Unconditional Repentance

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Translated by Kaeren Fish

The Torah's description of the Yom Kippur service opens on a seemingly negative note:

And God said to Moshe: Speak to Aharon your brother, that he not come into the holy place at any time. (Vayikra 16:2)

It focuses not on the holy day itself but rather on the other days of the year, prohibiting entry into the Holy of Holies. Nevertheless, we can learn from this verse a vital lesson concerning Yom Kippur itself, and concerning our attitude towards teshuva (repentance).

"What is teshuva?" asks the Rambam. He answers:

That the sinner leave his sin, remove it from his thoughts, and resolve in his heart not to repeat it… and THE KNOWER OF SECRETS CAN TESTIFY ON HIS BEHALF THAT HE WILL NEVER RETURN TO THIS SIN… (Hilkhot Teshuva 2:2)

This is one of the most difficult laws in all of the Rambam's writings. Many pens and many hearts have broken over these words. There are two ways of understanding them: the simpler and more extreme interpretation claims that unless teshuva is absolute and final, it is not considered teshuva at all. The Lechem Mishneh, on the other hand, maintains that a person fulfills the mitzva of teshuva at the time when he intends it, even if he later repeats the sin; the Rambam simply intends that the penitent should have in mind that the Holy One is witness to his teshuva.

The Lechem Mishneh fails to reassure us, because deep in our hearts we know that it is the first interpretation that demands our allegiance. It is possible that the MITZVA of teshuva was fulfilled at the time, and is not nullified retroactively by the repetition of the sin. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the PROGRESS that teshuva is supposed to bring – if one repeats his sin hasn't his teshuva lost its entire significance? Each year we come back to Yom Kippur with a strong feeling of deja vu; we know the whole procedure by heart. And we also know the script for after Yom Kippur: back to tests and failures; often – the same tests, with the same failures. What, then, we ask ourselves, is the point? (I would like to address this question from a slightly different angle than did Rav Lichtenstein shlit"a in this year's Rosh Ha-shana mailing.)

In the last century, two great Torah sages revealed new insights into the concept of teshuva. While the early sources give the impression that the crux of teshuva is the correction of sin, Rav Soloveitchik zt"l and Rav Kook zt"l both taught that its purpose is the correction of man. Of course, man's deviation and corruption are expressed in his sins, but the real source of the problem is man's distance from his Creator. Rav Soloveitchik speaks of the penitent as a person who creates and redeems himself. Rav Kook describes a teshuva that is necessary even in the absence of a specific sin, a teshuva that arises from the distance between the Holy One and His creations. Both focus on the change and the elevation that take place within the inner recesses of the soul.

This perspective may hold the key to a solution, but once again we must ask: What is the point of the soul being elevated and illuminated if ultimately we find ourselves once again mired in sin, continuing to commit wrongdoings, precisely as we did before? Can this really be called elevation and correction, or is it no more than an illusion?

In fact, the question expresses a certain illusion that has imposed itself on our thinking about teshuva. The problem lies in our mistake in thinking that teshuva must be absolute: all or nothing. The truth is that the principle that "there is no person so righteous in all the world that he does only good and never sins" applies also to a penitent. Ignoring this fact makes the process of teshuva unrealistic. Our mistake is to perform conditional teshuva: it is conditional on the fact that we will never sin again, and if sometime we do come to stumble, then in our minds we retroactively nullify our previous teshuva. This nullification has no objective justification. We do it ourselves, through our own free choice.

Paradoxically, one of the sources for our mistake is the spiritual awakening associated with the powerful period in which we find ourselves, and which reaches its climax on Yom Kippur – the day when the evil inclination has no control, when we become like angels. The danger is greater for someone who merits the feeling to which we all aspire, a feeling of inner illumination, signifying that something is indeed "happening." The evil inclination sits quietly on Yom Kippur, preparing its trap for afterwards. It knows that every Yom Kippur comes to an end, and that failure will come sooner or later. Then it will present us with irrefutable evidence that our repentance was all a joke, not serious, short-lived; the awakening was only an illusion. It serves the purposes of the evil inclination to leave us alone for that one day, for it will reap its profits on the next Yom Kippur, which we approach with greater skepticism, lacking faith in ourselves, in our ability to truly elevate ourselves, in the influence of the special days when the Holy One is close to us and awaits our teshuva.

The Torah wishes to prevent us from falling into this trap, and so it declares, at the very outset of the Yom Kippur ritual: "Let him not come at all times into the holy place!" But we rush to the heart of the matter, without internalizing this message. We do not pay attention to the greatness and uniqueness of this period. Entry into the "holy place" is an awesome act – but it is a one-time phenomenon, a gift from another world, which we may use to improve the quality of our lives throughout the year. If we imagine that entry into the holy place is a model for imitation the whole year round, we actually diminish the value of these days of repentance. Moreover, they will not achieve their intended purpose.

"It was customary in Germany that even those who were not careful to avoid bread manufactured by non-Jews the whole year round, would take avoid it during the Ten Days of Repentance" (Tur, OC 603, based on the Yerushalmi). Whom are we trying to impress? Is hypocrisy a worthy attribute for someone who is engaged in teshuva? Surely not. But it was clear to our sages that during this period, standards are different. During this period we must be more intense, take greater care – beyond that which we do at any other time, in order that we may emerge from the teshuva period with gains that will improve our lives throughout the rest of the year.

This special period is meant to awaken us, to penetrate our hearts with its purity. But concerning the process of teshuva itself, we must remember: its purpose is to carry us forward, to elevate our efforts to new levels, but certainly not "all or nothing." If someone invests all his consciousness and ability in the period of teshuva, then his investment is always significant – even if the person himself does not merit to sense its depth.

It is in the nature of teshuva to endow a person with peace and with solemnity simultaneously. Even the mere thought of teshuva is a comfort to him; in one tiny spark of its great light there is already to be found a lofty and elevated joy of a whole world. But together with this it confronts his mind continuously with the obligations of perfection, which save him from pride and bestow upon him a sweet light, which endows his life with great and abiding value…

It is necessary to deepen our faith in teshuva, and to be certain that even the mere thought of teshuva mends a great deal in oneself and in the world. It is inevitable that after every thought of teshuva, a person will be happier and more at peace with himself than he was before…

(Rav Kook, Orot Ha-teshuva 7:1, 7:6)

R. Tzadok ha-Kohen puts it differently, explaining that it is specifically the repeated battle with sin that characterizes a healthy and progressive process of teshuva:

Sometimes it seems to a person that he has performed teshuva and his sins have been forgiven, and then after some time he is aroused once again to bitterness over his sins, and he feels that these two thoughts are incompatible. But in truth both are genuine, for we hold that sins for which one confesses on Yom Kippur must be confessed again the next Yom Kippur - and this holds true even for sins which are forgiven immediately upon repentance... Just as there is no limit to the levels of a person, so is there no limit to the levels of teshuva… Therefore, when one arrives at a higher level, then according to that new level he has not yet embarked on his teshuva, and his sin is before him constantly as he rises from one level to the next. But when he is on the lowest level, he has already repented the sin according his level… But in any event, as he reaches a higher level, his sin returns to him in all its strength…

(Tzidkat Ha-tzaddik, 134)

Indeed, after a person has performed teshuva and has risen in his spiritual level, the duty to correct himself grows stronger accordingly. According to his new level, the sin is more serious, more disturbing, and the person is judged more harshly for it. Paradoxically, teshuva can give rise to a very strong sense of shame and disappointment, a feeling that was not possible at his previous level. But it is worth the pain: in order to merit standing in the place where only penitents stand, we are happy to pay the price; the responsibility will not deter us.

We call upon God, the Knower of all secrets, as our witness that we have embarked on the road of teshuva without any preconditions. We do this with the knowledge that even if we do not "return to THIS sin ever again," we have not guaranteed ourselves spiritual rest. We shall be ready psychologically for the new struggles that our teshuva itself will bring in its wake, with a "new sin." On the other hand, we shall stand firm – even if we stumble again into what looks like the familiar "this sin;" we shall know that this is not the case, for since then we have engaged in teshuva and the battle is now on a different level. Armed with this knowledge of the uniqueness of the act of teshuva and the period of teshuva, imbued with a desire to pursue the challenge continually upwards despite the difficulties involved, with this Aharon - and all of us - may approach the holy place.