

# CHAPTER 1, LAW 1 - LAWS OF REPENTANCE - STANDING BEFORE G-D

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***All the mitzvos (commandments) of the Torah, whether positive or negative, if a person transgressed one of them, whether purposely or inadvertently, when he repents and returns from his sin, he is obligated to confess before the Almighty, blessed be He. [This is] as it is stated, 'A man or woman, when they do any of the sins of man to trespass against G-d, and that soul becomes guilty, they shall confess their sins which they have done' (Numbers 5:6-7). This is [known as] verbal confession (lit., 'confession of words'). Such confession is a positive commandment.***

***How does one confess? He says, 'Please G-d, I have sinned, trespassed, and rebelled before You and I have done such and such. And behold I have regretted and become ashamed of my act and I will never return to it.' This is the essence of confession. The more one confesses and increases in this matter, it is praiseworthy.***

***So too, people who are obligated to bring Sin Offerings or Guilt Offerings, at the time they bring their sacrifices on their inadvertent or intentional sins, they are not forgiven through their sacrifices until they repent and confess verbally, as it is stated, 'and he shall confess that which he has sinned' (Leviticus 5:5). So too all those sentenced to death or lashes at the hands of the court are not forgiven through their death or lashes until they repent and confess. So too one who injures his fellow or damages his property, even though he has paid [his fellow] what he owes him, he is not forgiven until he confesses and repents from doing such ever again. [This is] as it is stated (in the first verse quoted above), 'of any of the sins of man' (Numbers 5:6).***

As a quick point of introduction, the previous section we covered, the Laws of De'os, was the second section of the Rambam's first book (The Book of Knowledge). This section is the final of the same book. (These are all sections of the Rambam's magnum opus, Mishneh Torah ("Repetition of the Torah"). It consists of fourteen "books" each containing multiple sections.) Although the topics covered in this section will differ vastly from the Laws of De'os, our study of it will generally resemble the previous section in both style and presentation.

Finally, in these studies we will generally use the Hebrew term for repentance -- "teshuva".

So far the Rambam has only briefly introduced the concept of repentance. There are many details which will be covered only later. Yet already I feel there are a few striking points in the Rambam's wording.

The Rambam, in his opening paragraph to the Laws of Repentance, hardly mentions repentance at all. He instead focuses almost exclusively on the obligation of confession -- "viduy" as we'll call it below. He does not describe what teshuva is, its mechanics, its importance, its effects on the soul, etc. -- all of which he discusses at various points later in his work. Rather, he makes an almost passing reference to it: "When he repents and returns from his sin, he is obligated to confess before the Almighty..." Teshuva is almost assumed, presupposed. The Rambam did not begin by saying we must do teshuva, just that **when** we do it, we must confess in the process.

We are therefore presented with two very basic related questions. First of all, why did the Rambam not begin by discussing teshuva itself? Wouldn't that be the appropriate starting point of the Laws of Repentance? And further, viduy (confession) we would assume to be merely a detail of teshuva -- that one of the conditions of repentance is that one articulate his guilt. It's an important detail to be sure, but only a detail of the overall process. Yet the Rambam all but glosses over teshuva itself, introducing his laws by focusing almost entirely on the detail -- almost a classic case of not seeing the forest for the trees. So firstly, why was teshuva itself almost ignored, and second what is so central about viduy that it immediately took center stage?

The simplest -- and probably correct -- answer is that the Rambam generally discusses a topic by beginning with the Torah's commandments on the matter -- with what Scripture itself has to say about it. The only Biblical verses relating to repentance do not mention teshuva per se. They obligate us in viduy -- that we verbally confess our wrongs., but they never say anything outright about repenting. The Rambam quotes two relevant verses above, Numbers 5:7 and Leviticus 5:5, both of which discuss a person who is obligated to bring a Guilt Offering (Korban Asham) -- although as the Rambam himself noted, the language of Numbers 5:6 clearly implies the obligation to confess is universal.

This however only backs up the question. Why does the Torah itself not obligate us in teshuva? If G-d wants us to repent our evil ways, why not **command** us to do so -- as the Prophets so very often exhorted us? Why instead does the Torah never actually **tell** us to repent, telling us only to confess our wrongs? For when we think about it, theoretically if we would confess our sins **without** regretting them, it would probably be worse than nothing. It would be as if we are bragging about our past escapades. And if so, why this peculiar approach in the Torah -- telling us to admit our wrongs but never telling us to regret them?

There are two very important ideas here. The first is one we've discussed a few times in the past, so I'll recap it briefly now. The Torah really cannot tell us how to feel. The Torah cannot "command" us to feel bad about our sins -- say we're stupid enough not to? Regret has to come from the heart. If G-d would attempt to impose it upon us, it would be meaningless. Rather, the Torah commands us in the concrete part of the teshuva process -- at least admit openly that you have done wrong, and that you are obligated to be better. **Hopefully** the admission will penetrate your insides and you'll repent fully. But as in most things, G-d cannot tell us to truly be moral, decent human beings. He can

command us to **behave** that way -- or at least through our admission pay lip service to it -- in the hope that moral actions and espousals will eventually transform us into moral beings.

A second idea is that the Rambam and Torah focus so strongly on confession to emphasize its critical importance in the teshuva process. Above we assumed viduy to basically be a minor detail of teshuva -- one of the particulars of how teshuva must be performed. In truth, however, it gives teshuva its entire meaning and direction, as we'll explain below.

Let me illustrate this concept by describing an episode which occurred to my wife and me well over 25 years ago, when our second child (a daughter) was born. We were living in Baltimore at the time, in an apartment complex with many young Orthodox couples. Community-minded members of that complex established an excellent practice. (As many Orthodox communities worldwide, it was exemplary in its acts of kindness.) The other ladies of the neighborhood would provide two weeks' worth of suppers for new mothers. We were blessed and gratified to become recipients of such kindness, one my wife repaid several times before and since.

Now one night of those two weeks, dinner never arrived. It turned out that the woman who volunteered to make us supper that night plumb forgot about it. The truth is, it actually made little difference to us. When people make meals for others, they typically round it way up just to be safe. Not then being a large family and not a particularly heavy eater myself, for the course of those two weeks we were basically inundated with more food than we knew what to do with (an ironic foreshadowing of the mourning period for my father years later), with more coming every day. So we were actually relieved not to have received yet another pan-full of chicken and rice, allowing us to dig into our ever-growing collection of half-eaten leftovers.

But the poor woman who had forgotten had no such consolation. She we imagine was completely mortified, having forsaken her neighbors in their time of need. And my wife noticed something -- that the woman basically avoided her so long as we lived in Baltimore. (You know, you're in one aisle of the supermarket and she makes sure to take a different aisle. Unfortunately, we all have people we'd prefer to avoid.) She was just too ashamed to come face to face with my wife after (in her mind) wronging us so deeply in our time of need. (My wife reflected after that it was really too bad she never had the chance to explain to the young woman how little a difference it made to us at the time. They could have laughed it off and lived happily ever after.)

All of this illustrates an important idea. We can be quite sure that that young woman never made the same mistake again (assuming she continued volunteering meals at all). I'm sure she began marking her commitments on her calendar (or multiple calendars) and assiduously checked her schedule every day. She would tie strings on her fingers, tell her husband remind her, set her alarm clock, put messages on her refrigerator, etc. (Our fridge today is so full of "reminders" that that one no longer does us any good.)

Thus, improving her ways the woman most certainly did, but she failed to do one thing -- to own up

to the person she wronged (or at least thought she wronged). She basically attempted to avoid the victim of her past mistake, making sure to never repeat her error and create so awkward a situation again.

And this highlights for us the importance of viduy, and why the Rambam places such emphasis on it. Viduy means confession, apologizing to the one you have wronged. It means coming face to face with him (with Him that is -- but quite often with the flesh and blood you hurt as well), and owning up to your wrong. Teshuva without viduy -- meaning improving your ways without apologizing for your past -- misses the entire point. Sure it's good to learn from your past mistakes and not repeat them, but the hurt is still there. You have perhaps made a wonderful New Year's resolution, but you haven't amended your wrong. True teshuva is, as the Rambam here states, saying "Please G-d, I have sinned, trespassed, and rebelled before You and I have done such and such..." It is humbly and contritely standing before your Creator and begging for forgiveness. It is having the courage to come back and plead for reconciliation.

These are ideas we will G-d willing develop further in coming weeks, but I wanted to establish this basic definition from the start. The Rambam (and Torah) focus so exclusively on viduy because that is really what teshuva is all about. Teshuva is owning up, admitting, and begging for forgiveness. It focuses on G-d, not on ourselves and our own program for self-improvement, worthy as that may be. For the starting point of the entire teshuva process must be and can only be our Creator.

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

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