

# 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*.<sup>122</sup> 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**

כל מצות שבתורה בין עשה בין  
לא תעשה אם עבר אדם על אחת  
מהן בין בזדון בין בשגגה  
כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו  
חייב להתודות לפני האל ברוך  
הוא שנאמר איש או אשה כי יעשו  
וגו' והתודו את חטאתם אשר עשו  
זה וידוי דברים, וידוי זה מצות  
עשה, כיצד מתודין אומר אנא  
השם חטאתי עויתי פשעתי לפניך  
ועשיתי כך וכך והרי נחמתי  
ובושתי במעשי ולעולם איני חוזר  
לדבר זה, וזהו עיקרו של וידוי,  
וכל המרבה להתודות ומאריך  
בענין זה הרי זה משובח  
**הלכות תשובה א:א**

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,<sup>123</sup> the Rambam here begins instead by outlining some of the technical requirements of

<sup>122</sup> For a sampling of the former, see the sources collected in the ספר הליקוטים and ספר המפתח sections on *Hilchot Teshuvah* in the edition of the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* published by R. Shabsi Frankel. Maran HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, zt'l, 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.

<sup>123</sup> 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.<sup>124</sup> 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.<sup>125</sup> His reference to *teshuvah* in this passage, however, is limited to the words “כשיעשה תשובה,” “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*

**הלכה א:** אי זו היא תשובה גמורה, זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופירש ולא עשה מפני התשובה, לא מיראה ולא מכשולון כח, כיצד הרי שבא על אשה בעבירה ולאחר זמן נתייחד עמה והוא עומד באהבתו בה ובכח גופו ובמדינה שעבר בה ופירש ולא עבר זהו בעל תשובה גמורה, הוא ששלמה אמר וזכור את בוראך בימי בחורותיך, ואם לא שב אלא בימי זקנותו ובעת שאי אפשר לו לעשות מה שהיה עושה אף על פי שאינה תשובה מעולה מועלת היא לו ובעל תשובה הוא, אפילו עבר כל ימיו ועשה תשובה ביום מיתתו ומת בתשובתו כל עונותיו נמחלין שנאמר עד אשר לא תחשך השמש והאור והירח והכוכבים ושבו העבים אחר הגשם שהוא יום המיתה, מכלל שאם זכר בוראו ושב קודם שימות נסלה לו.

**הלכה ב:** ומה היא התשובה הוא שיעזוב החוטא חטאו ויסירו ממחשבתו ויגמור בלבו שלא יעשהו עוד שנאמר יעזוב רשע דרכו וגו', וכן יתנחם על שעבר

<sup>124</sup> 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*).

<sup>125</sup> See R. Saadiah Gaon in his *Emunot Ve'Deot*, 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

שנאמר כי אחרי שובי נחמתי,  
ויעיד עליו יודע תעלומות שלא  
ישוב לזה החטא לעולם שנאמר  
ולא נאמר עוד אלהינו למעשה  
ידינו וגו', וצריך להתודות  
בשפתיו ולומר עניינות אלו  
שגמר בלבו.  
**הלכות תשובה ב:א-ב**

An examination of these two *halachot* reveals that the Rambam is actually providing two different definitions of *teshuvah*, speaking in 'א of “complete” *teshuvah*, and in 'ב 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?<sup>126</sup>

## Understanding Complete *Teshuvah*

In discussing “plain” *teshuvah* here, the Rambam in effect restates the ideas mentioned at the beginning of פרק א', 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.<sup>127</sup> 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,

<sup>126</sup> 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).

<sup>127</sup> 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**

התשובה מקרבת את הרחוקים, אמש היה זה שנאווי לפני המקום משווקן ומרוחק ותועבה, והיום הוא אהוב ונחמד קרוב וידיד  
רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ז:ו

*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**

כמה מעולה מעלת התשובה, אמש היה זה מובדל מה' אלהי ישראל שנאמר עוונותיכם היו מבדילים ביניכם לבין אלהיכם, צועק ואינו נענה שנאמר כי תרבו תפלה וגו' ועושה מצות וטורפין אותן בפניו שנאמר מי בקש זאת מידכם רמוס חצרי, מי גם בכם ויסגר דלתים וגו', והיום הוא מודבק בשכינה שנאמר ואתם הדבקים בה' אלהיכם, צועק ונענה מיד שנאמר והיה טרם יקראו ואני אענה, ועושה מצות ומקבלין אותן בנחת ושמחה שנאמר כי כבר רצה האלהים את מעשיך, ולא עוד אלא שמתאוים להם שנאמר וערבה לה' מנחת יהודה וירושלם כימי עולם וכשנים קדמוניות.  
רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ז:ז

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 ב' פרק 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 א' הלכה by stating the goal of *teshuvah*, namely, transformation of character. Then, in ב' הלכה, 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.<sup>128</sup> 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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<sup>128</sup> 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.<sup>129</sup>

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 “כשיעשה תשובה,” “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**

כיצד מתודה אומר הטאתי עויתי  
פשעתי ועשיתי כך וכך וחזרתי  
בתשובה לפניך וזו כפרתי  
הל' מעשה הקרבנות ג:טו

According to this, the individual, as an actual part of the text of his *vidui*, declares, “וחזרתי בתשובה,” “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.

<sup>129</sup> 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 (מקודשת מספק). See *Beit Shmuel* #55 and *Chelkat Mechokek* #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

חטאת ואשם ודאי - מכפרין.  
מיתה ויום הכפורים - מכפרין  
עם התשובה. תשובה מכפרת על  
עבירות קלות, על עשה ועל לא  
תעשה, ועל החמורות הוא תולה  
עד שיבא יום הכפורים ויכפר.  
**מסכת יומא פה:**

שאל רבי מתיא בן חרש את רבי אלעזר בן עזריה ברומי: שמעת ארבעה חלוקי כפרה שהיה רבי ישמעאל דורש? אמר: שלשה הן, ותשובה עם כל אחד ואחד. עבר על עשה ושם - אינו זז משם עד שמוחלין לו, שנאמר (ירמיהו ג) שובו בני ישראל שובבים. עבר על לא תעשה ועשה תשובה - תשובה תולה, ויום הכפורים מכפר שנאמר (ויקרא טז) כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם מכל חטאתיכם. עבר על כריתות ומיתות בית דין ועשה תשובה - תשובה ויום הכפורים תולין, ויסורין ממרקין, שנאמר (תהלים פט) ופקדתי בשבט פשעם ובנגעים עונם, אבל מי שיש חילול השם בידו - אין לו כח בתשובה לתלות, ולא ביום הכפורים לכפר, ולא ביסורין למרק. אלא כולן תולין, ומיתה ממרקת, שנאמר (ישעיהו כב) ונגלה באזני ה' צבאות אם יכפר העון הזה לכם עד תמותון.  
**מסכת יומא פו.**

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.<sup>130</sup> 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 “על חטא,” “*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 פרק ב', mentions nothing about the different gradations of atonement; he refers to them only in his discussion of general *teshuvah* (פרק א' הלכה ג'-ד'). 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**

הוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה שאין  
אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצות  
**אבות ב:א**

The Rambam, both in his *Peirush HaMishnayot* to that Mishnah and in הל' תשובה ג:ב 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.<sup>131</sup> 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.

<sup>130</sup> 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, סוף ד"ה וגרסי', in the name of the Raavad that repeated violations of a lesser prohibition can be worse than a single violation of a more severe prohibition.

<sup>131</sup> 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, *Maarhot 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, “על חטא שחטאנו לפניך ביצר הרע,” “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

אמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה, שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות, שנאמר (הושע יד) שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך כי כשלת בעונך. הא עון מזיד הוא, וקא קרי ליה מכשול. איני? והאמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכויות, שנאמר (יהזקאל לג) ובשוב רשע מרשעתו ועשה משפט וצדקה עליהם (חיה) [הוא] יחיה! - לא קשיא; כאן - מאהבה, כאן - מיראה.  
מסכת יומא פו:

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?<sup>132</sup> 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.<sup>133</sup>

*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*.

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<sup>132</sup> 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*.

<sup>133</sup> See HaRav Soloveitchik's development of this idea as cited in *Al HaTeshuvah*, p.169 ff.