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# Teshuvah

A GUIDE FOR THE  
NEWLY OBSERVANT JEW

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

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## Chapter one

# The Meaning of *Teshuvah*

**T***eshuvah* occupies a central place in Judaism and has many facets. As individuals differ from one another, so too do their modes of *teshuvah*, in both motive and form of expression. Broadly defined, *teshuvah* is more than just repentance from sin; it is a spiritual reawakening, a desire to strengthen the connection between oneself and the sacred. The effectiveness of *teshuvah* is thus frequently a function of one's sense of distance from the sacred. The greater the distance, the greater the potential movement toward renewed connectedness. As one Jewish sage put it, A rope that is cut and retied is doubly strong at the point where it was severed.

This movement of the soul toward renewed connectedness can also come about in one who has never sinned yet who feels called upon to draw closer to holiness. For at the root of the notion of *teshuvah* lies the concept of return (*shivah*) – return, not only to the past (one's own, or one's ancestors'), but to the Divine source of all being: "You shall return [*shavta*] to the Lord your God."

All forms of *teshuvah*, however diverse and complex, have a common core: the belief that human beings have it in their power to effect inward change. Many factors conspire to distance one from the Creator, education and habit among them; habit, in turn, has many causes.

## *The Meaning of Teshuvah*

The rule that “transgression begets transgression” reflects not only an assumption about the transcendent foundations of human life, but also a sober view of reality. There is a causal connection: one cannot extricate oneself all at once from both the inward and outward consequences of one’s actions. For this reason, one transgression creates a situation in which a second seems logical, natural, virtually inevitable. A way of life remote from religious observance not only makes such observance difficult, but also by its own inner logic makes it progressively more difficult. Yet, despite these behavioral laws, there remains *teshuvah*: the ever-present possibility of changing one’s life and the very direction of one’s life. According to the Talmudic sages, this possibility of altering reality after the fact, which is one of the mysteries of all being, was created before the world itself. Before the laws of nature came into existence – “before the mountains were born,” as the Divine poet put it – a principle even more fundamental and more exalted was proclaimed: that change – *teshuvah* – is possible.

Many books and articles have been written about *teshuvah*, providing detailed analyses of the various stages of the process from start to finish. Yet, for all this elaboration, a few fundamental principles underlie all forms and levels of *teshuvah*, whether its starting point be exalted or lowly, whether it aims at a high level of spiritual perfection or at more modest objectives. In fact, two essentials are found in every kind of *teshuvah*: the renunciation of a regretted past and the adoption of a better path to be followed henceforth. Put concretely, *teshuvah* is simply a turning, be it a complete, abrupt change of direction or a series of smaller turns, not all of equal significance. Implicit in our petitions for *teshuvah* and forgiveness, repeated by all in our thrice-daily services, is the possibility of some kind of turning. As a rule, the more settled and tranquil a person’s life, the less sharp a turn he is likely to make. Yet, often we surprise ourselves, and it is not unusual to realize only with the wisdom of hindsight what our true turning points have been.

There are, as we have said, two factors that make the turning possible: the realization that the past, whatever it may have been, is imperfect and in need of correction; and the decision to change direction, to go a different way in the future. The nature, exact description, and possible consequences of this turning are discussed in the literature of *teshuvah*.

The recognition of the need to turn comes about in different ways. Sometimes one is overcome by a sense of sinfulness, of blemish, of defilement, which results in a powerful desire for escape and purification. But the desire to turn can also take more subtle forms, feelings of imperfection or unrealized potential, which spur a search for something better. As a rule, the greater the initial feeling of past inadequacy, the sharper the turn is likely to be, sometimes to the point of extremism and total inversion. When the sense of discomfort or incompleteness is more subdued, the resulting turn will generally be more moderate, both in its speed and its sharpness. But, whatever the primary feeling regarding the past, the desire to do *teshuvah* always springs from some sense of unease or disquiet. The great obstacle in the way of *teshuvah*, an obstacle confronting all of us, wicked and righteous alike, is self-satisfaction, the smug conviction that “I’m okay, you’re okay,” that whatever flaws one may have are the inevitable lot of human beings. Such spiritual and moral complacency has no necessary relation to one’s objective condition. One may be seen by others as a sinner and a criminal, without being at all aware of one’s failings. Such a person will never attain *teshuvah*. Similarly, one may come to do *teshuvah* through an awareness of imperfections in himself that are not at all evident to others.

This great stumbling block has been referred to by one sage as “obtuseness of the heart.” Obtuseness of the mind is easily recognized as an impairment of cognitive functioning; that of the heart is more insidious, a condition of blocked moral and emotional awareness. Without this prodding awareness, however slight, without some feeling of inadequacy, no amount of intellectual sagacity can change a person’s behavior. In many cases, *teshuvah* itself, once underway, gathers steam and produces an “opening of the heart,” in which the initial block against the consciousness of one’s failings is fully overcome. For the very first crack of awareness leads to a wider, deeper opening, and thus to a stronger response.

These observations hold true for all kinds of people, from those whose lives have always been far removed from the realm of the sacred and who feel no lack in that area, to those who lead pious lives which they are so satisfied with that they cannot see how far they are from perfection. The initial perception and awakening is, in effect, the first and

most inclusive “confession.” When a vague feeling of discomfort turns to clear recognition that something is wrong, and when that recognition is expressed in words spoken either to oneself, to God, or to another person, the first step in the process of turning has been taken, the part that relates to one’s previous life and character.

The second ingredient in *teshuvah* is referred to as *kabbalah le’atid* – resolve. This step is, in a sense, essentially a continuation of the first, and its force, direction, and coherence are largely determined by the clarity and strength of the initial recognition concerning the past. To feel discomfort and explain it away with a shrug, or any number of verbal equivalents, may not lead to even the decision to change, let alone change itself. On the other hand, genuine regret for one’s misdeeds and recognition of one’s failings do not necessarily lead to the desired outcome either; instead, they can cause a deepening sense of despair and a fatalistic resignation. Rather than promoting positive change, such despondency, regarded in our tradition as one of the most serious afflictions of the soul, can cause one to sink even further. A person may come to feel so degraded, morally, religiously, or otherwise, that he decides to blot out altogether from his consciousness the source of his degradation. Such repression usually occurs when one takes up a life of instinctual pleasures or any of various pursuits designed to dull the senses, temporarily or permanently. It is a flight from depression. Alcohol, drugs, sex, and various forms of “entertainment” may obliterate feelings of discomfort or dissatisfaction, but nothing is solved. Rather, there is a distorted sense of relief from pain and the delusion that one can carry on as before.

Thus remorse alone, however decisive it may be initially, must be accompanied by something else: belief in the possibility of change. In this sense, the principle of *teshuvah* – that no matter what the starting point, no matter how far gone the sinner, penitence is possible – is itself an important source of reawakening and hope. Knowing that the door is always open and that there is a way through it, knowing that there is no irredeemable situation, can itself serve as a goad to *teshuvah*.

It is important to remember that resolutions are not always carried out. Great obstacles lie hidden along the way. Routine and habit, which often create a person’s predicament to begin with, do not disappear simply because that person has made up his mind to change. Even



though it may not immediately be carried out, the decision is in itself an essential step. As long as it is not mere talk or self-deception (one can deceive oneself as readily as one can others), every positive decision, however small, is important. Indeed, in some cases a person's great turn may appear to be made suddenly, at a sharp angle and at high speed. But usually such a turn is preceded by many less dramatic, less mature steps, small decisions that do not bear fruit, wishes never carried out. When the time comes, all these small moves coalesce into a single movement.

*Teshuvah*, then, is a universe unto itself, encompassing two apparent opposites: It is, on the one hand, an exceedingly lengthy path with no clear end. Whatever one's starting point, each subsequent moment of change throughout life becomes part of the unfolding of that initial inner resolve to make the turn. On the other hand, *teshuvah* can be seen as a flash of regret and resolution, a sudden insight that change and improvement are needed. These two aspects of *teshuvah* are not contradictory but complementary. When *teshuvah* is seen as a process of complete self-transformation, nothing could be more difficult; yet nothing could be easier than the momentary resolve that sets the process going.

The *ba'al teshuvah* is thus like a person on a journey who at some point decides to change direction. From that point on, his steps will be carrying him toward a different destination. The turn itself is accomplished in a second. Yet the new path, like the one abandoned, is long and arduous.

## Chapter two

# Teshuvah in the Modern World

**T**hough *teshuvah* has always been fundamental to Judaism, far-reaching changes experienced by the Jewish people in recent times have given the process a new dimension. In the past it had a definite human and social meaning as an integral part of Jewish religious life, and to a great extent this is still true. Religious people, too, even the most saintly and scrupulous, can trip and fall into sin. There are many possible causes: an instinctual impulse; a general decline in the level of one's conduct as the result of a weakening of religious motivation; a sudden, wholesale abandonment of the Jewish way of life; or recurrent self-doubt springing from a sense of unfulfilled religious potential. (The latter feeling, in particular, can overcome even individuals considered by others to be paragons of piety.) Whatever the cause, a feeling of regret and a desire to do penitence may follow. Every transgression and experience of failure has its appropriate means of *teshuvah*, from the simple decision to abandon a particular course of misconduct to a struggle for the renewal and elevation of the soul.

Most of what has been written about *teshuvah* is concerned with

the various stages of the process: how one is awakened to the necessity of it, when it is appropriate to do it, what attitude is called for, and what specific acts of redress must be performed, from the injunction to return stolen money to instructions regarding physical self-denial and those means of atonement known as *Teshuvat Hakane*.<sup>1</sup> All this assumes a religious context. When one sinned, stumbled, or went astray, it was as a departure from a pious way of life to which the person and those around him were committed. These kinds of *teshuvah* are still valid, of course, in the religious world; individuals periodically lapse in their observance and try to make amends and return to the Lord. But a new kind of *teshuvah*, quite unlike its predecessors, has made its appearance in the last generation: the *teshuvah* of one completely outside the religious fold, to whom the entire pattern of observance, the yoke of the *mitzvot*, is foreign. The *halakhic* term that best fits this new phenomenon is “an infant raised among gentiles.” This is not to say that *ba’alei teshuvah* of the new variety are subject to all the details of the laws that apply in that case, but that it aptly describes their spiritual state. They are like captives, spiritual captives, among the gentiles, whether the latter be actual non-Jews or Jews who think, speak, and behave like non-Jews. (Even in Israeli society there are many people who think of themselves as Jews, but whose way of life and outlook are indistinguishable, except in language and locale, from those of other peoples.)

The return of the “infant raised among gentiles” is in many ways, even according to *halakhah*, fundamentally different from the *teshuvah* described in the traditional literature. The former, too, is a return, but not to some personal point of departure. Rather, it is a return in a deeper sense, a return of the individual to his people, to his origins, to the crucible in which he was formed, both historically and morally – to God. Judaism and the Jewish people welcome all who wish to come “home,” from near and far. But how much greater and more powerful is the act of one who returns to a home he never knew. The person who momentarily goes astray seeks in his *teshuvah* to correct a flaw in the ongoing pattern of his life. The person who comes to Torah Judaism from outside

1. A system of ascetic practices and mortifications for the repentant from the Book of Hakane, a medieval kabbalistic work by Rabbi Alkane ben Yeruchem.

must make a fundamental change in his way of living and thinking, he must undergo a radical upheaval. What may seem like a quantitative difference between the two kinds of *teshuvah* is in reality a qualitative one.

The latter-day *ba'al teshuvah* enters a new world. The magnitude of the change is not just in the fact that he must now fulfill a certain number of *mitzvot* and cope with a system of specific “ritual requirements.” A Jew is indeed subject to many different sacred laws, yet it is not their number but rather their scope – the number of different areas of life on which they impinge – that makes for such an upheaval. To accept Judaism in its entirety is not merely to set aside a certain corner of one’s life as a sanctuary, outside the everyday flow of affairs, but to alter deeply that flow itself. More than this, there is a whole new culture to be absorbed, entailing a great deal of learning. Above all, the *ba'al teshuvah* must embrace the subculture of *limud Torah* (study of the Torah), not as a means, but as an end in itself. A culture is more than a set of rules to guide behavior; it is a comprehensive worldview and way of relating to one’s fellow human beings. Like all complex cultures, Jewish culture does not spell everything out literally, but leaves much to inference. A culture’s strength lies not only in what it says, but also in what it chooses not to say, and this too must be learned.

This world, with all its difficulties and charms, is the one the modern *ba'al teshuvah* enters. Some get acquainted with it ahead of time through reading; others have looked at it, often with hostility, from the outside. But the knowledge acquired as a participant is not only deeper than, but also essentially different from, that of an observer. The difference between “I am praying” and “he is praying” is not merely a matter of viewpoint or of substituting one pronoun for another; it denotes an altogether different experience. Another’s prayers, another’s faith, are “phenomena” that I see and judge according to my own criteria. My prayers, my faith, the *mitzvot* I fulfill, spring from my personal involvement and connection. The transition from the status of observer to that of participant does not take place all at once; in fact, it may be quite prolonged, involving many stages. Yet every one of these stages entails a change in substance, not just form.

There is thus a strong element of internal struggle in modern-day *teshuvah*. The *teshuvah* done by one who has never left the Jewish fold

is also the result of a struggle: between temptation – instinct, inertia, habit – and awareness. The leap to *teshuvah* takes place at the point where awareness somehow overcomes temptation. The way is then clear, and the power available, to change direction. In the *teshuvah* done nowadays by people new to the Jewish frame of reference, the internal struggle centers on the ability to make the transition from one cultural, experiential world to another. The basic difficulty is in the essential change in one's pattern of relating, a change more difficult than any other practical or personal problems that may arise.

It has always been said that smooth continuity was not to be expected in the process of *teshuvah*, that at some point a leap would have to be taken from one realm to another. The exodus from Egypt, considered the archetype of spiritual liberation, takes place in two stages: the moment of hesitation and the moment of release. The Jewish people hesitate at the shore of the Red Sea, then, suddenly, Nachshon leaps into the deep water. In other words, even with the help of numerous miracles and the pressure of a cruel enemy in hot pursuit, a crucial pause halts the steady onward march. One runs up against a barrier that cannot be traversed except by making a bold decision, taking a chance, and jumping. Such hurdles are always part of *teshuvah*, but they are immeasurably more difficult when, as in our time, *teshuvah* is a matter of summoning the strength to leave one world for another.

In this connection it is worth recalling a rule that applies in the spiritual as much as in the physical realm: passage from one kind of environment to another may involve hundreds or thousands of little steps, but there comes a certain moment of categorical change, a moment unlike any that came before or any that are to follow. One can pace up and down the shore or wade about in the shallows for a long time, even a lifetime, contemplating swimming, but until one takes the plunge, one is not swimming. One cannot get swimming experience without giving up the security of treading on solid ground, without actually lifting one's feet, even before there is absolute certainty that one can stay afloat. Thus it is in every such transition; there is a moment of risk, of uncertainty, every time a plane takes off or lands.

Entering the world of Judaism is like entering a different medium, and one who would experience that medium must at some point make

a decision for change. That is not to say that a sudden leap is by itself appropriate; leaping before one is ready to make the transition is dangerous and sometimes damaging. But prolonged theoretical exercises and circumambulations, aimed at preparation and gradual adjustment, must at some point culminate in a jump from old to new values and new ways of thinking if one is to cross into the new world. Sometimes it happens that one takes the final step, not deliberately, but helped along by circumstances, as when a person hesitating over whether to jump into the water accidentally falls in. Subjectively, there is little difference between the two situations, the one in which all the impetus comes from within and the one in which there are also some compelling external factors. In both cases there is bound to be an element of shock, a sudden loss of stability. Before a new equilibrium can be achieved, the old one must be abandoned; the two cannot be maintained simultaneously.

Undoubtedly there are cases in which the transition is instantaneous, unambiguous, and irreversible, in which one enters the world of Judaism and feels immediately at home, as if he had never been anywhere else. But one does not necessarily make a single decision or a single abrupt leap and thereby become a new person; often a lengthy process is required. Yet even in such cases a crucial difference distinguishes the person who has not made a decision to change from the one who has already made the move, however briefly or partially. One who has managed to cross over to the new world has undergone an experience of inestimable importance that cannot be taken away from him: he now knows that it is possible for him to accomplish this change. For above all the other difficulties, uncertainties, and misgivings, both practical and intellectual, a great question looms: can this thing really be done? Can I really imagine myself on the other side, in the world of Judaism? But once the leap is made, however briefly, this essential question is answered, just as it is for the would-be swimmer who pushes off for the first time or for the aspiring flier on his first flight. No doubt the second time is difficult, too, and turning the initial experiment into an ongoing way of life even more so; but it is now clear that it can be done. The difficulties now are of a different kind: matters of detail, of practicality rather than principle, of *zil gemor* – going on to study the ramifications of a step already taken.

Another common aspect of *teshuvah* concerns one of its most essential, and paradoxical, components. On the one hand, *teshuvah* entails a break with the past, fixing a cut-off point that divides one's life into a "before" and an "after." Indeed, the ability to atone for and rectify one's mistakes rests on the assumption that such a break is possible, that *teshuvah* results in the creation of a completely new being. The past is severed from the present; one's former self becomes a stranger or ceases to exist. Or, as the Sages put it, the sinner dies and passes from this world; the penitent self is a new creature. *Teshuvah* is thus a kind of spiritual death and rebirth.

On the other hand, it is the past that motivates *teshuvah* and gives it its specific character. The saying of the Sages that "in the place where *ba'alei teshuvah* stand, even saints cannot stand" is explained by the Zohar to mean that *ba'alei teshuvah* "draw out" the Holy One, blessed be He, "with greater force." In the course of *teshuvah*, they develop a religious tension that is far stronger than that found among those who move along the same path throughout their lives. To use a simile of the Sages, it is only the damming up of a river that makes its power evident. It is the very distance of the *ba'al teshuvah* from holiness in his former life that lends force to his present yearning. The measured pace of one whose whole life is lived uprightly becomes a frenzied rush in the case of the *ba'al teshuvah*, who is driven by a sense of lack to strive for that which has been "lost." In *teshuvah*, these two apparently contradictory movements – the break with the past and the thrust provided by it – must both be given expression. The *ba'al teshuvah* must be, in some ways, like a "newborn babe," but he cannot feel completely so. He must be reborn, paradoxically, as a mature adult.

The greatest difficulty the modern *ba'al teshuvah* is likely to face arises when he tries to ignore his past altogether. (I shall discuss this at greater length in Chapter 9.) Doing so can have some apparent benefits, but also carries with it the dangers of self-satisfaction, smugness, and impatience with the difficulties of others. One becomes callous and insensitive, losing sight of the fact that people differ and that those who are different are not necessarily worse. It is only by remembering one's own past, by seeing the past as an integral part of one's life, that one can make the proper assessments. Though the *ba'al teshuvah* may

now find himself in a “different world,” he must remember that he was not always there and that he is still responsible for what came before. He is thus saved from two opposing pitfalls: excessive self-deprecation, to the point of self-destructiveness, and excessive self-esteem. The modern *ba'al teshuvah* can, of course, claim that his past transgressions were not his personal failure or his succumbing to temptation, but rather the fault of his parents, the environment in which he grew up, or his people. While such a claim has some validity, it should not altogether replace one's regrets.

In fact, there is no way to escape the past and be reborn completely anew. On the contrary, even one who has undergone the most extreme change, who has turned his values and beliefs completely upside down, does not generally become a different kind of person than he was. Character and personality usually remain stable despite great changes in one's way of life; if they were flawed before, they are likely to remain so. Thus one who looks upon *teshuvah* as a panacea for personal problems is bound to be disappointed. Weaknesses may be dressed up in the garb of piety, but they remain weaknesses. That is not to say that imperfections cannot be corrected, but that they can be corrected only when they are consciously and directly addressed. One can and must overcome discouragement and gloom, rashness and arrogance, but only by making a strenuous effort to do so. “Esau's master,” as the ancients called the evil impulse, is, according to the Sages, revealed in two ways: Sometimes it is like a robber, open and violent. Sometimes it is like a scholar who is full of wisdom and understanding, psychological sensitivity, and even ethical and religious fervor, all of which can be clever obstacles on the path toward the good. These obstacles can take the form of imposing demands so high that few people can realize them, or of dwelling on spiritual problems so complex that they cannot be resolved. We must be wary of both dangers.

Thus, even after his great spiritual about-face, the modern *ba'al teshuvah* must come back to himself, to scrutinize what has really changed, to see whether the changes that have taken place are deep-seated or merely on the surface. No less than before, he must use his awareness of his past failings as a goad to push him onward. It is not a matter of breast-beating but of an ongoing self-evaluation.