

# CHAPTER 1, LAW 4 - MINEFIELDS AND HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***Even though teshuva (repentance) atones all and the day of Yom Kippur atones, there are sins which are expiated at the time [the person sins], and there are sins which are only expiated afterwards.***

***How is this? A person who transgressed (i.e., neglected to perform) a positive commandment which does not carry [the punishment of] excision and he [then] repents, he is forgiven immediately (lit., 'he does not move from there until they forgive him immediately'). Regarding such it is stated, 'Repent wayward children; I will heal your backsliding' (Jeremiah 3:22).***

***If [a person] transgressed a negative commandment which does not carry [the punishment of] excision nor the death sentence and he repents, teshuva delays (lit., 'hangs' -- defers justice), and Yom Kippur atones. Regarding such it is stated, 'For on this day (Yom Kippur) he will effect atonement for you to purify you; from all of your sins before G-d you will become pure' (Leviticus 16:30).***

***If [a person] transgressed [negative commandments carrying] excision or the death sentence and he repented, teshuva and Yom Kippur delay, and the affliction which is visited upon the person completes the atonement. [Such a person] is never forgiven fully until suffering is visited upon him. Regarding such it is stated, 'And I will punish with the staff their transgressions and with plagues their iniquities' (Psalms 89:33).***

***When is all of the above the case? (Lit., 'In what [context] were the words stated?') When [the sinner] did not desecrate [G-d's] Name at the time he sinned. But one who desecrates the Name, even if he did teshuva, and [the day of] Yom Kippur arrived while he was in a state of repentance, and suffering was visited upon him, he is not forgiven fully until he dies. Rather, the combination of teshuva, Yom Kippur and affliction delay, and death atones, as it is stated, 'And it was revealed in my ears [by] the L-rd of hosts: This sin will not be forgiven for you until you die' (Isaiah 22:14).***

This week's law discusses the process of atonement. As the Rambam describes, full expiation is often a long and protracted process. Except for the most minor of sins, repentance cannot be achieved immediately. Many stages must be realized before the sinner's atonement is complete. We may be inclined to think that as soon as we sincerely repent and mend our ways, we are immediately reconciled with our Maker. All is forgiven and forgotten. But in truth, life is not nearly so simple. Improved ourselves we may have, but truly eradicating the last vestiges of sin is a long and

difficult process.

There is, however, an interesting distinction in this. It is true that teshuva (repentance) is often a lengthy process, yet one aspect of it -- in fact the most critical one -- can be achieved instantaneously. I'll explain by way of illustration.

My teacher R. Yochanan Zweig once observed that we sometimes find decidedly un-spiritual people -- vicious criminals doing time on death row -- who all of a sudden "see the light" and become religious fanatics, considering themselves eminently qualified to preach to others what they should believe in and how they should act. Now sometimes, such people are the same old murderers, exhibiting the same aggressive, violent tendencies, just in a different (perhaps slightly more positive) manner. And to us such people seem ridiculous. Yesterday they were murderers and today they've become G-d's self-appointed spokesmen to humanity -- telling **us** -- people who have thankfully never tasted such evil -- how G-d wants us to behave. And further, knowing what the Rambam has just taught us, such people are very far from true rapprochement with their Creator.

But my feeling is that there is often some truth to such people's newfound passion. There **is** a spiritual side to such people -- untouched by even the worst of their behavior. We **are** beings fashioned in G-d's image. Except for the absolute worst of us, sins cannot entirely eradicate that. Thus, such people may very well have become attuned to the promptings of their soul -- and are tapping into an unsullied and unbiased part of their psyches, which really does reflect the will of the L-rd. (Not that I'd put too much reliance on their wisdom, but the sincerity is quite likely there.) In fact, sometimes a person has to hit bottom first -- engage in the most violent and depraved behavior -- till he realizes all is futile and the only endeavors worthwhile are spiritual.

We thus find two curious opposing truths, both correct at the same time: one that true expiation is a protracted process, and two that even the worst of sinners can become in touch with G-d and their spiritual selves in practically an instant. And the idea behind it is as follows. Entirely uprooting the rot of sin and the aftereffects of evil is a long-drawn process. Serious sinners carry much baggage with them and will have to endure much before their atonement is complete. Yet even with that baggage, such people can easily reconnect to G-d, merely by becoming attuned to that innermost part of them untouched by evil. And although more expiation is sure to come, G-d will lovingly accept such people back as His precious servants.

This is one of the major themes of repentance -- the fact that becoming in touch with G-d and with ourselves is a whole different matter from actually expunging sin from our systems. However, I won't belabor this point here since it is one we've discussed in the past (and no doubt will return to in the future). See for example our final class on the Laws of De'os ([Chapter 7, Law 8\(b\)](#)).

This law contains another interesting point worth noting. Taking the Rambam's final case, if a person desecrated G-d's Name in the course of sinning -- say he acted in a way which publicly lowered the

image of Jews in the eyes of humanity, his sin is not atoned until his death. Now the Rambam neither stated nor implied that such a person has to die an untimely or particularly gruesome death. He merely has to die -- as of course we all do sooner or later. It therefore does not seem that death is part of the penitential process -- that the person must suffer an excruciating death to complete his atonement. He could perhaps die peacefully in his sleep at 98 and still attain forgiveness merely by dying.

Based on this, it seems that death is not atonement per se. It is not a necessary part of the torment the sinner must endure. But somehow, such a person's repentance is not complete until it occurs. What is the idea behind this?

We can make a similar observation regarding the Rambam's second case -- the transgression of negative prohibitions, for which both teshuva and Yom Kippur are required. There too, the Rambam did not state that such a person must experience an especially meaningful and uplifting Yom Kippur to consummate his atonement. Perhaps he observed the day properly but not particularly enthusiastically. Even so, just living through the holiness of Yom Kippur completes such a person's teshuva.

Based on the above, it is clear that there are very precise rules to how true expiation may be achieved. Certain milestones must be reached before the aftereffects of sin can be utterly eradicated. Repentance is not simply a matter of feeling bad about your sins and putting the past behind you -- or even of suffering a prescribed degree of affliction. Certainly these are important components, but G-d in His wisdom decrees that more must occur for true atonement to be achieved. Just as in the physical world there are Laws of Nature which dictate for example that matter can never be destroyed, in the spiritual as well, sin may not be expunged without the necessary prerequisites occurring.

Let me make the same observation in a slightly more scholarly way. I believe this will bring us to the crux of the issue. There are three aspects to a sin, all of which must be amended. They are:

- (1) The sinner has angered G-d by disobeying His will, creating a barrier between himself and G-d.
- (2) Practically, by accustoming himself to sin, the sinner has dulled himself to spirituality and proper values.
- (3) The sin itself, by its very nature, has caused harmful effects both on the sinner and the world about. Since G-d has decreed that a certain action is by nature evil, it damages the world in very real, yet in spiritual and usually indiscernible ways.

How does one correct each of these aspects? Well, the first is fairly straightforward and presumably can be corrected quickly. If I regret my actions and determine to return to G-d, He will gladly and wholeheartedly accept me back. If I want G-d, He will most certainly want me as well (depending of course how far I lapsed and how truly I want Him). G-d's nature is to love man. This was the theme of

the earlier class I cited above ([Chapter 7, Law 8\(b\)](#)). Our failure to re-bond with our Creator after sin is generally our own choosing, not His.

Correcting the second issue -- the fact that sin dulls ourselves to spirituality -- will certainly take greater effort. It is a matter of retraining ourselves and our behavior, of realigning ourselves with Torah values. Very rarely does this happen instantly. However, it all depends on our own efforts. It is within our control to correct this as quickly as we are able.

The third issue is the great unknown. Sins have spiritual ramifications. They destroy the fabric of the universe, the tenuous sinews which connect the spiritual and physical planes. And for such matters we have no idea -- neither how much damage our sins do nor how the damage may be undone. And regarding this, I believe, is where we are told that repentance is a lengthy process. For reasons we cannot fully fathom, the aftereffects of certain types of sins may only be expiated through the cleansing process of Yom Kippur. And some are so heinous that merely the person's continuing to live in this world preserves their wicked memory. Only death removes the final vestiges of such behavior.

To wrap up, I feel this is the most significant lesson of this week. We simply cannot judge sins -- nor mitzvos (good deeds) for that matter. We simply do not know how devastating an effect wickedness has on the universe. One of the worst fallacies you sometimes hear from sinners is that their behavior is their own business; how does it hurt anyone else? It would take me effort to come up with a falser statement in Jewish thought. Sins destroy the world, not just a single individual's World to Come (devastating as that is). We are playing with fire; we are tossing about sticks of dynamite which do far more damage than we ever could once we loose them on the cosmos. We must approach all of the Torah's prohibitions with trepidation, with a sense that we are stepping through a minefield with no idea how much damage one wrong move will inflict. Scary, I know, but at times we must open our eyes to the utter awesomeness of the universe God created -- and left in the control of man.

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