

Shabbat Shuvah, 5784, 2023:

Is There a Mitzvah to Do Teshuvah?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, 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, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This Sabbath is Shabbat Shuvah, a time when our spiritual efforts are focused upon *teshuvah* (returning to Hashem). The Rambam's (1135-1204) *Hilchot Teshuvah* is one of the most celebrated works on *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*, they differ as to whether or not there is a *mitzvah* to engage in the *teshuvah* process. As is well-known, 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 Him, exalted be He, when we come to do *teshuvah* (to repent). This is *vidui* (verbal confession), the idea of which is to say, "O Hashem, 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 his *Commentary on the Torah*, the Ramban (1194-1270) champions the contrasting view that *teshuvah* does, in fact, constitute a *mitzvah*. He bases this approach on his interpretation of the *pasuk*: “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 Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In general, *Chazal* view the phrase, “*ki hamitzvah hazot*,” as referring to the entire Torah because of its proximity to the expression, “*lo bashamayim he*” (“it, that is, the Torah, is not in Heaven”), as found in the next verse. 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 Hashem swore to your forefathers.” (*Sefer Devarim* 8:1) Based on this reading, he opines that 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 Hashem your G-d has banished you,” (30:1) and you will return to Hashem, your G-d, (*v’shavta od Hashem Elokecha*) with all your heart and with all your soul (30:2). This [that is, *teshuvah*,] is the commandment that we are commanded to perform. (Translations, brackets and underlining my own)

The single greatest factor militating against the Ramban's view that *teshuvah* constitutes a *mitzvah* is the manner in which *teshuvah* is presented in these verses. Normally, a commandment is stated in an imperative construct. For example, in reference to Yom Kippur we find: "It is a Shabbat 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 format lacking any mandated action. This challenge, however, does not deter the Ramban from maintaining the *mitzvah*-status of *teshuvah*, as he suggests that this mode of presentation gives powerful voice to Hashem's promise that nothing 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 formulation to hint at the fulfillment of the promise that in the future the matter will be so [that is, 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 stresses the idea found in *Tachanun* that Hashem is the *pota'ach yad b'teshuvah* (the Holy One blessed be He continuously reaches out to us with the promise of *teshuvah*). Like the Ramban, the Rav emphasizes 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 Jewish people will join together as one, and return to Hashem in heartfelt *teshuvah*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *G'mar Chatimah Tovah*

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
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*** 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](#)