

The Joy of Teshuvah

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Chana bat Sarah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This Shabbat is primarily known as “*Shabbat Shuvah*,” named after the stirring words of Hoshea the prophet that are found in our *haftarah*: “Return, O Israel (*Shuvah Yisrael*), to the L-rd your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity. Take words with yourselves and return to the L-rd (*v’shuvu el Hashem*, 14:2-3, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Moreover, given its calendrical placement between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, this Shabbat is focused upon *teshuvah*, so much so that most Chasidic groups label it, “*Shabbat Teshuvah*.”

As many of us have been actively engaged in the *teshuvah* process since the beginning of Elul, and Yom Kippur is the day upon which it reaches its crescendo, this is the ideal time to analyze the constitutive elements of *teshuvah*. Fortunately, the Rambam’s (1135-1204) *Hilchot Teshuvah* is laser-focused upon this task:

And what is *teshuvah*? This is when the sinner rejects his sin, removes it from his thoughts and concludes in his mind that he will not undertake [this forbidden act] again. Moreover, he regrets what he has done in the past... [to the extent of which] that He Who Knows All Mysteries will attest that he [the sinner] will never return to this sin again...and he must confess with his lips and speak of all these matters that he has concluded in his mind. (II:2, this and all Rambam translations my own)

In sum, in the Rambam's view, *teshuvah* is comprised of three clearly differentiated cognitive and emotional aspects: recognition and rejection of the sin (*azivat hachate*), the sinner's heartfelt resolution not to perform this forbidden act again (*kabbalah al he'atid*) and profound remorse for that which has been done (*nechama al he'avar*). In addition, these new-found feelings of spiritual awareness must be given literal voice in the form of *vidui* (verbal confession).

Fascinatingly, the Rambam emphasizes the obligation for all members of the Jewish people to engage in *teshuvah* on Yom Kippur:

Yom HaKippurim is the time of *teshuvah* for every individual and for the community at large. Moreover, it is the end [of the period of] forgiveness and pardon (*mechilah v'slicha*) for the Jewish people. Therefore, everyone is obligated (*chayavim hakol*) to do *teshuvah* and confess on *Yom HaKippurim*. (Hilchot Teshuvah II:7)

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), suggests a novel interpretation of this passage in his celebrated work, *Al HaTeshuvah*:

From here we can learn that the Rambam maintains that in addition to the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* that is obligatory throughout the entire year, there is a unique *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* and *vidui* during the Ten Days of Repentance. Consequently, it is logical that [the Rambam asserts] that the *teshuvah* of *Yom HaKippurim* is, in fact, a new and unique *mitzvah*, that is relevant to *Yom HaKippurim* alone. (Page 39, translation my own)

The Rav's conclusion that "the *teshuvah* of *Yom HaKippurim* is, in fact, a new and unique *mitzvah*, that is relevant to *Yom HaKippurim* alone," parallels a statement in Rabbeinu Yonah's (1200-1263) seminal work, *Sha'arei Teshuvah*: "And there is a positive Torah commandment (*mitzvat aseh min HaTorah*) for a person to bestir his spirit and return [to Hashem] in *teshuvah* on *Yom HaKippurim*." Yet, what differentiates the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur from the *teshuvah* of the rest of the year? We are fortunate that Rav Yehudah Amital

zatzal (1924-2010), former co-*Rosh HaYeshivah* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, asks and answers this precisely this question:

To explain the words of the Rambam, we need to distinguish between the general *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* and the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur. In general, making a resolution for the future is an integral part of *teshuvah*... it seems [, however,] that there is a distinction between the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur and the *teshuvah* of the rest of the year. During the year, we need to repent “by the book,” which includes resolving not to sin again. However, on Yom Kippur, anyone who says, “we have sinned,” is considered a *ba'al teshuvah*. It is true that this form of *teshuvah* lacks a true resolution for the future; however, the great power of Yom Kippur is that even this *teshuvah* is effective... the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur, though lacking a resolution not to sin again, is nonetheless accepted by G-d... *Ba'alei teshuvah* are accepted and purified, as long as they speak sincerely. (*When G-d is Near: On the High Holidays*, translation, Kaeren Fish, page 202, brackets, and ellipses my own)

In my estimation, Rav Amital’s inspiring exposition is reminiscent of *Dovid HaMelech*’s well-known statement in *Ashrei*: “Hashem is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 145:18) As such, Yom Kippur emerges as the most barrier-breaking and joyous day of the Jewish calendar, for on this day, Hashem is nearest to us, and longingly accepts our *teshuvah* — even if it is imperfect and incomplete. No wonder that in his description of Yom Kippur, Rabbi Akiva declared so long ago: “Happy are you, O’ Israel! Before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? Your Father in heaven.” (*Mishnah Yoma* VIII:9, translation my own)

Shabbat Shalom, *Gamar Chatimah Tovah*, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

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* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** 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: [The Rav zatzal](#)