Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary
Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future

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Rabbi Josh Blass
Rabbi Reuven Brand
Rabbi Tanchum Cohen
Rabbi Yaakov Glasser
Dr. Yael Muskat and Dr. Debra Alper
Rabbi Michael Rosensweig
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Dedicated in loving memory of
Dr. Harlan Daman
by Carole, Gila and Avi Daman

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The Gemara, in Rosh HaShana 16b, describes the judgement of Rosh HaShana and the Aseres Yemei Teshuva:

א”ר כרוספדאי א”ר יוחנן שלשה ספרים

Ifchedern, one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous and one for those in the middle. The completely righteous are written and sealed immediately for life. The completely wicked are written and sealed immediately for death. The middle hang in abeyance from Rosh HaShana to Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are written for life. If they do not merit, they are written for death.

Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva 3:3

In the Gemara’s version, the “beinoni,” the individual who expresses neither the righteousness of the tzadik or the wickedness of the rasha, is suspended in judgement pending the ultimate outcome on Yom Kippur. Yet when the Rambam records this statement of the Gemara, he posits that the determining factor for the beinoni is teshuva. Rav Yitzchak Hutner, in his work Pachad Yitzchak (Rosh HaShana 18), asks: If indeed the beinoni is a person who teeters between virtue and evil, why not simply demand that the beinoni exert a greater effort in tipping that scale through the fulfillment of mitzvos? Why does the Rambam introduce the complex and overwhelming institution of teshuva, when clearly, all that is needed is a greater commitment to the observance of mitzvos?

Rav Hutner explains that the categories of tzadik, rasha, beinoni do not refer to quantitative evaluations of an individual’s Torah observance. It is nearly impossible to capture a status evaluation of religious commitment. We are constantly engaged in either fulfilling or ignoring the expectations of the Torah. Therefore, these categories are what Rav Hutner describes as “middos binefesh,” attributes of the soul. They represent an overall disposition of commitment and passion toward religious life. The tzadik strives to constantly embrace Torah and mitzvos as the foundation of life. The rasha may occasionally observe something proper, but has an overall disposition toward antagonism and dismissiveness of religious growth.

The beinoni is the one in the middle. The beinoni represents complacency, satisfied with living a life that is not too invested in religious growth, yet conforming enough to meet the threshold of basic Torah expectations. The beinoni leads a life of religious mediocrity, content to remain entrenched in his or her current state of observance and faith. The Rambam is instructing us that the path out of the beinoni identity is not simply found in doing another mitzvah. Rather, it requires a total reorientation of focus on religious growth that is framed by a passion and commitment to grow.

Teshuva, as explained by Rav Kook, Oros HaTeshuva (ch. 7 and 8) is an opportunity to discover the light within ourselves. A chance to reignite, not just our commitment to the expectations of Torah, but...
to a religious personality that seeks meaning and purpose in everything that we do. This rejection of complacency and mediocrity is fundamental to shaping and nurturing a committed Jewish community that can inspire and educate the next generation.

The tzadik and rasha are judged immediately. The beinoni must look toward the future. The beinoni's judgment is based on how he or she confronts the challenges of tomorrow, which will ultimately shape his or her future. As Yeshiva University celebrates the investiture of our fifth president, Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, this is an opportunity for us to look toward the world of tomorrow — to find the passion and purpose that comes from engaging new frontiers and new challenges in all dimensions of our lives.

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Selichos Chizuk - The “Process”

T he desperate, holy blasts of our shofar on Rosh Hashanah reflect the cries of the mother of one of the most barbaric Canaanite generals in history, when she realized that he was killed in battle.

The prevalent custom is to blow one hundred blasts of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Tosafos (Rosh Hashanah 33b) quotes the Aruch, who bases this custom on a Midrash that draws a parallel between our one hundred blasts and the one hundred cries of the mother of Sisra, the Canaanite general killed by Yael after he fled from the battle waged against him by Barak and Devorah (Shoftim chapter 5).

Rav Soloveitchik explained that her cries are the model for our teshuva. At first, she was nervous when Sisra did not return in a timely manner, and she groaned, fearing the worst. Despite the attempts of her family and friends to reassure her — “To the contrary, his delayed arrival is a sign that the spoils of war are so numerous,” they said — as time dragged on, she began to sob. Finally, word came back that he would not be coming home ever again. Upon hearing that news, she completely broke down in tears. Our shофar blasts are an external expression of our internal breakdown. At first, we groan (tekiah), but the yeitzer hара tries to convince us that there is really nothing wrong. If we are successful, we will begin to sob (shevarim), as we begin to internalize that there is work to be done. Finally, we break down (teruah), in a realization that we are so far from our potential connection to Hashem.

Not only does true change require a sincere process, the lowering of our defense mechanisms does as well.

In a completely different area of Torah, Hakadosh Baruch Hu expresses how critical this process is to Him:

In cases of a skin affliction be most careful to do exactly as the Levitical priests instruct you. Take care to do as I have commanded them. Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt.

Devarim 24:8-9

In unusual fashion, the Torah warns us to be very careful to follow the rules of a tzaraas affliction. Apparently, there is a concern that the laws of tzaraas will not be properly observed.

The very next statement of the Torah (these two verses are a section in and of themselves as demonstrated by the stumos bookending them) is an instruction to remember what Hashem did to Miriam on the way, when Bnei Yisroel left Mitzrayim. How is that instruction related to the prior warning? Does remembering Miriam encourage the observance of the tzaraas laws, or is it a distinct idea?

Rashi explains (based on the Gemara, Shabbos 94b) that the first verse is a prohibition to remove any element of the tzaraas that would purify it. In order to be problematic, a tzaraas affliction must possess two white hairs. If one were to remove a white hair (with tweezers, for example), the affliction would no longer be impure. Despite the fact that it would work to remove the tzaraas — or perhaps because it would work — its removal is prohibited. Rashi then quotes the Sifrei that the next verse adds that if one wants to avoid having tzaraas altogether, he should remember what Hashem did to Miriam — He gave her tzaraas for speaking lashon hara. If one wants to avoid tzaraas, rather than plucking out white hairs after he already has it, he should avoid speaking lashon hara in the first place.

The Netziv however, in Haamek Davar Devarim 24:9, sees another message here. It is not clear that Miriam had the status of a metzora at all. When Moshe discovered that Miriam had a tzaraas affliction, he davened to Hashem to heal her, which was an unusual response to tzaraas. Did her tzaraas go away as soon as Moshe davened? Why did Aharon not examine her affliction and deal with her as a metzora? Hashem told Moshe that because of her actions she should spend seven days outside of the camp. If she was being sent out of the camp for seven days as a technical “hesger,” (required isolation), why did Hashem make a specific instruction both to send her out and to bring her back in
after seven days? It seems that she was merely exiled from the camp for seven days and then brought back, without going through the remainder of the metzora process. How do we explain this? (See Bamidbar chapter 12)

The Talmud (Zevachim 102a) seems to be bothered by this when it asks who dealt with the tzaraas of Miriam (who sent her out)? A Kohen has to pronounce a tzaraas affliction impure, but all of the Kohanim were Miriam's relatives, and a relative cannot rule on a relative's tzaraas affliction. So who, in fact, dealt with her tzaraas? The Talmud answers that Hashem did it Himself. Tosafos asks: if no one can rule on her affliction, then it remains pure and she is not a metzora. If so, what is the point of the Gemara and what is Aharon so upset and nervous about (see Bamidbar 12:11-12)?

Tosafos have no answer.

The Netziv answers the question. While it is true that sometimes the pain of a tzaraas affliction is sufficient to atone for the metzora, when motzi shem ra (lashon hara that is not true) is involved, the sin is worse, and requires one to go through the entire process. While the easy way out would be to pluck out a hair, to remove the affliction, that is prohibited, because the Torah wants him to go through a process of change. If he has difficulty inspiring himself to go through the process, he should remind himself what Hashem did to Miriam. Remember how critical the process is!

Growth or change, in any respect, physical or spiritual, takes place in steps and stages. Skipping a step developmentally results in failure at best and regression or degeneration at worst.

This time of year, it is important to remember what Hashem did to Miriam. He performed a miracle, so that she could have a pathway to atone for her wrongdoing. He created a process for her.

Selichos is a similar process. In the same manner that Sisra's mother cried, we need to peel away layers of defense mechanisms to expose our feeling heart. Unfortunately, if we are not careful, we may feel their power the first night of Selichos and after that, we might read through them without feeling. In reality, the Selichos should be more and more meaningful and urgent as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur approach. We cannot simply make our blemishes disappear — remember what Hashem did to Miriam.

Mitzra. He gave her tzaraas, but He also gave her a way to rectify the sin that caused it.

When a person finds himself in a situation in which he has more than just the pain of a tzaraas affliction, he is told by the Kohen that his tzaraas is impure and he must go through the entire process. While the easy way out would be to pluck out a hair, to remove the affliction, that is prohibited, because the Torah wants him to go through a process of change. If he has difficulty inspiring himself to go through the process, he should remind himself what Hashem did to Miriam. Remember how critical the process is!

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Tzara’at Imagery in the Admission of Guilt

The tzara’at imagery is used in Tehillim to symbolize sin. Tehillim chapter 51 is the prayer that King David offered after he was confronted by Natan the prophet regarding the incident with Batsheva. The verse (Tehillim 51:9) states:

Purge me with hyssop till I am pure; wash me till I am whiter than snow.

Radbak explains why the hyssop is mentioned:

The sin is to the soul like the stain is to a garment or tzara’at is to the body. It states “purge me” just as purging is done with the hyssop, which is the end of the purification of the metzora, when the waters are sprinkled with the hyssop. Similarly, purge me of my sins. The purging is the removal of the sin.

Malbim adds that the hyssop specifically represents humility. This imagery fits nicely with the comment of R. Azariah Figo, Binah L’ittim derush no. 40, who contrasts King David’s admission of guilt with King Shaul’s. When King Shaul is confronted by Shmuel, he admits he is wrong, but makes an excuse (Shmuel I 15:32). When King David is confronted by Natan, he states, “I have sinned to HaShem” (Shmuel II 12:13), without making any excuses. King Shaul’s sin and his lack of proper admission led to the end of his reign, whereas King David’s humility in admitting wrongdoing became a hallmark trait of his leadership of the Jewish people.

Torah To Go Editors
One of the most prestigious, albeit relatively unknown, talmidim of the Alter from Slobodka was Rav Avraham Elya Kaplan, who would go on to become the head of the Hildesheimer Rabbinic Seminary until his death at the young age of 37. Rav Avraham Elya notes in his spiritual autobiography, B’ikvos Ha’yirah, what it was like to come back to Slobodka Yeshiva, in the presence of the Alter, for an Elul zman. To spend even a single day in the rarified air of Slobodka in Elul was a transformative experience that continued to resonate with Rav Avraham Elya decades later.

Whenever I would see those words quoted from B’ikvos Ha’yirah, or when I would read other similar recollections about the environment of awe that permeated the halls of batei medrashos (study halls) of days gone by, I always wondered why the name Elul, and the portent behind it, didn’t have the same effect on my own religious conscience. Why would I, and perhaps many others reading this article, not have the reaction of a trembling anticipation knowing that the Yom HaDin is fast approaching? And, more important, why didn’t we understand the opportunities for growth and personal transformation that Elul and Tishrei bring?

While explanations abound for this lack of enthusiasm for teshuva, perhaps one can argue that our apathy is a reflection of past disappointments. Perhaps many have felt, at different points in their lives, a sense of optimism that they are capable of real change, only to see just days and weeks later that true change is elusive.

It is indeed difficult to muster an awakened passion for teshuva when a person consciously or subconsciously feels that “This is who I am and this is who I will forever be.”

If the attitude that I am describing is accurate, how then does one counteract this sense of yei’ush, hopelessness? One possibility is to genuinely recognize that teshuva is a long process and that the goal is to be able to change over the course of a lifetime. To some degree comments from Chazal and the Rambam seem to imply that teshuva needs to be total and immediate. Throughout Rambam’s Hilchos Teshuva (see 2:2, 4 and 7:7), the implication is that teshuva needs to be absolute and that at the end of this process even Hakadosh Baruch Hu can testify that this repentant will never return to his old ways.

With that said, many meforshim take a far more moderate stance about the issue of “half a teshuva.” For instance, the Mabit in his Beis Elokim (Sha’ar Hateshuva, beginning of ch. 12), held that if a person has genuine remorse, even though he has not committed to changing his future actions, his repentance is efficacious, albeit on a more limited scale. This position seems to run counter to the Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva 2:3, who says that such a teshuva is completely worthless.

I have found that adopting the position of the Mabit, which recognizes that we are on a life journey of change and transformation, allows us to have a somewhat healthier attitude about teshuva. This attitude also helps us to avoid the destructive pitfall of self-castigation if and when we fail to completely turn our lives around.

There might also be another attitude that helps one to become engaged in the teshuva process, even if he or she is somewhat skeptical as to how permanent their return might be.

There is a well-known debate in the rishonim about whether or not teshuva, is in fact, a mitzva. The Ramban, Devarim 30:11, and others believe that it is a mitzvah, while the Rambam’s position is not clear. In a well-known comment, the Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva 1:1, states:

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 הא-ל ברוך הוא.

If one transgressed any commandment of the Torah, whether a positive or a negative one, whether deliberately or accidentally, then when one repents, one has to confess verbally to G-d.

This ambiguous language of “when one repents,” has led some to believe (Minchas Chinuch 364:2) that there is no formal obligation to do teshuva.
and that repentance is fundamentally a mitzvah kiyumis, an optional mitzvah with a significant fulfillment if performed. This understanding of the Rambam has led to much speculation among the acharonim as to why teshuva is not a mitzvah. Between all of the pesukim in Sefer Devarim and all of the statements of Chazal that speak about teshuva in the most elegiac of fashions, wouldn’t one think that it’s an obligation to repent?

While many answers have been provided to this question (see Meshech Chachma, Devarim 30:11, Ha’emek Davar, Devarim 30:11, Mishnas Yaavetz, Orach Chaim no. 54), one can suggest that repentance is not a formal mitzvah because it reflects man’s natural return to himself. The Ba’al Hatanya and others speak about man’s natural state of G-d consciousness and the pain that we feel when we move away from that state. Teshuva is not an external mitzvah that needs to be mandated, but is an outgrowth of man’s natural desire to seek spiritual meaning and wholeness. Man doesn’t need the mandate to be chozer b’teshuva, and doing so might cheapen the beauty of our natural tendencies.

This concept is reflected in the writings of the Maharal (Nesiv Hateshuva ch. 2), in which he says that teshuva is a process of being chozer el haschalaso — returning back to the beginning, returning back to one’s initial and natural state. All of the comments of Chazal — teshuva brings healing to the world, teshuva reaches the Kisei Hakavod (Celestial Throne) etc., reflect this notion of a natural return to self. Perhaps that is what the Rambam intended to say: that this process doesn’t need to be mandated.

If in fact teshuva is construed as a moment of a return back to the beginning, back to a truer version of oneself, then perhaps more important than teshuva reflecting sustained change, as important as that might be, teshuva is a chance — perhaps for just a few moments perhaps for longer — to reconnect with our own pristine essence. That singular moment of return seems to be reflected in the Gemara in Rosh Hashana 16b, that records the following statement in the name of Rebbi Yitzchak:

אינן דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שענה.

Man is only judged based on his status at that particular moment.

This idea is developed in greater detail in R. Shlomo Wolbe’s Alei Shur (Vol. I), in his writings about the Yamim Noraim.

If the goal of teshuva is to have a moment in which we deeply feel that we are approaching the Celestial Throne, then what comes down the road is less significant than having a moment of genuine reconnection. It is those moments that fuel our sense of self and motivate genuine spiritual ambition. It is those moments that we can generate internally even without the sublime environment of Slobodka. As emotionally, physically, psychologically and spiritually draining as this month-and-a-half long process of repentance can often feel, let us collectively fully engage in that process knowing the incalculable benefits of that sha’ah achas, the single moment of returning to oneself.

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Rabbi Soloveitchik on Applying the Principles of Teshuva to Modern Times

... Interestingly, this very idea constitutes the basis of all modern psychotherapy, i.e., a person’s actions do not necessarily reflect or emanate from his real self, but from a pseudo-self. Thus it is that a person can change behavior, and experience positive change and personal growth. This is not simply a philosophical principle, but something that has practical consequences for every rabbi, teacher, and parent. Especially in our time, we should each strive always to appeal to people’s better, deeper, and more authentic selves, that are not always apparent to others. I have often said that there are two kinds of mussar, rebuke. The first tells the sinner that he has done bad things and must renounce his erroneous ways. The problem with this approach is that it does not always work — and can even be counterproductive. ... Today we must favor the second approach. ... We should speak to them with words that convey that they are not as bad as they think, that their errant actions are not consistent with their core selves, which remain unsullied and pure at all times.

Adapted by Rabbi Dr. Basil Herring from a lecture given by Rabbi Soloveitchik in 1956. The full summary is available at www.torahmusings.com/2014/09/regret-annulment-essence-teshuvah.

Torah To Go Editors
Throughout the Yamim Noraim we do teshuva, the heart of which is a commitment to change for the better. This idea of change is complicated, as we know that in our Torah lives sometimes change is necessary and sometimes it is frowned upon. True introspection — a prerequisite to teshuva — requires that we explore how to maintain our commitment to personal and communal traditions while still developing in a positive religious direction, growing closer to Hashem.

Change is difficult. Regarding a change of character traits, it is reported that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter considered it more difficult to change one deficient trait than to master all of Talmudic literature. Behavioral change is also a monumental task. The strenuous nature of this kind of change is attested to in the written works of many prominent researchers and clinicians, including Dr. James Prochaska and Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski.

One of the most complex issues we face in the world of change in our religious lives is whether we should change in the first place. Often, we deliberately maintain a particular practice since this is how we’ve acted throughout our lives, perhaps in continuation of our parents’ behavior. Sometimes these practices exist across an entire community and may be a notable hallmark of a specific group. Change in our religious lives can be controversial and filled with tension. We find an example among students who study in Israel for a year after high school and often change their religious behavior, bringing home new customs, a stronger commitment to Torah study, as well as what some would call a stricter level of observance. In a study of this phenomenon, begun in May 2007, the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration found that while most parents supported their children’s changes in religious behavior, some parents reacted negatively. This study highlights a question that we each face individually, and our community faces collectively: when should religious change be encouraged and when should it not? Which practices should we maintain and strengthen and which should we leave behind as we go through life? Does it matter if these changes are focused on spiritual accomplishments or social conventions? What about changes between varying Torah communities and traditions?

### A Need For Change

It can be universally agreed upon that in certain areas of Jewish life, personal change is necessary. In the world of Torah study, for example, we must change over time. There would be an obvious deficiency if one’s understanding of a verse in Chumash as a grown adult were at the same level of sophistication and shared the same perspective as that of an elementary school child. Similarly, a basic goal of maturation in life is to change our behavior over time to reflect a more refined character. The verse in Mishlei states:

>Hold fast to discipline; do not let go; keep it; it is your life.

Mishlei 4:13

The Vilna Gaon, in his Commentary to

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Thank you to Avi Mori, Mr. Etzion Brand, Rabbi Joshua Flug, Rabbi Yisroel Greenblatt, Rabbi Elie Mischel, Dr. David Pelcovitz, Mrs. Andrea Polster and Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter for their many, helpful comments.
Mishlei explains:

...if you wish: that which is written and which is not written...

It is your life: Because the reason why a person lives is to break the [negative] character traits that one has not broken until now. For this reason, one must constantly inspire oneself, and if one doesn’t want to inspire oneself, why live? We all expect our children to grow out of the self-centered behaviors of youth and build emotionally intelligent lives that include new levels of empathy and concern for others. This constant change — seeking new ways to improve our character — is the essence of our lives, according to the Vilna Gaon.

Staying the Same

However, there are other aspects of our lives in which we do not encourage change as we age. In his magisterial eulogy for the late Rabbi Chaim Heller zt”l, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik described the aspiration of maintaining childlike faith in one’s religious life and one’s emunah in Hashem. Unlike the intellectual realm of Torah in which one morphs and grows over time, the experiential feeling of G-d’s presence requires a youthful perspective, which he ascribes to his own grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik zt”l:

Rashi explains:

This fealty to a religious experience where change may be found expressed in a beautiful image — the shawl of Shmuel Hanavi. When faced with his final crisis, King Saul seeks a sorcerer to conjure up the soul of Shmuel for guidance. When she does, she describes his appearance:

He is wrapped in a robe; he was accustomed to wearing a robe as it states, “His mother would also make a little robe for him,” and he was buried in his robe.

It is incredible that one of the greatest prophets of Jewish history, in his old age and into the afterlife, was still wearing the same shawl that his mother, Chana, knitted for him when he was a child. The shawl not only symbolizes the youthfulness described by Rabbi Soloveitchik, but also symbolizes how Shmuel Hanavi identified with his parents. It is a symbol of his identification with his upbringing and the family within which he was raised.

Each of us has a shawl given to us by our parents that we must keep with us, no matter what age or stature we attain. This concept of familial loyalty and its accompanying resistance to change is a strict halachic principle based on a Talmudic story:

The residents of Beit She’an were accustomed not to travel from Tyre to market day in Sidon on Shabbat eve. In deference to Shabbat, they

His mother would also make a little robe for him and bring it up to him every year, when she made the pilgrimage with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.

Shmuel I 2:19

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adopted a stringency and would not interrupt their Shabbat preparations even for a short sea voyage. Their children came before Rabbi Yohanan to request that he repeal this custom. They said to him: Due to their wealth, it was possible for our fathers to earn a living without traveling to the market on Friday; however, it is not possible for us to do so. He said to them: Your fathers already accepted this virtuous custom upon themselves, and it remains in effect for you, as it is stated: “My son, hear your father's rebuke and do not abandon your mother's teaching.” In addition to adhering to one's father's rebuke, i.e., halacha, one is also required to preserve his mother's teaching, i.e., ancestral customs.

Pesachim 50b (Translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)

This Gemara is the basis of the concept of minhag and the binding nature of personal, familial and communal precedent. Halacha grants significant weight to authentic minhagim in almost all cases. Oftentimes, prior practice helps establish halachic practice, and changes to prior practice can also raise concerns of disrespecting previous generations. Just one example of this is found in the halachic discussion in 19th-century Europe regarding the kosher status of turkey. The Darkei Teshuva, in his commentary to Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 82, cites these arguments in the name of the Netziv: since people have been consuming turkey with the presumption that it is kosher, we cannot overturn that presumption without a bona fide proof that it is not kosher because doing so will cast aspersions on previous generations that they ate non-kosher.

This is true not only of personal and familial customs; it is equally true of communal character as well. Each community within the overall spectrum of Judaism must maintain its unique traditions in Jewish outlook and practice. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a diversity of minhagim and practices between Jewish communities and families is not just an accident of history. It is an intentional, original design of the Jewish people. The creation of twelve distinct tribes reflects the need for differentiated modes of avodat Hashem. The classic introduction to the Chabad Siddur, Sha’ar HaKollel, makes this point in stating that there are going to be thirteen gates of entry to the Third Beit HaMikdash, one for each tribe, and a thirteenth that is all-encompassing. This is to reflect the many gateways and traditions to serving Hashem.

We learn that it is important to maintain the character of our specific community within the masorah of Torah communities.

A Challenge

The challenge, then, is how to balance this commitment to the unique character of our family and community with a quest to come ever closer to Hashem, which is our ultimate calling as avdei Hashem. Does fealty to tradition mean that we should never adapt or change in new circumstances? Should it be enough to say that we should never deviate from the practice of our parents and grandparents? What if this practice is inconsistent with accepted halacha? Does any shift in more scrupulous observance mean we are moving, as is often described, "to the right”? This question could be answered with a

rhetorical question. Would a business executive in the 21st century decline use of a website for ordering today because his firm didn’t do business that way in the 1950s? Certainly not. Imagine a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Would anyone expect the manner in which they speak to and treat each other to change in the years that they’ve known each other? Certainly not. As both the book of Shir Hashirin and the book of Eicha describe, we have a relationship with Hashem, our beloved. This relationship is deepened over time, and things that would have been acceptable during the initial stages of our relationship may no longer be appropriate. Times change and circumstances change. While certain practices may be appropriate in a given time and place, they may no longer be appropriate at a later time. This need for revision throughout life is conveyed in a fascinating parable of a map maker:

But the biggest problem of map-making is not that we have to start from scratch, but that if our maps are to be accurate we have to continually revise them. The world itself is constantly changing. Glaciers come, glaciers go. Cultures come, cultures go. There is too little technology, there is too much technology. Even more dramatically the vantage point from which we view the world is constantly and quite rapidly changing … If we are to incorporate this information, we must continually revise our maps, and sometimes when enough new information has accumulated, we must make very major revisions. The process of making revisions, particularly major revisions, is painful, sometimes excruciatingly painful. And herein lies the major source of many of the ills of mankind.
Once we understand that within a commitment to one’s personal and communal past there is still room, and sometimes a necessity, for new ideas and practices, we still face the challenge of navigating change. How do we know when change is appropriate and when it is not? Perhaps a first consideration is motivation. Is the change to a new practice motivated simply by a lack of confidence and desire to imitate another person or community? If so, then it is just shallow mimicry. If, however, it is a truly profound affinity for a specific religious community or overall desire to grow closer to Hashem that motivates change, then it is worthy of consideration. Additionally, a second, more complex issue is assessing the merit of the both the current and proposed practice.

**Merit**

Before abandoning a current practice, one must research and understand its values and merits. Occasionally, current practices may seem questionable on the surface but upon further inquiry have a sound halachic basis. On some occasions, however, we encounter a practice that is deemed a minhag ta’ut — an errant practice, which lacks halachic merit entirely. For example, no one could claim that they have a family or community minhag to eat non-kosher food just because members of a previous generation, who were not observant, did so.

A similar inquiry should be done regarding the acceptance of a proposed practice. Does this new practice fulfill a Biblical or Rabbinic mitzvah or is it a stringency? Stringencies, known as chumrot, are a meaningful and time-honored expression of piety. However, our rabbis have always stressed caution and balance when introducing them, as they may violate the Torah’s restriction against arrogance and sanctimony. The Gemara states:

> אלעזר צאהר הוא סימן אוסר וקאי בפאות תר針יות אספה תורה יד ושובו לא ויאמר לא מה אתה=sub minyan אמר מילא מocalypse איום葡萄酒 את השבת עתיבות יעבוד

Eliezer Ze’eira was wearing black shoes, unlike the Jewish custom of that time, and standing in the market of Neharde’a. Officials of the house of the Exilarch found him and said to him: What is different about you that causes you to wear these shoes? He said to them: I am wearing them because I am in mourning over the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, and so I wear black shoes, as is the custom of mourners. They said to him: Are you a man of such understanding to publicly mourn over Jerusalem? They thought that it was simply presumptuousness on his part. Since he was acting against the prevalent Jewish custom, they brought him to the prison and incarcerated him.

**Hesitation**

Even when all of these conditions are fulfilled satisfactorily, we often still feel uncomfortable around others who have made positive religious changes, as described in the Azrieli study above. We also often hesitate

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**R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto**

**Luzzatto on Taking on Additional Stringencies**

When the Sbarcaychah asked a question about whether it is proper to introduce new halachic considerations that may counterbalance it. As the Talmud notes, a stricture in one area of halacha and life may actually be a leniency and infringement upon another area.

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**Mesilat Yesharim Chap. 20**

What a person needs to understand is that one should not judge the matters of chasidut according to their superficial appearance. Rather, one must examine and contemplate the full extent of where the future consequences of the deed leads. For sometimes, the deed itself may appear to be good but since the consequences are evil one must abstain from it. For doing it would not have made him a chasid but rather a sinner … there are some additional matters of piety, which if a person were to do before the common people, they will laugh at him and ridicule him, thereby sinning and incurring punishment through him, and this is something he could have abstained from doing since these things are not complete obligations.
to make these changes for ourselves even when we know they are advisable and even necessary. Why are we so reticent? This is something with which I personally struggle, like many others, as Eric Hoffer notes in his book, The Ordeal of Change. There are many factors that impede and hinder change. In the context of teshuva, we can point to one emotional and psychological core issue that nags at our subconscious. It is highlighted by the words of the Rambam, who describes the transformation of teshuva in chapter 7 of Hilchot Teshuva:

Development, Not Change

Perhaps the answer to this concern and hesitation is an approach to teshuva suggesting that G-d and the halacha do not actually require us to shed our prior identity, even if it were sinful, in favor of a new one. Teshuva is about continuous development rather than a wholesale change of identity.

This idea is demonstrated in a remarkable story in the Gemara, Menachot 44a, describing the religious journey of a prostitute. The Gemara records that a certain individual was about to commit an illicit act with this prostitute, when his tzitzit hit him on the face. This inspired him to cancel his appointment. The woman was so moved by this, she asked the individual to write his name on a piece of paper, and she began a journey toward conversion to Judaism. The Gemara continues:
maintained a piece of her prior self. We learn that even a convert, whose transformation is compared by Chazal to being “born like a child,” is not completely reborn. Part of their prior identity remains with them as a badge of honor, not a mark of Cain.

This notion, that as we do teshuva we do not reject our past, demonstrates that we seek to develop more than we seek to change. Change, or “flipping out,” means becoming something or someone else. Development means taking myself to another level, closer to Hashem and closer to my potential. This is why Judaism’s term for repentance is teshuva, which literally means a return. Teshuva is about returning to our true selves, not becoming something or someone else. This may be why when we do teshuva, we do not erase our past misdeeds. When we embrace spiritual development with love, our past errors become merits as Reish Lakish teaches:

“A great deal of repentance is teshuva, which becomes like merits; there, when one repents out of love, his sins are counted as unwitting transgressions. Reish Lakish, one of the Talmud’s most renowned baalei teshuva, ultimately concludes that past actions remain a proud, meritorious part of our identity. This perspective on teshuva as not wholly rejecting our prior, unredeemed identity is advanced clearly by Rav Kook in his writings. Here is one example:

“כשעוסקים בתשובה ... צריך לברר את הטוב שאבד בפשענו.eilatKidushin (19:11). We learn that even a convert, whose identity remains with them as a badge of honor, not a mark of Cain.

The need to develop a fealty to our past or of our parents. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flawed behavior. We can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities even in flaws...
Some of the great joys of learning and studying halacha and minhag are the grand vistas and big ideas that we often discover in the exploration of problematic details. As part of our Rosh ha-Shana preparation, an examination of one such detail of practice — the colorful array of foods that annually adorn our Rosh ha-Shana tables — can also inspire and equip us for a more profound yom tov experience.

Moreover, this intellectual journey can provide us with globally important skills and insights particularly relevant for 21st-century Jews, enabling us to appreciate and discern authentic, sophisticated religious experience throughout the year.

While it is somewhat curious that eating honeyed apples on Rosh ha-Shana night — a minhag mentioned some seven centuries ago by the Tur — is far more prominent among Ashkenazim than consuming leek, black-eyed peas, and the other items cited more than 1½ millennia ago by the Gemara in Massechtos Horayos 12a and Kereisos 5b,2 the most surprising and most troubling aspect — as we are about to discover — is that we allow any of these foods at our yom tov tables.

I. Superstitious Se’uda?

In Parashas Shofetim, the Torah forbids many occult practices, particularly nichush:

Let no one be found among you who …
Devarim 18:10

In the Sifrei (the midrash halacha on Bamidbar and Devarim), the tannaim defined “nichush” as engaging in superstitious behavior:

Who qualifies as a “menachesh”? [One who interprets natural happenings as signs or portents] e.g., “His bread fell from his mouth; therefore …,” “his stick fell from his hand; therefore …,” “a snake on his right, a fox on his left, a deer crossed his path; therefore …,” and one who says “Do not begin” (a new enterprise) — it is morning; it is the New Moon; it is the end of Shabbath.”

Sifrei 171 trans. adapted from Sefaria

This Sifrei is quoted in Masseches Sanhedrin 65b, and it is codified as a matter of halacha by Rambam (Avoda Zara 11:4) and Shulchan Aruch (Yore De’ah 179:3). Yet this seems to stand in direct contradiction to the Gemara mentioned above, which appears to recommend consuming particular foods as a way to magically ensure a year of beracha!

Both Meiri and Rav Yaacov of Lisa address this quandary, and both of their answers actually flow from a third, striking Gemara.

II. Superstitious or Simply Super?

In discussing the bounds of forbidden nichush, we learn in Masseches Chullin 95b, that:

Rav said: Any nichush unlike that of Eliezer (Avraham’s servant) and of Yonasan (son of Shaul) does not qualify as nichush.
Rav points to two episodes in Tanach that serve as paradigms of nichush: Eliezer selecting a wife for Yitzchak by waiting to hear the significant phrase, “I’ll water your camels as well” (Bereishis 24), and Yonasan deciding whether or not to charge up the hill at the enemy Pelishti camp by testing whether the Pelishtim stream down the hill at Yonasan or invite him uphill (Shemuel I 14). Acting based on a sign — as did Yonasan and Eliezer — is the paradigm for forbidden nichush according to Rav.

Ba’alei ha-Tosefos are shocked: are these tzaddikim, Yonasan and Eliezer, actually models of sin? Ri ba’al ha-Tosefos answers that Yonasan and Eliezer planned to act regardless, Yonasan relying on his judgment and Eliezer upon zehuso shel Avraham, the merit of Avraham; the signs were merely an additional siman but were not dispositive whatsoever. Truly acting based upon signs, though, would indeed violate the prohibition against nichush.

In his chiddushim, Rabbeinu Nissim offers an alternative teirutz:

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I believe the solution is as follows: The Torah forbade nichush when one relies upon a siman for which there is no logical basis to presume it causes benefit nor harm, such as divining based upon bread falling from one’s hand or a deer crossing one’s path. These examples are indeed superstitious. If, however, one employs simanim with a logical basis — why, that is typical everyday living! For instance, “I shall not travel if it will rain, but I shall travel if it won’t rain” is typical practice, not nichush.

Eliezer and Yonasan employed the second [and permissible] type of siman. Eliezer sought a woman who would be appropriate for [the great tzaddik] Yitzchak, and so he took the following as his siman: if she is so refined and of developed character as to generously respond to my request for water with an offer to water my camels as well, she is a good fit for Yitzchak. Similarly, Yonasan — who sought to attack an entire Pelishti camp with only one companion — took the following as his siman: if they say to us, “Come up the mountain [to fight us],” then they seem unafraid, and logically we ought to flee rather than fight.

The Gemara referenced these episodes in order to teach us even if a siman is illogical, it is only forbidden if one acts upon it as did these two [Eliezer and Yonasan].

Acting based upon signs is prohibited provided that the signs are nonsensical, as are the examples mentioned by the Sifrei above. There is no rational reason to avoid business subsequent to bread dropping from one’s mouth or a deer (or black cat) crossing one’s path, so such avoidance violates the biblical prohibition against nichush, superstition. By contrast, choosing to take an umbrella based upon sky color (grey rather than blue) is a sensible, scientifically-based heuristic and is therefore permitted. Similarly, volunteering unasked to provide several hundred gallons of water certainly indicates exceptionally proactive and insightful chesed, and a mountaintop garrison’s surprising hesitancy to charge down at a pair of enemy soldiers reveals the garrison’s remarkable weakness or low morale, so Eliezer and Yonasan violated no prohibition. Combining his explanation with that of Tosefos, Ran writes there are two criteria that must be met for violation of nichush: truly acting upon a meaningless sign.

This pair of concepts is quoted by rishonim in discussing an adjacent Gemara as well. As the sugya progresses, a baraisa teaches us that sometimes what seems like prohibited nichush is in fact permitted, a mere siman:

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What distinguishes a permitted siman from forbidden nichush? Rambam writes:

It is forbidden to practice nichush

... And whosoever commits an act as a result of any one of such divinations, is lashed.

One who said: “This dwelling which I built was of good prefigurement,”

“this wife whom I married has brought a blessing to me” ... Likewise, one who asks a child, “What verse are you studying?” if he mentioned to him a verse

... and good works.

Meiri Horayos 12a

According to Meiri, simanei Rosh ha-Shana are not meant to directly, intrinsically determine our gezar din (verdict) for the coming year, but are instead a tool, an instrument for inspiring us to do teshuva. It is teshuva that does impact our gezar din, and the brief tefillos that accompany the foods serve to ensure that we do not mistake the foods for anything but teshuva-catalysts. (Note as well that Meiri interprets the language of each of those tefillos as references to teshuva.) This explanation is cognate to the first criterion above, siman be-'al-ma; according to Meiri, simanei Rosh ha-Shana are meant to be psychologically inspirational, not materially influential.

IV. Take Two: Rav Yaacov of Lisa

Rav Yaacov of Lisa⁸ suggests in his Emes le-Ya’akov that the basis for simanei Rosh ha-Shana lies in the Tanach-wide concept of po’al dimyon developed by Ramban in his Peirush al ha-Torah (Bereishis 12:6).⁹ Ramban writes that a nevua (prophecy) that is both spoken and acted out by the navi (prophet) is more potent than one that is only delivered verbally. It is for this reason that throughout Tanach, a navi may be instructed to both pronounce a given nevua and concomitantly perform a po’al dimyon, an action that portrays and mimics the content of that particular nevua.

By analogy, a tefilla that is both spoken and mimed is even more powerful than one that is only spoken. The objective of simanei Rosh ha-Shana is to serve as po’alei dimyon, enhancing and multiplying the power of the tefillos “Yehi ratzon ...” which they accompany. Instead of a solely verbal request for a shana tova u-mesuka (a good and sweet year), for ribbui zechuyos (increase in merits), and for kerisas sone’einu (destruction of our enemies), we both say those tefillos and mime them by eating corresponding foods, thus equipping our Rosh ha-Shana with enhanced tefillos.

This second explanation is cognate with the second criterion above in the definition of nichush, namely ta’am ba-davar. According to Rav

III. Take One: Meiri

Returning to simanei Rosh ha-Shana and the question of nichush raised above, one solution is offered by Meiri:

... and good works.

Meiri Horayos 12a

According to Meiri, simanei Rosh ha-Shana are not meant to directly, intrinsically determine our gezar din (verdict) for the coming year, but are instead a tool, an instrument for inspiring us to do teshuva. It is teshuva that does impact our gezar din, and the brief tefillos that accompany the foods serve to ensure that we do not mistake the foods for anything but teshuva-catalysts. (Note as well that Meiri interprets the language of each of those tefillos as references to teshuva.) This explanation is cognate to the first criterion above, siman be-'al-ma; according to Meiri, simanei Rosh ha-Shana are meant to be psychologically inspirational, not materially influential.
Yaakov of Lisa, simanei Rosh ha-Shana are permissible because while they are meant to effectively impact our year, they do so in an explainable, rational fashion — by leveraging and multiplying our verbal tefillos.

V. Reflections

Two reflections flow from this approach of Rav Yaacov of Lisa. First, it highlights the critical importance of uttering the tefillos “Yehi ratzon …” (To instead focus solely on consuming the array of siman foods while neglecting the tefillos is to embrace the tafel, secondary, while ignoring the ikkar, primary.)

Moreover, the Rav famously developed the notion of teki' as shofar as a primal, wordless form of tefilla. Taken together with Rav Yaacov of Lisa's insight, Rosh ha-Shana emerges as the tremendously consequential yom ha-din (day of judgment), which understandably requires us to employ not only routine methods of tefilla, but rather the full suite of tools in our tefilla arsenal, including both wordless and mimed forms of expression. Certainly, its more standard tefillos similarly demand singular effort and unique focus.

As we prepare to organize and energize our toolkit of tefillos — our Rosh ha-Shana panoply — to the best of our ability, may we merit kabbalas ha-tefillos.

Endnotes

1 Tur (Orach Chayim 583). Interestingly, the Gra (loc. cit.) suggests that the apple recreates the episode of birkas Yitzchak, and that it occurred on Rosh ha-Shana.

2 According to Tosfos (Avoda Zara 5b), it is already indicated in a mishna (Chullin 83a).

3 Quoted by Tosfos and Ritva ad loc.

4 Ad loc. See also the commentaries on the above-referenced Rambam, particularly Kesef Mishne who expands upon this thesis of Rabbeinu Nissim, as well as Hagahos Maimoniyos who references an earlier partial source for this position in Sefer Yere'im.

5 nationalgeographic.com/weepingcamel/thecamels.html.

6 This baraisa appears as well in Bereishis Rabbah 85:5 in the context of Yehuda's refusal to marry his third son Sheilah to Tamar (Bereishis 38:11).

7 In his comments, Ra’avad (ad loc.) disagrees with this reading of the passage in Masseches Chullin. He believes that the Gemara is concerned with the efficacy of the siman, not with its halachic permissibility. Ran explores Rashi's position on this question. Hagahos Maimoniyos supports the position of Rambam and Tosfos; see especially the strong language in his closing sentence: “כד"ה זה הארכתי נגד המשחיתים המלעיגים על פסקים אלו – I have written on this at greater length in order to counter those who destructively belittle these halachic rulings [namely, the halachic distinctions accepted by Rambam and Tosfos]."

8 Ad loc. 11:5:4*.

9 He is better-known for his Nesivos (ha-Mishpat) and Chavvos Da'as. Emes le-Ya'akov is a 94-page sefer on aggados ha-Shas.

10 Ramban sees this notion of po' al dimyon as lying at the core of ma'ase avos siman la-banim — the episodes of the forefathers are a siman for the history of the Jewish people to come — a concept that he takes as fundamental in globally understanding sefer Bereishis.

11 See Mi-Peninei Ha-Rav (Shofar 8, p. 126), et al. For the Rav, this perspective on shofar also explains why mitzvas shofar is fulfilled during tefilla — unlike other mitzvos such as lulav, hallel and keri'as ha-Torah which are fulfilled in the synagogue but not during Shemone Esrei.
Yom Kippur is a day entirely devoted to the spiritual experience of being lifnei Hashem, before G-d. The Torah tells us:

וֹם הַזֶּה יְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכֹל יַכִּי בַּחַטֹאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תִּטְהָר

For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord. 

Vayikra 16:30

We reach the climax of connection with the Divine through a variety of ways: the context created within the solemnity of the day; our complete immersion in the world of prayer; and the abdication of our basic physical pleasures and needs in order to accentuate the vibrancy of our soul.

Interestingly, the dominant halachic character of Yom Kippur is in the observance of its restrictions: the prohibitions against eating, drinking, bathing, anointing, wearing leather footwear, and marital intimacy.

Indeed, the poskim are clear that if illness compromises one’s capacity to fully observe the fast, it is more important to remain home and spend the day resting in bed, than to attend shul and risk having to expend enough energy that would require eating or drinking (Shemiras Shabbos KeHilchasa 39:28). The obligation to fast on Yom Kippur is one of the Torah’s most stringent expectations. Violating this prohibition is subject to the punishment of kareis (Vayikra 23:29). Yet the Gemara in Yoma 85a, states unequivocally that any Torah prohibition, aside from the three cardinal sins, whose observance would risk a person’s life, is suspended indefinitely in deference to the health and well-being of the individual. There are occasional situations, therefore, in which eating and drinking on Yom Kippur becomes necessary, and as such, a requirement. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the parameters of health conditions and their relevant halachic requirements with respect to Yom Kippur. Some situations permit an individual to attempt to fast, some permit the eating and drinking of shiurim, which would entail a lower form of prohibition, and some situations demand a total capitulation to satiating the body with food.

The question we are going to explore, from both a halachic and a hashkafic perspective, is: how does an individual who is required to eat on Yom Kippur relate to the halachic character of the day? How does this individual observe and relate to Yom Kippur?

Birkas HaMazon

The Tur, Orach Chaim no. 618, writes in the name of his father, the Rosh:

This is an obvious point because the individual was permitted to recite a blessing, my father, Rabbeinu Asher, has said that he should mention Yom Kippur in Grace After Meals by reciting Yaaleh V’Yavo in the blessing about building Jerusalem.

An individual who eats on Yom Kippur is required to recite Birkas HaMazon and include Yaaleh VeYavo with the individualized insertion of “Yom HaKippurim hazeh.” The Beis Yosef quotes the Maharam MiRutenberg who presents the following formulation:

This is an obvious point because the individual was permitted to eat the food. In fact it was a mitzvah, and for this individual, Yom Kippur is like our other festivals.

Beis Yosef, Orach Chaim no. 618

Yom Kippur is comprised of many dimensions of sanctity. It has the underlying kedusha of a standard yom tov, which is suppressed...
and overshadowed by the unique requirements of inuy (affliction). Therefore, the festive aspect of Yom Kippur’s identity usually remains dormant. However, if a person must break his or her fast, this dimension emerges and presents the identical manifesting elements of a yom tov, like any other chag, namely, the inclusion of Yaaleh VeYavo.

The Shelchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 618:10, rules that one who eats on Yom Kippur recites Yaaleh VeYavo. The Knesses HaGedolah, Orach Chaim 618, goes so far as to require lechem mishneh (two loaves of bread), however the Magen Avraham states that this is not the accepted practice. In fact, the Magen Avraham quotes the Shibolei HaLeket, who presents an entirely different perspective. The Shibolei HaLeket quotes Rav Avigdor Katz that the permissibility to eat on Yom Kippur essentially unravels the entire character of Yom Kippur altogether. He describes the day for this individual as “hava ledidei kechol” — for this individual, the day is like an ordinary weekday — and therefore one does not make Kiddush or mention Yom Kippur in Birchas HaMazon. The Magen Avraham himself seems to agree fundamentally with this opinion, but in deference to the Tur, he suggests reciting Yaaleh VeYavo, while exempting one from making Kiddush because of a concern of beracha levatalah (blessing in vain). The Taz, Orach Chaim 618:10, seems to agree with the Magen Avraham in principle, but goes further and exempts one from including Yaaleh VeYavo in Birchas HaMazon without any concern for the opinion of the Tur. The Mishna Berurah 618:29 follows the ruling of the Magen Avraham that one recites Yaaleh VeYavo but not Kiddush and adds that if one forgot the insertion, one would not repeat Birchas HaMazon. This dispute is explained by R. Mayer Rooth, Minchas Mayer no. 15, as being rooted in the nature of the underlying sanctity of Yom Kippur. According to one approach, there are two conflicting identities to Yom Kippur. On the one hand, it has the status of yom tov. On the other hand, it is a day of inuy. The Torah is clear that the requirements of inuy dominate the elements of yom tov. However, when those requirements are lifted, then perhaps the generic kedushas yom tov would reemerge, requiring one to at least recite Yaaleh VeYavo, and possibly engage in other elements of the yom tov experience.

The other approach views the inuy on Yom Kippur as definitional to the entire nature of the day. It is not a yom tov that is overshadowed by inuy, but rather it is fundamentally a day of inuy. It is a mikra kodesh — a festival, but its nature is a mikra kodesh of inuy. As a result, if one becomes exempt from the inuyim, the entire nature of the day has been compromised and we would not encounter any of the generic yom tov qualities in the resulting reality. The mikra kodesh is no longer applicable. An issur melacha (prohibition against creative labor) remains, but the underlying character of the yom tov is gone.

When Yom Kippur Occurs on Shabbos

Rav Akiva Eiger, in his glosses to the aforementioned Magen Avraham, makes a fascinating distinction between a calendar year in which Yom Kippur occurs on a weekday, and one in which it occurs on Shabbos. If Yom Kippur occurs on Shabbos, there is another layer of kedusha that has been added to this reality. Even if the Magen Avraham and the Taz are correct that there is no mikra kodesh independent of inuy that would require reciting Kiddush on Yom Kippur, this is only because Kiddush on yom tov is a rabbinic enactment and the rabbis never instituted Kiddush on Yom Kippur. However, on Shabbos, when there is a biblical obligation to recite Kiddush, one would imagine that there is a requirement to recite Kiddush. Furthermore, Shabbos exists as an entity independent from Yom Kippur, and therefore, when the obligations of Yom Kippur do not prevent one from fulfilling the obligations of Shabbos, one should fulfill those obligations.

Yet we find a different approach to the convergence of Shabbos and Yom Kippur in a comment of R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk. The Rambam writes:

The offering of these fifteen animals on [Yom Kippur] must be performed by the Kohen Gadol ... If [Yom Kippur] occurs on Shabbos, the mussaf offering of Shabbos must be performed by the Kohen Gadol.

Rambam, Hilchos Avodas Yom HaKippurim 1:2

Why does the offering for Shabbos have to be brought specifically by the Kohen Gadol? On an ordinary Shabbos, any Kohen can bring the Shabbos offering. R. Meir Simcha, Ohr Sameiach, Hilchos Avodas Yom HaKippurim 4:1, explains that the Rambam is of the opinion that when Yom Kippur occurs on Shabbos, the entire nature of kedushas Shabbos becomes redefined by the experience of Yom Kippur. For this reason, the offerings that are exclusive and unique to Shabbos also become part
of the service of the Kohlen Gadol. The Minchas Mayer argues that the comments of the Ohr Sameiach present a challenge to R Akiva Eiger. One sees from the Rambam that the kedusha of Shabbos does not exist as an independent entity when Yom Kippur occurs on Shabbos.

The convergence of Shabbos and Yom Kippur can be understood in two ways. One is to view the experience of inuy as entirely independent of Shabbos, while the other recognizes the capacity of inuy to redefine the nature of the Shabbos experience entirely.

In life, we strive mightily to discover meaning and resonance in the world of mikra kodesh. There are many aspects of our religious experience that present moments of sanctity, and our challenge is to connect to their purpose and to their transformative impact upon our lives. Indeed, there is a hovering angelic dimension to Yom Kippur that is palpable in an experiential and very tangible way. Part of our mandate on Yom Kippur, through the requirements of inuy, is to strip away our indulgence and temptation, and focus ourselves entirely on the purest form of sanctified existence. In a world where the notion of spirituality and transcendence is entirely counter cultural, this is becoming increasingly challenging. We ourselves, and certainly our children, are finding the synagogue experience more and more distant from our modern lives and contemporary experiences. Shuls throughout the world recognize the difficulty of connecting to the world of Yom Kippur and are are introducing programs and opportunities for people to address those concerns. Yet this is one of the dimensions of Yom Kippur that is so crucial, and expressed so poignantly by the position that we continue to recite Yaaleh VeYavo, make Kiddush, and perhaps even include lechem mishneh in a compromised Yom Kippur experience. The inuyim of Yom Kippur are not an obstacle to avodas Hashem. On Yom Kippur, they act as a vehicle to create the context for avodas Hashem without any distractions.

However, viewing the experience from the perspective of the Ohr Sameiach, perhaps there is an additional message as well. We so often bifurcate our lives between the religious ideals we seek to observe and to embrace, and the extraordinary challenges that we face in moving forward in our own personal development and avodas Hashem. We view the inuyim of life as a barrier to religious growth — one that stands in opposition to the momentum that we seek to create with our commitment, Torah learning, and religious observance. Yom Kippur is perhaps projecting a different message. Those challenges are not independent of our religious experience, but are, rather, part of it. As the Ramban explains regarding the nisayon (test) of Avraham:

The issue of this test, in my opinion, shows that a person has the absolute authority to perform an action; one can do what they want, and not do what one doesn't want. It is called a “nisayon” [test] for the individual being tested [e.g., Avraham], but the blessed Tester will command him to bring out the thing from ability to actuality, giving a reward for a good action and not just a reward for a good heart. … And behold, every test in the Torah is for the good of the one being tested.

Ramban, Bereishis 22:1

The purpose of a nisayon is to bring out the latent potential that exists within a person. Perhaps the purpose of Yom Kippur is indeed to make life a little harder so that we can discover how those very challenges are also a platform to cultivate a close relationship with the Divine — to learn how the challenges of our lives are truly opportunities to shape a meaningful and purposeful existence. If this can be accomplished, then Shabbos becomes part of Yom Kippur as well, and in suspension of the inuyim, we would not encounter a remaining echo of kedushas Shabbos, since the two dimensions are in fact inseparable.

People sometimes turn to religion in the hope that it is a utopian escape from life. A cocooned space of inspiration and meaning that we can retreat to from the vicissitudes of our lives. In reality what Yom Kippur is teaching us is that the oneg (enjoyment) and simcha of Shabbos can be experienced through the pain and challenge of inuy as well. In this way, it is a day when we can utilize life’s challenges as a foundation for growth.
During the season leading up to the Yamim Noraim, there is much focus on teshuva and change. On a basic level, each of us are called upon to take an accounting of where we stand in our observance and faith, and to commit ourselves to fewer sins and greater merits in the year ahead. On a deeper and more holistic level, we are encouraged during this season of teshuva to shed whatever brings each of us down, so that we may actualize the potential that lies within. Whether this means stepping up to a role of leadership in our communities and our families, or even just taking the reins of our own lives, transformation in Tishrei is about recognizing what each of us is capable of, and settling for nothing less.

The Halachic Calendar: The Inherent Dilemma about Behavioral Change

The very nature of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur season illustrates an interesting conflict with regard to the Torah approach to change. We ask ourselves: What can I take on? What can I do better? What must I atone for, and determine to do differently in the coming year? When we stand in individual and collective prayer, saying s’lach lanu, m’chal lanu, kaper lanu — forgive us, absolve us, grant us atonement — we are beseeching God and also ourselves. With those words, each of us proclaims, “I fully intend to be a reformed person in the new year. Please God, consider me not as the person I am, but as the person I want to be.”

And yet we know that each year we stand in shul with the changes we intended to make last year at least partially unfulfilled. While we are sincere in our desire for teshuva sheleima, complete or perfect teshuva, we also acknowledge that there will always be more work for us to do. The message here, we believe, is that change is inherent in Judaism. The very fact that there is a system of teshuva, and that there is this very specific time period built into our calendar every year, tells us that teshuva is meant to be a process that is life-long, never quite complete.

In the following pages, we will examine modern-day psychology’s view on behavioral change and personal transformation, and how it conforms with the Torah’s framework for change. To that end, we will analyze the narrative of one of the most transformational leaders in our nation’s history, Avraham Avinu. Avraham was a leader who underwent significant personal change in order to accomplish tremendous goals. Transforming himself from a passive observer to a leader of his family, and ultimately his nation, Avraham introduced a whole new philosophy into the world. His road to these changes was complex and deep, and was marked by a constant interplay of divine revelation and intentional behavioral change. While Avraham certainly possessed personal qualities that made him uniquely suited to this incredible responsibility, it is our belief that Avraham’s story reveals
universal truths about the path to change, which are teachable examples for us all.

**The Transtheoretical Model of Change: Change in Stages**

Also known as “stages of change,” the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) describes a process involving progress through a series of stages (Prochaska and Velicer). Developed by Prochaska and Di Clemente in 1977, this model delineates six discrete stages that make up the complete experience of individual change. Those are: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination.

In the precontemplation stage, an individual is not yet ready for change, and is not yet thinking about a particular change as part of his or her future. This person may be unaware that his or her behavior is problematic, and is not intending to take action in the foreseeable future. In the next stage, contemplation, we begin to see the precursors of movement. Individuals in this stage are beginning to recognize that their behavior is problematic, and are starting to look at the pros and cons of their current actions. We can think of these individuals as on the cusp, getting ready to activate a transformation in the near future.

Once an individual arrives at the preparation stage, he or she is ready. He is intending to take action in the immediate future, and may begin taking small steps toward behavioral change. These early, incremental first steps may be small, but their impact is large. They help propel this individual into the next stage, which is action. Individuals in the action stage are making specific, overt modifications to their behaviors. When these changes are made and sustained for at least six months, we consider this individual in the maintenance stage. He may now shift his attention to working to prevent relapse. Finally, the termination stage is reached when an individual has no residual temptation and is sure that he will not return to his old unhealthy ways.

Often when we think of change, we think only of the end product, focusing all our attention on the visible results. This conception of change is ill advised. In fact, change tends not to occur in a vacuum. Rarely if ever do we experience a singular flash of inspiration that then spurs a transformation that stands the test of time. Real change is built in stages and arrived at slowly. And in fact, even thinking about and engaging with the possibility of change is a step in the process which, if we stay on course, can ultimately bring us to achieve our goals.

The story of Avraham is no exception. Looking at the narrative presented to us in Tanach, it is easy to hone in on a few blockbuster events and be fooled into thinking that they alone were responsible for Avraham's growth as a leader. Hashem tells Avraham (Bereishit 12:1), “lech lecha” — go forth (to the Land which I will show you) — and Avraham goes, leaving behind his old life. But in fact, those “lech lecha” moments are pieces of a far vaster story. Those moments of divine intervention were there, and surely they were significant in their impact, but they were preceded by, and precursors of, behavioral changes that Avraham made. Examining the
narrative more closely, it is clear that Avraham's transformation was not instantaneous and did not stem from a single source. Just the contrary. Avraham grew into the leader he was via change that was slow, developmental, and transactional.

The Rambam in Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3 paints a rich story of Avraham's path to the point of "lech lecha." Avraham began to question the status quo in Terach's house very early on. At a young age, Avraham realized that it did not make sense to worship idols, and began looking for a master of the universe.

According to the Midrash HaGadol 11:28, he first believed that it was the sun, only to realize that the sun sets and the moon comes out. Following that thought process, he began to disqualify every tangible source of power that he could conceive of, ultimately concluding that there is one Supreme Being who must have created all the others.

In Bereshit Rabba (Parshat Noach, parsha 30) there is a disagreement regarding Avraham's age when he discovered Hashem:

In the glosses, it is written in the name of Ramach that it is possible to maintain both opinions. He was 3 years old when he began to think and contemplate how to recognize his creator but when he turned 40, he completed his quest. [Rambam] wrote 40, which is the most important age because it is when he completed his recognition.

Kesef Mishneh, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3

Put in psychological terms, Avraham spent his early years in contemplation, and arrived at a state of readiness when he took action. Avraham began teaching and inspiring others, transforming himself into a leader within his community.

Consistent Action as a Linchpin for Lasting Change

After many years spent in contemplation of change, it is telling that a major boost in transformation came after Avraham's "lech lecha" moment. Cognitive behavioral principles instruct that our feelings result from our thoughts and behaviors. Whereas we often think that it is our emotions that drive our behavior (I am not comfortable leading, and therefore I don't act as a leader), cognitive behavioral psychology explains that it is actually our behaviors that perpetuate our emotional state (because I do not rise to lead, I do not think of myself as "leadership material"). As such, in order to bring about emotional transformation, one must start with simple behavioral change. More specifically, in order to achieve real transformation, one must begin to act not as he presently is, but as he wishes to be. (Deacon and Abramowitz, 2004)

Looking at the story of Avraham, change in action and change in perception went hand in hand. Avraham spent many years thinking about God, but his transformation was largely confined to his personal internal experience. This all changed when Avraham took overt behavioral steps, signaling that he was ready for more pervasive transformation. When Avraham took action in Terach's house, when he forcibly showed his family that idol worship is foolish, that is when we start to see Avraham acting as the leader that we now know him to be. In order to solidify his transformation, Avraham had to leave his home, change his environment and act in a way that was conducive to his new mission. And in fact, it was after making these tangible changes, that the pace of Avraham' transformation increased even more. Avraham really starts hearing from God, with God telling him "lech lecha," commanding him to act again. Now, Avraham is no longer just thinking or talking about God. Now he is acting in accordance with God's word, actualizing the character that God intended him to be.

The actions required to make change happen can be small, but they need to be meaningful and consistent, realistic and specific. They need to coalesce to create an environment that is conducive to the change being sought. In doing so, they set the wheels in motion, driving the individual into the action stage, where the bulk of his transformation will occur. The same applies to the process of teshuva or personal growth. One must set
realistic spiritual goals, paired with specific behavioral changes that will bring him to attainment. Whether it be by setting up a chavruta, joining an online learning community or changing one’s schedule to allow for davening, an individual seeking spiritual growth must set up his environment so that it is conducive to reinforcing this change.

Change as Commitment

In the Transtheoretical Model, the last and final stage of behavioral change is that of maintenance. In order for change to be long lasting, one must commit to a new habit to replace the old. In some ways, this stage can be the most challenging. After the early excitement of achieving one’s goals begins to wane, maintenance requires unyielding diligence and ongoing commitment. In this regard too, we can learn from Avraham. As discussed by Rabbi Baruch Simon in his shiur “Change/Commitment in Avodas Hashem,” the Gemarah in Berachot states that one who sets up a makom kavua, a set place to pray, is going to be protected by the G-d of Avraham.

And the Canaanite was in the land at that time: The plain meaning of these words is that the Canaanite, a powerful people, dominated that land at that time. Avraham was afraid of them and this is why we did not hear of his building an altar, i.e. preaching his religion, at that time until God appeared to him at Shechem.

Rabbeinu Bechaya, Bereishit 12:6

In telling us of this worry, the Torah seems to highlight the fact that even Avraham Avinu displayed some ambivalence about his ability to fulfill God’s plan for him. In fact, even as he was being led by God, Avraham’s transformation was gradual, and he continued to seek divine reassurance that he could do what was being asked of him.

God did reassure Avraham, and Avraham followed His command. Following in the word of God, even in the face of his own self-doubt, Avraham created a space for continued divine intervention in his life. What started out as a dance between Avraham and his environment grew into an interaction between Avraham and God. Avraham continued on this transformative path, taking every opportunity that God put before him and using them to propel him to transform himself and his nation.

Avraham’s story presents an uplifting model for those of us attempting teshuva. When we hear the first shofar blasts as the month of Elul begins, how motivated are we, really? And how confident are we that we will be able to succeed? In reality, our confidence and motivation will likely wax and wane. Fortunately, seen in the context of the Transtheoretical Model, a temporary failure to progress in change is not an absolute failure. Instead, our ambivalence or hesitation

Ambivalence in Change

So often, we mistakenly think of change as a process that occurs in a straight, linear trajectory, with no bumps or dips along the way. In reality, the path to change is never straight, and one especially valuable aspect of the Transtheoretical Model is the room it leaves for doubt, or fluctuations in our motivation. Avraham too had moments of doubt. For example, Rabbeinu Bechaya comments that when Avraham got to Canaan, he was hesitant and nervous about building his tent in the middle of the Canaanim.

And the Canaanite was in the land at that time: The plain meaning of these words is that the Canaanite, a powerful people, dominated that land at that time. Avraham was afraid of them and this is why we did not hear of his building an altar, i.e. preaching his religion, at that time until God appeared to him at Shechem.

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Avraham’s story presents an uplifting model for those of us attempting teshuva. When we hear the first shofar blasts as the month of Elul begins, how motivated are we, really? And how confident are we that we will be able to succeed? In reality, our confidence and motivation will likely wax and wane. Fortunately, seen in the context of the Transtheoretical Model, a temporary failure to progress in change is not an absolute failure. Instead, our ambivalence or hesitation
Intentional Change Theory: Returning to One's Core

In addition to the Transtheoretical Model, there is another theory of change that provides a beautiful supplement to our understanding of this process, particularly as it relates to teshuva. Developed by Richard Boyatzis, Intentional Change Theory centers around the assumption that each of us has a core, or ideal self (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006). Both privately conceptualized and socially influenced, an individual's sense of ideal self results from his own personal vision of who he really is, and who he wants to be. According to this theory, real transformation can occur only when an individual knows what he hopes to accomplish for his future, and has a sense of self efficacy, or a belief that he has the ability to achieve his goals.

Intentional Change Theory states that a person will make lasting changes if he is motivated by the idea that these changes are returning him to who he truly is, at his core. Whereas change that results from fear or avoidance may happen quickly, those changes will not be nearly as long lasting. For example, if I only stopped speeding because I got a ticket, then next week I will likely find myself speeding again. However, change that is not simply reactive, not simply a response to an external punisher, has the potential to be much more meaningful. When a person works toward reaching what he believes is his own core self, he feels excitement and positive energy. This is the ultimate intrinsic motivation, and leads to long-lasting change that is deeply transformational.

This idea is consistent with our concept of teshuva. Teshuva literally means “to return.” Our goal should not be to change who we are entirely, but to actualize each of our own potential. Change does not “stick” if one is trying to be someone else — that is something that is done out of fear or self-hatred, and will not produce healthy, lasting results. Our goal in our pursuit of teshuva is to return to the ideal state that each of us is meant to be.

Again, we see an allusion to this concept in the steps of Avraham’s transformation. “Lech lecha,” literally translated as “go to yourself,” can be understood as an instructive to go toward who you are already (Kli Yakar, Bereishit 12:1). Avraham’s tests were designed by God to elicit the tremendous potential that was always at his core. The Ramban teaches:

And God tested Avraham: The issue of this test is, in my opinion, shows that a person has the absolute authority to perform an action; one can do what they want, and not do what one doesn’t want. It is called a “nissayon” [test] for the individual being tested [e.g., Avraham], but the blessed Tester will command him to bring out the thing from ability to actuality, giving a reward for a good action and not just a reward for a good heart.

Ramban, Bereishit 22:1

Avraham had a sense early on that he was not meant to worship idols with the society around him. He had internal surety about who he was, and who he was meant to me, which spurred him to execute behavioral changes. Much of the change he achieved was about awakening his internal potential.

In Elul, we use the shofar as one tool to wake us up, to bring us back to our core. The powerful last blast of the shofar, in the last moment of the Yom Kippur service, is meant to spur within us a moment of clarity, where each of us is awakened as to who we really are. Our challenge then, is to take that gift of inspiration, take that moment where our potential feels revealed, and turn it into something long lasting. As Avraham did, we must follow that moment of inspiration with behavioral change. In doing so, we set the stage for lasting transformation in the new year.

May this Yamim Noraim season bring each of us many moments of insight. May we take those moments and use them as a catalyst for real behavioral change, so that we may transform our core self into our lived self, in the year to come.

Citations


Ahavat Hashem and Talmud Torah: The Telos of Teshuva

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In the final chapter of the Laws of Repentance, the Rambam has a variety of famous and beautiful formulations regarding ahavat Hashem:

2) One who serves [God] out of love occupies himself in the Torah and the mitzvot and walks in the paths of wisdom … because it is true, and ultimately, good will come because of it. This is a very high level which is not merited by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch, Abraham, whom God described as, “he who loved Me,” for his service was only motivated by love …

3) What is the proper [degree] of love? That a person should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick … This concept was implied by Solomon [Song of Songs 2:5] when he stated, as a metaphor: “I am lovesick.” [Indeed,] the totality of the Song of Songs is a parable describing [this love].

Hilkhot Teshuva 10:2-3
(Translation: Chabad.org)

The Rambam then addresses the progression from performing a mitzva for ulterior motives to doing it for correct reasons. The Rambam concludes Hilkhot Teshuva, and by extension Sefer Mada, with this concept. It is fascinating that he then transitions into Sefer Ahava, which he begins with the motto of mah ahavti toratekha kol ha-yom hi sihati — how much do I love your Torah, it is [the subject of] my constant conversation.

The Rambam thereby conjoins the first two books of the Mishne Torah with the notion of ahavat Hashem. Why did the Rambam conclude Sefer Mada, and more importantly Hilkhot Teshuva, with a chapter devoted to ahavat Hashem?

Furthermore, it is particularly noteworthy and surprising that the Rambam devised and devoted an independent 10-chapter section to the laws of teshuva — which are scattered throughout the Talmud without any cohesion — as the culmination of the first of the 14 books of the Yad ha-Hazaka, his comprehensive and masterful halakhic magnum opus. The Rambam particularly expanded, reorganized, and invested pioneering effort in the formulation of these laws. Moreover, why did the Rambam specifically place Hilkhot Teshuva in Sefer Mada, foregoing the more obvious alternative of locating these laws in a narrower, if more obvious classification, such as Hilkhot Shegagot, Avodat Yom ha-Kippurim, or Hilkhot Shevitat Asor in Sefer Zemanim? The determination that Hilkhot Teshuva is pivotal to Sefer Mada, and even its appropriate coda, certainly requires clarification. It adds greater urgency to understanding this puzzling choice of dedicating the final chapter of Hilkhot Teshuva and all of Sefer Mada to the mitzva of ahavat Hashem.

These questions are compounded by the fact that the Rambam already codifies ahavat Hashem in Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah (2:1-2) at the beginning of Sefer Mada, together with the theological truths that a person is required to affirm to qualify as a believing Jew. It is striking that, despite the Rambam already having addressed the concepts of ahava and yira at the very beginning of Sefer Mada, he feels compelled to return to them at the culmination of Sefer Mada in Hilkhot Teshuva.
Resolution of the Rambam

A close examination of Hilkhut Teshuva reveals the Rambam’s intentions. The Rambam dedicates the final chapter of Hilkhut Teshuva to the mitzva of ahavat Hashem in order to emphasize that the ultimate goal of teshuva is ahavat Hashem. It cannot be a coincidence that the Rambam chose the culmination of Hilkhut Teshuva to ruminate about ahavat Hashem and the motivation and ambition that both suffuse and engender it. By accentuating the importance of ahavat Hashem, by promoting it as an ideal, and by utilizing the metaphor of intense romantic love found in Shir ha-Shirim, the Rambam effectively conveys that ahavat Hashem is of paramount importance as a key to all elements of avodat Hashem. Simply put, the Rambam’s unusual presentation reflects his profound comprehension that ahavat Hashem is the ultimate telos of teshuva. In turn, he thereby accentuates a perspective that undergirds his entire presentation and classification of Hilkhut Teshuva, and informs and reinforces his classificatory decision. For the Rambam, teshuva is a necessary, natural component of Sefer Mada and Mishne Torah more broadly, and a mode of avodat Hashem in and of itself. Teshuva is not exclusively about neutralizing chet (sin), but is instead an act of avodat Hashem that leads to the highest level of religiosity.5

Furthermore, the Rambam’s decision to place Hilkhut Teshuva in Sefer Mada is even intuitive because his goal is to integrate teshuva with avodat Hashem throughout the year. Teshuva is not just a narrow response to sin, but is itself a pinnacle of avodat Hashem, and therefore an obvious choice for the culmination of Sefer Mada. Additionally, the Rambam’s choice to conjoin Hilkhut Teshuva with Sefer Ahava via the concept of ahavat Hashem flows consistently from this perspective. The transition to daily mitzvot, which are described in Sefer Ahava, reinforces these themes and accentuates the broader relationship between man and Hashem that is also a key component of the process of teshuva. Hilkhut Teshuva, at the culmination of Sefer Mada, is juxtaposed with the Laws of Keriyat Shema at the beginning of Sefer Ahava. The Laws of Keriyat Shema encapsulate the comprehensiveness of ahavat Hashem — “bekhol levekha, bekhol nafshekha, bekhol me’odekha” — and capture the mission of total religious and halakhic commitment — kabalat ol malkhut shamayim. The juxtaposition of the Laws of Keriyat Shema with Hilkhut Teshuva further broadens the motif of teshuva and integrates it into the other primary institutions of avodat Hashem.6

Rambam’s Consistency on Ahavat Hashem

The Rambam’s approach to ahavat Hashem is very consistent. In Laws of Repentance (10:2), he refers to Avraham Avinu as the exemplar of ahavat Hashem, invoking the verse “Avraham who loves Me” (Isaiah 41:8), the same verse he quotes in Sefer ha-Mitzvot (Positive Command 3) when he talks about ahavat Hashem:

The third mitzva is that we are commanded to love G-d (exalted be He), i.e. to meditate upon and closely examine His mitzvos, His commandments, and His works, in order to understand Him; and through this understanding to

Teshuva is not just a narrow response to sin, but is itself a pinnacle of avodat Hashem, and therefore an obvious choice for the culmination of Sefer Mada.
achieve a feeling of ecstasy. This is the goal of the commandment to love G-d … We see that this mitzvah includes spreading love for G-d to others from] the Sifri: “You shall love G-d; i.e. make Him beloved among the creatures as your father Avraham did, as it is written, ‘The souls that he made in Charan.’” The meaning of this Sifri: Avraham, as a result of his deep understanding of G-d, acquired love for G-d, as the verse testifies, “Avraham, who loved Me.” This powerful love therefore caused him to call out to all mankind to believe in G-d. So too, you shall love Him to the extent that you draw others to Him. Translation: Chabad.org

Avraham Avinu is the model of ahavat Hashem for the Rambam and in Sefer ha-Mitzvot, he describes a practically uncontrollable impulse, an overflowing sense of ahava, which overtakes the person. The Rambam depicts Avraham as the paradigm of an ohev Hashem, one whose infectious enthusiasm and exuberance to share Torah with others derived from an overflow of his own intoxication with the Ribbono shel Olam and his Torah. The experience begins with a rational awareness, but it goes beyond that and becomes a religious experience. This is the foundation of Avraham Avinu’s method and mission. Avraham’s outreach activity was part and parcel of being “Avraham who loves Me,” reflecting an unrestrained and overflowing sense of purpose resulting from love of the Divine.

Talmud Torah and Ahavat Hashem

The Rambam articulates unambiguously that the primary mechanism for achieving this state of ahavat Hashem is talmud Torah, Torah study. Exposure to the word of Hashem, both Torah and mitzvot, has a transcendent and transformative impact (if one does not resist it), which ultimately leads to ahava and lishma, performing mitzvot for the sake of heaven (10:4-6). Hence, Torah study and observance of mitzvot in their own right are also the indispensable foundation for developing ahavat Hashem and fostering authentic avodat Hashem in the model of Avraham oha’i (Avraham who loves Me), the av hamon goyim (the father of many nations).

It is surely no coincidence that some commentators suggest that teshuva me-ahava (repentance out of love) can be attained primarily through talmud Torah. The connection that the Rambam makes between ahavat Hashem and the study of Torah in Sefer ha-Mitzvot, and in the way he describes the study of Torah in the tenth chapter of Laws of Repentance, is absolutely consistent with and reinforcing of this idea.

Moreover, it is likely no coincidence that the verse the Ramban identifies (noting the previous context and pesukim in Nitzavim) as the source for teshuva is:

כְּהֵם הָעָהֳבָה אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָאָה וּמְצַו לֵו
מַמֵּלָכָה הַזֹּה מַמְּרָךְ לְהַקְוָךְ הָאָו

For this commandment which I command you this day, it is neither too hard for you nor far off.

Devarim 30:11

The Gemara in Eruvin (55a, also cited by Rashi) says very explicitly that the verse refers to the mitzva of talmud Torah, and that is how the Rambam codifies it in Hilkhot Talmud Torah as well. The Ramban was obviously keenly aware of these normative sources, yet by identifying this verse as the source for teshuva, he establishes that Torah study and teshuva are two sides of the same coin. The intimate connection between talmud Torah and teshuva supports the notion that talmud Torah is the basis for teshuva me-ahava.

This perspective provides a framework for understanding why talmud Torah is so urgent and why it is so important that the undertaking of Torah study is not performed frivolously or even casually. While Torah study should engender joy because “the precepts of Hashem are right, making the heart rejoice” (Psalms 19:9), Torah study should be pursued with reverence and seriousness. The perspective that talmud Torah is the means to connect with the Infinite as the most ambitious expression of avodat Hashem precludes a casual, careless, or trivial approach.

Talmud Torah is both the foundation of the marital relationship between us and the Ribbono shel Olam and the prime tool for building this relationship. That is why learning Torah is not only equal in importance to all the other mitzvot (Pe’ah 1:1), but the way one engages in it is critical as well; Torah study requires mind, heart, and soul, and demands the surrender and subordination of one’s mindset and way of thinking to that of the Torah.

This highlights the importance of in-depth Torah study and analysis, which includes trying to uncover the subtleties within a topic and connections between topics. While it provides intellectual exhilaration, the exhilaration engendered by advanced talmud Torah is secondary compared to the spiritual aspiration that accompanies it. At the end of the day, the enthusiasm that we exhibit, the attachment to the topic,
the exploration of the options and the nuances, and the analysis of the expressions of the rishonim and other texts are really about the enthusiastic relationship of ahavat Hashem, which not only impacts teshuva but is the basis for avodat Hashem and a broader Torah-infused perspective on life.

The people who share the bench in the beit midrash, study partners who learn together, form a bond based on transformative shared experiences. There can and should be abundant joy associated with the creative process, including initiative and personal contribution, but the ultimate goal is a transcendent one: fostering a community built on shared values and the belief in the importance of Torah study.

The Rambam concludes Hilkhot Teshuva with ahavat Hashem and then he transitions into Sefer Ahava. Additionally, every book in Mishne Torah of the Rambam is really connected in some way to the mitzva of ahavat Hashem. Thus, teshuva is not a concept that is restricted to Elul and the Aseret Yemei Teshua, the Ten Days of Repentance, but it sets the tone for our relationship with Hashem throughout the entire year.11

Endnotes

1 This article is primarily an adaption of a siha given by R. Rosensweig at the start of Elul, 5774. The article was reviewed by R. Rosensweig.
2 For the Rambam’s full presentation of ahavat Hashem, see the entirety of Laws of Repentance 10:1-3.
3 For the Rambam, theological truths are essential because philosophical conformity is indispensable to halakhic observance. That is why he starts the entire Mishne Torah with Sefer Mada and its philosophical axioms. From the most elemental discussions of his foundational theology, the Rambam transitions into yirat Hashem and ahavat Hashem (Yesodei ha-Torah 2:1-2).
4 Additionally, in Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah, the Rambam does not treat each topic separately. In general, the Rambam introduces a mitzva, defines it, and then moves on to the next one. In this instance however, he groups ahava and yira together and then explains both of them. The Rambam’s choice is predicated upon his stated view and belief that there is a seamless and continuous interaction between these two. Yira leads to ahava and ahava leads to yira in an ongoing cyclical process. Instead of being two opposite emotions, these are really two parts of one religious experience.
5 The Rambam was likely inspired by a Gemara in Yoma (86b), which proclaims that teshuva me-ahava transfigures an unintentional transgression into a zekhut. Surprisingly, the Rambam, who masterfully compiled and formulated Hilkhot Teshuva, seemingly omits and ignores this remarkable assessment and idea that forcefully projects the ambitious capacity of teshuva, a theme that he would seemingly enthusiastically embrace. Moreover, the Rambam quotes many of the divrei aggadah collected at the end of Yoma, and yet does not codify this particularly noteworthy idea. We may speculate that the Rambam may have actually been providing an interpretation of this unusual Gemara by placing ahavat Hashem as the final chapter of Hilkhot Teshuva, thereby suggesting that ahavat Hashem should not be seen primarily as just the methodology for teshuva, but instead the ultimate goal. I have related to these themes elsewhere in my articles on Elul available at torahweb.org. See, for example, “Ahavat Hashem: The Teshuva of Chodesh Elul” and “Rambam’s view of Ahavat Hashem as the Telos of Teshuvah.”
6 Another example of the Rambam broadening the motif of teshuva is his treatment of behira hofshit, a lynchpin concept in avodat Hashem, in the middle of Hilkhot Teshuva (Chapter 5).
7 See in particular the comments of R. Hayyim Volozhiner in Nevesh ha-Hayyim Chapter 4 and the Netziv in Ha-Emek Davar, Deut. 4:2.
8 There are a number of strong formulations in rishonim and aharonim that articulate this concept. For example, even though in general there is a concept of mitzvot lav lehanot nittu, R. Avraham min ha-Har (Nedarim 48a) argues that this does not apply to talmud Torah because joy is intrinsic to the experience. Additionally, see the introduction of the Amei Nezer to his sefer Eglei Tid.
9 See, for example, Talmud Bavli, Berakhot (22a).
10 Hazal constantly link kabbalat ha-Torah to erusin and nissuin. See, for example, Vayikra Rabba Acharai Mot 20, and Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Parshat Yitro.
11 When we understand teshuva as a process that intensifies the relationship and also provides the perspective that transcends the sin, the otherwise mystifying and intriguing concept of naasch ke-zekhuvo (sins become like merits) can be understood. The reality of sin can be a catalyst for a person to rectify their avodat Hashem and their relationship with Hashem more broadly and that catalyst, in some sense, can become a “merit.”
Teshuvah: Moving From and Moving Toward

W hat 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:

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

Yechezkel 18:23

Amor Alomim hot ani avo, Alomim Sam Ahim.

And He did not do it.

Yechezkel 33:11

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 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:

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 confess before Hashem. Simply put, the goal of teshuvah is to distance oneself from one’s past actions and confess before Hashem.

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Do I desire at all the death of the wicked person? — [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

Therefore turn yourselves and the wicked person from his evil way, and the Lord will relent 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 one’s evil paths and from one’s misdeeds and thereby avert whatever punishment one might otherwise deserve.

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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 (1:19-20), 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 above) reveals this other category of teshuvah:

**Sha’arei Teshuvah**

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

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

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

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 (...ש א or ...ש א) a particular goal, namely, a close connection or identification...
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 Hoshea (Volume 2 No. 730; see also the presentation of the sugya in the Ein Yaakov there, and see Maharsha, Chidashei 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:

הנה שמתפו של אחרים זכיות ועונות… כלומר אם תחזור בתשובה בי תדבק. התשובה המובדל מה’ אלהי ישראל… צועק ואינו נענה… ועושה מצות וטורפין אותן בפניו… והיום הוא מצות ומקבלין אותן בנחת ושמחה… ולא עוד

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 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… שהחשיב את אחד מבני האדם של אחרים כשל אחרים — אחר כל דבר צריך,… של ימים נלך מדת trabal הראות, שמעון מרחשים,... ויעשו מצות ומקבלין אותן בנחת ושמחה… ולא עוד

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 kevrurah, 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 ... — from, and teshuvah ... or ... — 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.
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