It's the Thought That Counts

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The will to goodness is everything; all of the skills in the universe are only the means of completing it.

*Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook, Orot haTeshuvah 9:1*

Is Teshuvah in my Thoughts, or in my Speech?


When the Rambam (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 1:1) adopted Rabbi Meir's phraseology (Mishna, *Yoma* 9:3) describing a process of "performing teshuvah," he framed our understanding of the mitzvah as action-based. This is cemented by his description of *viduy* as a verbal enumeration of our failings. Just as we wave a *lulav*, ingest matzah, study Torah and give *tzedakah*, so we perform *teshuvah* with our speech, listing our sins and articulating our regret.

Of course, speech is crucial: Speaking our sins aloud makes the admission concrete, and compels us to confront the reality of our criminal record. But is there no intrinsic value in the thoughts which lead to these words? Is my regret merely a *hechsher mitzvah*, preparation and catalyst for the declaration which is the mitzvah? Or are my thoughts also an "act" of *teshuvah*?

The Talmud itself indicates that thoughts can constitute *teshuvah*:

*If a man proposes, “Marry me on condition that I am a tzaddik,” then even if he is fully wicked, she is married; perhaps thought of teshuvah in his mind.*

*Kiddushin 49b*

They said regarding Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya that he omitted no zonah in the world.... He then sat between two mountains and hills and asked, "Mountains and hills, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!"... He then asked, "Heavens and earth, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!"... He then asked, "Sun and Moon, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on...

16 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2. Indeed, the Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuvah* never identifies regret as a stage in *teshuvah*; he only mentions that one's *viduy* declaration includes a statement that one regrets his past deeds.
Your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!"... He then asked, "Stars and constellations, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!"... He then said: The matter depends only upon me. He placed his head between his knees and cried out in tears until his soul departed. A voice emerged and declared, "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is prepared for life in the next world!"

Avodah Zarah 17a

But these sources are puzzling: The transforming effect of verbal confession is clear, but why should the cycling of a synapse suffice to translate "fully wicked" into "tzaddik"? If a listing of sins is critical to teshuvah, how could Elazar ben Durdaya earn the next world, not to mention ordination, for repentance which amounted to internal thought and an animal wail?

Teshuvah: A Return to Greatness

Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook proposed a concept of internal teshuvah, repentance played out on a stage within the heart. While Rav Kook acknowledged our obligation to speak in confession and act in correction, he emphasized that our first step is to think in contrition.

As Rav Kook explained, we are created as pure souls, but entry into a material realm dulls our sensitivity to the sacred and so makes us vulnerable to sin. We are challenged to assert our spirit over our material trappings, strengthening our holiest aspect and committing ourselves to life on a higher plane. This is the process of repentance:

Entities come into existence as a descent from the Divine realm to worldly realms – a form of descent and of terrible “death” – to which no earthly descent... can compare. This is engineered on the higher calculation of justice, which gauged the justice of existence before anything was created... But this descent has the foundation for greater ascent stored within... as it is written, "Before mountains were birthed and earth and foundation were formed, You were G-d for all eternity. You laid man low, and declared, 'Return, sons of men!'"

Orot haTeshuvah 11:4

Our pure thoughts are our return to greatness

Within this philosophy, perfection is always present, albeit hidden, within the human being. As Rav Kook promised,17 "Teshuvah always resides in the heart; it is stored in the heart even during the sin itself." This pledge did not originate with Rav Kook; its roots are in the Talmudic18

17 Orot haTeshuvah 6:2
18 Nedarim 39a
statement that repentance was created before the universe itself. Embedded in the Divine schematic is our pristine core, and the route via which we restore it as our identity.

Certainly, the journey back to this truest nature of our soul involves actions, as described by the Rambam, but it is not defined by those actions. Rather, teshuvah – literally “return” – is a spiritual quest during which we retrieve the ethereal identity hidden beneath material layers. We seek the Divine message, and this search, taking place in our thoughts, is itself a revelation of our purity:

Via thoughts of teshuvah, one hears the voice of G-d calling to him from within the Torah, from within his heart’s emotions, from within the world, its fullness and all therein... Thoughts of teshuvah reveal the depth of one’s desire, and the strength of the soul is revealed in all of its glory through those thoughts. The greater the thought of teshuvah, the greater its liberation.

Orot haTeshuvah 7:3-4

The will to goodness is everything; all of the skills in the universe are only the means of completing it. The content of one’s will [to goodness] is imprinted upon his soul by the light of return that is affixed within, and as a result, the great flow of Divine inspiration is manifested upon him continually, and a will which is great in its holiness, beyond the trait embedded in other human beings, grows powerful within him.

Orot haTeshuvah 9:1

This may explain how a man can declare himself righteous and be granted that status instantly, such that his proposal of “Marry me on condition that I am a tzaddik” is accepted on the basis of an intellectual decision – he has revealed his unsullied core, and therefore he is now a tzaddik.

This may also explain how Elazar ben Durdaya could, in the words of Rebbe, "acquire his world in a single moment," despite a career of immersion in immorality. The sinner had done nothing to correct his sin, but his immense regret displayed his native character.

To cite the words of Rav Kook:

One who feels within himself the depth of regret of teshuvah, and the exasperated desire in his thoughts to mend his flaws – those he is already capable of mending and those he is not yet capable of mending but for which he anticipates Divine mercy – can already count himself among the righteous.

Orot haTeshuvah 8:6
Using our thoughts to create our tongues anew

This idea can help answer a challenge put forth by the Chida,\(^{19}\) regarding the acceptability of our verbal *viduy*.

We are taught "*,None נעשה קטגור*" that a prosecutor cannot switch sides to serve as a defense attorney. Based on this principle, gold may not be used for the garments worn by the Kohen Gadol when he enters the Holy of Holies to appeal for forgiveness; gold represents the sin of the Golden Calf.\(^{20}\) How, then, can a mouth which has spoken *lashon hara* offer acceptable *viduy* before G-d – is this not a case of the agent of sin becoming a defense attorney? If gold represents ancient idolatry and is therefore ineligible before G-d, then a tongue which was used for evil should certainly be unacceptable for *viduy*!

The Chida sought to resolve the problem by explaining that once a person repents, he becomes a new creature. Therefore, the tongue in his mouth is no longer the same tongue that sinned, and it may be used for *viduy*. However, others objected to this answer: If teshuvah is effective only via the *viduy* declaration, then the conversion of sinner to tzaddik does not take place until the *viduy* is complete!

Rav Michael Yaakov Yisrael, a 19th century Turkish Rav and author of *ימין שנות*, answered the objection, explaining that once a person produces thoughts of *teshuvah*, he is already recreated as a new person. Therefore, the tongue is "new" before we ever arrive at the *viduy* declaration. This mirrors Rav Kook’s conception of *teshuvah*: Our thoughts of repentance are our return to greatness, restoring us to our spiritual greatness.

First, then, we engage ourselves in thoughts of repentance, returning to the pristine spirit inside, removing obstructions and awakening our spiritual talents. Only afterward do we embark upon the process of actualizing those thoughts through the speech of *viduy* and through the actions of correction.

We are promised that when we commit ourselves mentally to a path of repentance, G-d will take this as a down payment, and ease the remainder of our journey:

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**Orot haTeshuvah 7:5**

May we commit ourselves to return to internal purity, and follow up with practical steps, and so merit a הַשְׁלֵם הַכֹּל הָעֵדוּת וְתַחְתִּימָה כְּלִי.

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\(^{19}\) Cited in *Sdei Chened Maarechet י", Klal יי

\(^{20}\) Talmud, *Rosh haShanah* 26a