

Repentance Beyond Sin¹

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm

RIETS Class of 1951

Rosh HaYeshiva, RIETS, and Chancellor, Yeshiva University

The beginning of a new year of learning and living a full Jewish life of mitzvot is a proper occasion to explore the often neglected overlay of meaning of our religious growth in these areas. The following comments are inspired largely by the writings of the founders of the HaBaD school of Hasidism, but they do not necessarily follow them entirely and, indeed, depart from them in certain details.

It is customary to associate *teshuvah* with sin. A person transgresses and he then rues his deed. The proper response is *teshuvah*, repentance. The halakhic analysis of *teshuvah* is highly sophisticated and articulates well with the psychology of the penitent, accompanying him on the various stages of his "return" to his pre-sin state.

However, sin does not exhaust the entire *teshuvah* phenomenon, for were it so, how would we account for the fact that the Talmud and Midrashim recommend *teshuvah* every day of one's life² and that the truly righteous are described as those preeminent souls who are in a state described as *kol yamav bi-teshuvah*, spending all their lives in repentance? It is stretching the point to answer that the greater the person the more aware he is even of the most minor infractions. Moreover, the Talmud does posit a category of *tzaddik gamur*, a completely righteous, i.e., sinless, person. Is such a totally unblemished individual to be denied this unique and inspiring mitzvah of *teshuvah*?

The most compelling answer is offered by R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, author of the immortal Tanya and founder of HaBaD Hasidism.³ He differentiates between two kinds of repentance which he terms a Lower Repentance (*teshuvah tata'ah*) and a Higher Repentance (*teshuvah ila'ah*). The former is the kind of repentance we are most acquainted with - the confession, contrition, resolution, etc., that follow upon sin. This *teshuvah* may take the form of abjuring evil in any and all its many guises (thus, the negative commandments), or that of the active pursuit of the good and the noble and the holy (the positive mitzvot). The choice is as much a function of individual temperament as ideological preference. But both are motivated by the consciousness of moral or spiritual failure.

¹ Reprinted with permission from Rabbi Lamm's *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith* (2002), Vol. II pp. 45-49.

² *Shabbat* 153a; *Eccl.* R. 9:8; *Mid. Psalms* 90:16; *Shelah, Be'asarah Maa-marot, Maamar* 7 (18).

³ In his *Likkutei Torah to Balak*, 74a.

The Higher Repentance has nothing at all to do with sin or defeat. It is the reaching out for God in an attempt to overcome the human condition of being separate and alienated from Him. Man's soul is the divine "spark" within him, and this *neshamah* strives for *teshuvah*, or, literally, "return" to its Source. In other words, *teshuvah ila'ah* represents a genuinely spiritual yearning, and is unrelated to psychology or disobedience - the realm of *teshuvah tata'ah*. The return, in the former, is not to one's own prior, pristine, pre-sin state, but to one's ontological origin, prior to his very existence separate from his Creator.

Both of these forms of repentance bespeak a high level of spiritual maturity, but the difference in focus results in qualitatively different experiences. Thus, the Higher Repentance is thoroughly rational; the striving to reunite that which once was one. The Lower Repentance, however, is irrational, almost absurd. It seeks to undo the past, declaring that the past transgressions never occurred or have even been transformed into virtues (*zekhuyot*).⁴ It is a violation of causality and, indeed, common sense - although without it, we would be condemned to an inflexible, fatalistic, brutish existence. The divine forgiveness which is the shining goal of *teshuvah tata'ah* defies our reason, and the human reaction to such irrational Divine pardon is fear or awe, sheer amazement, as we are overwhelmed by the divine indifference to mere reason and His overruling of necessity and causality (*ki imkha ha-selichah lema'an tivarei*).

In the major elaboration of repentance in the Torah, that recorded in *Nitzavim*, both forms of *teshuvah* are mentioned, but there is a clear separation between them. Thus, verses 1-6 apply to *teshuvah tata'ah*, while the following four verses, 7-10, refer to *teshuvah ila'ah*.

R. Shneur Zalman maintains that the Higher Repentance is addressed to God as the *Ein-Sof*, as the Infinite beyond all relationship, and is achieved through the study of Torah. The Lower Repentance involves an encounter with God in His self-revelation via the Sefirot, the Ten Emanations of His attributes, and proceeds through performance of the mitzvot. This is a most reasonable view, in light of the role of man in both forms of *teshuvah*. In the sin-driven Lower Repentance, a human being strives to reintegrate his personality the wholeness of which has been shattered by sin, and it stands to reason that he should appeal to God in *His* role of personality, i.e., the Ten Sefirot. This reintegration of one's personality is an expression of the psychological dimension of sin and repentance--and this is characteristic of the mitzvot, with their positive and negative modes of conduct both expressing and influencing one's will and emotions. When it comes to the Higher Repentance, however, which is the yearning to rejoin the Source of all being, it is not man's psychic state that moves him but his spiritual fate, his metaphysical and meta-psychological search for his ontological origins. In this stance, therefore, he addresses the *Ein-Sof* proper, that inner and ineffable essence of Divinity which is beyond personality, beyond the Sefirot, beyond relationship, beyond even divine transcendence itself. This more exalted form of *teshuvah* finds its channel only in the study of Torah, the realm of the "Light of the *Ein-Sof*."

Which of these two forms of repentance is superior? The question may be irrelevant; both are vital in the development and growth - perhaps very existence - of a religious person. In the

⁴ *Yoma* 86b.

Nitzavim passage, mentioned above, the progression is from Lower Repentance to Higher Repentance, implying that the latter is the more significant goal for which the former is the necessary precursor. Yet an analysis of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* tends to the reverse conclusion. Thus, Rosh Hashanah hardly speaks of sin at all. Its most cogent and significant message is that of the majesty of God – *malkhuyot* - and the sounding of the shofar, the symbol of the Sinaitic revelation. The shofar is the wordless cry of the supplicant aching in his spiritual solitude and calling out to his Creator with whom he seeks not reconciliation (for it is not sin that alienates him from the Creator but his very humanity) but reunion, reintegration, the overcoming of the "real" world which creates the distance between Creator and creature, between the divine and the human.⁵ Reconciliation after sin is the theme of Yom Kippur, and the whole range of Lower Repentance is evident throughout the day: *vidduy* is recited time and again; the shame and embarrassment attendant upon *chet* is pervasive; the plea for pardon, for *selichah u-mechilah* is repeated again and again. The progression from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur is thus one of *teshuvah ila'ah* to *teshuvah tata'ah*, the opposite direction from that mentioned in *Nitzavim*, and one which, by the same token, would indicate the higher level of *teshuvah tata'ah* over that of *teshuvah ila'ah*.

Perhaps the answer lies in the perspective taken. The Torah is, as it were, the divine point of view: God's anthropology. Here the Higher Repentance is the ultimate desideratum.⁶ The cycle of the year, the precedence of Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, reflects the human experience and therefore the human perspective, and so the final goal is *teshuvah tata'ah*, the Lower Repentance, for this more directly affects one's conduct and therefore his daily life. Or, perhaps, the priority of Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, and the different forms of repentance they represent, is meant to instill in us an awareness of the ultimate goal of all our aspirations, indeed all of our lives, before we proceed to the "practical" task of mending what we have broken in the course of our imperfect existence of the past year.

Both of these exalted experiences should be with us, especially during this season of repentance, buttressing our spiritual courage and our determination to master our studies and, even more important, our very selves. May we succeed in these noble endeavors, and may our study of Torah and performance of the mitzvot be enhanced by the consciousness of their respective spiritual achievements, and thus inspire us to higher aspirations in both realms.

May all of us, as we enter the new year, succeed in both endeavors, and may the *Ribbono shel Olam* grant each of us, all our loved ones, all Israel, and all humanity, a year of peace and prosperity, of reconciliation with Him and with each other. And may our ultimate goals be so lofty that we can never fully achieve them - and yet so inspiring that we never despair of so doing.

⁵ The wordlessness of the shofar and its superiority to mere speech is much commented upon in Hasidic writings, although the interpretations are not necessarily those I am suggesting. See R. Shneur Zalman in his commentary to his *Siddur*, p. 242b; and especially R. Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, *Or ha-Torah*, section on Rosh Hashanah 2:81,82; *Beiurei ha-Zohar* 402:4, and *Derushim le-Rosh Hashanah* 1:374. Cf. the Rav in his *Ish ha-Halakhah*, pp. 57-59. 5.

⁶ Nevertheless, in the course of one's life experiences, the defect caused by sin must be rectified before the process of Higher Repentance is undertaken. See *Tanya* 1:17.