

## CHAPTER 7, LAW 3 - WHO ARE WE?

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

***Do not say that teshuva (repentance) is only for sins which involve doing an action, such as adultery, theft, or burglary. [Rather,] just as a person must repent these, so too he must examine his bad qualities and repent over them, [such as] from anger, hatred, jealousy, rivalry, mockery, greed (lit., 'chasing after wealth'), honor-seeking, gluttony (lit., 'running after foods'), and the like. From all these one must repent. And these sins are more difficult [to repent from] than ones which involve an action, for when a person becomes deeply immersed in such it becomes difficult to dissociate [from them]. So too does it state, "Let the wicked one forsake his way and the man of iniquity his thoughts" (Isaiah 55:7).***

In the last class, we introduced this chapter of the Rambam. We asked why the Rambam appears to re-introduce man's obligation to repent -- although that had basically been the subject of his entire work. As we explained, the Rambam here discusses repentance from an entirely different perspective. Now that he has established the concept of man's free will, teshuva assumes an entirely higher dimension.

In the earlier part of his work, the Rambam presented teshuva basically as an obligation to G-d: We wronged Him and we must make it up to Him. The same G-d who told us not to sin to Him in the first place now demands that we come back and apologize. We must humbly and contritely make our amends.

Now, however, repentance can be viewed as our own path towards self-fulfillment. When we sin we get out of touch with our true inner selves. We act in ways which we know deep down are not how we really want to be. We feel wasted, upset with ourselves, as failures in life. But free will teaches us that we are not bound by our mistakes. We are free not only to choose our actions, but to dissociate ourselves from our outer, corrupted selves. Free will is an enormously empowering feeling, the sense that we can toss it all away -- in an instant -- and truly be ourselves.

This law clearly follows the same theme. Teshuva on this level is not limited to repenting our specific past mistakes. Of course every wrong deed will have to be accounted for sooner or later. But we are really dealing with a much more profound issue: who we are as people. Are we the outer front we put on for others -- our corny acts and routines, the affected image we project to the world? Or are we our true inner selves -- which want nothing other than goodness and closeness to G-d? And this is not a matter of the precise actions we did, but who we really are as people, which aspect of our psyches we identify with.

Thus, the Rambam points out here that the issue is really one of our character. What kind of people are we actually? Of course we basically are the sum total of our actions. That is true, but the question here goes deeper. The repentance of Chapter 7 relates to our basic personality type, our basic self-definition, more than the specifics of our behavior. And again, though retraining our actions may take a lifetime to master, how we see ourselves is something we can really correct right away.

This also explains why the Rambam focuses on death in this chapter. In Law 2, the Rambam advised us to imagine we may die at any time, and so we must repent before it is too late. Why not repent simply because it's the right thing to do? Why must we have the macabre image of death hovering over us to get us to do what we anyway should be doing in our lifetimes?

The answer is that teshuva on this level focuses on who we are as people more than the specific actions we have done. And when we think about it, this is really who we will be after we die. After we die, we will be souls without bodies. None of the things which interested or excited our bodies during our lifetimes will mean anything to us then. All we will be left with is our **selves** -- the sum total of what we have made ourselves during our lifetimes. Were we angry, impatient people? Were we petty and self-centered? Did we care exclusively about our popularity, our ability to come up with that good comeback? Did we care only about ourselves, or did we develop a sensitivity to others around us? After we pass on, we will be **us**, for better or worse. It's true, we will also undergo purgatory for the specific sins we have done. But who **we** will be really depends on our character.

And this is precisely what our World to Come will be based on. The Talmud (Brachos 17a) describes the World to Come as follows:

"The World to Come has no eating, drinking, reproduction, commerce, jealousy, hatred, or rivalry. Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their head, enjoying the shine of the Divine Presence, as it says 'And they saw the L-rd, and they ate and drank' (Exodus 24:11)."

Thus, in a word, the World to Come is not pleasure or enjoyment per se. We will not just be sitting back enjoying an infinitely large banana-split or chewing on an infinitely long Twizzler. Rather, the World to Come is one thing only -- closeness to G-d. The righteous will be enjoying the shine of the Divine Presence (Shechinah). And only someone sufficiently righteous will be able to achieve that closeness.

More accurately, in the World to Come we will be having a relationship with G-d in Heaven. We will sit right before Him, enjoying that closeness. And as with all relationships, it really depends on how much the two parties have in common. If our inner souls are all jealousy, anger or hedonism, there is no way we could have a relationship with a perfect G-d in the World to Come. How can we be "close" to a Being we have nothing in common with? We might not even **want** to be close to Him if all we cared about was our ball team's record or the latest high-tech gizmo to come out. And all of this might be in spite of mountains and mountains of mitzvos (commandments) such a person

fulfilled in his lifetime.

Ultimately, our World to Come is not based on a bunch of actions -- even if they happen to be "good deeds." It depends on who **we** were. Did our mitzvos change us? Did they transform us into spiritual people who can appreciate G-d's values? Or did we live for ourselves, merely being careful to keep within the parameters of Torah law? If the former, we can approach G-d's Presence. We and G-d will have a lot we can share, much to build a relationship upon. And the resulting communion will be the ultimate bliss. If the latter, we may have technically done many good deeds, but we will not be truly spiritual people. And there will be no place for us in G-d's domain.

The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 3b-4a) writes as follows: "There is no Hell in the days to come. Rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, will remove the sun from its sheath and cause it to pierce through. The wicked will be judged by it and the righteous will be healed by it." The Talmud then proceeds to quote Malachi 3:19-20 which describes the sun as both a fiery furnace consuming the wicked and a balmy source of warmth, bringing healing to the righteous.

The implication, as my teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) explained, is that at least this opinion in the Talmud holds there is no Purgatory per se. There is the exact same World to Come for us all. We will simply be brought before G-d's Presence. For those of us who spent their lifetimes preparing for it, such an encounter will be the ultimate rapture. We made ourselves into people who could relate to G-d. And after our deaths we will return to our Maker and enjoy the fruits of our efforts in man's Ultimate Pleasure.

For those, however, whose lives were devoid of spirituality, it will be absolute torture -- more than anything we can imagine in this world. They will spend an eternity before a G-d they cannot handle, whom they never conditioned themselves to connect with. And they will burn. This is only in part because they will become paralyzed by the intense reality of G-d's presence. A major part of it will be their mortification in the knowledge that they failed in life, that they never fulfilled the mission they were sent to earth to accomplish. They will stand before G-d with all their faults revealed. And that in itself -- more than any sort of physical pain -- will be the most agonizing torture imaginable.

This again is why the Rambam invokes the notion of our deaths to obligate us in repentance. Teshuva is not just about fixing our mistakes. It's about figuring out who **we** are, what really is inside of us. And that is precisely who we will be when our souls at last depart their bodies. We will be the sum total of our **selves**. What kind of people are we actually? That is a question we ask ourselves very rarely. Yet everything rides on the Ultimate Answer.

---

Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and [Torah.org](#)