

An Exploration of Teshuvah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Anshul Pinchas ben Chaya and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This Sabbath is Shabbat Shuvah, a time when many of our spiritual efforts are focused upon *teshuvah* (returning to Hashem). One of the most celebrated works on *teshuvah* is the Rambam's (Maimonides, 1135-1204) *Hilchot Teshuvah*. Therein, he notes that *teshuvah* is comprised of four essential elements:

What constitutes Teshuvah? A sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart never to commit them again, as the text states, "May the wicked abandon his ways...." (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 55:7) Similarly, he must regret the past, as the text states, "After I returned, I regretted." (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 31:18) ... [And] he must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart. (II:2, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger).

In sum, *teshuvah* consists of four inextricably connected parts: Abandonment of the sin, regret for having performed the prohibition, confession before Hashem, and heartfelt acceptance and determination that he or she will never commit the transgression again.

While nearly all classic halachic authorities accept this definitional structure of *teshuvah* as formulated by the Rambam, they differ as to whether or not there is a *mitzvah* to engage in the *teshuvah* process. Quite famously, the Rambam does not consider *teshuvah* a *mitzvah* in and of itself; instead, he conceptualizes it as a complement to *vidui* (confession):

The 73rd *mitzvah* we are commanded is to verbally acknowledge the sins we have committed before G-d (exalted be He), when we come to do *teshuvah* (to repent). This is

vidui (verbal confession), the idea of which is to say, “O G-d, I have sinned, I have committed iniquity, I have transgressed and done ...” (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, translation, Rabbi Berel Bell)

This approach was embraced by a number of illustrious *Acharonim* (later halachic authorities), including the *Avodat HaMelech* (1869-1929), the *Minchat Chinuch* (1800-1874) and Rav Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook (1865-1935), the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate.

In contrast, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, champions the view that *teshuvah* does constitute a *mitzvah*. This position is based upon his interpretation of the *pasuk* (verse): “For this commandment (*ki hamitzvah hazot*) which I command you this day is not concealed from you, nor is it far away.” (*Sefer Devarim* 30:11, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The general consensus of *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) is that the phrase, “*ki hamitzvah hazot*,” refers to the entire Torah because of its proximity to the expression, “*lo bashamayim he*” (“it, i.e. the Torah, is not in Heaven”), as found in the next verse. (See *Talmud Bavli*, Baba Metzia 59b) The Ramban, however, suggests that this approach is grammatically incorrect, for if “*ki hamitzvah hazot*” did refer to the totality of the Torah, it should have stated, “*kol hamitzvah*” (“every commandment”), as we find in the *pasuk*: “Every commandment (*kol hamitzvah*) that I command you this day you shall keep to do, that you may live and multiply, and come and possess the land that the L-rd swore to your forefathers.” (*Sefer Devarim* 8:1) Consequently, asserts the Ramban, since the Torah writes, “*ki hamitzvah hazot*,” it must refer to a single *mitzvah*, namely, *teshuvah*:

...the expression, “*ki hamitzvah hazot*,” however, is mentioned in reference to *teshuvah*, as we find in the [earlier verses of our chapter], “you will consider in your heart (*v’hashavota el levavecha*) among all the nations where the L-rd your G-d has banished you,” (30:1) and

you will return to the L-rd, your G-d, (*v'shavta od Hashem Elokecha*) with all your heart and with all your soul (30:2). This [i.e. *teshuvah*] is the commandment that we are commanded to perform. (This, and the following translations, brackets and underlining my own)

The single greatest factor militating against the Ramban's view that *teshuvah* constitutes a *mitzvah*, and one that was often cited by his critics, is the manner in which *teshuvah* is referenced in these verses. Normally, a commandment is stated in an imperative formulation. For example, in reference to Yom Kippur we find: "It is a Sabbath of rest for you, and you shall afflict yourselves. It is an eternal statute." (*Sefer Vayikra* 16:31) In our verses, however, *teshuvah* is presented in a narrative and descriptive format that is devoid of any mandated action. This challenge, however, does not deter the Ramban from advocating the *mitzvah*-status of *teshuvah*. Rather, he maintains that the narrative presentation of this *mitzvah* gives powerful voice to Hashem's promise that nothing ever stands in the way of *teshuvah*, and that in the future, the entire nation will return to Him:

And this [*mitzvah* of *teshuvah* was stated] in a narrative construction to hint at the fulfillment of the promise that in the future the matter will be so [i.e. the Jewish people will universally undertake the *teshuvah* process]. The underlying reason for this is to inform us that even if we are scattered about to the very ends of Heaven, and we are under the hegemony of the non-Jews, we will be able to return to Hashem and fulfill all of the *mitzvot* that "I command you this day." For the matter of doing *teshuvah* is not beyond us or distant from us, rather it is very close to us indeed – and we may begin the *teshuvah* process at any time and in any place...

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, was very fond of the Ramban's theological positions. Little wonder, then, that he often stressed the idea found in the *Tachanun* prayer (Supplications), that Hashem is the *pota'ach yad b'teshuvah* (G-d continuously reaches out to us with the promise of *teshuvah*). Like the Ramban, the Rav never ceased to emphasize that "we may begin the *teshuvah* process at any time and in any place..."

May the time come soon and, in our days, when the entire Jewish people will join together to return to Hashem with our complete hearts and souls. As the prophet Jeremiah so famously said, “Return us to You, O L-rd, that we may return! Renew our days as of old.” (*Sefer Eichah* 5:21) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.