

CHAPTER 5, LAW 1 - REPENTANCE AND UNBOUNDED SOULS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Every person is granted free will. If he wants to incline himself to a good way and to be righteous, the ability (lit., 'permission') is in his hands. And if he wants to incline himself to a bad way and be wicked, the ability is in his hands. This is as it is written in the Torah, 'Behold, the man has become as one of us [the angels] to know good and evil' (Genesis 3:22). Meaning, this species, man, is unique in the world, with no other species resembling him in this matter that he himself with his knowledge and thoughts knows good and evil and does whatever he wants, without anyone holding him back from doing good or evil. Since this is the case "lest he send his hand etc."

We are now beginning the fifth chapter of the Laws of Repentance. As we can already see, this chapter is very different in content and in style from all the previous. Up until now the Rambam has been discussing the practical aspects of teshuva (repentance) -- how one repents, what one must repent for, how teshuva is effectuated, and various factors which interfere with repentance. Now the Rambam begins discussing more fundamental topics of theology.

The basic theme of this law -- in fact of all of this and the next chapter -- is that man is granted free will. Our decisions and actions are entirely in our control -- to improve ourselves, choose good and serve G-d, or to ruin our lives and to some extent the entire world. As the Rambam quotes, after man's sin in the Garden of Eden, G-d had to specially appoint an angel to block the path to the Tree of Life because had He not, man easily had the ability to change the course of the world by partaking of that tree and living forever.

Further, as the Rambam will explain in coming paragraphs, as a result we and only we are responsible for our actions. G-d commands us to be good because it is within our ability to decide how we will behave. And G-d rewards us when we choose good because it was our own doing. G-d likewise has every right to punish us when we fail since we alone are responsible. No one forced us to sin -- not our parents, not our friends, not our boss, and certainly not the stars we were born under. Sure there are many factors influencing our lives and decisions -- our inborn predilections, peer pressure, the behavior we saw and absorbed in our parents' home. But ultimately our actions are our own doing. We made the decision and carried out our action. A myriad of factors may have nudged us in one direction or the other, but there is no such thing as predestination in the eyes of the Torah. The ultimate decision was ours alone.

The Talmud (Niddah 16b) makes a closely related statement. Before a baby is born, an angel holds the drop (of semen) before G-d to determine what sort of person will be formed from it -- "Strong or

weak? Wise or stupid? Rich or poor?" Continues the Talmud that "wicked or righteous" the angel does not inquire of G-d since that is not in G-d's hands. Rather, "All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven." We have little control over our height, our looks, our inborn talents, and our intelligence, but whether we will be good or bad is entirely up to us.

My teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) posed a very basic question on this Rambam. Why does the Rambam discuss this principle here in the Laws of Repentance? How is this principle relevant to teshuva? Isn't it a much more fundamental law? As the Rambam will discuss in future weeks, without free will there is no basis for the entire Torah. How can G-d command us to be good if we have no control over our actions, if we are predestined to one path of life? And likewise, how can G-d reward or punish us for our behavior if it is not our conscious doing, if our "stars" forced us to become murderers or thieves? Thus, some of the most basic premises of Judaism -- reward and punishment, Heaven and Hell, G-d's judgment of man -- are predicated on the fact that man is granted free will. If so, why didn't the Rambam discuss this in the first section of his work "The Foundations of the Torah" ("*Yesodei HaTorah*"), where he discusses so many of the other underpinnings of our faith. Sure, since there is free will we have free will to repent too. But presumably this principle is far more basic and should have been dealt with far earlier.

My teacher explained as follows. There are really two types of teshuva. The type we typically think of is behavior modification. I must recognize my sins, regret them, determine not to repeat them, and commit to become a better person. And of course, I must open up to G-d -- as well to as anyone else I hurt -- and apologize for my failings. It's a long, arduous process, and requires determination and long-term commitment. And this, in a word, was the subject of the first four chapters of the Rambam.

Further, it really takes a long time to exorcise sin from our systems. If I've sinned and have become accustomed to evil, weaning myself from it and remolding my personality is a very long and taxing process. The Rambam likewise wrote in [1:4](#) that while some sins can be atoned for immediately, there are some which are not atoned for until Yom Kippur arrives (and is properly observed), while even more serious sins require that a person endure suffering or actually suffer death. Thus, true penitence is rarely effected instantly, no matter how bad we feel afterwards. It is a long, slow process until we are truly cleansed -- until we have fully remade ourselves into righteous human beings. And as we all know, until that point is reached, the danger of slipping back to our old selves is great indeed.

But there is a different type of repentance entirely -- and it's the one the Rambam introduces us to now. I'll begin with a brief quote from Chapter 7 -- where the Rambam revisits the topic of teshuva after discussing free will. Law 7:6-7 states: "How great is teshuva for it brings a person close to the Divine Presence ('Shechina').... Yesterday this person was hated by G-d, detested, distanced, and an abomination, and today he is loved, precious, close and beloved... Yesterday this one was separated from the L-rd, G-d of Israel... he would cry out and not be answered... he would perform a mitzvah

(good deed) and [the angels] would tear it up before him... And today he is bonded with the Divine Presence (*'Shechina'*)... he cries out and is answered immediately... he performs mitzvos and they accept them amiably and joyfully..."

The obvious question is that in Chapter 1 the Rambam told us that teshuva is generally a long-drawn process. Except for the most minor of sins which may be atoned for immediately, repentance typically requires Yom Kippur, suffering, perhaps even death. We cannot just repent and instantly become perfect. However, in Chapter 7 the Rambam describes one who "yesterday" was the most heinous of sinners -- literally detested by G-d (and believe me, that's not easy to pull off), who seems to overnight become loved by G-d. What happened to the long, difficult road to repentance? How can such a person become beloved so fast?

The answer is something we all know in our hearts. The earlier chapters of the Rambam were discussing the mechanics of teshuva, teshuva as a complete and thorough cleansing process. As we explained, completely expunging sin from our systems and remaking ourselves spiritually is a long process indeed. But Chapter 7 is talking about a different sort of repentance entirely -- one based on the concept of free will.

As we will see, free will does not just mean that we have the freedom to choose how to behave. That is a part of it, but there is a much deeper concept behind it: that we are not bound by our negative actions. They do not define who we are.

Say a person has acted a certain way for years. He is addicted to certain bad behaviors -- his temper, his passions, his greed. And he feels that practically speaking, he has no true choice anymore. It is too late for him to become anything different.

Enters the concept of free will. Our negative actions are not who **we** are. We may be responsible for them and they have certainly affected us and the world for the worse. But they are not **us**. They are the errors of our adhering to our bodies or our outer souls. They were our failings, but they were never **us**. **We** are our inner souls -- the ones which truly want nothing other than to cleave to G-d. Deep within each and every one of us is a soul which wants only good, which never wanted to be lulled or seduced by our outer selves. It was and always is wholly pure and pristine. It is our true souls -- our true selves, which deep down every one of us knows he or she possesses.

And that is precisely the level at which free will operates. Every one of us has the ability to get in touch with his inner self and inner wants. We all have the free will to separate ourselves from all the mistakes and bad behaviors our outer selves foisted upon us. We can recognize -- and we can do this instantly -- that they are not us and not who we really want to be. In spite of so many layers of apathy, confusion and sophistication, we can, if we just let go and look inside, reconnect with our true selves. We can find out who we truly are, and in spite of the many sins and faults we have without, we can truly make ourselves free.

This is what the Rambam is referring to in Chapter 7. How can a person overnight change himself so

dramatically? Simply by exercising his free will and getting in touch with himself. Before the person was a terrible sinner. He obeyed every nasty impulse. He never gave the slightest thought to who he actually is. He never stood up to his evil inclination. And G-d was thoroughly disgusted with him. But today he is beloved. How? By taking that one critical step -- by getting in touch with himself and recognizing himself for who he truly is. And that's all it really requires. Teshuva on this level is not dealing with a lot of baggage. There will be a time for that -- but not yet. The first step is simply a matter of honest self-awareness -- and it takes so much less effort than we imagine. We **are** close and beloved to G-d by nature. Our souls are pure beauty, the direct handiwork of our Creator. All we need do is see ourselves for who we really are and we will again cleave to the G-d who knew all along we could do it. And it all depends on that crucial first step. If we ignore our souls and follow our outer impulses, we and our G-d have nothing in common. There is no reason why He would care for us. But if we shake ourselves loose from that stupor, if we reach in and touch our very souls, G-d will love us once again.

Certainly such a person still has debts to pay. As we wrote, truly excising the sin from him will be a long and strenuous process. But having a few sins -- or even a very many sins -- does not make us detestable to G-d. G-d loves us right now -- we just have some serious work to do to make it up to our Lover. Conversely, a person who really does not identify with his soul may have performed all the mitzvos in the world, but the angels may well tear them up to his face. If he isn't a soul who loves G-d it may very well all be worthless to the G-d who really cannot stand him.

This, to wrap up (sorry for the length of this!), is the concept of free will the Rambam introduces us to now. It is not simply a matter that we can choose our actions. It is that we can disassociate ourselves from them. We are never bound by our past mistakes -- simply because we can look into our true selves beneath them and find out who we really are. And as we explained above, this opens up an entirely new world of repentance. We do not only repent to correct our mistaken actions and pay up for them. We do so to reconnect our souls with our G-d. And when we reach that level of devotion and self-awareness, we will discover G-d right there -- waiting for us all along.

Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and [Torah.org](https://torah.org)