

Why Does Teshuvah Work?

by Rav Gil Student

As Elul arrives and Rosh Hashanah approaches, we need to start thinking about *teshuvah*, about how we can build positively on all the events of tumultuous past year so that we are better Jews in the upcoming year. I would like to explore two different ways to think about *teshuvah* and the implications that arise from those different approaches.

I. How Does Teshuvah Work?

Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah* 2:4) says that among the ways of *teshuvah* is you change your name (or nickname) as if to say, "I am someone else, not the person who did those actions." To Rambam, part of the *teshuvah* process is changing yourself so that your new personality is disassociated from the sins. You have grown and no longer deserve punishment for past actions. In this accounting, *teshuvah* is *emes*, truth, justice.

Rav Elchanan Wasserman (*Kovetz Ma'amarim, Ma'amar Al Teshuvah*, 1991 edition p. 23) illustrates this approach by quoting the Gemara (*Kiddushin* 40b) that someone righteous all his life who rebels at the end loses all his merits because he regrets his past good deeds. From the perspective of religious standing, regret undoes past actions. If regretting past good deeds causes someone to lose his merits, regretting past sins should cause you to lose your punishment. That is the just, true outcome.

In contrast, Rabbeinu Yonah (*Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:1) argues that *teshuvah* has no place in justice. You committed the sins and deserve punishment for them. It is only through divine kindness, *chesed*, a *tovah*, that we can erase our past misdeeds. The prophet Yirmiyahu describes it as "*erpa meshuvoseichem*, I will heal their repented deeds" (3:22). *Teshuvah* consists of divine healing of our past that otherwise would require punishment.

II. Teshuvah's Steps

Rambam (*ibid.*, 2:2) lists four steps to *teshuvah*: 1) stopping the sinful act, 2) regretting the sin, 3) accepting to never return to the sin, 4) confessing to G-d for the act. Other Jewish thinkers divide the steps somewhat differently. Rav Sa'adia Gaon (*Emunos Ve-Dei'os* 5:5) adds a fifth step of asking for forgiveness. Rabbeinu Yonah (*ibid.*, ch. 1) offers a more detailed *teshuvah* program with twenty steps that include changes in attitudes as well as behaviors.

What if you only start the first step of *teshuvah*? Are you divinely forgiven at the beginning or only when you complete the course? If *teshuvah* is a matter of justice, then only when you have completely changed into a new person then you achieve forgiveness. However, if *teshuvah* is a result of divine mercy, then perhaps anyone who starts on the path of repentance merits that mercy. In fact, we find that Rav Moshe of Trani (*Mabit, Beis Elokim* 2:1) says that *teshuvah* is a function of divine *chesed* and mercy and later (2:2) says that even though Rabbeinu Yonah lists twenty steps of *teshuvah*, you receive forgiveness after only the two steps of regretting and stopping the sin.

The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 49b) says that if a man marries a woman on condition that he is righteous, then he is married even if until then he was wicked. As soon as he does *teshuvah* in his thoughts, he is considered righteous. According to Rabbeinu Yonah, we understand why this would be the case since *teshuvah* is a function of mercy. You can stop sinning and regret the sin in your thoughts, even without

fulfilling the other steps. According to Rambam that *teshuvah* is a function of *emes*, justice, the later commentaries have to distinguish between being righteous and achieving forgiveness. You are righteous even if you repent in your thoughts but you achieve forgiveness only after following all the steps of *teshuvah* (see *Minchas Chinuch* 364:1).

III. Extra Teshuvah

Medieval Ashkenazic authorities prescribed a variety of strong acts of self-induced suffering as part of the *teshuvah* process, including long-term fasting, lashes, exile and more. Rabbeinu Peretz (Gloss to *Semak*, no. 53) lists four kinds of *teshuvah*:

- 1) *teshuvah charatah*, in which you regret the sin;
- 2) *teshuvah ha-geder*, in which you set additional boundaries for yourself to avoid sinning in the future;
- 3) *teshuvah ha-kasuv*, in which you undergo the punishment listed in the Torah for your sin;
- 4) *teshuvah ha-mishkal*, in which you inflict yourself with pain corresponding to the amount of pleasure you enjoyed with your sin.

Of these four, the first is what we consider standard *teshuvah* and the second is going above and beyond. The third and fourth are not — and should not be — practiced today. The Vilna Gaon's brother (*Ma'alos Ha-Torah*, introduction) makes clear that we cannot undergo these harsh forms of *teshuvah* in our time (his time, even more so in our time) and emerge physically and religiously healthy. Instead, he recommends intense Torah study.

If *teshuvah* is an element of justice, what value is there going beyond the official steps? Once you have fulfilled the steps, you no longer are burdened with those sins. If you then continue repenting, you are repenting for sins you have already shed. Even if Rambam's four steps are a telescoped version of Rabbeinu Yonah's twenty steps, once you have followed all the steps, you achieve forgiveness. However, if *teshuvah* is a divine mercy, then we can rightfully beg for mercy as hard as possible, going as far as our spiritual and physical limitations allow to arouse divine forgiveness. If *teshuvah* is an element of *chesed*, we can better understand these extreme forms of *teshuvah*.

Although perhaps even according to Rambam, who holds that *teshuvah* is an element of *emes*, we can still understand the extreme *teshuvah* practices mentioned above. Rav Yechezkel Landau (*Noda Bi-Yehudah*, vol. 1 *Orach Chaim* no. 35) explains that these self-punishments are designed to inspire a person to true *teshuvah*. They have no inherent value but serve as methods to fully achieve the required steps of *teshuvah*. According to this explanation, even Rambam would agree that these additional punishments have value in the *teshuvah* process when they do, in fact, motivate toward complete *teshuvah*.

IV. Teshuvah For Whom?

Minchas Chinuch (364:34) quotes an opinion that *teshuvah* does not work for gentiles. What about Nineveh's *teshuvah*, in the biblical book of Yonah? He says he discusses it in his *Shabbos Shuvah derashah*, which to my knowledge was never published. Even if only a minority opinion, how can we understand the idea that *teshuvah* works only for Jews?

Rav Menachem Azariah (Rama) of Fano adopts the view that gentiles cannot do *teshuvah* (*Asarah Ma'amaros, Chikur Ha-Din 2:11*). He explains that *teshuvah* is a mitzvah and therefore only applies to Jews who are obligated in the commandments. He continues that the people of Nineveh merited salvation for any of three reasons:

- 1) There were many innocent people and animals in the city who would have suffered if the guilty were punished.
- 2) The sinners of Nineveh returned what they stole, thereby undoing the sin to some degree.
- 3) Their repentance did not clear their sins but merely delayed their punishment.

If *teshuvah* is part of divine justice, then that justice should apply equally to all people. G-d is just and righteous. He would not deny gentiles their fair opportunity to repent. However, if *teshuvah* is due to divine *chesed*, then G-d can apply that kindness unequally. Perhaps that *chesed* is part of the unique divine relationship with the Jewish people.

Put into practical terms, if *teshuvah* is *emes*, then true *teshuvah* will always erase past sins. On the other hand, if *teshuvah* is *chesed*, then G-d may respond differently to it. For Jews, with whom there is a covenant that includes *teshuvah*, G-d will erase past sins. For others, *teshuvah* will be treated as an attempt to reach out to G-d, which can achieve different kinds of responses. For us, *teshuvah* guarantees atonement. For others, *teshuvah* might achieve atonement for past sins, great reward for the action itself or something in between.

V. Ask Forgiveness

The *Chofetz Chaim* (1:4:12), quoting Rabbeinu Yonah (*Sha'arei Teshuvah 3:207*), writes that if you say *lashon ha-ra* about someone, you must ask his forgiveness even if he does not know about it. The story is told (see Dirshu edition of *Chofetz Chaim*, ad loc., n. 92) that the author of the work, known as the *Chofetz Chaim*, took the manuscript to Rav Yisrael Salanter for an approbation. Rav Yisrael Salanter refused because of this ruling. He believes that you should not apologize to someone who does not know about the *lashon ha-ra*, because doing so will hurt him (see *Orechos Chaim* edition of *Chofetz Chaim*, ad loc., n. 142; Rav Moshe Sternbuch, *Mo'adim U-Zemanim*, vol. 1 no. 55).

Perhaps we can understand this disagreement based on our categorisation above. If *teshuvah* is a function of *emes*, then you have no choice. You have to fulfill all the steps in order to achieve forgiveness. You cannot skip the step of asking for forgiveness because then your *teshuvah* is incomplete and you do not deserve forgiveness. However, if *teshuvah* is a function of *chesed*, then we have to appeal to G-d's greater picture. Causing more damage by apologizing would push away, rather than bring close, divine mercy and therefore you should not apologize if doing so will further hurt the victim.