

Humility, Self-Efficacy, and the Teshuva Process

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The Role of Humility in the Teshuva Process

Chazal are highly complimentary of the modest and humble, and emphatically critical of the haughty and arrogant. The Mishna in *Avot*,¹ for example, emphasizes the need to avoid any form of arrogance ("מאד מאד הוא שפל רוח", be exceedingly humble") and the Talmud² states that God does not dwell among those who are haughty.³ In explaining the problematic nature of this trait, many sources indicate that arrogance induces a sense of irreverence and precipitates sin. For example, Rabbeinu Yona⁴ states that the evil inclination controls one who is haughty.⁵

Conversely, modesty is perceived by Chazal as a trait that promotes virtue and righteousness. One who is humble has an easier time accepting constructive criticism from others and engaging in introspection with the goal of bettering oneself.

In light of the above, it is not surprising that many Jewish thinkers view modesty as a necessary prerequisite for effective teshuva. Such a perspective has been stated, for example, by R. Nachman of Breslov and is developed at length by R. Avraham Schorr.⁶ Teshuva demands willingness to acknowledge wrongdoing and openness to change, both of which are more likely to be found among individuals with a humble spirit.

Question: The Role of Self-Efficacy

When considering the close link between humility and repentance, an important question arises. On the one hand, teshuva seems to be inextricably linked with humility. On the other hand,

¹ *Avot* 4:4.

² *Sotah* 5a.

³ *Semag* (Neg. Prohibition 64) even records a prohibition to be arrogant in his list of 613 mitzvot.

⁴ *Sha'arei Teshuva* 1:27.

⁵ The Talmud (*Sotah* 4b) writes that such a person will eventually sin with a married woman.

⁶ See R' Avraham Schorr's *HaLekach ViHalibuv* on Chodesh Elul at length.

might humility also stunt the teshuva process? Research has demonstrated⁷ that self-efficacy, the belief that one is capable of actualizing one's goals, is critically important for working hard to achieve a desired outcome and to overcome challenges along the way. Effecting meaningful and lasting personal change requires ongoing investment of energy and a high degree of perseverance. Wouldn't a lowly spirit interfere with the self-efficacy needed to succeed at this lofty and arguably grueling endeavor? Does humility not hinder one's ability to engage in effective teshuva?

The following article presents three perspectives on the deeper relationship between teshuva and humility. The first approach is based on a well-known idea found in a variety of sources about the true definition of humility. The second and third approaches, while rooted in primary sources, may offer new insights into the function and role of humility in the teshuva process.

Answer # 1: Humility as Understanding of Self-Worth

One approach with significant and well-known precedent is to redefine the meaning of humility. While numerous sources describe humility as a requirement to perceive oneself as lowly and contemptible,⁸ there is an additional and very well-known understanding of humility. Some *ba'alei mussar* (masters of character development)⁹ explicitly state that humility does not entail denying one's actual abilities; rather, humility involves the recognition that one's qualities and strengths are an endowment from God and should thus be channeled toward serving Him. Furthermore, the humble individual understands that even the greatest of human talents are dwarfed by G-d's greatness and that all human capacities are intrinsically limited. The problem of arrogance, according to this perspective, is when one feels entitled to respect and honor, attributing credit to oneself rather than recognizing the true source of these and all talents.

This perspective is often cited in the context of a Talmudic statement of Rav Yosef. The Mishna¹⁰ states that humility and fear of punishment ceased to exist when Rebbe passed away. The Talmud cites Rav Yosef's response:

R. Yosef said to the recorder of the Mishna, "remove the word humility because [humility doesn't cease to exist], I am still humble."

Sotah, 49b

אמר ליה רב יוסף לתנא לא
תיתני ענוה דאיכא אנא.
סוטה מט:

Many commentators are bothered by Rav Yosef's response. How can he claim to be so humble? Does such a statement not undermine any modesty he purports to have? For this reason, some suggest¹¹ that authentic humility does entail knowledge of one's strengths and abilities, but concomitantly demands recognizing that these strengths come from G-d and one must stand humbly before the Divine. Rav Yosef was both aware of his own strengths, as well as profoundly aware of G-d's role in endowing him with these gifts.

⁷ Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist*, 37, 122-147.

⁸ This may emerge from the Mishna in *Avot* cited above. Rambam's commentary on that Mishna confirms such an approach.

⁹ See, for example, *Lev Eliyahu* Vol. 1 pg. 294.

¹⁰ *Sotah* 49a.

¹¹ See Maharsha (ad loc) and *Chovat HaLevavot, Shaar HaKenayah* ch. 9 with slightly different formulations.

According to such a perspective, one can understand how humility contributes to effective teshuva. There is no contradiction between high levels of self-efficacy and modesty. Awareness of one's strengths, coupled with a deep appreciation of the source of one's talents, leads one to live with a sense of mission to use one's abilities toward the service of G-d. The teshuva process is only strengthened by belief in one's own abilities and the determination to capitalize on one's strengths to strive for spiritual perfection.

Answer # 2: Humility in Relation to G-d

The above approach suggests that one look inward, at one's own strengths and abilities, in order to cultivate self-worth and appreciate one's ability to grow, which can then spur the teshuva process. An alternate approach suggests that rather than looking inward, a person look upward, toward G-d, in order to accomplish successful repentance.

R' Yitzchak Meir of Ger,¹² known as Chiddushei HaRim, presents an approach to teshuva based on a verse in Sefer Tehillim that is recited daily in *Pesukei D'Zimra*:

Know that G-d, he is the Lord, He made us and we are His, His people and the flock of His pasture.

Tehillim 100:3

דַּעַן כִּי־הוּא אֱלֹהִים הוּא־עָשָׂנוּ וְלֹא (וְלוֹ) אֲנַחְנוּ עִמּוֹ וְצֹאן מִרְעִיתוֹ.
תהלים ק:ג

Interestingly, there are in fact two versions of this verse. The verse is written as "וְלֹא אֲנַחְנוּ," meaning that G-d made us and we did not make ourselves. However, it is read as "וְלוֹ אֲנַחְנוּ," which means that we are His, that we belong to G-d. Chiddushei HaRim suggests a homiletic interpretation that merges these two versions together. He explains that to the extent to which we view ourselves as miniscule and small (לֹא אֲנַחְנוּ), we become increasingly connected to the Divine (וְלוֹ אֲנַחְנוּ).

Though the Chiddushei HaRim doesn't explicitly connect this idea to teshuva, one may homiletically extend this concept to the process of repentance. R' Yisrael Salanter is often quoted as saying that changing even one character trait is harder than learning the entire Talmud. Even one with a strong sense of self-efficacy may feel quite deflated as he approaches the Yamim Nora'im with a determination to change the same trait that he had planned on changing last year, and the year before, and the year before. How can one continue to believe in one's capacity to change when one's history indicates that self-improvement is rather elusive?

The Chiddushei HaRim's idea suggests that the combination of "וְלֹא אֲנַחְנוּ" and "וְלוֹ אֲנַחְנוּ" presents an important perspective when embarking on the teshuva process. Achieving meaningful and lasting change is an incredibly challenging endeavor. To the extent that one appreciates "וְלֹא אֲנַחְנוּ," that one's own efforts are insufficient in order to attain one's goals, that one depends on G-d's assistance and graciousness for tasks big and little, will a person merit "וְלוֹ אֲנַחְנוּ." The more that a person acknowledges G-d's critical role and involvement in his/her life, the more that individual tethers him/herself to the Divine and merits Divine assistance. Though a person may feel that effecting meaningful personal change is unattainable by virtue of his own

¹² Cited by his grandson, *Sefat Emet*, Elul 5642.

efforts, embracing the limitations of the human condition can yield a stronger and deeper connection with the Divine, as well as Divine assistance in achieving lasting teshuva.

Chiddushei HaRim concludes his insight with the statement that this form of connection is the primary task during the month of Elul. In support of such an idea, he notes that the two words in question in the aforementioned verse, "לא" and "לו," have the same letters as the Hebrew spelling for the month of Elul, אלוּל. It is when the ideas represented in those two words merge together that we have truly gained what the month of Elul has to offer.

Answer # 3: Humility and Connection to the Jewish People

In addition to reconnecting with oneself and with G-d, humility may also be a catalyst for deepening one's connection with Knesset Yisrael, which can play a key role in facilitating and mediating the teshuva process.

The trait of humility is conducive to establishing positive interpersonal relationships. While the arrogant may feel threatened by others' success, the modest individual is comfortable acknowledging the good in others and open to learning from and being inspired by that goodness. On a basic level, the teshuva process is bolstered by the ability to learn and gain strength from positive influences in one's surrounding. Though many people may be presented with countless learning opportunities each day, it is the humble individual who is willing to constantly learn from the characteristics and contributions of others. On a pragmatic level, the teshuva process is strengthened by positive, meaningful relationships and the willingness and ability to learn from others.

On a more metaphysical level though, the spirit of unity that can be fostered by a humble stance may have profound effects on the teshuva that is attained. Teshuva that is achieved as an isolated individual may have a lower currency or metaphysical value than the same teshuva that is accomplished by one who is connected to the *klal* (whole). The supplication and transformation of the Jewish people is more readily accepted by G-d when done as a unified nation rather than as disjointed individuals.

A basis for this idea can be found in the words of the Tur.

Each person should have in mind on erev Yom Kippur to appease anyone that he has wronged . . . We do this so that the entire Jewish people should be whole one to another and there should be no possibility for the Satan to indict them.

Tur, Orach Chaim no. 606

ויתן כל אדם אל לבו בערב יום הכפורים
לפייס לכל מי שפשע כנגדו... ועושין כן
כדי שיהא לב כל ישראל שלם כל אחד עם
חבירו ולא יהיה מקום לשטן לקטרג
עליהם.

טור, אורח חיים סימן תרו

Referring to the requirement to ask forgiveness of others before Yom Kippur, the Tur explains that the goal of this practice is to achieve unity and harmony within Am Yisrael, which somehow serves as a deterrent to the Satan who is attempting to indict the Jewish people. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik¹³ similarly explained the requirement to ask for *méchilah* (forgiveness) from others,

¹³ *Harerei Kedem* Vol 1, pg. 82.

suggesting that the forgiveness attainable on Yom Kippur comes as a communal forgiveness and that only one who is connected to the Jewish people is able to achieve that form of forgiveness.

Perhaps, in light of these ideas, one can explain why the *Viduy* recitation is worded in plural form. *Viduy*, confession of sins, is a central element of the teshuva process. Though an individual is meant to be pondering his/her own personal wrongdoings, the plural phraseology suggests that this highly personal process is meant to be occurring on the backdrop of a deep and real connection to the entire nation. As individuals, our actions may be scrutinized and our teshuva insufficient. As a unified nation, though, our prayers and efforts are deemed sufficient and *kapara* (atonement) can be achieved.

Conclusion/Ensuring Long-Term Teshuva

The process of teshuva is a central feature of the Yamim Nora'im season. Any significant attempt at change must involve self-confidence and the belief that one has the capacity to effect such change. Nevertheless, many view humility as a necessary prerequisite for authentic teshuva. The above article explores three different approaches that elucidate the role that humility may play in catalyzing teshuva, as summarized in the table below:

Approach #1: Humility	→	TURNING INWARD: Appreciation of one's strengths and understanding of the source of those strengths (leading to self-efficacy and drive)	→	Teshuva
Approach #2: Humility	→	TURNING TO G-D: Recognition of the role of G-d in succeeding at the teshuva process (thus meriting increased Divine assistance)	→	Teshuva
Approach #3: Humility	→	TURNING TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE: (a) Pragmatic: Open to learning from others (which fosters personal growth) (b) Metaphysical: Viewing oneself as part of the nation (resulting in increased metaphysical value of one's teshuva)	→	Teshuva

Humility seems to play an important role in understanding oneself both in isolation as well as in relation to G-d and the Jewish People. Ironically, through developing one's sense of humility, one emerges a more ambitious and ennobled person, further empowered to grow and to achieve spiritual heights.

May we merit feeling empowered by our own potential, encouraged by the Divine support that constantly accompanies us, and inspired by being a part of this distinctive nation. May our efforts to engage in authentic teshuva be blessed and may the entire Knesset Yisrael achieve *mechila, kapara*, and be inscribed for a happy, healthy, and peaceful year.