religious scrupulosity or vice versa.¹¹ An individual who repeats the *Shem’a* dozens of times may be particularly careful about having the proper intentions during prayer or he may be displaying symptoms of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Proper understanding of both Torah (i.e. the proper *halachah*) and psychology, as it applies to that particular situation, can both clarify the situation and assist in prescriptive intervention, if necessary.

A second way in which one benefits from the integration of Torah and psychology is through language. That is, while particular concepts, mechanisms and processes may ultimately be the same or similar in both the worlds of Torah and psychology, the language that is used in psychology may be more descriptive, more instructive and/or more palatable to the individual. At the same time, the language of psychology may be less weighted with other baggage when compared with the language utilized in one’s religious history. An example might be someone who is struggling with severe sadness and/or worry about the future. In these cases, rather than simply imploring the individual to “be *b’simchah*, joyful” or “have more *bitachon*, faith in God”, the use of the terms depression and/or anxiety is crucial to ensure that the individual receive proper treatment, while not feeling guilty for lacking proper religious devotion. These two general benefits will accrue to us, as well, as we attempt to deepen our understanding of *teshuvah* and attempt to achieve its desired goals.

Teshuvah has at its core, the basic element of change. The Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b) says:

And Rav Yitzchak said, Four things tear up an individual’s decree of judgment: Charity, calling out, **changing** one’s name and **changing** one’s action... and some say also **changing** one’s location.

"וא"ר' יצחק ד' דברים מקרעין לו גזר דינו של אדם אלו הן צדקה צעקה שינוי השם ושינוי מעשה... וי"א אף שינוי המקום"

Based on this Gemara, the Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 2:4), after describing what *teshuvah* ultimately is, writes as follows regarding the process of *Teshuvah*:

Of the paths of *teshuvah* is for the returnee to scream out constantly in front of Hashem with cries and supplications and

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני ה' בבכי ובתחנונים.

¹¹ For further discussions on this topic see, for example, Siev, J., Baer, L., & Minichiello, W. E. (2011). Obsessive-compulsive disorder with predominantly scrupulous symptoms: Clinical and religious characteristics. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 67, 1188-1196, as well as, Rosmarin, D. H., Pirutinsky, S., & Siev, J. (2010), Recognition of scrupulosity and non-religious OCD by Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 29, 930-944. I thank Dr. Yitzchak Rosman for pointing me toward these articles.

to perform charitable acts according to his ability and to distance himself greatly from that object with which he sinned. And he should **change his name, that is to say that I am a different person and I am not the same man that did those actions. And he changes all his actions for the positive and to the straight path** and he is exiled from his place, for exile atones for sins because it causes him to be subdued and be humble and bent-kneed.

ועושה צדקה כפי כחו. ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו. ומשנה שמו, כלומר שאני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותן המעשים. ומשנה מעשיו כולן לטובה ולדרך הישרה. וגולה ממקומו, שגלות מכפרת עון מפני שגורמת לו להכנע להיות עניו ושפל רוח.

We see clearly from the Rambam that the **process** of *teshuvah* involves the fundamental component of change.

Moreover, Rabbeinu Yonah (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 2:10) seems to take this one step further. While discussing different techniques which one can utilize to correct and remove oneself from inappropriate actions, the third technique Rabbeinu Yonah lists is for that person to listen to the ethical reprimands of those wiser than he or she. In that context he writes:

*And behold, this man in a brief moment has emerged from deep darkness to great light, for at the moment that he listens and attends and his heart understands and he repents, and he accepts from that day he hears the words of the one who reprimands him, and he accepts upon himself from that day forward to do as he is taught by those that grasp Torah... he has accomplished teshuvah and has been **changed** into a different man.*

והנה האיש הזה ברגע קטן יצא מאפילה לאור גדול כי עת אשר יאזין ויסכית, ולבבו יבין ושב, ויקבל ביום שמעו דברי המוכיח, ויקים עליו להיותו עושה ככל אשר יורהו תופשי התורה מן היום ההוא ומעלה... עלתה בידו התשובה ו**נהפך** לאיש אחר.

According to Rabbeinu Yonah change is not just a component within the **process** of *teshuvah* as the Rambam seems to suggest, it is a - or, perhaps, *the* - **goal** of *teshuvah* itself. Thus, the way we approach change in general will have great bearing on how we perform *teshuvah*.

There is a rich literature, developed over the past three decades, that discusses the psychology of change. In particular, there is a transtheoretical model of change (i.e. it is universal and not limited to any one particular psychological orientation) that describes change in stages. Two psychologists, James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente, studied individuals who were able to change themselves without formal outside help. Noting that change is rarely sudden and spontaneous, they described five stages of change that these individuals moved through gradually: (1) precontemplation, (2) contemplation, (3) preparation, (4) action and (5) maintenance.¹²

Precontemplation is the stage at which there is essentially no awareness of a problem by the individual. Others in that person's life may clearly realize that there is a problem, but the individual does not share that realization and has no intention to change. **Contemplation** is the point at which the individual realizes that there is a problem but has yet to commit to making any change(s). There is a nagging ambivalence on his or her part. **Preparation** is the stage during which the individual

¹² A popular version of their research is Prochaska, JO, Norcross, JC and DiClemente, CC (1994). *Changing for good: A revolutionary six-stage program for overcoming bad habits and moving your life positively forward*. New York: Quill. The sixth stage is termination, which is the end of the process. If, when and how one completes the process of change is beyond the scope of this essay.

both intends to change and begins practically to map out a strategy and a plan for how that change will take place. He or she develops a picture for what that change will look like. **Action** is the implementation of the planning that took place during the preparation stage and is the stage during which the most overt change indeed takes place. Finally, there is the **maintenance** stage during which the individual seeks to maintain and consolidate the gains made in the previous action stage, while being careful not to relapse and revert back to previous problem behaviors.

These stages, at first blush, may seem intuitive; however they are crucial to effective change on at least two levels. First, as mentioned above, the awareness that change itself is a process and not an all-or-nothing proposition allows for gradual and effective change, enhances resilience and limits abandonment of the change process while limiting the sense of failure one would experience when backsliding. Whereas in a dichotomous approach, if one stumbles, one is no longer considered abstinent and has essentially failed, in this process approach, there is a greater likelihood that one will persevere, since it is understood that recovery is a process. At times, there may be slight setbacks even as it takes great effort to maintain the gains he has achieved. Indeed, the fact that there is a maintenance stage in the process, points to the challenge of sustained change. If the man who led our *tefilah* at the spiritual retreat had been clean for 20 years and then used drugs once again during the retreat, the clock on his journey to self-change would not restart to zero. He has *not* failed epically; he has simply stumbled while moving in the right direction.

The Mabit (*Beis Elokim, Sha'ar HaTeshuvah*), Rav Moshe ben Yosef Trani writing in the 16th century, accentuates this point as it relates to *teshuvah*.¹³ There, he discusses the idea of partial *teshuvah*, *teshuvah chelkis*:

*After we have explained that the concept of teshuvah consists of regret and leaving the sin, we will say that they are not like other mitzvos that if a person does a portion of that mitzvah he does not receive a portion of the reward. Like if you said that tzitzis is with four corners. If a person does three corners only, he doesn't receive three quarters of the reward... rather it is as if he has not done anything. However, with regard to teshuvah, although it is certainly not complete until one has both regret of the past and acceptance to leave the sin for the future, ... **regret alone without leaving the sin helps a little bit, and similarly leaving the sin without regret...***

אחר שנתבאר ענין התשובה כי היא
החרטה ועזיבת החטא, נאמר כי אינם
כשאר המצוות שהעושה חלק המצוה אין
לו חלק שכר המצוה, כמו שתאמר מצוות
ציצית הוא בד' הכנפות והעושה ציצית בג'
כנפות לבד, אינו מקיים ג' חלקי המצוה
שהרי ד' ציציות מעכבין זה את זה והרי
הוא כאילו לא עשה שום דבר, ואולם
התשובה גם כי אינה שלימה עד שתהיה
בחרטה לשעבר ועזיבת החטא לעתיד, **עם**
כל זה החרטה לבד בלי עזיבת החטא
מועיל קצת, וכן עזיבת החטא בלי
חרטה, ...

Similarly, Rabbeinu Yonah (*Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:9), after describing the most complete levels of *teshuvah* writes, "אכן כל תשובה מועילה..." - "However, **all** *teshuvah* helps." This quote in its context clearly implies that even not yet complete *teshuvah* is of value. Understanding *teshuvah* as a process with partial gains along the way allows us to stay on the path of change, limits our sense of failure and maintains our resilience.

¹³ Rav Moshe ben Yosef Trani, *Beis Elokim* (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 139-40. I am grateful to Rabbi Shalom Baum of Congregation Keter Torah in Teaneck, NJ for pointing out this source to me.

Second, when we move from the general idea and awareness of the process of change to its particular stages, we benefit from both the prescriptive and proscriptive nature of the stages. Depending on what stage an individual finds oneself, the nature of the therapy and the intervention of choice will vary. An action oriented therapy will be appropriate for those in the preparation or action stages. Thus, for those at one of the latter stages of the process of *teshuvah*, there is a need to map out a plan for how that *teshuvah* will take place. To paraphrase the language of Rabbeinu Yonah (*Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:4), it is incumbent upon us "לשית עצות" "בנפשינו", to develop ideas in our souls and to map out a plan to accomplish our desired goals. If we want to be kinder to others, what concrete steps are we taking to implement that desire? If we are going to limit our talking during *tefilah*, prayers, how are we going to create a context for that to happen? If we want to learn more Torah, how will we develop a strategy to designate the time for it and limit our distraction to ensure that we will be successful?

These same action-oriented strategies, however, could well be detrimental to someone at the earlier precontemplation or contemplation stage. Individuals at these stages are simply not ready for action and will either ignore or be demoralized by attempts at change for which they are not ready. At those stages, we would seek first to motivate rather than attempt to concretize and/or maintain the change. And, if one is not yet motivated to change, this may be our greatest challenge to successful *teshuvah*.

In this context, an exceedingly brief glance at the nature of motivation may help. Based on the understanding of change primarily as a process rather than a momentary epiphany, Dr. William R. Miller developed a therapeutic style initially intended for use with those suffering from alcoholism or drug addiction called *motivational interviewing*. One of its goals is to help motivate and move clients through the aforementioned stages of change. Countering a common misconception of motivation, Miller's description of motivation is as follows:

"[M]otivation can be understood not as something that one *has* but rather as something that one *does*. It involves recognizing a problem, searching for a way to change, and then beginning and sticking with that change strategy."¹⁴

Toward this end, one of the core principles in Miller's approach is what he calls "developing a discrepancy", which we can apply in the context of *teshuvah*. In one column, we list values and ideals that we hold dear. We consider them to be at the core of our existence. In the next column, we list the behaviors that we exhibit in these areas. Do they match? Are they consistent? If not, we have developed a discrepancy and we need to think about how we can change. Next, we begin to develop a plan to change. Finally, we begin its implementation. Though a somewhat minor example, it is something that can potentially move us toward a motivation to change, toward *teshuvah*.

Teshuvah is both a lifelong challenge and gift. Through the understanding of psychology (in our case, the psychology of change) and the wealth of insight and language it has contributed to the way we understand ourselves as human beings, we are better able to embrace the challenge and appreciate the wonderful gift that Hashem has given us. We, like the man who was clean zero days, have the ability to strive continuously to change ourselves, our actions and our relationship with Hashem.

¹⁴ Miller, W.R. (2003), Enhancing motivation for change, in Hester, R.K. and Miller, W.R. (Eds.), *Handbook of alcoholism treatment approaches* (pg. 134), Boston: A and B.