



GEULAS YISRAEL

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RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

Imperfect Teshuvah

Elul is here, and our thoughts turn toward teshuva. Human beings are endowed with the extraordinary gift of free will. We normally exercise that freedom by making choices about the world around us: where to live, which profession to pursue, whom to marry, and how to shape our lives.

Teshuva demands a far bolder exercise of that freedom. Instead of choosing what we will do or where we will go, we turn the looking glass inward and ask who we want to become. Teshuva rests upon the audacious belief that we are not prisoners of the people we have become. The person we have become does not have to be the person we remain.

THE DREAM OF כְּדָם

Our ambitions for this process are extraordinarily high. The conclusion of Eicha sets the tone:

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁכַּח, חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם.

“Return us to You, Hashem, and we will return; renew our days as of old.”

Chazal understand כְּדָם as a yearning to return to עולם של עולם, to the original state of the world, to Gan Eden before Man disobeyed the will of Hashem. Teshuva aims at more than small improvements. We dream of restoring something that has been lost, of returning to a purer version of ourselves before sin and failure took their toll.

Each of us has had our own Gan Eden moments, periods when we were better than we are now and more faithful to Hashem. Since then, we may have betrayed Hashem, surrendered to weakness, or fallen short religiously. Teshuva asks us to walk back toward the person we once were, and ultimately toward the person we were meant to be.

THE REALITY OF IMPERFECT TESHUVAH

Yet the greater our ambitions for teshuva, the more painfully aware we become of the distance between those ambitions and the teshuva we actually perform. We yearn for כְּדָם, but we know ourselves too well. We have seen this movie before. We confess our sins, sincerely resolve to change, and too often find ourselves returning to the same behavior. It is difficult not to feel a measure of hypocrisy as we recite viduy.

In fact, one of the confessions we recite is **עַל חַטָּא שְׁחָטָנוּ לַפְנֵיךְ בִּידוּי פַה**, for the sin of confessing with our mouths without producing genuine change. There is a painful irony in this confession. We acknowledge that previous confessions did not always lead

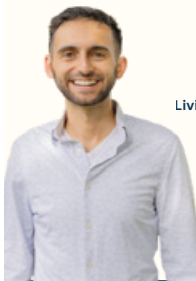


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to change, even as we wonder whether our present confession will fare any better. Even our confession for **פה וידוי** risks becoming yet another **פה וידוי**.

This tension lies at the heart of our experience of teshuva. We yearn for nothing less than **נקדמ**, yet experience teaches us how incomplete our teshuva may remain. The question, then, is what value does imperfect teshuva possess? If our motives are mixed and our resolutions uncertain, does our teshuva still count?

Chazal already recognized that teshuva need not be perfect to be genuine. The Gemara distinguishes between **teshuva me'ahava**, repentance motivated by love, and **teshuva me'yirah**, repentance driven by fear. The Rambam draws a different distinction. He describes the highest caliber of repentance as **teshuva gemurah**, complete teshuva, implying that there is also genuine teshuva which falls short of that ideal.

Yet even these lower forms presume a fairly advanced process of teshuva. The sinner has recognized his failure, regretted it, and consciously turned toward change. The Torah takes us back to even earlier stages of teshuva. It records far more basic and compromised forms of teshuva, moments when people have barely begun the journey of return. Remarkably, even these first steps are treated as meaningful acts of teshuva.

ACKNOWLEDGING SIN

Kayin was the first person to embark upon teshuva. Adam and Chava, despite committing a sin that altered the course of human history, never embarked upon a process of return. They couldn't imagine that teshuva was even possible.

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גדול עוני מנשוא

"Is my sin too great for You to bear?"

There are many interpretations of this oblique phrase, but on a literal level Kayin is asking whether his sin is really too great for Hashem to bear. His response is insolent: surely the Creator of the entire universe can bear his crime without exacting punishment. This truculent response leads Chazal to describe Kayin at this moment as:

נעשה כגונב דעת העליונה

"He acted as though he could deceive the Divine mind."

Yet beneath this defiant response lies the first glimmer of teshuva. Simply by referring to his behavior as a *sin*, Kayin acknowledges that he has committed a crime.

Acknowledgment is the first step toward teshuva. Without accepting guilt, the process of teshuva cannot begin.



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LOOKING BACKWARD

Close to two thousand years later, the Torah records a second form of incomplete teshuva. The brothers had sold Yosef into slavery in Egypt and assumed that their secret was safe.

Two decades later, they become entangled in Egypt, accused of being foreign agents. As their predicament becomes more severe, they experience an awakening:

אבל אשמים אנחנו על אחינו...

“Indeed, we are guilty concerning our brother...”

They connect the dots. Their current struggles are a consequence of their crime decades earlier. More than merely acknowledging a sin, they understand that sins carry consequences, something Kayin was unable to fully accept.

They also realize that sins have a lasting impact. They travel back in time and reexamine their past conduct. The Rambam writes in Hilchot Teshuva (2:8) that even sins confessed in the past should be confessed again on subsequent Yom Kippurs. Teshuva requires us to continue confronting earlier chapters of our lives.

The brothers’ teshuva isn’t perfect. They never voice their apology directly to Yosef, and their remorse appears, at least initially, to be prompted by fear of consequences. Yet they achieve something significant. They admit their sin, accept that it carries consequences, and widen the lens through which they examine their lives.

VIDUY

About a thousand years later, yet another form of imperfect teshuva is recorded. After returning to Israel and witnessing that only about 42,000 Jews had come back from the Diaspora, it becomes clear to Nechemiah that they cannot rebuild Jewish life without

accounting for the misdeeds that contributed to the collapse of the First Mikdash. Nechemiah orchestrates a public confession in which they articulate their sins.

Yet despite this public accounting, not everything changes. They had taken foreign wives, and despite their contrition, many refused to separate from them. Many of the behaviors they confessed remained unchanged.

Still, through this confession they advance the arc of teshuva. The brothers’ declaration, **אבל אשמים אנחנו**, was a spontaneous recognition of guilt, not a formal act of confession undertaken as part of a process of teshuva. Nechemiah and his generation take the next step. They deliberately gather to confess, reviewing their past and giving explicit verbal expression to their failures. Their confession begins to resemble our own viduy.

There is a reason teshuva demands formal confession rather than allowing remorse to remain buried within our thoughts. Ideas left unspoken remain nebulous. By articulating our sins, we make them concrete and force ourselves to confront what we have done. This confrontation produces pain and shame over our failures, difficult but crucial emotions in the process of teshuva.

Nechemiah’s generation does not achieve *complete* teshuva. Their behavior does not fully match their confession. But they have advanced beyond recognizing guilt and understanding its consequences. They have turned acknowledgment into viduy.

None of these forms of teshuva were complete or perfect. That is exactly the point. The Torah records these incomplete forms of teshuva to provide hope for us. We certainly aspire to a teshuva that will far exceed these limited examples. Yet our teshuva may never

be the perfect teshuva we dream of. It may be laced with doubt, inconsistency, and even hypocrisy. Despite its flaws and limitations, however, it is still teshuva, and it is still accepted by Hashem.

ONE DAY, TESHUVAH WILL BE PERFECT

Imperfect teshuva is not our final destination. The Torah also promises that history will ultimately culminate in a very different kind of teshuva. In Parshat Nitzavim the Torah writes:

ושבת עד ה' אלוֹקֶיךָ

“And you will return to Hashem your God.”

The Rambam, in Hilchot Teshuva, perek 7, views this pasuk as a prophecy that ultimately, at the end of time, every Jew will perform teshuva. Hashem's presence will be so clear and unmistakable that everyone will recognize His authority and repent for their sins. That teshuva will be complete, inspired by a Divine presence that can no longer be ignored or denied.

Until that day of perfect teshuva, we have our own imperfect teshuva. It is human teshuva, often flawed and incomplete. We should strive for more, but we should never dismiss the teshuva we are capable of achieving. It may not be **teshuva gemurah**, but it is still teshuva, and it is accepted by HaKadosh Baruch Hu. ■



Rabbi Moshe Taragin's latest sefer entitled: **Reclaiming Redemption, Vol. II: Faith, Identity, Peoplehood, and the Storms of War**, is available at: mtaraginbooks.com.

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