

Ahavat Hashem and Talmud Torah: The Telos of Teshuva

In the final chapter of the *Laws of Repentance*, the Rambam has a variety of famous and beautiful formulations regarding *ahavat Hashem*:²

(ב) העובד מאהבה עוסק בתורה ובמצות והולך בנתיבות החכמה... מפני שהוא אמת וסוף הטובה לבא בגללה, ומעלה זו היא מעלה גדולה מאד ואין כל חכם זוכה לה, והיא מעלת אברהם אבינו שקראו הקדוש ברוך הוא אוהבו לפי שלא עבד אלא מאהבה... (ג) וכיצד היא האהבה הראויה הוא שיאהב את ה' אהבה גדולה יתירה עזה מאוד עד שתהא נפשו קשורה באהבת ה' ונמצא שוגה בה תמיד כאלו חולה חולי האהבה... והוא ששלמה אמר דרך משל כי חולת אהבה אני, וכל שיר השירים משל הוא לענין זה.

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)



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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.³ It is striking that, despite the Rambam already having addressed the concepts of *ahava* and *yira* at the very beginning of *Sefer Mada*,⁴ he feels compelled to return to them at the culmination of *Sefer Mada* in *Hilkhot Teshuva*.

Resolution of the Rambam

A close examination of *Hilkhot Teshuva* reveals the Rambam's intentions. The Rambam dedicates the final chapter of *Hilkhot 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 *Hilkhot 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 *Hilkhot 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 *Hilkhot 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 *Hilkhot 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. *Hilkhot 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 levavekha, 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 *Hilkhot 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*:

והמצוה השלישית היא שצונו לאהבו יתעלה
וזה שנתבונן ונשכיל מצותיו ופעולותיו עד
שנשיגהו ונתענג בהשגתו תכלית התענוג
וזאת היא האהבה המחוייבת... ולשון סיפרי
(שם) ואהבת את ה' וכו' אהבה על הבריות
כאברהם אביך שנאמר ואת הנפש אשר
עשו בחרן. ר"ל כמו שאברהם בעבור שהיה
אוהב השם כמו שהעיד הכתוב (ישעי' מא)
אברהם אוהבי שהיה גם כן לגדול השגתו דרש
האנשים אל האמונה מחוזק אהבתו כן אתה
אהוב אותו עד שתדרוש האנשים אליו:

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

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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 *ohav 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 ohavi* (Avraham who loves Me), the *av hamon goyim* (the father of many nations).

It is surely no coincidence that some commentators suggest⁷ 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:

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא
נפלות הוא ממך ולא רחוקה הוא.

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),⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 Teshuva*, 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 *Nefesh 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 nitnu*, 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 *Avnei Nezer* to his *sefer Eglei Tal*.

9 See, for example, Talmud Bavli, *Berakhot* (22a).

10 Hazal constantly link *kabbalat ha-Torah* to *erusin* and *nissuin*. See, for example, *Vayikra Rabba Acharei 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 *naaseh ke-zekhuyot* (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."



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