

Teshuvah: Moving From and Moving Toward

What is the essential nature of teshuvah? Is the goal to turn away from certain modes of behavior, to master the resistance of various temptations, to desist from specific actions and conduct? To be sure, the answer to all of the above is a resounding yes! When we do teshuvah, especially during the Yomim Noraim season, we try to evaluate the behavior that dominates much of our activity on a day-to-day basis, to commit to overcome the temptations that entice us and lead us to do things wrong, at least from time to time, and to determine to avoid engaging in some of the conduct in which we typically involve ourselves throughout the rest of the year.

A look at a few of the famous pesukim regarding teshuvah confirms this idea:

וַעֲתָה אֲמַר נָא אֶל אִישׁ יְהוּדָה וְעַל יוֹשְׁבֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר ה' הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי יוֹצֵר עֲלֵיכֶם רָעָה וְחָשַׁב עֲלֵיכֶם מַחֲשָׁבָה שׁוּבוּ נָא אִישׁ מִדַּרְכּוֹ הָרָעָה וְהִיטִיבוּ דַרְכֵיכֶם וּמַעַלְלֵיכֶם: *So now, please say to the people of Yehudah and regarding the residents of Yerushalayim, saying: So said Hashem — Behold I am fashioning evil against you and [I am] devising a scheme against you; [therefore] please return, each man from his evil way, and improve your ways and your deeds.*

Yirmeyahu 18:11

הֲחָפֵץ אֲחַפֵּץ מוֹת רָשָׁע נְאֻם ה' אֱלֹקִים הַלּוֹא בְּשׁוּבוֹ מִדַּרְכָּיו וְחָיָה: *Do I desire at all the death of the wicked person? — [this is] the word of Hashem*



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the Lord — is it not [rather that I desire] his return from his ways that he may live?

Yechezkel 18:23

אָמַר אֱלֹהִים חִי אֲנִי נְאֻם ה' אֱלֹקִים אִם אֲחַפֵּץ בְּמוֹת הָרָשָׁע כִּי אִם בְּשׁוּבוֹ רָשָׁע מִדַּרְכּוֹ וְחָיָה שׁוּבוּ שׁוּבוּ מִדַּרְכֵיכֶם הָרָעִים וְלָמָּה תָמוּתוּ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Say to them: As I live — [this is] the word of Hashem, the Lord — [I swear that] I do not desire the death of the wicked person, but rather [I desire] the return of the wicked person from his way that he may live; return, return from your evil ways, for why should you die, O House of Israel!

Yechezkel 33:11

וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי שָׁבוּ מִדַּרְכָּם הָרָעָה וַיִּנָּחַם הָאֱלֹקִים עַל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:

And the Lord saw their deeds [and] that they had returned from their evil way, and the Lord relented concerning the evil which He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.

Yonah 3:10

All of these pesukim indicate that the goal of teshuvah is to return to Hashem by moving away from (...מ) one's evil paths and from one's misdeeds and thereby avert whatever punishment one might otherwise deserve.

The Rambam, in describing what must be done in order to properly do teshuvah, thus writes in his *Sefer HaMitzvos* (*Mitzvas Aseih* 73), that one must verbally confess and acknowledge the sins and transgressions that he has committed in the past and then ask Hashem for forgiveness; the *Sefer HaChinuch* (*Mitzvah* 364) makes a similar presentation. In his introduction to *Hilchos Teshuvah* in his *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam likewise declares that the mitzvah associated with teshuvah is to repent from one's sinful ways and confess before Hashem. Simply put, the goal of teshuvah is to distance oneself from one's past actions and attitudes, and, as the Rambam then stresses in beginning *Hilchos Teshuvah* (1:1), one must verbalize not only what he has done, but his regrets and his embarrassment as well, a notion that may be rooted in a passage in the *Yerushalmi* in *Taanis* (1:1), where an individual who wished to do teshuvah for having spoken excessive lashon hara is told that he must begin by regretting his past conduct.

Perhaps the clearest formulation of this understanding of teshuvah is found in the words of the Rambam a bit later:

above) reveals this other category of teshuvah:

וְשָׁבָתָה עִד ה' אֶלְקֵיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹל כָּכָל אֲשֶׁר
אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם אֶתְּהָ וּבְנִיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל
נַפְשְׁךָ:

And you shall return to Hashem your Lord and listen to His voice in accordance with all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul.

Devarim 30:2

מִחִיתִי כְעָב פִּשְׁעֶיךָ וְכָעָנָן חַטָּאוֹתֶיךָ שׁוֹבָה אֵלַי
כִּי גָאַלְתִּיךָ:

I have wiped away your transgressions like a mist and your sins like a cloud; return to Me for I have redeemed you.

Yeshaya 44:22

שׁוֹבָה וְיִשְׂרָאֵל עִד ה' אֶלְקֵיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֵינֶיךָ:
קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵל ה' אִמְרוּ אֵלָיו כָּל
תְּשׂוּאָה עִוֹן וְקַח טוֹב וּנְשַׁלְמָה פְּרִים שְׁפַתֵינוּ:

Return, O Israel, to Hashem your Lord, for you have stumbled in your iniquity. Take words with you and return to Hashem; say to Him: Forgive all iniquity and accept [our] good [intentions], and let [the words of] our lips replace the [offering of] bulls.

Hosheia 14:2-3

וְגַם עַתָּה נֹאֵם ה' שְׁבוּ עִדֵי בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְצוּם
וּבִבְכִי וּבְמִסְפָּד: וְקִרְעוּ לְבַבְכֶם וְאֵל בְּגֵדֵיכֶם
וְשׁוּבוּ אֵל ה' אֶלְקֵיכֶם כִּי חָנוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֲרָךְ
אֲפִים וְרַב חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל הָרָעָה:

And even now — [this is] the word of Hashem — return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with lamentation. And rend your hearts and not your garments, and return to Hashem your Lord, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, great in kindness, and He relents from [doing] evil.

Yoel 2:12-13

All of these pesukim indicate that the purpose of teshuvah is to move toward (...אל or ...עד) a particular goal, namely, a close connection or identification

20), the latter stressing that one must do what one can to eliminate whatever internal motivations may exist that led him to sin in the first place.

But even in discussing the future, the emphasis here is on the deeds — or misdeeds — of the past. In order to do proper teshuvah, one must be determined to discontinue, from here forward, his behavior of the past. His need to accept upon himself a commitment about the future relates to the avoidance of the act or acts of the past. Teshuvah thus remains, in this sense, an enterprise that focuses on the past; when one engages in teshuvah, one acknowledges and regrets the mistakes of the past and commits not to repeat them. In short, when one does teshuvah, one moves “away from.”

There is, however, an additional dimension to teshuvah; there is a teshuvah where the entire focus is on the future, where the goal is to create something new that may not now exist, at least in the way that we should want it to. When we do this sort of teshuvah, we are looking to start over again with a renewed sense of purpose, to begin a new chapter in life in terms of our observance of Torah and mitzvos, to build a relationship with the Ribbono shel Olam. Again especially during the Yomim Noraim season, we do teshuvah in order to reestablish our connection with Hashem, to rekindle a passion and an excitement that may have diminished, and to recommit and reinvigorate ourselves regarding the lifestyle that He has set forth for us. This type of teshuvah points us toward something rather than away from something.

An examination of the following famous pesukim (especially contrasting them with those cited

ומה היא התשובה הוא שיעזוב החוטא חטאו ויסירו ממחשבתו ויגמור בלבו שלא יעשה עוד שנאמר יעזוב רשע דרכו וגו', וכן יתנחם על שעבר שנאמר כי אחרי שובי נחמתי, ויעיד עליו יודע תעלומות שלא ישוב לזה החטא לעולם שנאמר ולא נאמר עוד אלקינו למעשה ידינו וגו', וצריך להתודות בשפתיו ולומר עניינות אלו שגמר בלבו.

And what is teshuvah? It is [what is attained] when a sinner abandons his sin, removes it from his thoughts, and concludes in his mind that he will not do it again, as it is stated (Yeshayah 55:7), let the wicked person abandon his way, etc. And [the sinner] likewise should regret the fact that he transgressed, as it is stated (Yirmeyahu 31:18), For after [beginning] my return, I regretted. Moreover, [his resolve should be such that] he should be able to call He Who knows all that is hidden as a witness that he will never return to this sin ever again, as it is written (Hosheia 14:4), nor will we ever again call our handiwork “our gods,” etc. And he must verbally confess and declare these matters which he has concluded in his mind.

Hilchos Teshuvah 2:2

It is true that the Rambam, both there and in the first halachah cited above, stresses not only looking back at the past, but also looking toward the future and making a commitment not to engage in sinful activity again. This idea is actually articulated earlier by Rav Saadyah Gaon (*HaEmunos VeHaDeos* 5:5), who speaks of four parts of the teshuvah process, including abandoning the particular behavior, regretting it, requesting atonement, and accepting upon himself not to do it again. Others who mention these different steps, likewise pointing out the need for a commitment regarding the future, include the *Chovos HaLevavos* (*Sha'ar HaTeshuvah* Chapter 4) and Rabbeinu Yonah in his *Sha'arei Teshuvah* (1:19-

with Hashem Himself. The nature of this closeness, and whether this is attainable by an individual doing teshuvah or is perhaps dependent upon the communal involvement of the *tzibbur*, may be the subject of a dispute in the Gemara in *Yoma* (86b); it is certainly understood as such by Rabbeinu Chananel and the *Bach* (in his *Hagahos*, No. *Aleph*) on the page there, and is likewise presented that way in the *Yalkut Shimoni* to *Hosheia* (Volume 2 No. 730; see also the presentation of the sugya in the *Ein Yaakov* there, and see Maharsha, *Chidushei Aggados* there *d.h. Ad kisei hakavod*). In any case, though, it is clear that one of the major goals of proper teshuvah is the achievement of a sense of closeness to Hashem.

Once again, the words of the Rambam most clearly articulate the essence of this type of teshuvah:

גדולה תשובה שמקרבת את האדם לשכינה... כלומר אם תחזור בתשובה בי תדבק. התשובה מקרבת את הרחוקים, אמש היה זה שנאו לפני המקום משוקץ ומרוחק ותועבה, והיום הוא אהוב ונחמד קרוב וידיד... כמה מעולה מעלת התשובה, אמש היה זה מובדל מה' אלהי ישראל... צועק ואינו נענה... ועושה מצות וטורפין אותן בפניו... והיום הוא מודבק בשכינה... צועק ונענה מיד... ועושה מצות ומקבלין אותן בנחת ושמחה... ולא עוד אלא שמתארים להם...

Great is [the power of] teshuvah, for it brings a person to the Divine Presence ... that is to say, [Hashem says that] if you return [to Me] with [proper] teshuvah, you will [be able to] cleave to Me. Teshuvah brings close those who are far away; yesterday (i.e., before doing teshuvah), this person was [considered] hated before the Omnipresent — disgusting, distant, and abominable. But today (i.e., after having done teshuvah), he is loved, desirable, close — a friend.

How exalted are the benefits of teshuvah!

Yesterday, this person was alienated from Hashem, the Lord of Israel ... he would cry out and not be responded to ... he would fulfill commandments and they would be thrown back in his face ... But today, he is attached to the Divine Presence ... he cries out and is responded to immediately ... and he fulfills commandments and they are accepted with pleasure and joy... and not only that but there is a longing for them...

Hilchos Teshuvah 7:6-7

It may be noted, as pointed out by R. Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor (in the introduction to his *Teshuvos Ein Yitzchak*, *Pesach HaSha'ar* No. 47), that the Rambam does not distinguish there between an individual and the *tzibbur*, implying that even an individual who does teshuvah properly can attain this lofty level. Rabbeinu Yonah, in his *Sha'arei Teshuvah* (1:9), likewise asserts that there are many levels of teshuvah, and how close the person will indeed come to Hashem depends upon the level of his teshuvah. The point is, though, that a person can, through teshuvah, forge a new relationship with Hashem. Teshuvah in this sense is an enterprise that focuses on the future, and when one does this type of teshuvah, one moves “toward.”

It is relatively easy to understand (if not necessarily to accomplish) what one must do to engage in the first type of teshuvah discussed here — namely, as outlined by the authorities cited above, to recognize one's transgression, regret it, verbalize his confession, and commit to avoid repeating it in the future. What must be done, however, to achieve the goal of the second type of teshuvah — establishing a closeness with Hashem — is less obvious. What exactly should one be doing in order

to build this desired relationship? The question is further compounded by the fact that, as indicated later by Rabbeinu Yonah (*Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:42), one can be successful in terms of the first goal — that is, his past transgressions can be forgiven and any punishments previously deserved set aside — but yet still not be anywhere near where he wants to be in terms of his connection to Hashem. What, then, should this person be doing?

In describing the general human condition as it relates to one's status in the eyes of Hashem, the Rambam tells us:

כל אחד ואחד מבני האדם יש לו זכיות ועונות, מי שזכיותיו יתירות על עונותיו צדיק, ומי שעונותיו יתירות על זכיותיו רשע, מחצה למחצה בינוני...

Each and every human being has merits and iniquities; one whose merits outnumber his iniquities is [called] a tzaddik, and one whose iniquities outnumber his merits is [called] a rasha, [one whose merits and inequities are] half and half [that is, they are equal], is [called] a beinoni.

Hilchos Teshuvah 3:1

We might wonder what exactly the Rambam here is teaching us. Why does it matter what a person is called — whether a *tzaddik*, a *rasha*, or a *beinoni*? Why does the Rambam make a point of stressing the individual's status — what difference does that make? Perhaps we may suggest that the Rambam is actually instructing us as to how to be a *tzaddik*, a *rasha*, or a *beinoni*. Contrary to what may be popular belief, a *tzaddik* is not some perfectly behaved person who does not sin and never does anything wrong. Indeed, the pasuk in *Koheles* (7:20) affirms that no such individual exists. The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (46b) derives from here that even someone

who is considered a *tzaddik* thus requires the atonement brought about by *kevurah*, while a later Gemara there (101a) adds that even the greatest of people who meticulously observe the entire Torah err and sin as well.

Instead, the Rambam asserts, a *tzaddik* is somebody who may have sins to his name — perhaps even many sins — but he has even more mitzvos and merits. A *tzaddik* is someone who on balance is closer to Hashem than he is far from Him. He may make mistakes and do things that are wrong, but his overall trajectory, based on the totality of his deeds, is toward Hashem and not away from him.

This same point is made by Tosafos to *Rosh HaShanah* (16b, *d.h. VeNechtamin*), where we likewise learn that a *tzaddik* is defined as someone who has more merits than demerits, and not someone who has no demerits at all. As an aside, the fact that the term “*tzaddik*” can have this broader connotation and is not applied (exclusively) to one who is completely, or almost completely, free of sin, may be seen from statements in the Torah itself. In these statements, we find that someone who is “in the right” regarding a particular circumstance is called a *tzaddik*, even though that title may not accurately describe his general conduct (see Shemos 23:7 and Devarim 25:1). The *Lechem Mishneh* in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (3:2) makes this point explicitly.

In our context, then, the term “*tzaddik*” may be understood as a description of a person who is pointed in a certain direction, who is headed along a certain path, who is moving toward a certain goal. An individual who seeks a relationship with Hashem and thus works to make sure that he is generally doing what is right in His eyes, who wants to observe the

mitzvos and avoid transgressions and works hard to make that happen, and who strives for perfection in his service of Hashem, may be said to be a *tzaddik* even though he actually falls far short of that perfection. He is a *tzaddik* because of the path that he is on as evidenced by his overall behavior. One who wishes to attain the second category of teshuvah must conscientiously place himself on that path and see that he stays on it.

With this in mind, we may be better able to understand three famous but otherwise difficult Talmudic passages. The first is a Gemara in *Niddah* (30b), which teaches that before a child is born into this world, while yet in his mother’s womb, he is enjoined, with the power of an oath, to be a *tzaddik* and not a *rasha*. If we interpret the words *tzaddik* and *rasha* here in the usual manner, we have to wonder what the purpose of this oath is, as it seems to impose upon everybody an impossible standard — we know in advance that this oath will not be able to be fulfilled! If, however, we assume that a *tzaddik* is a description of someone who has made the choice to follow a specific road and work toward a relationship with Hashem by trying to do more mitzvos and fewer sins, that title is indeed attainable by all.

As explained by the Maharsha there (*Chidushei Aggados, d.h. Ve-Amar*), the directive to each child about to be born is to try to maintain the connection with Hashem that the soul had while in the womb, and not to succumb to the *Yeitzer HaRa*. One who tries to maintain that purity may be labeled a *tzaddik* (though it should be noted that the *Ba’al HaTanya, Likkutei Amarim Tanya* Chapter 1 understands the term *tzaddik* in this Gemara in the more traditional sense). This may relate to the idea

expressed by the Gemara in *Berachos* (61b) which indicates that the *tzaddik* is controlled by his *Yeitzer Tov*; this does not mean that he does not have any temptations to do evil or even that he does not at times give in, but rather that he is in general under the dominion of the positive influences that point him toward the *Ribbono shel Olam*.

This may also be what the Torah is telling us when it advises us to choose the path of life — *u’vacharta bachaim* (*Devarim* 30:19). What is important is to be on a certain path. The *tzaddik* is the person who has chosen a direction and works on following it closely, resulting not in perfection, but in more accomplishments that further his goals than that detract from it. Finally, this may also be the point emphasized by the Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:2), that the reckoning of how many merits and how many demerits one has is not a matter of simple numbers, since there are certain individual good deeds that outweigh many misdeeds, and there are specific transgressions that outweigh many mitzvos. Of course, each mitzvah has its own reward and each sin its own punishment regardless of whatever else is on the individual’s ledger. But what is important overall is the path that the person is on, where he is heading, and what general choices he has made — and to determine that he is moving in the right direction we have to look at the entire picture and not just at individual mitzvos and transgressions.

A second Gemara is found in *Kiddushin* (40b), where we are taught that someone who had been identified as a *tzaddik*, even for a long time, but subsequently rebelled and became a sinner, is considered to have forfeited all the good deeds that he previously

performed. In explaining why this should be the case, the Gemara asserts that it is referring to someone who expressly regrets having done all those good deeds. The Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:3) rules accordingly. The question, however, still may be asked: Why should that matter — why are all his good deeds erased? The answer may be that what we are looking at is the person's path. Since he is now moving away from a positive relationship with Hashem, he is heading the wrong way and his overall trajectory is downward. It is in that sense that his previous good deeds are irrelevant because he is now moving in a very different direction.

Lastly, a later Gemara in *Kiddushin* (49b) states that if man betroths a woman but says that he is doing so only on the understanding that he is a *tzaddik*, the betrothal is valid even if he has been, up to that point, an absolute *rasha* and not a *tzaddik* by any definition. This is because it is possible that just at that moment, sincere thoughts of teshuvah entered his mind, meaning that he made a mental commitment to change his ways for the better. Many commentators, however, are understandably troubled by this, because even if the man did make a sincere commitment in his mind to do teshuvah, does that already make him a *tzaddik* now? And yet both the Rambam (*Hilchos Ishus* 8:5) and the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Even HaEzer* 38:31) accept this ruling (although both assert that the betrothal is only doubtfully valid, a status which has its own ramifications, because we cannot know for sure what was in the man's mind). But the question still stands: How can it be valid at all based upon only a (possible) mental commitment if the basic requirements for teshuvah, which include, as described above,

an oral confession, were not fulfilled? How can this person be labeled a *tzaddik*?

The *Minchas Chinuch* (Mitzvah 364 No. 1) famously asserts that we can, in fact, infer from here that even one who does teshuvah mentally can be labeled a *tzaddik*. Maran HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, while not willing to go as far as the *Minchas Chinuch* in assessing this person's status, agrees that by virtue of a person's decision to change his direction in life, he is labeled a *tzaddik* despite the fact that he has not completed the teshuvah process (see *Harerei Kedem*, Volume 1 No. 41 in the revised edition). This is very much in line with our suggestion here that from one perspective, what matters in terms of teshuvah is where one is heading — the road one is presently on — and although the person may now be far from a *tzaddik* in the classic sense, the fact that he is sincerely looking to move toward a relationship with Hashem is already enough to qualify him as a *tzaddik* for certain purposes. It may be added that the *Chelkas Mechokek*, commenting on the aforementioned ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch* (No. 44), appears to concur.

What emerges from all of the above is that there is an aspect of teshuvah that focuses on the path in life upon which one finds oneself, and one who wishes to engage in this aspect of teshuvah must work at making sure that he is indeed heading in that direction. He should be moving along a road toward a close relationship with Hashem by generally increasing the number of mitzvos he performs and decreasing the number of transgressions he does. This is not to say, of course, that a person who does work at assuring that his overall trajectory is in the right direction may ignore the more

technical aspect of teshuvah and not consider his individual sins and seek to expiate them by a verbal confession and everything which that includes. This is certainly not true! It is not enough to simply be on the correct path toward connecting with Hashem and disregard his specific sins. At the same time, though, it is not enough to eliminate one's technical sins and not also work on one's overall path in life. One must engage in both *teshuvah* ...*מ* — from, and *teshuvah* ...*ע* or ...*ל* — toward.

As a postscript, it may be added that when raising and educating children, the same dual obligation should be borne in mind. We all want our children and our students to learn how properly to conduct themselves, to act, to interact, and to carry themselves by engaging in certain specific behaviors and avoiding other specific behaviors. Much time and effort is spent, as it should be, on training children regarding those behaviors. But it is also imperative to impress upon them the need to be on a particular path in life, to be pointed in a certain direction, as opposed to moving vaguely and aimlessly, and to act in accordance with being along that path. The successful parent, grandparent, teacher, mentor, or guide is the one who is able to motivate the student not only to stay away from, but to move toward. And for that to happen, it is insufficient to simply convey rules, though it is certainly necessary to do so. But in addition, one must create a culture, foster an environment, and nurture an atmosphere where the student feels that he or she is not only on a definitive path, but is proud of it and will eventually want on his own to do everything possible to remain on that path, a path toward a closer relationship with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.