On Teshuvah and Complete Teshuvah

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Two Types of Teshuvah

The very first halachah in the Rambam’s famed presentation of Hilchot Teshuvah has generated much debate, analysis and discussion, via both the printed word and through shiurim and derashot.122 The Rambam writes:

If a person has transgressed any of the commandments of the Torah, whether positive or negative, whether intentionally or unintentionally, when he does teshuvah and repents from his sin, he is obligated to confess before God, blessed is He, as it is stated (Numbers 5:6-7): A man or a woman who commits [any sins] ...they shall confess the sin that they committed - this refers to a verbal confession. [The requirement to verbalize] this confession is a positive commandment. How does one confess? He says, “I beg of You, Hashem, I have sinned, been iniquitous and willfully rebelled before You, and I have done such and such; and I regret and am ashamed of my deeds, and I will never repeat such a thing again.” This is the fundamental form of confession, and one who elaborates on his confession and lengthens [his presentation of] this matter is indeed praiseworthy.

Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1

Rather than explaining what exactly is meant by “teshuvah,” what its goals are and what Scriptural evidence there is that the notion even exists, which one might expect him to do in his opening comments,123 the Rambam here begins instead by outlining some of the technical requirements of

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122 For a sampling of the former, see the sources collected in the הליקוטים ספר ההלכות ווטרא and הפתח ספר ההלכות טשועוה in the edition of the Rambam’s Mishneh Torah published by R. Shabsi Frankel. Maran HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, z’tl, expounded on this passage in several shiurim; see, for example, the citations in Al HaTeshuvah, p. 37 ff. and p. 149 ff., and in Harrerei Kedem Volume 1 Chapters 36 and 58.

123 See, by way of contrast, Rabbeinu Yonah’s opening remarks in his Shaarei Teshuvah and the beginning of the Meiri’s Chibbur HaTeshuvah (1:1).
the teshuvah process, stressing that a particular formula of vidui, generally understood as confession, is an absolute necessity from a procedural perspective. According to his description, the individual reciting the vidui must express three primary feelings: recognition of the sin(s), remorse for past deeds, and a resolve to not repeat such acts in the future. His reference to teshuvah in this passage, however, is limited to the words “when he does teshuvah,” implying that teshuvah, the essence of which he does not define here, is in effect the backdrop, or perhaps the psychological and emotional underpinning, for the mitzvah of vidui, and it is to the specifics of that mitzvah that the Rambam devotes his attention in this section.

It is not until the second chapter of Hilchot Teshuvah that the Rambam gives us his precise definition of teshuvah. There he writes:

What is complete teshuvah? That is [what is attained by a person] when the very circumstance in which he [previously] sinned presents itself to him and he has the ability to commit the sin [again] but instead turns away and does not commit it because of teshuvah, and not because of fear or weakened capability. If, for example, a man had illicit relations with a woman and after some time was alone with her [again], still in love with her, still physically capable, and in the same place where he sinned with her previously, and instead he turned away and did not transgress [again], such a person has attained complete teshuvah. This is in line with what [King] Solomon said (Ecclesiastes 12:1): So remember your Creator in the days of your youth. But if one did not repent until the days of his old age and until a time when it was not possible for him to do what he had done, even though this [kind of teshuvah] is not the preferred teshuvah, it still helps him and he has attained [a level of] teshuvah. [Indeed,] even if one transgressed for all his days but he did teshuvah on the day of his death and he dies having done teshuvah, all his iniquities are forgiven, as it is stated (ibid. v. 2): Until the sun, the light, the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain. – which is [a reference to] the day of death.

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 (Isaiah 55:7), let the wicked one abandon his way, etc. And [the sinner] likewise should regret the fact that he transgressed, as it is stated (Jeremiah

124 Indeed, it would appear that vidui, and not teshuvah, is the actual mitzvah; see, for example, Minchat Chinuch 364:1, Netziv in Haamek Davar to Devarim 30:11, and Meshech Chochmah to Devarim 31:17 (Parashat VaYeLech).
125 See R. Saadiah Gaon in his Emanot VeDe'ot, 5:5, for an earlier formulation of these three components (together with a fourth). But whereas R. Saadiah Gaon explicitly presents them as categories of teshuvah, the Rambam here associates them with vidui, as at least somewhat distinct from teshuvah.
31:18): For after my returning, 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 (Hosea 14:4): nor will we ever again call our handiwork ‘our gods,’ etc. And he must verbally confess and declare these matters that he has concluded in his mind.

Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1-2

An examination of these two halachot reveals that the Rambam is actually providing two different definitions of teshuvah, speaking in א Halifax of “complete” teshuvah, and in ב Halifax of “plain” teshuvah. At least two questions may be raised here. First, what is the essential difference between the two? And second, assuming that “complete” teshuvah is somehow a higher or more perfect level of teshuvah, why does the Rambam discuss that first? Wouldn’t it have made more sense to first present the more basic or simpler level before detailing the greater or more exalted level?126

Understanding Complete Teshuvah

In discussing “plain” teshuvah here, the Rambam in effect restates the ideas mentioned at the beginning of א Halifax, writing that the individual must acknowledge and regret his sin and commit to change his behavior in the future. One who has done this, and indeed succeeds in avoiding the repetition of his sin, has apparently done teshuvah on this level. In describing the individual who has attained complete teshuvah, however, the Rambam stresses that he has to confront the same situation in which he previously had sinned, having both the opportunity and the ability to repeat the transgression, and this time show the necessary restraint to resist doing the forbidden act again. It clearly cannot be, however, that the distinction between this greater level of teshuvah and the basic level is only a matter of circumstance, a function solely of whether or not the individual happened to have been “tested” with the chance to repeat his misdeed. There must be a substantial qualitative difference between the two types of teshuvah as well.

It would appear that “complete” teshuvah entails more than just making sure not to repeat one’s past mistakes, significant an accomplishment though that undoubtedly is. One who finds himself tempted by sin should surely make every effort to avoid that temptation, just as one who knows that certain things are dangerous for his physical health should avoid those things.127 If that requires him to stay away from the conditions in which the particular temptation presents itself, then so be it. One who knows, for example, that when walking along a certain block he has been and still is strongly tempted to enter into a non-kosher food establishment there and partake of its delicacies would be well advised to seek out another suitable route where he will not be similarly tempted. And yet, while a person should certainly be admired for keeping himself away from that which tempts him to sin, and can be considered, if he has fulfilled other pre-requisites,

126 Again, see, by way of contrast, Rabbeinu Yonah’s discussion in Shaarei Teshuvah (I:49), where he describes what the Rambam identifies as “complete” teshuvah towards the very end of his presentation of the principles of teshuvah. See also the Meiri’s Chibbur HaTeshuvah (I:12).

127 See Rambam, Hilchot De’ot 4:1.
to have indeed done teshuvah, he has not, by merely having avoided the circumstances in which he sinned in the past, achieved “complete” teshuvah according to the Rambam.

Complete teshuvah requires something deeper. Complete teshuvah is attained only when a person has undergone a transformation of character to the point that he now no longer has to avoid a particular temptation because he has completely overcome his desire for that temptation. He has altered his way of thinking, reconsidered his motivations and goals, and shifted his path in life. He has developed the ability to control his behavior and is now in fact a totally different person. The fact that he has been confronted with the opportunity to repeat his sin and did not do so is proof of the fact that this major change, this transformation, has in fact taken place. Complete teshuvah is identified with newly mastered self-control, resulting in a change in one’s very nature and personality.

In describing the person who has achieved this level of teshuvah, the Rambam writes later:

Teshuvah brings close those who are far away; yesterday (i.e., before doing teshuvah), he was hated before the Omnipresent – disgusting, distant and abominable. But today (i.e., after having done teshuvah), he is loved, desirable, close – a friend.

Rambam Hilchot Teshuvah 7:6

How exalted are the benefits of teshuvah! Yesterday, this person was alienated from Hashem, the God of Israel, as it is stated (Isaiah 59:2): your iniquities have separated between you and your God; he would cry out and not be responded to, as it is stated (ibid. 1:15): even if you were to intensify your prayer, I will not listen; he would fulfill commandments and they would be thrown back in his face, as it is stated (ibid. v. 12): who sought this from your hand, to trample My courtyards, and (Malachi 1:10): If only there were someone among you who would shut the [Temple] doors, so that you could not kindle upon My Altar in vain! I have no desire for you, said Hashem, Master of Hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand, and (Jeremiah 7:21): Add your burnt-offerings to your peace offerings and eat [their] meat [yourselves]. But today, he is attached to the Divine Presence, as it is stated (Deuteronomy 4:4): But you who cling to Hashem, your God; he cries out and is responded to immediately, as it is stated (Isaiah 65:24): It will be that before they call I will answer; and he fulfills commandments and they are accepted with pleasure and joy, as it is written (Ecclesiastes 9:7): for God has already approved your deeds, and not only that but there is a longing for them, as it is stated (Malachi 3:4): Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to Hashem as in the days of old and in previous years.

Hilchot Teshuvah 7:7
How can such a sharp distinction, such a dramatic turnabout, be explained? The answer is that the person who has done complete *teshuvah* has undergone a dramatic change. He is now no longer the same person as he was before. And his relationship with Hashem is thus also markedly different. This is the nature of complete *teshuvah*, and it is indeed significantly different qualitatively than the basic kind of *teshuvah* where the essence is developing the ability to avoid sin through the discipline that comes as a result of the three stages of recognition, remorse and resolve. Complete *teshuvah* involves making changes in one’s very character and becoming a different person.

**The Ultimate Goal and the Process of Teshuvah**

The second question posed above as to why the Rambam began by describing complete *teshuvah* before defining the more basic elements of *teshuvah*, a seemingly out of order presentation, may perhaps be addressed by analyzing what *teshuvah* is really all about. It is possible to understand that what the Rambam defines as “complete” *teshuvah* is something beyond the fundamental requirement of *teshuvah* – a goal to be striven for, certainly, but essentially an “extra” – an option for one who wants to “go all out” and engage in doing “*teshuvah*-plus.” If that is the case, then it is true that the Rambam should perhaps have begun with a discussion of the general obligation before moving on to the optional “extra.”

It is possible, however, to suggest that complete *teshuvah* is in fact the ultimate goal; it is that level which in truth defines the very obligation of *teshuvah*. All “lesser” forms of *teshuvah*, while significant, indeed quite significant, can be considered as means toward the end of complete *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah*, according to this approach, is a process, consisting of several steps, each of which, though important in its own right, is a prelude to another step, with the final purpose being the change in personality. If this is true, the Rambam’s formulation makes good sense. He begins in by stating the goal of *teshuvah*, namely, transformation of character. Then, in, he discusses the key steps needed on the way to that goal. It is obvious that not everybody in every circumstance is able to redefine himself as part of the *teshuvah* process; in many cases, doing *teshuvah* by disciplining oneself to avoid the temptation of sin, accompanied by the requisite feelings of remorse, is the best one can hope to achieve. As even that accomplishment is often rather elusive, such *teshuvah* is nothing to be embarrassed about. But it still falls short of complete *teshuvah*. The person who attains this level of *teshuvah* has taken steps – big steps – but he has not reached the target. The Rambam thus chose to begin his definitions of *teshuvah* by setting the target.

With this approach, another answer may be offered to a famous question raised by the *Minchat Chinuch* (364:1) and others. The Gemara in *Kiddushin* (49b) teaches that if a man says to a woman, “Become betrothed to me on the condition that I am a righteous person,” even if he (until now) was a completely wicked person, she is considered betrothed to him because it is possible that at that moment, he had made a mental commitment to do *teshuvah*. That thought in his mind suffices to categorize him as a righteous person because he has done *teshuvah*. The question is, if, as noted above, *vidui*, a verbal confession, is such an integral component of the *teshuvah* process, how

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128 See *Kiryat Sefer* to *Hilchot Teshuvah* 1:16.
can this mental commitment be enough to characterize this person as a righteous man – he cannot be viewed as having properly done teshuvah, because he made no confession.

According to the aforementioned understanding of the Rambam, though, the answer is clear. Teshuvah, as explained, is a process, consisting of many steps. A mental commitment to mend one’s evil ways is one of those steps – possibly the very first step. The vidui, consisting of the three components outlined above, is another, later step. But even that brings one to only one level of teshuvah; the ultimate teshuvah, “complete” teshuvah, is further yet down the road. The individual who mentally committed to change his behavior for the better has certainly not done complete teshuvah. He has not even done teshuvah on the basic level, as he did not recite vidui. But he has taken a step; he is on the road. And concerning at least this particular law of betrothal, his being on the road is sufficient to qualify the person as righteous.129

It should be pointed out that this idea that teshuvah is in fact a process with a number of steps, and that a mental decision to do teshuvah is an early one of those steps, can be shown to emerge from the words of the Rambam himself. As alluded to above, the Rambam in א:א, when introducing the formula for the text of vidui, prefaces his presentation of the mitzvah of vidui with the words “תשובת ועשיה ושם,” “when he does teshuvah.” This implies that the decision in the person’s mind to do teshuvah has already happened; the first step has been taken. The notion is even more clearly evident in the words of the Rambam in describing the procedure followed when bringing certain sacrifices:

How does one confess? He says, “I have sinned, been iniquitous and willfully rebelled, and I have done such and such; but I have returned through teshuvah before You, and this [sacrifice] is my atonement.”

Hilchot Maaseh HaKorbanot 3:15

According to this, the individual, as an actual part of the text of his vidui, declares, “and I have returned through teshuvah.” Note that this phrase is in the past tense; the person is thus stating when he recites his vidui that he has already done teshuvah, at least in some sense. Some form of teshuvah comes first, the formal, technical vidui comes a little later, and, if all goes well, “complete” teshuvah is attained later still.

It seems clear from all of the above that at least according to the Rambam, there are many steps which must be taken as part of the overall teshuvah process, and each one is important in its own right. It is conceivable that one may never fully achieve the total personality change identified with complete teshuvah, and the attainment of these other levels of teshuvah is thus to be encouraged and is commendable as well, as each step brings the individual closer to Hashem. At the same time, however, the ultimate goal of teshuvah remains the transformation of one’s character, the metamorphosis into a person no longer even tempted by the sins which were previously violated, difficult though reaching that goal may be.

129 HaRav Soloveitchik is cited in Harrerei Kedem (Volume 1 Chapter 35) as having presented a similar understanding of this sugya in Kiddushin. It must be noted here that both the Rambam (Hilchot Ishut 8:5) and the Shulchan Aruch (Even HaEzer 38:31) rule that the betrothal in this case is not definitely valid, but rather that it might be valid (מספק מקודשת). See Beit Shmuel #55 and Chelkat Mecherek #44 there; see also Ohr Zarua I:112.
The Sin and the Sinner

Put in different words, the teshuvah process may be said to address two entities: the sin and the sinner. When one has sinned, he has committed an act that is in violation of Hashem’s Will. This act has consequences, and depending upon the specific nature of the transgression, the person is subject to certain punishments; we thus find throughout the Torah that different punishments are associated with different sins. In addressing “sin,” the goal of teshuvah is to expiate that misdeed, to remove it, as it were, from the person’s ledger. What is needed for that to happen depends again upon the nature of the transgression. The Mishnah in Yoma states:

The chatas offering and the definite asham offering atone [for sin]. Death and Yom Kippur atone [along] with repentance. Repentance [alone] atones for lesser transgressions, whether [in violation of] either positive or negative commandments. And for severe [transgressions], it [i.e., repentance] suspends [punishment] until Yom Kippur comes and atones.

Mishnah Yoma 85b

A subsequent gemara at there elaborates:

R’ Masya ben Charash asked R’ Elazar ben Azaryah: “Have you heard the four categories of atonement that R’ Yishmael expounds?” He said [in response]: “There are three, and repentance [is needed] with each and every one. If one violated a positive commandment and repented, he does not [have to] move from there until he is forgiven [i.e., he is forgiven immediately], as it is stated (Jeremiah 3:22): Return O wayward children. If one violated a negative commandment and repented, repentance suspends [punishment] and Yom Kippur atones, as it is stated (Leviticus 16:30): For on this day He shall atone for you…from all your sins. If one violated [sins punishable by] premature death or death at the hands of a Beit Din and repented, repentance and Yom Kippur suspend [punishment] and suffering purges [the sin], as it is stated (Psalms 89:33): Then I will punish their willful rebellion with a rod and their iniquity with plagues. But [for] one who has [the sin of] desecration of the Name [of Hashem] in his hand, repentance does not have the capability to suspend [punishment], nor Yom Kippur to atone, nor suffering to purge. Rather, all of them [together] suspend [punishment] and death purges, as it is stated (Isaiah 22:14): And it was revealed in my ears by Hashem, Master of Hosts, “This sin will not be atoned for you until you die.”

Yoma 86a
It is clear that repentance plays a significant role in purging or expunging sin, and that more may be needed if the sin is of a greater type.\(^{130}\) For this reason, Rabbeinu Yonah writes in his *Shaarei Teshuvah* (III:1-2) that one must examine the severity of his sins as part of the *teshuvah* process.

But in addition to committing the technical act of a transgression, one who sins does something else as well. The person, the **גברא**, becomes a sinner. The sin becomes a stain on his personality, regardless of the punishment associated with it, and he suddenly has a different identity. The *teshuvah* process for this consequence is thus different. It is not enough to deal with the sin; the individual must do something to change his personal status as a sinner. It is to this consequence which complete *teshuvah* addresses itself. While *teshuvah* responds to the sin, “complete” *teshuvah* responds to the sinner. Perhaps for this reason, each line of the long *vidui* recited on Yom Kippur includes the words “**חטא על**,” “*For the sin,*” and “**שחטאנו**,” “*that we have sinned.*” We have sinned and we have become sinners.

It is noteworthy that the Rambam, when defining complete *teshuvah* in י"ך פסקיא, mentions nothing about the different gradations of atonement; he refers to them only in his discussion of general *teshuvah* (פרק ג"ד הלכות:). This may be because when considering the sinner, as opposed to the sin, the severity of the transgression is less critical. The issue is the impact on the person’s character and that can depend on numerous other factors. Regardless of the nature of one’s misdeed, then, he has become a sinner, and he must do whatever he can to change that status; he must try to transform his personality. The Mishnah states:

*Be as careful with a “minor” mitzvah as with a “major” one, for you do not know the [true] reward given for the mitzvot.*

_Pirkei Avot_ 2:1

The Rambam, both in his *Peirush HaMishnayot* to that Mishnah and in ה"ד החפשיות נב: אבות, explains that we are incapable of evaluating the relative worth of mitzvot; only Hashem is capable of so doing. Despite the fact that we do know the severity of the punishment for many mitzvot, we are still incapable of properly assessing their true value and weight, as there are many other factors relating to mitzvot, including very subjective ones, which we are not able to take into account.\(^{131}\) In light of our presentation here, it may perhaps be added that the Mishnah is teaching as well that nobody really knows the impact that an act can have on one’s personality (whether positive or negative); the omission of even a seemingly minor mitzvah, or the commission of even a seemingly minor transgression can categorize someone as a sinner. “Complete” *teshuvah* is needed to address one’s failure to have learned the lesson of this Mishnah, and to change the character of someone who is, in any other fashion, considered a sinner.

\(^{130}\) It stands to reason that the frequency of the sin also plays a role in what is needed for its removal; see Ran to *Yoma*, 4b in Rif, in the name of the Raavad that repeated violations of a lesser prohibition can be worse that a single violation of a more severe prohibition.

\(^{131}\) See the examples presented by R. Yitzchak Blazer (“R’ Itzele Peterburger”) in his *Kochvei Ohr* Chapters 58 and 62 of some such factors; see also R. Eliyahu Lopian in *Lev Eliyahu*, Part III, *Maarchot HaTeshuvah* #11, and R. Moshe Feinstein in *Dibrot Moshe* to *Kiddushin* Part I #50, note 74.
Redirecting One’s Traits

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the “transformation of character” which defines complete teshuvah does not necessarily demand a total and sweeping alteration of all of one’s inner tendencies and natural proclivities. On the contrary, sometimes those very same characteristics, if channeled in the right direction, can lead a person to greatness. Complete teshuvah is, in one sense, attained when one has learned to use for positive things the very abilities that in the past led him to sin. Indeed, the Yeitzer HaRa, the so-called “evil inclination,” itself can be used and is actually needed for productive purposes, as demonstrated by the Gemara in Sanhedrin (64a).

The Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah (9:7) cites an opinion that the words “very good” found in the Torah regarding the creation of the universe (Genesis 1:31) actually refer to the Yeitzer HaRa! How can this be understood? The answer is that a person can use even his Yeitzer HaRa for very good purposes; the Gemara in Berachot (5a) thus directs one to use his Yeitzer Tov to combat his Yeitzer HaRa, to control it, to sublimate it – but not to eliminate it. This may be the true meaning of the line in the Yom Kippur vidui which states, “For the sin that we have sinned before You with the Yeitzer HaRa.” The subject here is perhaps not the temptations of the Yeitzer HaRa in general, for many individual transgressions are expressly listed; such a general statement is not needed. Rather, the confession here is for failing to use the Yeitzer HaRa in a positive and constructive fashion, the way it should be used.

With this idea, we can perhaps better understand the following fascinating passage in the Gemara in Yoma:

Reish Lakish said: Great is repentance, for [through repentance] intentional transgressions are considered as unintentional transgressions, as it is stated (Hosea 14:2): Return, O Israel, unto Hashem your God, for you have stumbled through your iniquity. Now an iniquity is an intentional transgression, yet [the verse] calls it “stumbling” [which implies something unintentional]. Is this so? But Reish Lakish [himself] said: Great is repentance for [through repentance] intentional transgressions are considered as merits [and not as unintentional transgressions], as it is stated (Ezekiel 33:19): And if the wicked man turns away from his wickedness and behaves with justice and righteousness, he shall live on account of them. This is not a question. Here [in the second statement, the reference is to teshuvah motivated by love, there [in the first statement, the reference is to teshuvah motivated] by fear.

Yoma 86b

Even aside from the details relating to teshuvah motivated by fear and teshuvah motivated by love, this passage requires some analysis. It is understandable that the power of proper repentance is such that it can “downgrade” intentional sins and allow them to be viewed as though they were actually committed unintentionally; teshuvah can release a person from liability for his misdeeds. But how does it make sense, even when motivated by the very best of
motivations, for teshuvah to have the power to transform sins into merits? Can it really be said that all of this person’s previous transgressions are now accounted for him as positive actions?\footnote{The Chafetz Chaim explains that in considering things in this manner, Hashem, in His kindness and mercy, is going beyond the letter of the law. See R. Elchanan Wasserman in Kovetz He’arot, Dugmaot LeBeurei Agadot Al Derech HaPeshat #3, also in Kovetz Maamarim, p.23, Maamar Al Teshuvah.}
The answer is that when a person changes his character and reforms his personality, such that he is now a different person, all of those very traits and all of those very experiences which previously enabled him and led him to become a sinner can now be used in a proper manner. The same Yeitzer HaRa will now be used for good things, and this person’s future good deeds will build on the foundation of his earlier misdeeds, leading to constructive results. The prior sins thus, in a way, now lead the person to great heights and are therefore viewed as merits.\footnote{See HaRav Soloveitchik’s development of this idea as cited in Al HaTeshuvah, p.169 ff.}

Teshuvah is a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional process. Change, as a rule, does not happen in a fleeting moment, but rather in stages. One who does teshuvah takes steps; steps to avoid sin, to improve his behavior and to become a new and better person. “Complete” teshuvah is achieved when one has reached the final destination: when he has redefined his character to the extent that even his prior misdeeds now help motivate him to do what is right, where all aspects of his personality contribute to his service of Hashem. That is the ultimate, if difficult to attain, goal of teshuvah.