



A Teshuva Brimming With Confidence

“Rabbi Eliezer says: ...repent one day before your death...” (Pirkei Avot 2:10)

This statement in the Mishnah is explained by the question Rabbi Eliezer’s students asked: “How is one to know the day one will die?” Rabbi Eliezer responded, in essence, “That is exactly what I meant. Since one is never certain that one will not die the next day, one should do teshuva every day” (Shabbat 153a).

Rav Kook raises a fascinating question regarding Rabbi Eliezer’s teaching: Why did the great sage specifically say that one should repent “one day before one’s death” rather than simply say that one should repent every day because one might suddenly pass from this world?



Title page from Rav Kook’s ‘Orot HaTeshuva’

Rav Kook answers that the phrase “one day before” represents a profound lesson about the ideal way to engage in teshuva. Had Rabbi Eliezer simply said that one should do teshuva every day because one might die at any moment, this teshuva would likely be characterized primarily by fear and remorse. One would focus on *charatah al ha’avar*, remorse for past sins - a last-minute effort centered on guilt and regret. Such teshuva, however, would be sorely lacking in *kabbalah al ha’atid*: a commitment to the future, an optimistic vision for a more noble life.

It is for this reason, says Rav Kook, that Rabbi Eliezer carefully chose his words: “Repent one day before your death.” “One day” means that there is a day to plan for and to live fully. Teshuva is not meant to lead to morbidity or depression. One of Rav Kook’s most lasting and inspiring messages is that teshuva should be invigorating and uplifting, inspiring a Jew to live his or her best life (Midbar Shor, Drush #10, cited in *Nelcha Ad HaRo’eh, Iyun B’Pirkei Avot*, Slav, p. 82).

EATING AND FASTING

In a similar vein, Rav Kook applies this



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idea to the obligation to eat on *erev Yom Kippur*. Based on the Torah's verse concerning Yom Kippur, "And you shall afflict your soul on the ninth of the month in the evening," the Talmud derives that one must eat and drink on the day leading into Yom Kippur.

It is surprising that the Torah identifies Yom Kippur with the ninth day of Tishrei when the day of its observance is the tenth. Apparently, the Torah chose to place emphasis on the ninth day as well. Why?

Rav Kook explains that Yom Kippur, with all its solemnity and emphasis on restraint and restriction, represents one dimension of teshuva: limiting our interaction with the physical world and entering a kind of angelic state. Yet this is only one facet of teshuva. Teshuva is also beautifully reflected in one's ability to live life with energy - to eat and drink, to engage with the physical world, and to transform those experiences into an expression of *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*, acceptance of God's heavenly kingship.

The Talmud says that "one who eats on *erev Yom Kippur* is tantamount to fasting on the day of Yom Kippur" (Berachot 8b). In what way can eating and drinking possibly be compared to the solemnity of the twenty-four-hour fast of Yom Kippur?

Rav Kook suggests that this is precisely the point. The Yom Kippur fast represents only half the story of what true teshuva entails. It is a day of asceticism and *inuy*, affliction, designed to inspire introspection and self-evaluation.

The other dimension of teshuva, epitomized by the eating and drinking of the day before Yom Kippur, is a teshuva of action and engagement with life - a teshuva in which one propels oneself toward growth and self-actualization. Both aspects of teshuva are

necessary to achieve the fullness and nobility of repentance (*Ein Ayah*, Berachot, chapter 1, piska #103).

"ONE DAY"

Rav Kook adds another beautiful insight regarding the Mishnah in Avot and Rabbi Eliezer's emphasis on doing teshuva "one day" before death. From a psychological perspective, when engaging in teshuva, a person can easily feel overwhelmed by the thought that it will be nearly impossible to maintain a change in behavior over the long term. The weight of that burden can become so great that a person chooses not to embark on the journey at all.

It is for this reason that Rabbi Eliezer suggests "one day." There is no need to overthink how long a new commitment must be maintained or to become discouraged by imagining the years ahead. Simply choose to do it for today. Focus on the immediate future.

A person can more easily commit to improved behavior or a particular practice knowing that he or she only needs to maintain it for a short time. Perhaps, without the pressure of thinking about the distant future, that newly adopted behavior continues into a second and third day. Eventually, almost unexpectedly, one discovers that the change has become part of one's life and that one has reached a new plateau in spiritual growth (Midbar Shor, Drush #10).



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Rav Kook was known to have had a close affinity for the teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. It is noteworthy that Rebbe Nachman expresses a similar idea: often, the key to making a lasting change is simply to focus on today rather than looking too far into the future. He quotes the verse, “On this day, if you hear His voice” (Tehillim 95:7). When a person feels that the burden is too great, he may simply refuse to carry it. But when the task is manageable, a person is willing to give it his best effort (*Likutei Moharan*, I, 272).

FORGING AHEAD

One of the most exhilarating themes Rav Kook conveys in *Orot HaTeshuva* is the notion that the process of teshuva should be accompanied by optimism and that a person should feel energized and revived through the experience. We should avoid a form of teshuva that is emotionally exhausting or paralyzing. When the process becomes overly weighty and we lose our sense of joy, we need to find a path of teshuva that is refreshing and invigorating.

Rav Kook expresses this idea beautifully:

“At times it is best to avoid thoughts of holiness and teshuva when they come in the spirit of melancholy. The joy that flows from the depth of holiness is greater than other expressions of holiness and teshuva. When thoughts of fear and teshuva occur to a person in a

spirit of melancholy, let him distract his mind from them until his mind becomes more settled” (*Orot HaTeshuva*, 14:11).

Rav Kook strongly advises that joy and optimism be essential components of the pursuit of change and self-improvement. If anxious or depressing thoughts related to teshuva begin to surface, it may be best to step back until more encouraging and invigorating thoughts become predominant.

Rav Kook also teaches us to recognize the positivity that emerges from the decision to change itself. Even before embarking on the process, and even before knowing exactly how one will proceed, the moment a person decides that it is time to improve or change can itself be energizing and uplifting:

“Although at the time he may be perplexed how to extricate himself from the mire of sin, although he may still be unsure how to mend all his past and his course is not yet clearly marked out to him, with many stumbling blocks yet facing him, the will to be good—this is a wind from the Garden of Eden blowing on the soul and filling it with contentment, to a point that even the hellish fires of remorse are turned into a source of delight” (*Orot HaTeshuva*, 16:4).

There is something profoundly satisfying about tapping into one’s will to do good and beginning the journey of growth.

Rav Kook offers one final teaching that captures this entire approach in a single sentence: “The focus of teshuva must always be directed toward improving the future” (*Orot HaTeshuva*, 13:11).

Although one of the essential aspects of teshuva is *charatah al ha’avar*, remorse for past wrongdoing, Rav Kook urges us not to dwell endlessly on our history or harp on our missteps. The past must be acknowledged,

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but the purpose of teshuva is ultimately to propel us forward. We are meant to look with optimism and confidence toward the future and envision a brighter and better life.

A TESHUVA OF CONFIDENCE

Perhaps this is the deepest message of Rav Kook's vision of teshuva. Teshuva is not fundamentally a story of looking backward with shame; it is a story of looking forward with hope. The past may teach us where we have fallen short, but it does not have to determine where we are going. Every day offers the possibility of beginning again, and even a single day can become the starting point for lasting transformation.

That is why Rabbi Eliezer tells us to repent "one day before your death." We are not being asked to carry the burden of an entire lifetime at once. We are being asked to live today differently, to make one meaningful decision, take one step forward, and allow that step to lead to another. The teshuva of Rav Kook is therefore not a teshuva of despair, but a teshuva brimming with confidence: confidence in the power of the human spirit, confidence in the possibility of change, and above all, confidence that the future can be better than the past.

Rav Kook teaches that we should certainly reflect on where we have been, but we should not remain there. We should ask ourselves not only, "What must I regret?" but also, and perhaps more importantly, "What kind of person can I become?" The answer begins not tomorrow, and not sometime in the distant future, but with the one day that is in front of us today. ■



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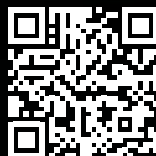
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