

THE WORLD OF TESHUVAH

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The World of Teshuvah¹

Teshuvah is not an exit strategy for the sinner. It is not a process or a procedure. Teshuvah reaches so far and so deep, that we must view it as a parallel world or universe.

Teshuvah is a vital element in the life of a Jew. It is part and parcel of his very Jewishness. Teshuvah applies to everyone - not just to the evildoer, but to the average person, and even to a tzadik on a lofty plane. Similarly, it applies at all times in a person's life. It applies when a person reaches a nadir in his ruchniyus, when his spiritual existence is clouded and dark, as well as at times of heightened spiritual elevation.

A Jew must learn to take up residence in the world of teshuvah. The standardized text of Shemonah Esreh was designed for all Jews, without exception. Morning, midday and night, everyone asks Hashem for key spiritual blessings. After asking for understanding and comprehension, we continue, "Bring us back to Your Torah, bring us close to Your service, and return us to complete teshuvah before You." Teshuvah clearly is on the short list of absolute spiritual needs of all people

All this enlightens us to teshuvah's position and role. If teshuvah's importance is universal, then we must not mistake it for a way to deal with sin. It is at once the most basic of all levels - an outgrowth of the supernal Will that no one ever be pushed away, even the sinner - as well as the highest of levels - suitable to the needs of the absolutely righteous. "There is none in the land who is righteous, who does good and does not sin." [2] No matter how great the tzadik, he does not reach the pinnacle of perfection. He may understand much about the greatness of HKBH, and act accordingly in avoiding evil and performing good deeds. Nonetheless, anyone standing before the King of Kings, whose unlimited greatness is unknowable to mortal flesh and blood, must possess some defect owing to a lack of appreciation of the true loftiness of Ein Sof. Accordingly, Hashem created teshuvah, allowing us to compensate for all imperfection and flaws. Thus, the tzadik, who has nothing for which to repent, employs the world of teshuvah to burnish his good deeds, using its power to add luster to them.

Teshuvah, then, is the vehicle to complete and perfect the life of a Jew. Chazal [3] see teshuvah as one of a short list of elements that Hashem put into place even before Creation. Teshuvah was a necessary precursor of existence - even before Man was created, or tasted of sin. Without teshuvah, the world simply cannot get to its goal of a perfected society.

We will certainly not make the common error of viewing teshuvah as a form of expiating sin, a protocol to secure forgiveness for misdeeds, to express remorse and restore the relationship to where it stood before the sin. So many passages in Chazal won't allow such a reading, but support the idea that teshuvah is something new and something substantive. It is new in the sense of not setting the clock back to where it was earlier, but creating something more elegant than that which it replaces. Thus, Chazal tell us[4] that teshuvah brings healing to the entire world, brings redemption to the entire world. "In the place of ba'alei teshuvah the complete tzadik cannot stand." [5] The Rambam's words[6] are particularly instructive: "Great is teshuvah, which brings a person close to the Shechinah....Whereas a person was previously detested and distant to G-d, he now is beloved and cherished." Teshuvah is seen as taking the repentant sinner to a place greater than where he was before he sinned at all.

We can explain by way of analogy to a king whose treasury was plundered in a brazen attack on the royal palace. One of the king's subjects risks his life to penetrate the enemy camp, and singlehandedly liberates the stolen treasure. The operation demonstrates so much dedication on the part of this brave subject, and brings so much honor to the king, that he showers benefits upon the entire realm.

In truth, the dedication of the ba'al teshuvah is but one element that makes teshuvah so potent. Another element is the magic that teshuvah works on its practitioner. As Chazal point out[7], human reason would predict that there is no way to evade the strict consequences of any sin. Aveiros are not arbitrary; each one represents something harmful to us. When we damage one of our limbs or organs, we become less functional. The body does not replenish a lost limb or organ. Why should our spiritual selves work any differently? Teshuvah, however, does more than reconcile humans and their Divine Father. Teshuvah does not slap a new coat of paint on an old structure. Teshuvah builds anew, from the ground up. The ba'al teshuvah is not given an extension of his life, but a new life. He is not the person he was previously. (This is perhaps the most incisive explanation of why the tzadik cannot stand in the same place as the ba'al teshuvah. Because "there is none in the land who is righteous... and does not sin," it follows that the tzadik is not entirely free of any blemish. The ba'al teshuvah, on the other hand, stands blessed with the innocence of the newborn.) The Rambam's advice[8] to ba'alei teshuvah also flows from this reality. "Among the ways of teshuvah is that the person changes his name, as if to say, 'I am another! I am not the one who sinned and acted in that way.'" Teshuvah connotes a complete change of being.

Even the conventional form of teshuvah - regret for one's conduct - includes more than we generally realize. We must examine not only our actions, but our inner selves as well. We will then find ourselves repenting not only for misconduct, but for our personality flaws and bad traits. We will find ourselves lacking in hashkafic and attitudinal arenas - sometimes harboring ideas that border on the heretical.

Some of us will face a tougher challenge, when we realize that we need to repudiate our entire life

style! We might be relatively free of aveirah, and yet realize that our lives have become so mired in the pursuit of the material, that our constant desire is for unworthy goals. We will then require a much broader kind of teshuvah.

A still more difficult challenge awaits a person whose life is devoid of any spiritual content. He feels no spiritual longing, has no spiritual vision, and feels no stirrings of kedushah on the special days of Shabbos and Yom Tov. His teshuvah will need to be even more intense.

The toughest teshuvah challenge is posed to the person who is clueless about its very need. He feels nothing wrong, and has no inclination to do teshuvah or any inkling that he needs to. Teshuvah for such a person will be difficult, indeed.

The difficulty, however, is no match for the power of teshuvah to turn a person into a new being. Such power can overcome all difficulties. It is available, for the asking.

[1]Based on Nesivos Shalom, vol. 1, pgs. 195-198

[2]Koheles 7:20

[3]Pesachim 54A

[4]Yoma 86B

[5]Berachos 34B

[6]Teshuvah 7:6

[7]Yerushalmi, Makos 2:6

[8]Teshuvah 2:4

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