

Parschas Haazinu 5772

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF TESHUVAH

At this point in the Jewish calendar – replete with the *Aseres Y'mei Teshuvah* (Ten Days of Penitence), Shabbos *Shuvah*, the approaching Yom Kippur – the focus, naturally, turns to *teshuvah* (repentance).

What is *teshuvah*?

To be sure, properly defining, understanding, and mastering the institution of *teshuvah* may initially seem like a formidable task. Like all *mitzvos* and aspects of Torah, it is a Divinely ordained product, created by the Eternal G-d. As such, it is characterized by boundless depth and breadth and may take a lifetime to fully master (cf. *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:20). Furthermore, a comprehensive presentation of the endeavor of *teshuvah* and all of its details could fill many volumes; indeed, it does. The Rabbeinu Yonah – who composed an entire treatise on the subject of *teshuvah* – lists twenty essential elements in the *teshuvah* process. And all of this in the first chapter alone! Of course, there are also the ten chapters that comprise the Rambam's *Hilchos Teshuvah*, as well as the volume *Chibur Hateshuvah* of the Me'iri, in addition to the many other extensive and classical writings by our sages on this topic.

For our present purposes, however, let us attempt to examine the most elementary essentials of what *teshuvah* entails. The above surely represents the ideal and the guidelines for a lifetime career of perfecting our *teshuvah* efforts. But it may be worthwhile to begin with the very basics.

FUNDAMENTALS OF TESHUVAH

There appears to be a consensus that, at its most rudimentary

level, *teshuvah* is comprised of three main aspects: *charatah*, *vidui*, and *azivas hachet*. *Charatah* – regret – refers to the feeling of angst one should experience over his misdeed, when he wishes he could “redo” the past. Regarding *vidui* – confession – one contritely acknowledges his sin before Hashem. *Azivas hachet* – abandonment of the sin – is necessary to complete the process, whereby the penitent makes a *kabbalah* – sincere resolution – to avoid repeating his transgression (cf. *sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchos Lashon Hara*, 4:12).

It should be noted that the above applies to sins that fall into the category of *bein odom laMakom* – between man and Hashem (e.g., Shabbos). The other variety belongs to the category of *bein odom l'chaveiro* – between man and his fellow – and includes the interpersonal offenses (such as evil gossip, insults, etc.). Another step is required when seeking to repent from sins of this second category. One who has desecrated Shabbos, for example, has violated Hashem's command and sinned against Him. One who has slandered his friend, however, has two issues to contend with: he has sinned against his friend, as well as having sinned against Hashem, Who commanded him to refrain from such speech. As such, the violator who seeks to rectify his misdeed must first approach the wronged party and beseech him his forgiveness. When this is achieved, he is then left with a violation against Hashem, which he corrects through the three-part process mentioned above (*ibid.*).

TOTAL TRANSFORMATION

What seems to emerge from the words of the great teachers who have shed light on this vital subject is that there are numerous *madreigos* (levels) when it comes to *teshuvah*. Consider the following well-known scenario in the area of *kiddushin al tenai* (conditional betrothal). The Mishnah in

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Kiddushin states (2:2):

התקדשי לי... על מנת שאני עשיר ונמצא עני... אינה מקדשת.

“One betroths a woman on the understanding that he is wealthy, but it is later discovered that he is in fact poor. The betrothal does not take effect.”

The Mishnah relates the basic principle that an act of marriage consecration performed on false pretenses bears no validity. Yet, the Gemara (*Kiddushin 49b*) discusses a similar case, where the *kiddushin* is considered valid: על מנת שאני צדיק, אפילו רשע גמור, מקדשת. “One who betroths a woman on the basis that he is righteous, the *kiddushin* is valid – even if it emerges that he was a complete *rasha* (wicked sinner) at the time.”

Someone who tries (falsely) passing himself off as a rich person invalidates the betrothal act, but when a *rasha* links his betrothal to his status as a *tzaddik*, the *kiddushin* is considered viable. What is the difference? The Gemara explains: שמה הרהר תשובה בדעתו. “We anticipate that he contemplated *teshuvah* in his heart.”


Apparently, this, too, qualifies as a form of *teshuvah*. In a matter of seconds, sincere *teshuvah* thoughts can propel a complete *rasha* to a certain level of righteousness.

THE FOUR WORDS

Teshuvah, apparently, is a multi-faceted idea. There are particulars, components, levels – in a sense, it is an *avodah* (long-term spiritual project), the details of which fill many volumes. But it also can be broken down and viewed in its most basic form.

Returning to the original question – what is *teshuvah*? – there is a certain classic passage that bears our attention. In the beginning of the *sefer Beis Elokim*, the Mabit provides what may be the most concise definition of *teshuvah*. Encapsulating its essence in four simple words, he describes *teshuvah* as: קריבה לדי מריחוק החטא (coming closer to Hashem from the distance imposed by sin).

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Through this formulation, the Mabit provides some surprising illumination as to what constitutes *teshuvah* and what does not. We may be habituated to think of *teshuvah* as a method of escaping punishment; all is not lost, for one can attain forgiveness by “doing *teshuvah*.” While undoubtedly true, the Mabit contends that such a notion falls far short of real *teshuvah*. To be sure, one who repents for the sole purpose of preempting retribution will be so spared; but does not earn the title of *ba'al teshuvah* (bona fide penitent). The real essence of *teshuvah* is to return – to what, exactly? Having committed a sin or sins, a barrier has been erected between man and his Creator. The more numerous and the more severe his transgressions, the farther he has fallen. The true *ba'al teshuvah* repents with this goal in mind: to become closer, once again, to his Father in Heaven.

Hopefully, knowledge of the primary aim of *teshuvah* will aid our efforts in achieving a full and complete return.