

Return and Renewal



Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

RETURN
AND
RENEWAL

REFLECTIONS ON
TESHIVA AND
SPIRITUAL GROWTH

ADAPTED AND EDITED BY
Michael S. Berger and Reuven Ziegler

Mishnat HaRAL
Yeshivat Har Etzion
Maggid Books

Return and Renewal
Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth

First Edition, 2018

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.maggidbooks.com

© Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, 2018

Spine Photo © Yeshivat Har Etzion

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-507-7, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

בני בנים הרי הם כבנים

In loving memory of our grandparents

Gertrude and Leslie Zack

גיטל בת שמואל ואליעזר בן איסר

whose legacy of kindness and *chesed*,
devotion to family and to the Jewish people,
continues to light the way for our family

והיו על לב אהרן

We gratefully acknowledge the supporters of Mishnat HaRAL

Steve & Renee Adelsberg	Emanuel & Ellen Kronitz
Ben & Aviva Adler	Avrom, Zev & Rael Krengel
Lior & Drora Arussy	Gershom & Janine Kutliroff
Howard & Chaya Balter	David & Faye Landes
Jack & Giti Bendheim	Eliot & Marilyn Lauer
Etan & Sarah Bendheim	Josh & Beth Mermelstein
Julius & Dottie Berman	Leon & Marilyn Moed
Andrew Borodach & Rachel Wolf	Sam & Debbie Moed
Eli & Judy Clark	Terry & Gail Novetsky
Arye & Bashi Colton	David & Andrea Polster
Ezra & Adena Dyckman	Donny & Arielle Rosenberg
Michael & Yaffa Eisenberg	Gidon Rothstein & Elizabeth Holland
Steve & Adina Fredman	Len & Dorothy Sank
Allen & Rachel Friedman	Allen & Miriam Schick
Shai & Tovah Gerson	Jacob & Vered Schimmel
Joseph & Leelah Gitler	Menachem & Rena Schnaidman
Murray & Batsheva Goldberg	Kalman & Jordana Schoor
Eric & Tamar Goldstein	Jacob & Julianne Schorr
Jerry & Anne Gontownik	Elli & Efrat Schorr
Ari & Shira Gontownik	Raphi & Yonit Schorr
Robert & Virginia Bayer Hirt	Arye & Renana Schreiber
Yisroel & Shira Hochberg	David & Ruth Schreiber
Simcha & Barbara Hochman	Avi & Sarah Schwartz
Ben Zion & Naomi Hochstein	Daniel & Debbie Schwartz
Jay & Rachel Jubas	Heshe & Harriet Seif
Marcos z"l & Adina Katz	Hillel & Saritte Silvera
Zvi & Tzippy Katz	Herb z"l & Marilyn Smilowitz
Kolatch Family Foundation	Michael & Liora Stein
Rachmiel & Gita Koppel	Richard Stone
David & Sarena Koschitzky	Paul z"l & Kathryn Wallach
Hartley & Faye Koschitzky	Howard & Tova Weiser
Henry & Julia Koschitzky	Gary & Hildee Weiss
Joel, Yedidia, Yekutiel & Amitai Koschitzky	Mark & Susan Wiesen
Jono & Tamar Koschitzky	
Saul & Mira Koschitzky	

Contents

Preface ix

Teshuva: Obligation and Opportunity 1

Purify Our Hearts to Serve You with Truth 19

The Integrity of Teshuva 37

Teshuva: Impetus and Motive 59

Kallot Va-chamurot: Gradation of Sins in Repentance 79

Mediocre Teshuva and the Teshuva of the Mediocre 97

Teshuva of Norm and of Crisis 121

La-kol Zeman: Teshuva Within Four Time Frames of Our Lives 139

Teshuva: Ferment and Repose 161

Renunciation, Divorce, and Rehabilitation 177

Humility and Pride in Teshuva 193

Teshuva and Joy 211

About the Author 229

Preface

In 2014, *Tradition* dedicated an issue to an analysis and appreciation of R. Aharon Lichtenstein's religious thought – a volume that came out just a few months before his passing. Scholars joined longtime students in limning the contours of R. Lichtenstein's approach to contemporary religious life and thought, highlighting its uniqueness and assessing its impact.

The majority of these articles, understandably, focused on R. Lichtenstein's published works,¹ or were based on the authors' personal experiences as his students. But R. Lichtenstein had a more public persona as well, which exposed much wider audiences, both in Israel and the United States, to his distinctive brand of religious humanism. One such forum was his *teshuva derasha*, offered annually beginning in 1985, with the first Hausman/Stern *Kinnus Teshuva* lecture at Yeshiva University's Gruss Kollel in Jerusalem, and continuing for the next twenty-five

1. The bibliography of R. Lichtenstein's published works is available at <http://etzion.org.il/en/RAL-bibliography>. There are more than one thousand entries, which are organized topically.

years in a variety of venues in Israel or in the New York area. This volume assembles twelve of these *derashot*, the earliest from 1989, adding to the *derashot* from 1987 and 2002 already published in *By His Light*.²

As in every other area of his intellectual probing, R. Lichtenstein brought to bear on his subject his signature talents: sharp analytic powers and organized thinking, coupled with an almost-encyclopedic knowledge of both traditional Jewish sources and a good deal of the Western canon of literature and religious thought – and all these within a framework of spiritual yearning, ethical sensitivity, and commitment to duty. Readers of the two volumes of *Leaves of Faith* will find familiar structures and comparable breadth in this volume, along with penetrating insight and constructive analysis. Accustomed to seeing sin as a catalog of broken things that the spiritual handyman must fix, we are helped by R. Lichtenstein to see in fact the varieties and gradations of sin (“*Kallot Va-chamurot*”), and commensurately, the many facets and types of *teshuva* of which the tradition was deeply aware – whether over the course of one’s life (“*La-kol Zeman*”) or in the context of various human conditions (“*Teshuva* of Norm and of Crisis” and “Renunciation, Divorce, and Rehabilitation”) – and to which we can commit, if only we are willing to be honest with ourselves.

Given their focus on *teshuva*, the essays in this volume understandably have the added emphasis of the aspirational demands of a life of serious *avodat Hashem* and intensive *talmud Torah* (“Purify Our Hearts to Serve You with Truth,” “The Integrity of *Teshuva*,” and “*Teshuva*: Obligation and Opportunity”), themes resonant of the essays in *By His Light* and *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Yet the subject matter of this volume also evokes R. Lichtenstein’s candid awareness of, and sensitivity to, the inner life of the human being and of the average Jew. Not surprisingly, in these essays he frequently quotes Socrates’ call, cited in Plato’s *Apology*, that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” an invitation, if you will, particularly poignant during Elul and *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*.

2. If readers can help us locate recordings of the *derashot* not available to us when preparing this volume, we would be happy to consider including them in future editions. The missing *derashot* are those of 1985, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1994–96, 1999, and 2000. Please contact office@etzion.org.il.

But it is not only our behaviors *per se*, whether major or minor, that need to come under examination. In virtually every essay, R. Lichtenstein forces us to confront and scrutinize the personal religious soil in which these practices were planted and nurtured. The reason our annual resolve to change so frequently fizzles out is that we fail to address the underlying religious beliefs and personality traits that provided such fertile ground for the practices we wish to change.

In this context, citations of Christian thinkers and British poets – at times by way of comparison, at other times by way of contrast – stud these essays next to *Tanakh*, *Chazal*, and *Rishonim*, highlighting the universal character of many of our religious and aesthetic sensibilities and spiritual challenges. As a religious humanist, Rav Lichtenstein sought out those authors and thinkers who help deepen our human sensitivity and understanding, which can then serve as the basis for more profound spiritual growth and piety within our own lives.³ As we read these *derashot*, we are brought to acknowledge the painful truth that, without probing to that deeper level, our *teshuva* will almost necessarily be shallow and short-lived. To overcome that tendency, in these essays R. Lichtenstein comes to our aid, spade in hand, to help us dig far below the surface of our selves and achieve more lasting change.

For all their power, many of these essays are admittedly not an easy read – and not in the sense of their syntax or structure. We are referring to the way these essays, if taken seriously, will likely make us uncomfortable. As we read them, we may ineluctably nod our heads in anguished agreement, acknowledging the often-painful accuracy of R. Lichtenstein's descriptions, whether of ourselves individually (“Mediocre *Teshuva* and *Teshuva* of the Mediocre”) or of our communities writ large. At the same time, we are helped to see previously unnoticed, or even counterintuitive, aspects of the process of *teshuva* (“*Teshuva*: Impetus and Motive,” “*Teshuva* and Joy,” and “Humility and Pride in *Teshuva*”), enriching our appreciation of this most basic religious urge and demand, and hopefully finding renewed inspiration to once again try to scale the mountain of our inadequacy.

3. See Shlomo Fischer, “The Religious Humanism of R. Aharon Lichtenstein,” *Tradition* 47:4 (Winter 2014), p. 22.

Return and Renewal

More than many of his other writings, these essays in both tone and substance give us the palpable sense of sitting at R. Lichtenstein's feet, and of being in his *beit midrash*. The honesty and candor of the *rebbe-talmid* relationship suffuses this volume, as does the concern of the master for his disciples' improvement. As we read these comprehensive yet personal essays, we are really listening to one who knows us well yet does not despair of our potential and of how we might actualize our better selves. Like his Talmud *shiurim*, these essays reflect R. Lichtenstein's *torat chesed*: each one generously builds a conceptual scaffold upon which seeking, repentant Jews can rise up out of their spiritual morass and change for the better. In that sense, these essays can be read at any time, not only between Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur. To those of us willing to make the effort, R. Lichtenstein extends his hand, not to lift us out, but to help us climb up, to give us firmer footing, as we try to re-create ourselves.



The process employed in converting these oral discourses into written essays is similar to that followed in R. Lichtenstein's earlier volume, *By His Light*. First, all the recordings were transcribed word for word by the people noted below. Next, the transcripts were reviewed and proofread by Rabbi Dov Karoll. Subsequently, the transcripts were adapted for print, which entailed editing for language and content, abridgment, occasional reorganization, removal of tangential remarks to footnotes, division into subsections and addition of subsection headings, translation of sources and terms, and so on. Ilana Sobel copy edited the adaptations, after which the co-editors reviewed the essays and Nechama Unterman proofread them.

The date and venue of each essay is noted in its initial footnote. A list of those who adapted and transcribed the essays follows:

- “*Teshuva: Obligation and Opportunity*,” adapted by Michael S. Berger and Reuven Ziegler from a transcript by Michael and Rena Siev

- “Purify Our Hearts to Serve You with Truth,” adapted by Michael S. Berger from a transcript by Sholem Hurwitz
- “The Integrity of *Teshuva*,” adapted by Michael S. Berger from a transcript by Dov Karoll
- “*Teshuva*: Impetus and Motive,” adapted by Michael S. Berger from a transcript by Dov Karoll
- “*Kallot Va-chamurot*: Gradation of Sins in Repentance,” adapted by Reuven Ziegler from a transcript by Shlomo Brody
- “Mediocre *Teshuva* and the *Teshuva* of the Mediocre,” adapted by Daniel Landman and Reuven Ziegler from a transcript by Michael Platt and Ariela Goldsmith
- “*Teshuva* of Norm and of Crisis,” adapted by Reuven Ziegler from a transcript by Marc Herman and David Raphael
- “*La-kol Zeman*: *Teshuva* Within Four Time Frames of Our Lives,” adapted by Michael S. Berger from a transcript by Dov Karoll
- “*Teshuva*: Ferment and Repose,” adapted by Michael S. Berger from a transcript by Rochie Hurwitz
- “Renunciation, Divorce, and Rehabilitation,” adapted by Eli D. Clark from a transcript by Ariela Goldsmith
- “Humility and Pride in *Teshuva*,” adapted by Michael S. Berger from a transcript by Dov Karoll
- “*Teshuva* and Joy,” adapted by Michael S. Berger from a transcript by David Raphael

Many people contributed to the production of this volume. First, our thanks to Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein for her encouragement and her championing of this project, as well as to Mishnat HaRAL’s Yoel Weiss, Noam Shalit, and Aaron Lewin for their help. We are also extremely grateful to all those named above who contributed to this volume, and most especially to Rabbi Dov Karoll for his careful review of the transcripts and Ilana Sobel for her careful review of the adaptations. Our gratitude extends to Matthew Miller, Shira Finson, and the staff of Maggid Books for their professionalism and high standards; to Rabbi Dr. Moshe Berger, Prof. Aaron Segal, Rabbi Yair Kahn, and Debra Berkowitz for their helpful comments; and to Yeshivat Har Etzion, the cherished institution

Return and Renewal

which R. Lichtenstein shaped and guided for more than four decades, for its enthusiastic support.

Most importantly, we thank our revered teacher, *moreinu ve-rabbeinu* HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein *zekher tzaddik livrakha*, for conveying to us in his teachings and embodying in his personal example the highest ideals of Judaism – and, indeed, of humanity. Having been blessed by Rav Lichtenstein’s presence in our lives, we are gratified to be able to share his wisdom with others. May his memory continue to be a blessing as his teachings pass on to the ages.

Michael S. Berger and Reuven Ziegler

Teshuva: Obligation and Opportunity

How do we categorize and describe *teshuva*: as an opportunity or as an obligation? The two terms are, of course, quite different. When we speak of opportunity, we generally have in mind some fortunate, perhaps undeserved, option to which we are glad to have access, whereas obligation conjures up a sense of pressing demand, a categorical imperative grounded in an existential situation or mandated by an authoritative commander. One doesn't need to think hard to realize that the answer is that *teshuva* is both. I would like to examine in what sense it is both and how these two aspects of *teshuva* are related.

TESHUVA AS OPPORTUNITY: FREE WILL

We can bring to bear two distinct elements upon the concept of opportunity, one general and one specific. Broadly speaking, *teshuva* is grounded in our faith in and experience of free will. It certainly is no accident that the Rambam, probably the greatest champion of free will among the

Delivered as the Hausman/Stern *Kinnus Teshuva* lecture at the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem, Tishrei 5759 (1998).

Return and Renewal

Rishonim, placed the concept of free will at the very heart of *Hilkhot Teshuva*. In the three central chapters (chaps. 5–7), the Rambam presents what is probably his fullest exposition of the concept and its significance.

Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and the wicked, the choice is his. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:1)

In *halakha* 2, he presents and rejects the opposing view, a theological, astrological determinism, insisting instead that “each person is fit to be righteous like Moshe *Rabbeinu* or wicked like Yarovam.” After expounding upon the theme of free will over the course of two chapters, he draws his conclusion at the beginning of chapter seven:

Since free choice is granted to all people, as explained, a person should always strive to do *teshuva* and to confess verbally for his sins, striving to cleanse his hands from his sins in order that he may die as one who has performed *teshuva* and [thereby] merit the life of the World-to-Come. (7:1)

Thus, the prelude to discussing the need for *teshuva* is the concept of free will generally, the confident faith – so deeply rooted in the world of Halakha – that we have the capacity to manage our lives in accordance with our moral and religious will. This is the first aspect of the opportunity implicit in *teshuva*.

TESHUVA AS OPPORTUNITY: THE GIFT OF TESHUVA

But there is an additional aspect: the *gift* of *teshuva*, which is, itself, multiple. At one plane, it is free will writ large. One might have assumed that while freedom is a gift with which we are initially graced, this gift is given to us when we are a kind of *tabula rasa*, a blank slate unencumbered by sin and degradation; but once the albatross of sinful and immoral behavior has been cast around our necks, we no longer are able to move freely, and no longer possess that capacity for free choice. Indeed, the Rambam states that in extreme cases, such as with Pharaoh,

that is exactly what occurs (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 6:3). Fortunately, this is not the norm. The freedom that characterizes our lives generally continues to be in force and allows us to move freely even after sin, even after we have distanced ourselves from God and from our true selves.

Apart from that, there are other elements of opportunity within *teshuva* that have nothing to do with our ability to repent, but rather with the results of *teshuva*, and the readiness of God to accept *teshuva*. We are granted the opportunity of remission of sin; God is willing to waive whatever punishments we had justly deserved. And at the relational level, quite apart from canceling our terrible debts, God is willing to receive us again into His presence and reopen channels of communication. The Rambam, in the continuation of the seventh chapter, stresses this element particularly:

How exalted is the level of *teshuva*! Only yesterday this sinner was divided from God, the Lord of Israel.... He would call out [to God] without being answered.... He would perform *mitzvot*, only to have them thrown back in his face.... Today, [after having repented,] he clings to the Divine Presence.... He calls out [to God] and is answered immediately.... He performs *mitzvot*, and these are accepted with grace and joy... and, furthermore, God longs for our *mitzvot* and good deeds. (7:7)¹

Thus, the opportunity afforded by *teshuva*, the gift which, by divine grace, we have received, entails three components: (1) the element of free will, which remains operative, notwithstanding the fact that we have defiled ourselves; (2) the readiness on God's part to forgive our sins;

1. The concept of *teshuva* as a gift God has given us can also be found in the way Rab-beinu Yona opens his *Sha'arei Teshuva*:

Concerning the principles of *teshuva*: among the Blessed One's kindnesses to His creations is having prepared for them the way to rise from the pit of their deeds and to escape the trap of their offenses.... In His great goodness and uprightness, He has taught and exhorted them to turn to Him upon having sinned against Him.... Even if they have offended and rebelled exceedingly and been utterly faithless, He has not closed the doors of repentance to them.

This *chesed* is a gift, an opportunity conferred upon us by God.

(3) His willingness to forget about the past, and to enable us to come unto Him once again.²

TESHUVA AS OBLIGATION

But, of course, *teshuva*, for us, is not simply an opportunity, an option of which we can avail ourselves to the extent that we wish. It is – wondrously – that, but not only that. *Teshuva* is also an obligation.

Now, it is well known that the *Minchat Chinnukh* questions the imperative nature of *teshuva*. The Rambam, both in the heading before *Hilkhot Teshuva* and in the *halakhot* themselves, speaks of *teshuva*, but when prescribing actions he seems to focus upon *viddui*, verbal confession.³ The *Minchat Chinnukh* (364:2) asserts that according to the Rambam *teshuva* is not counted as a *mitzva*; rather, it is *viddui* that is a *mitzva*. If a person wants to do *teshuva*, then the Rambam prescribes how it is to be done, just as if one chooses to wear a four-cornered garment, one must affix *tzitzit* according to certain specifications. There is no verse mandating, at least at the halakhic plane, that a person perform *teshuva*.

This is, however, an exceedingly strange position to assume. It is absolutely chilling to think that *teshuva*, the key to our present spiritual state and to our ultimate metaphysical destiny, should be merely a matter of preference and predilection. Is it conceivable that a particular action, *viddui*, is thoroughly legislated by the Torah, yet that which concerns the totality of our being, *teshuva*, is a matter of choice? Both the Torah and the prophets constantly hammer away at the theme, “*Shuvu, shuvu, shuvu*, Return, return, return,” speaking in the name of God to

2. These different aspects of free will can also be detected in the language of the prophets. They speak not only of *teshuva* “from,” turning away from sin, as in the verse: “Turn, turn from your evil ways” (*Yechezkel* 33:11), but also *teshuva* “to,” exemplified by: “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God” (*Hoshea* 14:2). [For more on this theme, see the chapter “*Teshuva* of Norm and of Crisis.”]

3. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 1:1 states:

If a person transgresses any of the *mitzvot* of the Torah, whether a positive commandment or a prohibition, whether willingly or inadvertently, when he repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess before God, blessed be He, as the verse states (*Bemidbar* 5:6–7), “Any man or woman who commits any wrong toward a fellow man . . . They shall confess their wrongdoing.” This refers to verbal confession (*viddui*), and this confession is a positive commandment.

the individual, the Jewish people, and even the other nations! These convey a strong sense that one who is sensitive to his relationship to God, one who is concerned about spiritual values and his own spiritual existence, certainly will want to do *teshuva*, and surely must do *teshuva*. Indeed, other *Rishonim* counted *teshuva* as a mitzva, and, to some extent, the Rambam himself can be construed as believing this.⁴ In any event, regardless of whether we accept the position of the *Minchat Chinnukh* or we accept that *teshuva* is an independent obligation, the place of *teshuva* as a central value, as a lynchpin within religious life, is certainly secure.⁵

This obligation is, of course, multiple. Inasmuch as sin itself entails various components, likewise, *teshuva*, which is the corrective of sin, has various components. First, there is the evil in the sin itself that needs to be corrected, be the sin *bein adam la-Makom*, in the man-God realm, or *bein adam le-chavero*, interpersonal. Second, at the level of *bein adam la-Makom*, there is obviously the affront to God in every violation of His will. Furthermore, sin defiles spiritually and religiously, and that requires a corrective. Likewise, at the level of *bein adam le-chavero*, sin defiles a society, a community, and one needs to perform *teshuva* for that defilement, too.

Finally, a sinner must repent for the offense to himself, *bein adam le-atzmo*. To sin, and to remain mired in sin is, first and foremost, to endanger ourselves, as sin is damaging to one's personality, regardless of religious or spiritual consequences. A central aspect of our worldview is that one has responsibility not only to others, but also to oneself. The liberal notion that

-
4. In the heading to *Hilkhot Teshuva*, the Rambam writes, "There is one positive commandment herein, namely, that a sinner should repent from his sin before God and confess." The emphasis does seem to be more on the act of *teshuva* itself than on the detail of confession.
 5. No less an authority than the Vilna Gaon insisted that there are values that may be of the highest order, even though they are not counted among the *mitzvot*. See his commentary on *Megillat Esther*, 10:3, s.v. *doresh tov*:

This refers to good deeds and proper *middot*, for proper *middot* are more crucial than all the [actions], as I have written that the proper *middot* are not written explicitly in the Torah, for they underlie the entire Torah. As the *Gemara* states, one should regard one who gets angry as an idolater (*Shabbat* 105b), and one who gossips is considered like a heretic (*Arakhin* 15b); and the same goes for all the *middot*.

a person is master of himself and therefore can arrange his life and activities as he wishes, so long as he is ready to bear the consequences, stands totally in opposition to the worldview of Judaism, and indeed to any religious perception. A religious perspective views human life and the human self as a gift or a charge given by God. Hence, we have a responsibility not only to the divine image in others, but to the divine image in ourselves. A person who curses himself or maims himself violates the same prohibition as one who curses or maims others. And, surely, just as we are enjoined to save others from impending disaster, so we are enjoined to save ourselves, and this relates not only to our physical lives, but *a fortiori* to our spiritual lives as well. *Teshuva*, therefore, is demanded of us, quite apart from what we need to do for God, or need to do for our surroundings. We need to do it for ourselves, as part of our responsibility to our Creator who has entrusted us with a *nitzotz Eloka mi-ma'al*, a divine spark embedded within us.

These elements of *teshuva* are clearly obligatory, whether *teshuva* is an independent mitzva or, even failing that, is a religious and moral imperative growing out of our sensibility regarding spiritual matters.

LINKING OPPORTUNITY AND OBLIGATION

When speaking of *teshuva* as an obligation, there is an additional element to be borne in mind. The Rambam states:

Yom Kippur is a time of *teshuva* for all, individuals and community, and it is the occasion of forgiveness and remission for Israel. Accordingly, everyone is obligated to repent and confess on Yom Kippur. (*Hilkhos Teshuva* 2:7)

The Rambam presents a fact and then draws an inference from it. The fact is that Yom Kippur is a day which is favorable for *teshuva*. That being the case, says the Rambam – and there is a causal nexus here – all are obligated to do *teshuva* and recite the *viddui*. In effect, the Rambam has linked the two elements we are addressing: if you have the opportunity, you *must* avail yourself of it. So, apart from the fact that there might be a mitzva of *teshuva*, just as there is a mitzva of *lulav*, *sukka*, or *shofar*, there is an additional ground for *teshuva* being obligatory: the fact that it is possible renders it mandatory. The opportunity produces an obligation.

Teshuva: Obligation and Opportunity

The same thought is presented by Rabbeinu Yona in *Sha'arei Teshuva*:

Realize that the penalty of the sinner who defers *teshuva* greatly intensifies itself each day. [Why?] For he knows that anger has gone forth upon him and that there is a sanctuary to which he can flee, the sanctuary of *teshuva*, and still he persists in his rebellion and continues in his evil. Though it is within his power to emerge from the turmoil, still he does not fear the scorn and the wrath. His evil, therefore, is great. (1:2)

The reason the punishment increases daily is that person knows he has offended God and is justly liable for punishment, and, additionally, knows that there is an escape hatch, and yet he doesn't avail himself of that opportunity. As an example, Rabbeinu Yona cites a famous *midrash* (*Kohelet Rabba* 7:32) about a group of imprisoned criminals who show some initiative and dig a tunnel underneath the jail. One by one, naturally, they leave, yet one of them remains behind. The jailer comes along, sees the tunnel open, and strikes the remaining criminal with his staff, saying, "Fool! The tunnel is open before you; how did you not avail yourself of it and rush to freedom?" The jailer, who, after all, should be reacting against this escape hatch, regards the remaining criminal as a person to whom freedom – which should be a central value – is of little moment. In effect, Rabbeinu Yona and the *midrash* are saying that the moment the opportunity is there, it engenders obligation, at least to a person who is morally and religiously sensitive; failure to avail ourselves of the opportunity becomes a sin all over again.

So, if we ask ourselves whether *teshuva* is an opportunity, a *chesed* granted by God, or an obligation, a demand imposed upon us, the answer is not only that it is both, independently; it is both, *intertwined*. The very existence of the opportunity imposes a fresh obligation. This is the meaning of the Rambam's expression, "Accordingly." It is inconceivable that a person who attaches significance to his own spiritual state should be totally impervious and insensitive to the ability to restore his relationship to God and to cleanse himself. If, indeed, he does not seize the opportunity, this is both a symptom and a cause of spiritual weakness.

**OPPORTUNITY AND OBLIGATION WITHIN
A GENERAL RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW**

Within the worldview of *Chazal* and of *gedolei Yisrael*, this sense of both the centrality of opportunity and obligation and their interaction can be viewed as a manifestation of a much broader concept. It can be placed within the more general context of our conception of divine service in particular and of human existence in general. Both opportunity and obligation are central concepts within our view of human life as it is and as it ought to be. At one plane, the sense of obligation, of duty, is both critical and central, whether at the moral plane – we think of humans as *by definition* committed, willy-nilly, to a moral and ethical life as part of having been created in the image of God⁶ – or at the religious plane. If we were to take a single term that, more than anything else, we could regard as defining human existence and what frames our lives, it would certainly be the concept of *mitzva*. A Jew lives, first and foremost, as a called being, as a commanded being.

The very first Rashi in *Chumash* presents this idea not only surprisingly, but I would say audaciously. Rashi quotes the celebrated *midrash* in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak that the Torah ought to have started not with *Bereishit* but with the first *mitzva* – the implication being that what is important in Torah is the *mitzvot*. This perspective holds that Torah is, essentially, a legislative document that speaks to us in normative terms. The sense of being commanded is central to Jewish existence.

Although the Jew is commanded more thoroughly and extensively than others, divine command is also a universal category. The sense of human life as being guided, informed, and saturated by the sense of command is part of our conception of universal existence. In this context, let us examine two very striking verses in *Bereishit*, chapter 2. The first verse says, “The Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may eat’” (2:16). Then the Torah continues, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it, for

6. Like Kant’s famous sense of wonder – inspired, as he said, by the starry heavens above him and the moral law within him (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:161) – the force of moral law is certainly part of our tradition and part of our sensibility.

on the day that you eat of it, you shall be worthy of death.” The question arises: Whereas the first verse says that God commanded Adam, the actual command, not to eat from the tree of knowledge, is only in the second verse. Why, then, is initial reference made to “Of every tree of the garden you may eat,” which is not part of the commandment?

The question, as I have formulated it, is grounded in the essentially secular conception that God has commanded us only with regard to certain areas of life, and that He has left a large neutral area where our own will and preferences find expression; there we act as we want. He has “His four cubits” (*Berakhot* 8a), but the rest of the ballpark is ours. However, a religious conception does not view any aspect of human reality as devoid of God and His commanding presence. While the Halakha does, at times, distinguish between a *devar mitzva* (obligatory matter) and a *devar reshut* (optional matter),⁷ fundamentally, the message is that the realm of *devar reshut* is not outside the ambience of God, but under His tutelage. Thus, not only is abstaining from the tree of knowledge a realization of the divine command, but eating every other fruit in the Garden of Eden – and anywhere else – is likewise part of serving God, part of the realization of “the Lord God commanded.” As a verse stated to Adam, it is of universal import.⁸

SEIZING OPPORTUNITY IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM

The sense that opportunity engenders obligation in the spiritual realm is not just a universal religious conception but also a central category of a Torah-based worldview. The failure to exploit spiritual potential, the failure to drink spiritual life to the lees, is not just some kind of pallid passivity, but, in the perception of *Chazal*, it is spiritual rot, described as such and condemned as such.

Let me cite several examples drawn from various areas of human life. The *Gemara* in *Yevamot* speaks of the mitzva of procreation. One would think that if a person is enjoined to procreate and he does not do

7. For example, a person can make an oath with regard to a *devar reshut*, but not with regard to a *devar mitzva*. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Nedarim* 3:7–8.

8. The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 56b) uses this verse as a point of departure for the seven Noachide laws incumbent on all humanity.

Return and Renewal

it, his failure is only that he has not fulfilled a positive mitzva. While it is not ideal to miss a mitzva, he hasn't taken an evil action; he simply has not done something good. But this is not how *Chazal* speak of him:

It was taught: Rabbi Eliezer states, He who does not engage in procreation is as though he [is one who] sheds blood.... Rabbi Ya'akov said, It is as if, so to speak, a person has diminished the stature of God.... Ben Azzai says, It is as though he sheds blood and diminishes the divine image. (*Yevamot* 63b)

All this where one has simply not availed himself of the opportunity to fulfill a certain mitzva, that of procreating and building a family.

Let us now take something more directly interpersonal. The *Gemara* in *Berakhot* (12b) states: "Rabba bar Chinnana Sava said in the name of Rav: Anyone who is able to beg for mercy for his friend and does not do so is called a sinner." For example, if a friend of his is ill, he could have said *Tehillim* or he could have implored God on his behalf; yet he didn't do it, either because he didn't think of it, or he was busy with other activities. Again, we would say he hasn't done the mitzva, but we might not have said he sinned. After all, it is not an absolute mitzva like procreation, but rather *gemilut chesed*, an act of kindness. Nevertheless, *Chazal* say, "He is called a sinner."

Or, to take another area: regarding Torah study, the *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* (99a) is literally frightening. The verse at the end of *Shelach* (*Bemidbar* 15:31) refers to a person very severely: "A person has defamed the word of God and has countermanded His command." Who is considered to have "defamed the word of God"? "Rabbi Nehorai says, He who can engage in the study of the Torah but fails to do so." If one wants to understand how seriously *Chazal* regarded this, you need only to look at the other things listed there: one who maintains that the Torah is not from Heaven, or a heretic, etc. And who joins this list? One who has an opportunity for Torah study and didn't avail himself of it! Then there is the *Gemara* in *Chagiga* (5b) that lists three classes of people over whom God, so to speak, weeps daily. Who is the first on the list? "He who can engage in the study of Torah but fails to do so." God, so to speak, weeps over the failure to translate opportunity into obligation, to avail oneself spiritually of that which was within reach.

Chazal saw the significance of opportunity and the need to translate it into obligation not only in abstract terms; they read *Tanakh* and saw central figures in the Bible in its light. For example, *Chazal* say (*Berakhot* 7a) that when Moshe *Rabbeinu* asked God, “I pray, please show me Your glory” (*Shemot* 33:18), God said to him, “When I wanted to reveal Myself [at the time of the burning bush], you ran away. Now that you want, I don’t want.” Apparently, this *gemara* regards Moshe critically in the same vein we have been developing: he had an opportunity to see the revelation of the Divine Presence, but he didn’t have the spiritual resources or inner strength for that encounter. This was a failing, and that opportunity, having been missed, was not to be restored.

Even more strikingly, the *Gemara* in *Chullin* (91b), cited by Rashi,⁹ discusses Ya’akov *Avinu* as he was leaving his father’s house. Based on an inconsistency in Ya’akov’s itinerary – he seems to have arrived in Charan and then gone *back* to Beit-El – Rabbi Yitzchak says that Ya’akov reached Charan and then realized what he had passed. “Is it conceivable that I passed by a place where my forefathers had prayed and I did not pray there?” I suppose most of us could do that quite readily and quite frequently. What *Chazal* are stating here is that Ya’akov, in what was a critical juncture in his life, suddenly realized, retrospectively, that he had had an opportunity and passed it up. It wasn’t a *mitzva* – there is no *mitzva* to pray specifically where one’s ancestors did – but it was an *opportunity*: to find inspiration, to define his mission and his future, and to derive strength from a return to his roots. He could have done all that, but he did not. He passed by the place at which his ancestors prayed as if it were a subway station. The moment that Ya’akov realized that, he was struck with regret and guilt over having neglected a wonderful opportunity. But being Ya’akov *Avinu*, he didn’t just let himself be eaten away by remorse; he turned around.

A remarkable passage in the *Yerushalmi* extends this concept far beyond the spiritual area with which we are dealing.

Rabbi Chizkiya, Rabbi Kohen in the name of Rav stated: A person will stand in judgment [before the Almighty] for every

9. *Bereishit* 28:10, s.v. *ki va*.

Return and Renewal

[fruit] that he saw and of which he did not partake. Rabbi Lazar took this to heart and planted a little garden [with many types of fruit]. At least once a year he took pains to partake of each fruit. (*Kiddushin* 4:12)

A person has the opportunity to partake of God's world, to come in live contact, even as a consumer, with that which the Almighty has created, and that, too, is a form of contact with God. Now, why must a person eat all types of fruit? He has his staple fruits that he enjoys, which he eats from year to year. Even if that means having a more circumscribed experience of God's world, so be it. Yet for that one is going to stand in judgment! If the opportunity to eat a guava engenders an obligation to eat it, what are we to say of the opportunity to pray properly, to learn Torah properly, to engage in *chesed* properly, to be suffused with a sense of God's presence, to perform *teshuva* properly? We are expected to lead a life charged with a sense of obligation, on the one hand, and with a sense of the awareness of opportunity, on the other. We need to keep our eyes and ears open to know where opportunity is present, and to live a life suffused with the interaction of the two.

BRINGING OPPORTUNITY AND OBLIGATION BACK TO TESHUVA

These two concepts and their interaction have special relevance to *teshuva*. Life is, to a great extent, a field of opportunity; but at the same time, it is also a field of missed opportunities. When an infant is born, the whole world is potential. Gradually, by the exigencies of life and the need for self-definition, the field of one's activity narrows, and all kinds of opportunities that had, in theory, existed at birth dwindle and eventually disappear from sight. Beyond this natural constriction, there is our failure to seize opportunities that were within grasp. We were not sufficiently sensitive and aware; either we did not realize the importance of the value, or did not sufficiently take heed to look around us and see where the opportunity existed. As a result, we missed *so much* valuable, significant spiritual potential. Retrospectively, we realize we could have structured our lives so much better, suffused it with greater value, organized it more efficiently, utilized time and effort more wisely.

Teshuva: Obligation and Opportunity

We could have set our priorities more correctly. We look back upon life, and, even when we don't see active evil, we see so much waste. And waste is itself evil.

With regard to the prohibition of *bal tashchit*, of wasting property, the *Gemara* in *Shabbat* (129a, 14ob) teaches: “*Bal tashchit* as applied to one's own person stands higher”; waste of human resources is more critical than waste of property. How much worse is the waste of spiritual potential, that gap between what we could have been, what we should have been, and what we are. Everyone has this gap; for some it is enormous, and for others it seems smaller, but there is always the gap. That gap is the waste of human potential that was inherent within us, of the divine image God gave us. We, somehow, “diminished the stature of God” within ourselves. We could have procreated spiritually, but we did not do it. Maybe it sounds too severe to translate this into a kind of bloodshed, choking off incipient life, but we can certainly speak of “diminishing the stature of God.” To the extent that we are spiritually sensitive, this is both pitiful and tormenting.

Along comes the opportunity of *teshuva*. *Teshuva* is not just an opportunity *per se*; it is the opportunity to amend for all the missed opportunities. *Teshuva* is the chance to redress the balance, to take all of that waste and not only neutralize it but energize it, even transforming it into a positive force. *Chazal* teach:

Reish Lakish said: Great is *teshuva*, for one's intentional sins are counted as unwitting transgressions.... Is that so? Did not Reish Lakish say: Great is *teshuva*, for one's intentional sins are counted as merits?... This is not difficult; one is out of love, the other out of fear. (*Yoma* 86b)

Where *teshuva* is properly experienced, even “intentional sins are counted as merits.” So if one can speak of life, generally, as opportunity translated into obligation, *teshuva* is the opportunity to bring back all that we missed, to confront the torment and amend the failure. Ultimately, it allows us to restructure and rebuild our lives, and perhaps even more, when *teshuva* is performed out of love, to build upon our failure, our waste, and our diminishing of the divine stature.

TESHUVA: A GATE AND A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

When we speak of opportunity, we can refer to two separate concepts. There is, first, a kind of constant opportunity. One has the ability to involve oneself in Torah every day, every hour, within the limits of other obligations and commitments. Second, there are opportunities that are more specific, that arise at a particular time due to a confluence of circumstances, as when opportunity “knocks.” We might speak, then, of a “gate” of opportunity, and a “window” of opportunity. A gate is always open, so that you can walk through it whenever you want. In contrast, a window normally is shut, and during the fleeting moment when it is opened one can hope to extend his hand through it.¹⁰

Teshuva, as the opportunity to amend for the failure to exploit opportunity, can be viewed in both perspectives. In a certain sense, *teshuva* is always possible. Every moment, every day, a person can perform *teshuva*. “The gates of *teshuva* are eternally open” (*Devarim Rabba* 2:12), and the outstretched hand, as it were, of the Almighty is always there. But there are also moments when He knocks on our window, when we experience “*Kol, Dodi dofek*, A sound, my Beloved is knocking” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:2). And then the obligation, grounded in opportunity, becomes that much greater. The constant opportunity is certainly challenging and imperative, but if, beyond that, God does not simply remain majestically ready to receive you, but reaches out to you and descends to you, woe to one who misses that, who relives the verse, “*Dodi chamak avar*, My Beloved has slipped away” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:6). When the opportunity is sharper and more immediate, the obligation is much greater as well.

It is in this vein that we are to understand the Rambam and Rabbeinu Yona. Yom Kippur is “the occasion of forgiveness and remission for Israel.” This is a time when God is not simply present in the recesses of His infinite being, but has descended to us. The verse commands us to “Seek out the Lord when He may be found, call upon Him when He is near” (*Yeshayahu* 55:6), and *Chazal* say, “These are the ten days from Rosh Ha-shana to Yom Kippur” (*Rosh Ha-shana* 18a; *Yevamot* 49b).

10. These relate to two terms in Modern Hebrew: *hizdamnut*, which by definition is of a particular time and occasion, and *efsharut*, which connotes the possible, something that is always there.

This is “when He is near”; this is the opportunity that beckons particularly. And if it beckons it obligates! “Accordingly, everyone is obligated to repent.”

SELF-EXAMINATION DURING THE TEN DAYS OF REPENTANCE

What does this *teshuva* demand of us? Of course, we must view our lives honestly and in detail to see where and whom we have wronged. But that kind of introspection is not sufficient, for if *teshuva* is indeed the opportunity to amend for lost opportunity, we need to address ourselves to that loss, to that waste. We need to confront not simply the active sinner in us, but the indolent in us.

The *Gemara* in *Berakhot* (5a) states:

Rava, and some say Rav Chisda, said: If a person sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct, as the verse states, “Let us search and examine our ways and return to the Lord” (*Eikha* 3:40). If he checked and did not find [sinful behavior], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of Torah.

The question arises: when he examined his conduct, did he not look into neglect of Torah study? I think the answer is clear. Of course, when a person examines his conduct, among the various areas he investigates is whether he is learning Torah: “The study of Torah is equal to all the others” (*Pe’u* 1:1). But he conducts his self-examination only at the level of whether he sinned by neglecting the mitzva of Torah study. Yet neglect of Torah is not just a question of a sin. While the *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* castigated one who had the opportunity to study but did not, the *Gemara* in *Chagiga* discussed another dimension of neglect of Torah – one that caused the Almighty, so to speak, to weep! Why is He described as weeping only over neglect of Torah study, but not over desecration of Shabbat or eating non-kosher food? It is because the weeping is not over sins as such; it is over the waste of this wonderful resource of human life that could have been developed and was instead left to rot. When *Chazal* speak of attributing suffering that has no discernible cause to “neglect of Torah study,” they refer to the waste, the failure to energize spiritual potential.

Return and Renewal

That examination of deeds of which Rava speaks has various components. Broadly speaking, we certainly subscribe to the Socratic axiom that the unexamined life is not worth living – but we need to bear in mind what it is that we examine. We need to undergo self-examination at three different levels. There is the examination of which the Rambam speaks at the beginning of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, where a person examines his *actions*: I did this, or I didn't do that. There is, at the other extreme, the examination of one's *self*: who am I, and where do I stand in relation to who I could be? Between these extremes, the *Gemara* quotes the verse in *Eikha*, "Let us search and examine our ways" (3:40), referring to the totality of our behavior. The Rav *z"l* used to speak frequently of "sin," meaning specific actions, and "the ways of sin," the whole context of lifestyle and personality out of which sin develops and by which it is sustained. This direction that life takes, this modality of activity, stands somewhere between the definition of self and the analysis of particular actions.

With regard to the concept of the waste of spiritual resources, of the failure to implement a kind of spiritual *carpe diem*, we need to examine ourselves at all three levels: we check our actions, we examine our ways, and, perhaps most profoundly and painfully, we investigate our very being, our inner self.

All of this is extraordinarily demanding and difficult. It is hard enough to do what we are supposed to do and abstain from that which we are proscribed from doing, clearly and narrowly defined. But, when we not only hold ourselves to a standard of what we do, but gauge ourselves by optimum, by potential, and therefore hold ourselves accountable for every opportunity we could have seized and did not – this is, as I said, painful, even tormenting. Yet here we encounter not only the obligation of *teshuva*, but the *chesed* of *teshuva*.

TESHUVA AS TASHLUMIN

I spoke earlier of a kind of opportunity to make amends for missed opportunity. In the world of Halakha, this is known as *tashlumin*. We have two models for this, and there is a clear difference between them.

First, there is a type of *tashlumin* where, if you missed the first opportunity, you have a second chance. The paradigm is *Pesach sheni*

(*Bemidbar* 9:9–14).¹¹ If you didn't bring the *Pesach* offering on the fourteenth of Nisan – not only, as in the passage in the Torah, where a person was at a distance or impure (*Bemidbar* 9:10), but even if you violated intentionally – you bring *Pesach sheni*, the compensatory *Pesach* offering on the fourteenth of Iyar. Similarly, if you didn't bring the mandatory festive offerings, the *korbenot ha-regel*, on the first day of a Festival, you can bring them during the entire holiday.¹² Or, if you didn't make *havdala* on Saturday night, according to many *Rishonim*¹³ you can make *havdala* until Tuesday, *be-torat tashlumin*, as a compensation. We don't know why the Torah gave *tashlumin* for *korban Pesach* and didn't give *tashlumin* for hearing the *shofar* or sitting in the *sukka*. Whatever the reason, with regard to certain *mitzvot*, there is a second chance.

The second type of *tashlumin* is applicable to prayer. The *Gemara* says that since prayer contains an aspect of *rachamei*, supplication for mercy, the *halakha* of *tashlumin* applies to it. Unlike the earlier cases, here the *Gemara* explains *why* there is a second opportunity for prayer. The reason is that prayer is an expression of our quest, our pleading, and a plea can never be shut off. Therefore, there is a halakhic difference between the *tashlumin* of *korban Pesach* and *korbenot ha-regel*, and the *tashlumin* of prayer. Regarding *Pesach* and *regel*, even if a person violated the *mitzva* intentionally the first time around, he still has *tashlumin*. It's a *gezerat ha-katuv*, a Torah edict. With regard to prayer, however, there is *tashlumin* only for unintentional neglect of the *mitzva*, such as if he accidentally forgot, or if circumstances did not enable him to pray, but not if he omitted prayer intentionally. The *Gemara* implies that, fundamentally, prayer should not have *tashlumin* – it should be like most other *mitzvot*. But at the level of *rachamei*, mercy, prayer is essentially a plea, a turning to the Almighty, and those gates can never be closed. That being the case, if one wantonly missed the prayer, if one knew it

11. There is a dispute in the *Gemara* regarding exactly how to define *Pesach sheni* (*Pesachim* 93a–b), but, for our purposes, I will regard it as a *tashlumin*, compensation.

12. Here, again, there are two views in the *Gemara* (*Chagiga* 9a) whether this is regarded as *tashlumin*, compensatory, or not.

13. *Tosafot*, *Pesachim* 107a, s.v. *Ameimar*; *Rosh*, *Pesachim* 10:13; *Rambam*, *Hilkhos Shabbat* 29:4; see *Tur* and *Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chayim* 299:6.

Return and Renewal

was taking place but did not want to stop what he was doing and pray – such a person is denied the opportunity to make it up later.

Teshuva is a kind of *tashlumin*, an opportunity to amend that which one did not avail himself of initially, and it is an opportunity grounded in *rachamei*. *Rachamei* here has a dual sense. On God's part, it is an expression of compassion and kindness. It defies all logic to turn back the clock, to restructure the past; this is divine *chesed*. On our part, it means a plea, turning to God out of the depths of our remorse and our desire, not only to amend but to build. And where there is *rachamei* on our part and on His, then, indeed, the great burden of trying to review one's life, with all the concern and all the anxiety accompanying that review, is then channeled into *teshuva*. This introspection into one's actions and into the path of one's life, which in one respect is so difficult and perhaps tormenting, becomes – to the extent that it is our *rachamei* and His *rachamei* – so uplifting, so ennobling. It becomes, indeed, a manifestation and a realization of the opportunity to restore everything we had missed and which now, in the infinite kindness of the Almighty, we are able to sustain and to develop.

We do not want to be like the prisoner in Rabbeinu Yona's *midrash*: not to be prisoners of ourselves, of our past, or of our failure. If we have within us the spiritual resources, the desire to move, to build, and to avail ourselves of that remarkable *chesed* of the Almighty – the *chesed* of *teshuva*, of forgiveness and atonement, of the remission of sin and of punishment, and, above all, the *chesed* of the restoration of our relation to Him – then what might seem almost an unbearably difficult task becomes a source of joy. Then we encounter the Almighty receiving us, opening the gates, “*Petach lanu sha'ar... ki fana yom*, Open the gate for us... for day is nearly past” (*Ne'ila* prayer).