YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**YHE-HOLIDAY: SPECIAL YOM KIPPUR 5777 PACKAGE**

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**In honor of our mother Mrs. Diana Weiner, with all our love and gratitude and with best wishes for a shana tov u-metuka!
Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise
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**Higher Repentance and Lower Repentance**

**By Rav Nechemia Raanan**

Translated by David Strauss

***Bina* (Understanding) and *Malkhut* (Kingdom)**

 The *Zohar* (*Ra'aya Mehemna* III, 122b) distinguishes between two types of repentance: "*teshuva ila'a*”– the higher level of repentance, and "*teshuva tata'a*” *–* lower-level repentance. Each type of repentance is connected to a different *Sefira* of the ten *Sefirot*: The higher level of repentance is connected to the second *Sefira* – the *Sefira* of *Bina* (understanding), whereas the lower level of repentance is connected to the tenth and final *Sefira* – the *Sefira* of *Malkhut* (kingdom).

 Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi – the first rebbe of Chabad – explains the difference between these two types of repentance at length in the *Tanya* (*Iggeret Ha-teshuva*, chapters 7-9):

The true and direct path to lower-level repentance… involves two general elements:

The first is to awaken supreme compassion from the Source of mercy for one's spirit and Divine soul, which has fallen from a lofty height, the Infinite Source of Life, into a deep pit, namely, the chambers of defilement and *sitra achra*…

The second element is to crush and subdue the *kelipa* and *sitra achra*, whose essence is simply grossness and arrogance… Crushing and subduing it to dust is its death and nullification. [Evil is crushed] through a broken and contrite heart, a sense of personal unworthiness, repugnance, and so forth…

And how is the heart to be broken and humbled? Only a very minor part of this can be accomplished through mortification and fasting… But the true humbling of the heart, so that it becomes broken and crushed, and so that the spirit of impurity and *sitra achra* will be removed, is achieved through being a "master of accounting" with all the profundity of one's mind. One should concentrate his intellect and understanding deeply for a period of time every day, or every night before *Tikkun Chatzot*, to contemplate how his sins have brought about the exile of the Divine Presence, as noted above, and caused his spirit and Divine soul to be uprooted from the Divine Source of all Life, and demeaned it to a place of defilement and death…

After deeply considering all this… his heart will be thoroughly impressed with the pathetic state of the spark of Divinity within his soul, and [in his soul's Source] Above, as noted earlier. He will thereby arouse Supreme mercy, from the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy which derive from the Supreme Will… There is no further nurture for the evil (lit., "extraneous") forces and for the *sitra achra*… After the spirit [of forgiveness] passes over [the souls of sinners] and purifies them, their souls are then enabled to return literally unto God Himself, to ascend the greatest heights, to their very Source, and cleave to Him with a remarkable unity… This is perfect repentance. This state of unity and this repentance are called *teshuva ila'a*, higher-level repentance, which follows *teshuva tata'a*, lower-level repentance.

 *Malkhut* is the lowermost of the ten *Sefirot*, which is the furthest point of Divine revelation, the closest to the material world. The *Sefira* of *Malkhut* is where the word of God turns into physical reality, as is stated: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (*Tehillim* 33:6). Lower-level repentance, which is identified with the *Sefira* of *Malkhut*, is repentance that focuses on eradicating one's sins and achieving atonement – both by praying to God that He have mercy upon the soul that has sinned, and by humbling one's heart.

 In contrast, *Bina* is the second highest *Sefira*, and it expresses the initial point of the Divine revelation in this world. *Bina* is likened in kabbalistic writings to *Ima*, mother, whose “descendants” are the *Sefirot* that follow it – *Chesed*, *Gevura*, and the others. Therefore, higher-level repentance – which is connected to the *Sefira* of *Bina –* is repentance that returns the soul to the highest spiritual levels, to actual cleaving to God.

 Just as the *Shekhina* reveals itself in the world through the ten *Sefirot*, so too the personality of man – who was created in the image of God – reveals itself in the structure of the ten *Sefirot.* In the human soul, the *Sefira* of *Bina* is very close to the deepest aspects of the individual's personality, whereas the *Sefira* of *Malkhut* is the manner in which the individual's personality is realized in actions.

 Higher-level repentance should involve a struggle with a person's very identity, bringing it to perfection. It is concerned not with external actions or with the manner in which the individual's personality finds expression in the real world, but with the depths of that personality. This repentance should bring about a revolution in the person's inner world. This itself will lead to a change in his behavior as well. In contrast, lower-level repentance – which is directed at the *Sefira* of *Malkhut* – struggles directly with a person's actions, with his deeds and sins, and wishes to perfect the individual's conduct in the world.

**Repentance Through Free Will**

 Who is charged with the task of repentance in each of its forms? This issue is the subject of a disagreement between leading medieval authorities.

 According to the Rambam, it is the individual who stands at the center of repentance, and the responsibility to engage in repentance is wholly on him:

Free will is granted to all men. 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 be wicked, the choice is his… There is no one who can prevent him from doing good or evil. Just as a person can sin consciously and willfully, he can repent consciously and willfully. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:1, 6:2)

 According to the Rambam, God does not play an active role in the process of repentance. God's role is to observe man and examine the sincerity of his repentance, as full repentance involves reaching the state where "He who knows the hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again" (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 2:2). Indeed, the idea of free will plays a central role in the Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuva*, as his entire conception of repentance is based upon this idea.

This is true of lower-level repentance. But according to the Rambam, this is also true of higher-level repentance. The first two chapters of *Hilkhot Teshuva* deal with repentance for specific sins. This repentance is focused on fixing the sin and purifying one's soul of it, and the objective is "that he will never return to that sin again":

If a person transgresses any of the *mitzvot* of the Torah, whether a positive command or a negative command – whether willingly or inadvertently – when he repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess before God, blessed be He…

What constitutes repentance? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart never to commit them again… Similarly, he must regret the past… [He must reach the level where] He who knows the hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again…

Among the paths of repentance is for the penitent to a) constantly call out before God, crying and entreating; b) perform charity according to his ability; c) separate himself far from the object of his sin; d) change his name, as if to say "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned;" e) change his behavior in its entirety to the good and the path of righteousness; and f) travel in exile from his home. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 1:1-2:4)

 Later the Rambam deals with the exalted level of repentance, and there he mentions that repentance brings a person close to the *Shekhina* and allows him to cleave to it:

Great is repentance, for it draws a man close to the *Shekhina*, as it is stated (*Hoshea* 14:2): "Return, O Israel, to the Lord, your God";… and it is stated (*Yirmeyahu* 4:1): "If you will return, 0 Israel, declares God, You will return to Me." That is to say, if you will repent, you will cling to Me.

Repentance brings near those who were far removed. Previously, this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed, and abominable. Now, he is beloved and desirable, close, and dear… As it is stated (*Hoshea* 2:1): "Instead of saying to you, You are not My nation, He will tell you, You are the children of the living God"…

How exalted is the level of repentance! Previously, the [transgressor] was separate from God, the Lord of Israel… He would call out [to God] without being answered… Now, he is clinging to the *Shekhina*… He calls out [to God] and is answered immediately… He fulfills *mitzvot* and they are accepted with pleasure and joy… And what is more they are desired… (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 7:6-7)

 The repentance mentioned here by the Rambam parallels higher-level repentance, whose objective is cleaving to the *Shekhina* and returning to God. But, according to the Rambam, this repentance is the result of the process of lower-level repentance, which is the sole responsibility of the individual. Free will is granted to every person to engage in repentance, a process which can only be undertaken "consciously and willingly."

**Partnership In Repentance**

In contrast to the Rambam, the Ramban maintains that God joins man and helps him in the process of repentance.

According to the Ramban, repentance commanded by the Torah: “For the passage ‘And you shall call them to mind… and shall return to the Lord your God’ (*Devarim* 30:1-2) – is a *mitzva* that He commands us to do” (commentary on *Devarim* 30:11). In order to understand the essence of repentance according to the Ramban, we must examine the verses in this passage.

 The passage dealing with repentance opens with initial and general repentance, which is when the sinner is ready to obey the voice of God:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you shall call them to mind among all the nations, into which the Lord your God has driven you, and shall return to the Lord your God, and shall obey His voice according to all that I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul. (*Devarim* 30:1-2)

This repentance appears to be general in nature and is still deficient. It is motivated by suffering that the person experienced, and not by an inner awakening to repentance. The repentance is "*ad Hashem*," to God, but without actually reaching Him. The individual does not yet return "*el Hashem*," all the way to God, as he does later in the chapter (*Devarim* 30:10). What is more, the Torah merely writes that the person obeys the voice of God, but does not indicate whether he fulfills all the statues and commandments, as in the later verses (*Devarim* 30:10). Indeed, Rabbi Avraham Y. Kook sees these verses as relating to repentance that is still filled with hindrances, as was exemplified by the movement of national revival that arose in his time:

When one truly wishes to repent, even if he is blocked by various hindrances, e.g., because of confusion, or because of weakness, or because of an inability to mend matters relating to interpersonal relations… nevertheless, since the desire to repent is strong, even though he is still unable to remove all the hindrances, we must accept this illumination of repentance as something that purifies and sanctifies…

And just as this is a great principle regarding the individual, so too this applies to the community as a whole. The illumination of repentance is found in Israel. A willing awakening of the nation as a whole to return to its homeland, its essence, its spirit and its nature – indeed, it contains the light of repentance.

Indeed, this matter finds clear expression in the wording of the Torah: "And you shall return to (*ad*) the Lord your God… And if you turn to (*el*) the Lord your God." Repentance is an inner process, only it is covered by many buffering screens – but no hindrance has the power to prevent the heavenly light from appearing upon us. (*Orot Ha-teshuva* 17:2)

 The second stage in the process of repentance is God's response to man's actions:

And then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations, among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are at the utmost parts of heaven, from there will the Lord your God gather you, and from there will He fetch you: and the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you more than your fathers. (*Devarim* 30:3-5)

 In response to Israel's initial repentance, God gathers them from their dispersion and returns them to their homeland. The beginning of the process was indeed in the hands of man, but its continuation is in the hands of God.

 The third stage in the repentance process – which is described in the verses that follow – is complete inner repentance, and it includes circumcision of the heart, keeping all the statutes and commandments, and returning to God. As is clear from the verses, in this stage as well, a major and important role is played by God:

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your seed, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live. And the Lord your God will put all these curses upon your enemies, and on them who hate you, who persecuted you. And you shall return, and obey the voice of the Lord, and do all His commandments which I command you this day. And the Lord your God will make you plenteous in every work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your land, for good: for the Lord will again rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers: if you shall hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statues which are written in this book of the Torah, and if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul. (*Devarim* 30:6-10)

 The process described in these verses is a circular one. The people of Israel open with weak repentance, based on impure motivations, but this repentance suffices to move forward the continuation of the process by God. After God restores His people to their land and circumcises their hearts, Israel reaches the lofty repentance of returning to God.

 Using the distinction between the different types of repentance discussed above, it may be suggested that the people of Israel open with lower-level repentance, and God helps them engage in higher-level repentance. The people of Israel are initially motivated by the troubles encountered in their exile, but in the end they are driven by a quest for God's closeness, a desire to return to Him. Man is asked to open the door, and the process is then completed by God.

 For this reason, the Torah explains that this process, which ultimately leads to high levels of closeness to the *Shekhina*, is in fact a simple matter:

For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not hidden from you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it. (*Devarim* 30:11-14)

 A person must do with his mouth and with his heart that which is in his power to do, and he will receive Divine assistance to complete his course of repentance. Rabbi Chayyim of Chernovitz explains: "When it is truly in your heart and in your mouth, then 'to do it,' the Holy One, blessed be He, becomes your agent to perfect it and to do it" (*Sidduro shel Shabbat* I, 6, 2, 5).

The primary difference between the Rambam and the Ramban lies in their respective perceptions of the essence of repentance. According to the Rambam, the *mitzva* of repentance relates to lower-level repentance, which is the sole responsibility of man, whereas the Ramban posits that the *mitzva* of repentance includes the entire process – until higher-level repentance is reached. In other words, according to the Rambam, the *mitzva* of repentance calls upon the sinner to assume responsibility and totally change his ways by force of his own will, whereas the Ramban believes that the *mitzva* of repentance demands a person to open the door to change and then hope for Divine grace that will help him bring about a revolution in his personality.

For this reason, the Ramban sees the Biblical passage dealing with repentance as the source for the *mitzva* of repentance, while the Rambam maintains that this passage should be understood as a promise for the future, and not as a command:

The Torah has already promised that, ultimately, Israel will repent towards the end of her exile and, immediately, she will be redeemed as it is stated (*Devarim* 30:1-3): "And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you… and you shall return to the Lord your God… Then the Lord your God will return your captivity." (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 7:5)

**Open Up For Me An Opening Like The Eye Of A Needle**

In light of the Ramban’s explanation, we can explain a Midrash that is based on two seemingly contradictory verses:

"Turn us to You, O Lord, and we shall be turned" (*Eikha* 5:21) – The people of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, it is up to you – turn us. He said to them: It is up to you, as it is stated (*Zekharya* 1:3): "Return to Me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts." (*Eikha Rabba* 5, 21)

 The Midrash works on the assumption that repentance is a joint process, which involves both man and God as partners. The people of Israel and God disagree about who must initiate the process: The people of Israel ask God to begin the process, as it is stated: "Turn us to You, and we shall be turned"; whereas God demands that the people of Israel turn to Him first so that He may turn to them, as it is stated: "Return to Me, and I will return to you." In another Midrash we find a compromise between these two positions:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: My son, Open up for me an opening of repentance like the eye of a needle, and in turn I will open up an opening for you through which wagons can enter. (*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 5, 2)

 It is man’s responsibility to start the process of repentance. He must initiate by admitting to his sins and repenting for them. In this way he opens up an opening for God as small as the eye of a needle. But once the door is open, the *Shekhina* bursts through and expands the opening to be as large as the opening of the entrance hall of the Temple. Once man sets the repentance process in motion, with lower-level repentance, he is promised that God will circumcise his heart, draw him close, and complete the repentance process, turning it into higher-level repentance.