

COMPLETE TESHUVAH

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Complete Teshuvah¹

No one appreciates a job only partially finished. Yet, something about teshuvah demands that it not be done in half measure. The berachah in Shemonah Esrei that deals with our repentance speaks of our returning to Hashem "in complete teshuvah." We do not attach the notion of completeness to any of our other requests in our fixed prayer. Something unique to teshuvah signals that if it is not complete, it is just not going to work.

We can isolate several elements that comprise complete teshuvah, in contradistinction to ordinary teshuvah. The first is that the teshuvah should be effective. A person can be moved to offer effusive words of regret. He can cry his heart out before Hashem, and his teshuvah will predictably be brief and fleeting if he lacks the precursors for effectiveness. The most important of those precursors is full understanding of the seriousness of his sin. It spells the difference between teshuvah, and complete teshuvah. Only the latter will endure.

The yetzer hora tells us that our sin is a small thing. It does not allow us to contemplate its implications, including the wedge that sin drives between ourselves and our Heavenly Father, and the darkness that envelops all of the spiritual worlds as its consequence.

A person who is oblivious to the reality of the horror of sin dwells in utter confusion. The holy seforim speak of a state worse than gehinom. Some people wander through life, oblivious to the requirements of law. They sin without any awareness of its seriousness. They also can for decades without experiencing any Divine retribution! Hashem leaves them in their state of confusion. When they die, they are treated similarly. Even gehinom is inappropriate for them. They continue to wander without judgment or accounting in what is called "olam ha-tohu," an existence of astonishing chaos. To a certain extent, the olam ha-tohu spills over into our world, experienced by people still alive. They glide in and out of the Yamim Nora'im, oblivious to their sanctity and meaning, as if unsure in which world they reside.

Such a person cannot do teshuvah properly. If he is moved somehow to repent, it will not last. For this reason, when we ask Hashem's help in doing teshuvah in Shemonah Esrei, we first request that He should return us to His Torah, and bring us closer to His service. Torah and avodah open our eyes to the true, deadly nature of sin. Only then can we hope to achieve what we next ask of Him: complete teshuvah.

Another possible meaning of "complete teshuvah" emerges from the words of the Rambam.[2] He tells us that the fullness of teshuvah requires that we find ourselves in comparable circumstance to those surrounding our sin, but this time avoid giving in. One who sinned with a particular woman does full teshuvah only when he is once again alone with her, his desire for her unabated, his strength intact- but this time manages to overcome his evil inclination. If he only repents when he is much older, his teshuvah is not full, but it nonetheless is effective. Even when done on his death bed, his teshuvah serves to gain for him forgiveness for his sin.

Yesod Ha-Avodah explains the Rambam. He writes that complete teshuvah must come from the depths of one's heart, preparing one to withstand future temptation. This kind of teshuvah indeed uproots sin from its source retroactively.

We can draw a parallel from the laws of koshering utensils. The overarching rule is one of equivalent effect: that the non-kosher substance absorbed in the walls of a pot can be drawn out the same way it entered in the first place. (If, for example, non-kosher flavor was absorbed in the presence of direct heat, the pot can be purged of that flavor only by the application of direct heat.) Similarly, we commit aveiros with varying amounts of passion. When we sin with great passion, our teshuvah is not complete until we can resist in the presence of great passion. It takes great internal resolve to resist that great passion; that resolve is what undoes the sin.

Another explanation of "complete teshuvah" is that it be appropriate to its milieu. In fighting a military battle, it is important to know what materiel the other side will bring to the front. If they come equipped with heavy armaments, you will lose the battle before even beginning if all you can muster is small arms. Similarly, it is important to inventory what the yetzer hora brings to the front. The sitra achra did not manifest itself as brazenly and openly as it does today. Tumah, corruption and heresy have penetrated the gates of the Holy City itself, reaching even to the holiest sites. What used to get by as teshuvah is inadequate today. Nowadays, a person must factor in the realities of the next assault by the yetzer hora. His teshuvah must take this into account. At the same time, a Jew must keep in mind the balance built into the system. As the powers of evil seem to grow, we can be sure that there are parallel powers of kedushah that offset them, and are available to us.

Complete teshuvah might also mean a teshuvah that encompasses the entire person. Such teshuvah will address the head, insuring that outlooks and attitudes are faithful to Hashem's expectations. It will work on the heart, changing its wants and feelings into holiness. It will alter the character traits that manifest themselves as activity of the limbs. As teshuvah envelops the entirety of a person, the words of Tehilim[3] accurately describe him: "All my limbs will say 'Hashem, who is like you?'" He becomes a personification of "My hear and my flesh shout joyfully to the living G-d." [4] When teshuvah occurs through the mind alone, or through feeling alone, it is in danger of eventually failing. Teshuvah must penetrate all parts of a person and all of his limbs.

As was the case with the other explanations of "complete teshuvah" that we offered above, it is the

comprehensiveness of the teshuvah that assures its longevity. That teshuvah works as it does manifests the extraordinary chesed of Hashem towards us. It accomplishes so much, given the stakes involved - as well as the forces that are arrayed to counter it, and to erode it even when we are able to do it. If we are aware of this, we should be in a better position to reinforce it by making it indeed a "complete teshuvah."

[1]Based on Nesivos Shalom, vol. 1, pgs. 207-209

[2]Teshuvah 2:1

[3]Tehilim 35:10

[4]Tehilim 84:3

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