

Understanding the Teshuva Process of the Yamim Noraim

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TESHUVA IS NOT DEPRESSING

A. The Teshuva/Elul Myth

Tales are told of tzadikim who, upon simply hearing the word “Elul” during the Shabbos Mevorchim prayers at the end of Av, would begin to faint. These stories were probably passed down with the hope of giving us perspective on how powerful the days of Elul could and should be, and to depict the ideal attitude toward the Days of Awe. Unfortunately, the downside of sharing such stories is the creation of a misperception that the days of Elul are days of *fear*, not awe. Early texts describing teshuva by referencing “*charata*” (guilt) and “*busha*” (embarrassment) further reinforce the notion that teshuva is either anxiety-provoking, or simply depressing.

However, a closer look at some of the actual sources describing the teshuva process highlights that, in fact, the exact opposite is true: teshuva in its purest form should be neither anxiety-provoking nor depressing; rather, it is an exciting opportunity, and our mood in Elul and the High Holidays should reflect that mindset.

B. Constructive vs. Destructive Guilt

Perhaps the most famous work on teshuva is the Rambam's ten chapters of *Hilchos Teshuva*. In the first chapter, he speaks at length about the *viduy* process and teshuva on Yom Kippur. In the second chapter, he addresses the general concept of teshuva and walks us through the process:

ומה היא התשובה הוא שיעזוב החוטא חטאו ויסירו ממחשבתו ויגמור בלבו שלא יעשהו עוד שנאמר יעזוב רשע דרכו וגו'. וכן יתנחם על שעבר שנאמר כי אחרי שובי נחמתי. ויעיד עליו יודע תעלומות שלא ישוב לזה החטא לעולם שנאמר ולא נאמר עוד אלקינו למעשה ידינו וגו'. וצריך להתודות בשפתיו ולומר עניינות אלו שגמר בלבו

What is repentance? The sinner shall cease sinning, and remove sin from his thoughts, and wholeheartedly conclude not to revert back to it, even as it is said: "Let the wicked forsake his way" (Is. 55.7); so, too, shall he be remorseful on what was past, even as it is said: "Surely after that I was turned, I repented" (Jer. 31. 19). In addition, The Knower of all secrets will testify about him that forever he will not turn to repeat that sin again, according to what it is said: "Say unto Him ... neither will we call any more

the work of our hands our gods” (Hos. 14.3–4). It is, moreover, essential that his confession shall be by spoken words of his lips, and all that which he concluded in his heart shall be formed in speech.¹

The Rambam identifies three indispensable steps to the teshuva process: regret (“*yis’nachem al she’avar*”), confession (“*l’hisvados bi’sfasav*”), and leaving the sin/committing to not doing it again (“*she’ya’azov ha’choteh chet’o ... vi’yigmor b’libo she’lo ya’asehu ode*”).

Several commentaries note that in contrast to others (such as Me’iri and Rabbeinu Yonah), the Rambam seems to emphasize that the key phase in teshuva is the last one chronologically, the abandoning of the sin and the commitment not to regress.² This is evident from the way the Rambam structures this halacha, where he asks, “What is teshuva?” and responds with the requirement to abandon the sin, removing it from our thoughts, and committing to never recommit the sin. He then adds, almost as an addendum, “*v’chen*,” and the repenter should also regret his deeds. This framework reveals the Rambam’s belief that the crucial step in teshuva is the positive acceptance going forward, and that the component of regret is only required to ensure that he remains genuinely committed moving forward. This is further demonstrated from the verse the Rambam cites, “*acharei shuvi, nichamti*,” after I have completed teshuva, [then] I regret [my previous sins].

In other words, the Rambam believes that although there is a place for guilt in the teshuva process, he only subscribes to “constructive guilt,” which inspires better behavior going forward, and not “destructive guilt,” which ruins a person’s mood, and

distances him further from his goal.³ The most important part of teshuva is to simply be better. A person should work toward changing his actions, and through that process, he has already performed the most significant aspect of teshuva. The feelings of guilt are beneficial only inasmuch as they help a person maintain his commitment for the future. Clearly there is no benefit, or even permissibility, in allowing feelings of guilt to become so overwhelming that they cause a person to continue doing the very deeds that he was upset about in the first place!

When beginning the teshuva process, we must completely forget the past, lest we give up hope when looking back.

This dilemma can be illustrated with the following brief example. A person begins to work toward ceasing to speak loshon hara. If this person commits the sin again, he may struggle with normal disappointment and constructive guilt over his continued speaking of loshon hara. If, however, he also experiences destructive guilt — in the form of self-directed frustration for continued loshon hara-speaking — this can trigger maladaptive feelings of sadness and anger that may not have been present prior. Put simply, he will be worse off than he was before.

At Yeshiva University’s Counseling Center, we often discuss the idea of this Rambam with students who express guilt over their religious

misdeeds. In our role as clinicians, we cannot (and do not) tell students how to behave. However, when a student presents with overwhelming guilt over their misdeeds, we can and do explore with them the source of the guilt. If the guilt is caused by their desire to grow in their spiritual lives, then we help the students recognize that focusing on “constructive guilt,” which produces a stronger relationship with G-d, is useful; “destructive guilt,” on the other hand, often perpetuates their negative cycles of behavior.

C. No Place for Hopelessness

In a similar manner, Rav Moshe Shternbach analyzes another curious detail in the Rambam.⁴ Specifically, he notices that when defining teshuva, as quoted above, the Rambam lists commitment for the future **before** listing regretting the past. By contrast, when the Rambam describes in his first chapter of *Hilchos Teshuva* how to confess (*viduy*), he writes that a person must first acknowledge his regret over past misdeeds and then commit to never doing them again. Why, in the context of *viduy*, does the Rambam list the stages of teshuva in chronological order (regret then commit), when he clearly deviates from that order in defining the essence of teshuva (commit then regret)? Rav Shternbach explains that when beginning the teshuva process, we must completely forget the past, lest we give up hope when looking back. This is the Rambam’s intention in his framing of the general halacha about teshuva: forget the past and worry about the present. Only once a person has succeeded in correcting his ways, and there is no longer concern about his giving up hope, can he properly do *viduy* and reflect back on his past

in a healthy and productive way. Just as destructive guilt can turn a person away from achieving his goals, perhaps its most dangerous outgrowth is hopelessness. The true beauty of teshuva is that regardless of how many times we have failed, we always have hope, and although we may feel otherwise, we always have another opportunity.

D. The Real Me

In describing the process of the *se'ir la'azazel*, the goat thrown off the cliff, the Gemara makes it very clear that the two goats used in the lottery must be nearly identical in price as well as in every detail of their physical appearance.⁵ In explaining this need for total similarity, Rav Yechezkel Yakovson, rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Sha'alvim, points to the history of psychology.

Although a founding father of modern day psychology, Freud had a tragic view of man, defining him as constantly struggling against his innate desires for aggression and sexuality. Later psychologists, such as Abraham Maslow and Viktor Frankl, developed humanistic psychology, which asserts that man, at his essence, is in search of meaning and value in life, and animalistic impulses merely interfere with man's innate desire to achieve spiritual and/or psychological growth.

Rav Yakovson concluded that the *se'ir la'azazel* demonstrates that we side with the humanists. The message that the Jewish people send to Hashem on Yom Kippur, as they send the goat off the cliff, is that at our core, we really are good

people. We may often look like we are doing the wrong thing, but that is not us; it is our doppelganger.

Similar to our own distinction between “constructive guilt” and “destructive guilt,” psychologists have come to a similar conclusion in explaining the fundamental difference between “shame” and “guilt.” According to Helen Block Lewis:

*The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but is not itself the focus of the experience.*⁶

Put more simply in recent years by Brené Brown, “Shame is, ‘I am bad.’ Guilt is, ‘I did something bad.’”⁷

The difference between these two concepts is more than semantics; studies confirm that a person's subsequent behavior is affected by whether we experienced shame or guilt. In the case of the former, we are more likely to retreat or withdraw, often leading to addiction and depression, among other potential mental health problems. Contrast this reaction to those who experience guilt, who may possess a more balanced and reasonable awareness of themselves and are therefore less likely to develop those same issues.

Perhaps a case example from our experience can help demonstrate the all-too-common path from destructive guilt to hopelessness to shame. Yaakov presents to us as frustrated and annoyed about a particular behavior that he continues to engage in, though

Tefillah Insights: Avinu Malkeinu

In Avinu Malekinu we refer to God as our father and as our king. These two references parallel what we recite in HaYom Harat Olam after the shofar is blown during Mussaf “*im k'vanim im k'avadim*”— whether we are like children or like servants. Indeed, many congregations use the same tune for Avinu Malkeinu and HaYom Harat Olam.

In HaYom Harat Olam we say that if we are like Your children, please have mercy on us like a father has mercy on his children, and if we like servants, we turn to You until You can be gracious to us. R. Yaakov Etlinger, *Minchat Ani* to Parashat Ha'azinu, asks: If a child got into trouble with his or her father and said, “My master, be gracious to me,” it would be inappropriate and cold. The father might ask, “Are you ignoring the loving relationship that we have?” If a servant of the king said to the king, “Please show me some loving kindness and have mercy,” it would be equally inappropriate. If we are unsure whether we are like children or servants, how can we ask for both mercy and graciousness? Wouldn't we be reciting something inappropriate regardless of our status? R. Etlinger answers that when God presented His Thirteen Attributes to Moshe Rabbeinu, he said “*ani a'avir kol tuvi al panecha*” — I will make all My goodness pass before you (Shemot 33:19) — meaning that we can refer to all of the attributes of God simultaneously. Different people have different relationships with God, and He allows us to reference these multiple relationships simultaneously. That is what allows us to refer to him as Avinu and Malkeinu.

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his shame prevents him from even expressing his primary issue until we have met three or four times. He finally acknowledges that he is behaving in a way contrary to how he wants to live; he desperately wants to stop his behavior and move in another direction. He has attempted to change multiple times but has not yet been successful. Yaakov is aware that he is doing something that he wants to discontinue and although he is trying, he has not yet succeeded. The healthy awareness of knowing and working on what he wants to change, even if not yet successful, falls under the category of constructive guilt. As soon as Yaakov pivots and views himself as a “failure” for struggling to make those important changes in his life, Yaakov enters into the domain of destructive guilt. He attacks himself for being unable to succeed at overcoming his desires, and becomes frustrated and angry at **himself**, identifying with his failures. He becomes less focused on his original goals and behaviors and concentrates more on his inability and failure to change. He begins to feel hopeless about the future, his ability to move forward and behave consistently with what he believes is appropriate. At this point, in addition to his original struggle with changing his target behavior, Yaakov now faces the additional challenge of feeling like a hopeless failure who may as well stop trying to improve. This vicious cycle, which we work with in the Counseling Center, understandably makes teshuva seem hopeless and overwhelming, instead of exciting and inspiring.

E. Living in the Moment

There is one final point in the Rambam worth highlighting. When

describing the necessary extent of our commitment to avoid regressing, the Rambam writes, “*vi’ya’id alav yode’a ta’alumos*,” “The Knower of all secrets will testify about [the repenter]” whether he is indeed sincere in his commitment not to engage in a repeated offense. At first glance, we find yet another trigger for feelings of hopelessness: even as we try to swear off all of our sins, the Omnipresent G-d sits and testifies about our eventual return to our old habits, thereby negating our attempt at teshuva.

Several commentaries suggest an insight into the Rambam, which can elevate our teshuva and hopefully our entire lives.⁸ The Rambam describes G-d as the “*Yode’a ta’alumos*,” One who knows that which is hidden; however, he does not refer to G-d by an equally accurate title of “*Yode’a asidos*,” One who knows the future. The Rambam chose his words carefully to emphasize that Hashem does not actually look into the future to testify about our inevitable relapses. Rather, He seeks complete and sincere repentance in the moment that we reach out to Him. Additionally, this can also mean that He is well aware of, and takes into account, a person’s intent to improve. There is real spiritual and psychological value to wanting and trying to change, even if that change does not occur immediately and is not visibly obvious. Therefore, if a person can focus on constructive guilt when self-reflecting rather than sinking into a self-defeating destructive guilt approach (i.e. he as a whole is not bad, even good, but his behaviors could use some work), it is valuable to The Knower of all secrets regardless of actual results.

Just as Yishmael’s teshuva was accepted by G-d “*ba’asher hu sham*,” as he was in the moment, without considering his progeny, so too G-d looks at each of us as we stand before Him on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and only considers our sincerity and effort in that moment. We all know from past experiences that we may relapse, but G-d wants to know as we stand before Him that our motives are for good.

The months of Elul and Tishrei can unfortunately prompt feelings of fear and anxiety. Throughout the year, but especially now, the concept of teshuva can sound scary and overwhelming. It is crucial that we look back at the words of our rabbis, both of recent generations and many years ago, to remind ourselves that teshuva is a gift from G-d and an inspiring and achievable opportunity for each and every one of us.

Endnotes

1. Translation courtesy of Sefaria.org.
2. See, for example, Rav Noach Isaac Oelbaum’s *Minchas Chen* and Rav Elya Baruch Finkel’s *Poseach Sha’ar*, #9.
3. The terms “constructive guilt” vs “destructive guilt” are our own; they are similar in ideology to distinctions that appear later in this article.
4. *Mo’adim U’zmanim* vol. 6 #19.
5. *Yoma* 62a.
6. *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (1971).
7. https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame.
8. See for example, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz’s *Sichos Mussar*, #57, Rav Aharon Kotler’s *Mishnas Rav Aharon* vol. 2, p. 249, Rav Moshe Shternbach *Mo’adim U’zmanim* vol. 6 #19, and Rav Elya Baruch Finkel’s *Poseach Sha’ar*, #10.