

CHAPTER 7, LAWS 1-2 - SOULS OF INFINITY

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

[Law 1] Since every person has free will, as we have explained, a person should make the effort to repent and to shake his sins off his hands so that he will die in a state of penitence (lit., 'he will die and he will be a master of repentance (ba'al teshuva)'). [This is] in order that he merit life in the World to Come.

[Law 2] A person should always see himself as if he is on the brink of death, and perhaps he will die in the [current] hour, remaining in his sinful state. Therefore, a person should repent his sins immediately, and he should not say, 'When I get old I will repent' lest he die before he gets old. This is as Solomon said in his wisdom, 'At all times shall your clothes be white, and oil on your head should not lack' (Koheles (Ecclesiastes) 9:8).

Last week we concluded the Rambam's two-chapter discussion of the topic of free will. The Rambam discussed free will at great length, establishing the overall principle while addressing various philosophical difficulties with it and apparent contradictions to it appearing in the Torah.

This chapter seems to loosely follow the previous. Since free will exists, not only are our actions our own responsibility, but we also have the ability (and the obligation) to repent our wicked ones. Therefore, continues the Rambam, we must take advantage of this opportunity, and be sure to repent before the day of our deaths -- whenever that may be.

This point, incidentally, is based directly upon a mishna in Pirkei Avos, "Repent one day before you die" (2:15). The obvious inference is that since no one knows just when his day of death will be, he must always live in a state of penitence.

There are a few issues I found bothersome with the Rambam this week. He seems to reintroduce teshuva (repentance) to us from scratch -- although that has been the topic of his entire work since the very start. Sure, the obligation is more logically compelling now that we've established the principle of free will, but why the fresh start? The Rambam told us long ago that we must repent. Why does he re-obligate us now?

Second, the Rambam's focus on death is curious. Shouldn't we repent because G-d told us to? If it's an obligation, we should do it **now** -- or at least by the nearest Yom Kippur! At least ideally, we should not require the threat of death hanging over us to cause us to do what we should be doing anyway. Is there any other obligation in the Torah regarding which the Rambam writes: "Do this because you might die before you get around to it?" Do it because you must! G-d commands you to

do this -- period.

(To be fair, as we noted in the beginning of this work ([1:1](#)), it is not that clear if the Torah actually obligates us to repent. Our remorse and repentance to G-d must really come from within; it cannot be imposed on someone who really does not want to make it up to G-d. The Torah's direct command is therefore not that we repent, but that when we **do** regret our mistakes -- which we hopefully will -- that we enunciate it by recited the *viduy* confession. Thus, perhaps the Rambam here means to say that although G-d doesn't directly command us to repent, we ought to motivate ourselves -- using the fear of death. Yet even so, why because of death? Why not more correctly because we know this is what G-d wants us to do -- even if He does not directly command us?)

Lastly, the motivation the Rambam lists for doing teshuva seems rather selfish: We must repent before our deaths so we'll receive our share in the World to Come. And this again seems to miss the point of teshuva. Shouldn't we repent to make it up to the G-d (as well as the people) we have wronged? Isn't the purpose of repentance repairing our relationship with G-d? Isn't it primarily something we owe G-d -- rather than our own selfish seeking of our portion in the hereafter? Why does the Rambam appear to discuss teshuva on so much lower and pettier a level than earlier?

All of these questions are pointing us in a new direction -- and with it we'll understand the entirely different thrust of this most critical chapter of the Rambam.

Up until now, until the past two chapters on free will, the Rambam presented repentance as an obligation to G-d. G-d created us, He sustains us, and He continually provides us with all we have been blessed with. He therefore has every right to command us how we must live -- and we failed Him. We misused the gift of life He has granted us, and we owe it to Him to make amends.

Thus, teshuva, as we had studied it, was something we do to G-d (as well any others we hurt along the way). Even if, as above, the Torah does not directly obligate us in teshuva -- you can't tell someone else to feel bad if he just doesn't -- still, the primary obligation was a G-d-oriented one.

In fact, we pointed out back then (see again [1:1](#)) that if not for this, if a person doesn't clearly direct his repentance to the G-d he wronged, teshuva can be seen as no more than New Year's resolutions. You failed and you want to be better next year. The natural reaction would be to put the past out of mind and try not to make the same mistakes again. Sure, next year might be better, but such "repentance" leaves G-d out of the picture entirely. You never stood before G-d and apologized to Him for your infractions. You just attempted to improve yourself -- to get yourself a better share in the World to Come.

Thus, the earlier part of the Rambam is certainly the foundation of repentance. If we repent only because we don't want to be punished, that is not a return to G-d at all. Such is not teshuva -- it is self-improvement. Only if we stand before G-d and apologize to Him does the entire process begin.

All of the above is perfectly valid -- but it leaves something very basic out. Repenting because of G-

d alone turns it into yet another Torah obligation. Sure G-d didn't actually command it, but it's basically an imposed action -- because G-d wants it, even if He didn't say so. And such can only go so far.

By way of analogy, say a person gives charity because the Torah tells us to tithe our income. Such a person does so not because he is sensitive to the needs of others and wants to help those less fortunate, but because G-d told him to. Clearly, such is a very hollow performance of the mitzvah (commandment) of charity. The initial obligation may be because G-d said so -- and of course we must listen to G-d whether we feel charitable or not -- but clearly, the Torah's intent is that we care about other human beings and develop within ourselves a desire to help them.

The same is true regarding teshuva. Step 1, as the earlier chapters of the Rambam, is that we repent because it is G-d's will. And as we explained, teshuva requires that prerequisite -- just as all mitzvos must ultimately be predicated on our obligation to G-d.

However, once that basis has been established, we need to move on -- to put ourselves behind repentance as we should with any other mitzvah of the Torah or any other quest in life. And the basis, the jumping-off point for that, is free will. Let us explain.

Free will is not just a principle that we can choose our actions. It means something much more profound, as we discussed earlier (see e.g. [5:1](#)). Free will means we can change ourselves, that we can decide -- really in an instant -- to become different people. Free will means I am not bound by my earlier mistakes. Perhaps on the outside I have sinned and corrupted myself. But within -- as we all know deep down -- we are still pure. Our souls are still beautiful; they remain unsullied by our faults. Sure, we have to go many layers down to find it. But our souls are still there. They still desire nothing other than goodness and closeness to G-d. And if I simply get in touch with my inner self, I can be free.

This is the true concept of free will. We can free ourselves of our outer shells -- of so many layers of coarseness and apathy. We can release our true selves, realize our full potential. We can cut beneath the confusion and our physical limitations and become who we really want to be. We can find fulfillment. We can be great. And even more than great, we can be ourselves.

One of the most depressing aspects of sin is the inner sense that we know deep down this isn't what we want to do. It is not just that we're defying G-d. We're not being true to ourselves. We know in our inner hearts that sin is not for us, yet we allow ourselves -- our outer selves -- to be drawn after it. Sin thus leaves us feeling not only wicked, but empty. Not only have we failed G-d, but we failed ourselves.

Once we truly become aware of the potential free will gives us, we will take it and fly. We will repent to G-d not simply because He told us to -- although of course that must always be part of the picture -- but because we ourselves want fulfillment. Teshuva will be an exciting, invigorating process of self-realization and self-fulfillment. We will become our true selves and find true

happiness.

We can now appreciate why the Rambam here is so focused on death. The simplest point is that once the focus is teshuva for your own self-improvement, death is a pretty powerful motivator. We all want get in touch with our inner selves and realize our potential. We must realize that our time on this earth is limited and take advantage of every day we have on this earth.

Even deeper, however, is the fact that we are not dealing with specifics. The focus here is not to repent over a particular sin we did on a particular day. That is the day-to-day obligation of teshuva. Here we are talking about self-fulfillment, about achieving our life's goals. And for that we must approach matters from a lifelong perspective. Our goal here is one which in one sense we can fulfill instantly -- simply by getting in touch with our true selves, yet in another, relates to the entirety of our beings and our lives. We are talking about our lifelong goals, who would we like to be when all is said and done, how we would like to be remembered, how we would want to stand before our Creator after 120. And so, the emphasis is on our deaths. It may come at any time. We must always be prepared.

Anyway, this topic is deep and has far more potential -- as will be developed throughout this chapter. So I won't delve further today. We are talking about a very lofty subject, but at the same time something very close and natural to us. We all know who we are deep down. When we allow ourselves to think about it, we realize that much of our outer behavior -- our front, our routines, the face we put on for the world -- are all a spurious act, a mask we put on to hide ourselves from the world at large -- and hide our own inner selves from ourselves. Yet as we all know, we really want to be in touch with ourselves, to really become the pure and beautiful soul we know we possess. Sooner or later we will have take off that mask -- and hopefully we will do it before we die.

(Part of the above based on ideas heard from R. Yochanan Zweig.)

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