

Staying Engaged

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.



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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 2:2,2:4 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 Rabbi Yitzchak:

אין דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותו שעה.

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.



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.

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