

CHAPTER 2, LAW 4 - SPIRITUAL REMAKING

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Among the ways of teshuva (repentance) are: (1) The repenter cries out constantly before G-d with crying and supplication. (2) He gives charity according to his ability. (3) He distances himself greatly from the matter in which he sinned. (4) He changes his name, as if to say "I am another; I am not that same person who did those actions." (5) He changes all of his actions for the better and towards the straight path. (6) He exiles himself from his place, as exile atones sin since it causes the person to be subdued, humble, and of lowly spirit.

After discussing the basic teshuva process earlier this chapter, the Rambam lists other activities beneficial to the process. Although not requirements of teshuva, such are electives -- actions which help concretize the process and make it last.

The Rambam's advice this week is based upon a similar statement in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16b): "Said Rabbi Yitzchak: Four things tear up the [evil] decree of a person. They are charity, crying out, changing one's name, and changing one's acts. And some say also changing one's place."

There's a significant common thread running through all six actions the Rambam mentions. They all bring about the same basic result -- that the repenter is transformed into a different person. They thus bring teshuva to an entirely higher plane. Simple teshuva means I've stopped sinning, I regret, and I accept to be better for the future. I'm the same old me (for better or worse); I just desist from doing certain improper actions. Here, however, the repenter is doing something altogether more meaningful: he literally becomes a different person from the one who sinned.

The best indication of this is the fourth practice the Rambam brings, that the sinner change his name. Here the sinner states outright that he is now someone else. As we see constantly throughout Scripture, a name is considered to define a person's essence. Children were named according to the circumstances in which they were born (see for example the end of Genesis 29). Their name epitomizes who they are and their life's mission. Abraham was the father of many nations ("AV HaMon goyim") (Genesis 17:5), Sarah was princess (the exact translation of her name), Solomon was to be a man of peace (Shlomo = Shalom).

Similar to this is the Jewish practice of changing the name of a deathly-ill person. Perhaps Heaven has decreed that Moshe's life is about to end, but perhaps Chaim Moshe will be granted a different verdict. A new name means a new person with a new mission. The repentant sinner is likewise stating that he is now a new person with a new outlook. His past sins have no bearing on him; they

were literally done by someone else.

My teacher R. Yochanan Zweig has noted that short of doing something so drastic as changing one's name, at times simply switching from one's English to his Jewish name may do the trick. This too gives a person a wonderful opportunity to make a break from his past. Steve used to act that way -- but not Shalom. By letting all your friends know you'd now prefer to be known by your Hebrew name, you make a statement -- to them as well as yourself -- that you now aspire to higher standards.

Another good example is method #6 -- exiling oneself. The Rambam adds regarding it that being out of place tends to humble a person. He cannot act up the same way he used to. He's now a stranger, living in the good graces of his host community.

Another idea is that it allows a person to make a clean break from his past. Say in the past you were always known as the class clown. It's very difficult to deviate from that when the entire class is watching you, smirking, waiting for you to cause trouble. It's sometimes easier to change environments, using the fresh start to reestablish your personality -- the way **you'd** like it to be -- or at least how you'd truly like it to be.

Several years ago, one of the boys in my son's class switched to a different school. My wife asked the mother sometime later what was the reason. The response was that it actually had nothing to do with the school itself. It was that the boy was extremely quiet (partly on account of being a recent immigrant from America to an Israeli school) and had already gotten a reputation as someone who **never** talked in class. And it was too embarrassing for him to break away from that. Finally, the decision was made to move him to a new environment where he could start fresh.

Let's now look at the Rambam's way #2 -- giving charity. This would seem to simply be a nice thing to do -- not necessarily an identity-changing act as the others. Yet, my teacher R. Zweig observed that this seems to be an entirely different act from the standard obligation of charity. Jewish law obligates us to give 10% of our profits to the needy. Although in itself quite demanding, rarely does such a percentage significantly alter a person's lifestyle or financial standing. Here however the Rambam writes that a person must give "according to his ability" -- i.e., as much as he can. The implication is far stronger -- giving more than normal, giving as much as he is possibly able, giving till it hurts.

And this too is a transforming action. I'm not the same old person who has just happened to do an additional good deed. I have literally lowered my economic status. I sinned as a rich man (that quite often has something to do with it). Now I am a much humbler and better-behaved poor one.

The Rambam's remaining three examples also revolve around this same theme. They were that the repenter constantly cry before G-d, that he distance himself from his bad behavior, and that he change all of his acts for the better. These too all go beyond simple repentance. The repenter is not simply **refraining** from the sin itself but **distancing** himself from it, going to the opposite extreme. He

is likewise changing all his acts for the better -- not only the specific matter in which he sinned. He remakes his entire personality. And finally, he cries out to G-d -- not specifically for atonement for this sin but in general. He wants to reestablish his entire relationship with G-d, to beg G-d to truly allow him to return.

All of this makes it clear that true repentance is a wrenching, uprooting process. I don't just stop; I remake myself. One of the themes we'll return to many times in these studies is that true teshuva is enormously hard work. You can't just shrug your shoulders and try to be better next time. You need to go into yourself, hold firm your scalpel, and exorcise the evil from your mind and heart. Even though man is naturally good, evil, once given the opportunity, will take deep root in his soul. As the most malignant of viruses, it attaches itself to one's very essence and constantly changes form to avoid detection. Repentance is a tough battle. We must do our part, but as the Rambam states, in the final analysis we must just cry to G-d to accept us once again.

Based in part on ideas heard from my teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#).

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