

Teshuvah from Fear, Teshuvah from Love

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In a few minutes, we will enter into the Selikhot portion of the service, a series of prayers that are unique to the Yom Kippur liturgy. Selikhot means "forgiveness" or "pardons"--it is here that we begin our Yom Kippur work of asking forgiveness for those ways in which we've strayed in the past year.

Rabbinic literature and Jewish law codes are full of specific details about how to do this--how to acknowledge our mistakes and wrongdoings and make amends, the process known as *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* begins with an internal process of acknowledging what we've done wrong, regretting our actions and resolving to change our behavior. The next step is confession, a verbal acknowledgment of our wrongs. So in a few minutes we recite the Vidui, the Ashamnu and Al Hayt, alphabetical listings of transgressions that name the variety of ways in which we may have gone astray this past year. Tonight, along with the traditional list of "al hayts," transgressions, we will also hear a list of things for which members of our community would like to ask forgiveness.

True *teshuvah* involves naming our transgressions out loud, in front of others, but does not stop there. We must ask forgiveness directly from anyone we have hurt; and we must refrain from doing the same negative action again, when we are placed in a similar situation. So the liturgical confession that we enact together tonight is a beginning, it helps prod us into an examination of our actions, but it does not suffice. And our tradition famously teaches that while the rituals of Yom Kippur can help us atone for any sins we have committed in the spiritual realm, in our relationship to God and our own souls, it does not atone for wrongs done to others--for that we have to engage directly with anyone we may have hurt.

But beyond the mechanics of seeking forgiveness for our wrongs, there is another level on which *teshuvah* is understood and described in Jewish tradition. It is a spiritual and psychological process, and a kind of cosmic process as well. The Talmud bring this teaching from Rabbi Meir: *Gedolah teshuvah, sh'bishvil yachid sh'asah teshuvah, mokhlin l'kol ha-olam kulo* - "Great is *teshuvah*, for on account of one individual person who does *teshuvah*, the sins of all the world are forgiven." Rabbi Hama ben Hanina says something similar: "*Gedolah teshuvah sh'meivi'ah refuot l'olam*--Great is *teshuvah* for it brings healing to the world." (Yoma 86a) Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Hama are getting at the same truth: the power of seeking to make a repair for our actions is such that we bring a measure of forgiveness, of healing, not just to ourselves and those around us, but to the entire world.

Another midrashic statement makes an even more powerful claim about *teshuvah*:

"Rabbi Abahu bar Ze'ira said: Great is *teshuvah*, for it existed in the world before Creation". (*Genesis Rabbah 1:4*) Commenting on this midrash, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes: "The implication of this remarkable statement is that *teshuvah* is a universal, primordial phenomenon...It is embedded in the root structure of the world...Before we were created,

we were given the possibility of changing the course of our lives." (in *Kol Haneshamah machzor*, p. 8)

Given the richness and complexity of *teshuvah* suggested by these teachings, I'd like to explore a bit more deeply what it actually means to do *teshuvah*. How does it work, beyond the mechanics of regret, confession, asking forgiveness, and changing our behavior? What are the deeper processes at work?

The first thing to acknowledge is that *teshuvah* is both something accessible to everyone and necessary for everyone. We do not need to be a hardened criminal or habitually engage in debilitating behavior to do *teshuvah*. Our tradition's emphasis on *teshuvah* accompanies a very realistic sense of human nature: none of us are perfect.

Our rabbinic ancestors understood this; they were greatly concerned about their own *teshuvah*, and they were the spiritual leaders of their generation! In a powerful discussion of *teshuvah* in the Talmudic tractate that deals with Yom Kippur, the early rabbis discuss the worst kind of transgressions, those that are so severe that only one's death can ultimately effect atonement. The worst, they say, is *hillul Hashem*, desecrating God's name—which the rabbis understood to mean doing something in public that will bring shame to God, that will make a mockery of what it means to serve God. And what are the examples they give? Rav said, "If I take meat from the butcher and do not pay him at once," that is *hillul Hashem*. That is, if he gives the impression that it is okay not to pay one's debts immediately, he has profaned the Holy Name!

Rabbi Yohanan did him one better, saying, "In my case, it is *hillul Hashem* if I walk four cubits without saying words of Torah or without wearing tefillin." In both cases, these rabbis take very seriously the example that they set for the community around them, and they think about their own need to do *teshuvah* in relation to that responsibility. (Yoma 86a)

Most of us can get away with slightly lower standards of behavior, but what I take from this teaching is the need to take seriously our own need to do *teshuvah*. The question is not, "what can I get away with?" but rather, "what are my responsibilities to myself and the people around me? What kinds of impact might my actions—or my failure to act—have on my family, my friends, my community?" The tradition invites us to cultivate an awareness of where each of us is on our own spiritual and ethical path, and what the next step might be in moving forward.

In this same section of the Talmud, we find two very intriguing statements by Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, known as Reish Lakish. The story goes that before he became a great scholar, Reish Lakish had a less savory career - that he was either a bandit or a gladiator. In either case, it would appear that Reish Lakish was familiar with profound personal transformation. Here is his teaching about *teshuvah* (Yoma 86b):

"Reish Lakish said: Great is *teshuvah*, for because of it, intentional sins are accounted as *shgagot*, mistakes, errors." The Talmud then brings another teaching from Reish Lakish

that seems to contradict the first one: "Resh Lakish said that *teshuvah* is so great that intentional sins are accounted as *zechuyot*, merits." So which is it--does *teshuvah* turn intentional sins into mere errors, or completely transform them into merits, positive things?

As it often does, the Talmud concludes that there is no contradiction between the two statements. The first case refers to *teshuvah* that is done from *yirah*, fear; the second, from *ahavah*, love.

So we have here two interesting questions: how does an "intentional sin" turn into a "mistake," on the one hand, and even more mysteriously, into a "merit" on the other? And secondly, what does it mean to do *teshuvah* from *yirah*--from fear, or a sense of awe--and to do *teshuvah* from *ahavah*, from love?

As I think about the term *teshuvah m'yirah*, turning based on "fear," the question arises: Fear of what, exactly?

One possibility is a fear of getting caught. Whatever I am doing wrong, someone will find out, and there will be serious consequences.

On a more religious plane, there could be a fear of heavenly retribution, that God will get me if I don't change my ways. Not the most Reconstructionist of motivations! But we might translate this into a more general dis-ease, of being conscience-stricken: a fear that on some cosmic level I am messing things up, and the gods are unhappy.

A more prosaic, but no less powerful, sense of *yirah* might be a fear that if I don't make some serious changes in my life, everything is going to fall apart. Maybe they already are falling apart, and that is motivation to start the process of *teshuvah*.

Another type of fear might be a fear of some aspect of myself. I do *teshuvah* when I decide to turn away from some aspect of my thought or my behavior that disturbs me, that frightens me.

The Arvei Nachal, the Hasidic Rabbi David Eybeshuetz of Soroka (cited in *Yesod Avodah*), teaches that when a person does *teshuvah m'yirah*, *teshuvah* from a sense of fear, it becomes a two-step process. In the first step, when we make a change based on fear of consequences, or because our lives are getting unmanageable, we are left with *sh'gagah*, with the sense of unintentional, yet still present errors. We are not completely clear of our transgressions - there is still a lingering sense of past mistakes, maybe even some leftover sense of guilt, even though we have done our *teshuvah*. We are in some way haunted by our past self, our past transgressions.

This type of *teshuvah* is an important step - to stop any active harm that is happening, even if the motivation is out of fear of getting caught or fear of what is happening to my life. If I can make real change, then I will have succeeded in turning intentional sins--or perhaps we

could say, obvious wrongs—into unintentional mistakes. But, the *teshuvah* is not complete. There is another step left - something more transformative.

This next step is *teshuvah m'ahavah*--turning out of love. The Arvei Nachal says that we do this kind of *teshuvah* not from a sense that something is wrong in our lives. Quite the opposite, our lives may be going just fine. There are no negative consequences that motivate our change. So how powerful it is that we decide that still, we need to do *teshuvah*! And when we engage in *teshuvah m'ahavah*, *teshuvah* from love, we need only do the one step—the power of this *teshuvah* is such that even our intentional sins are transformed into merits, into positive good.

So let's explore this a little more deeply. *Teshuvah m'ahavah*, turning from love of - what?

In the traditional commentaries, the answer is: love of God. In this understanding, sins are those things which estrange us from the sacred, which create a sense of alienation from that which is Ultimate and good. We become estranged from our own Godly nature, and from our divine Source. We experience a kind of hunger in our souls, a profound sense of spiritual alienation and distance from the divine. *Teshuvah* from love is motivated by that hunger, that thirst, a yearning for intimacy with God. As the great medieval philosopher and rabbi, Maimonides, wrote in his Mishneh Torah:

"*Teshuvah* is great because it brings a person close to the Shekhina, to God's Presence in the world...Teshuvah brings close those who are far off." (Hilchot Teshuva 7:6)

While Maimonides does not use the phrase *teshuvah m'ahavah*, it seems that here he is describing turning out of love, *teshuvah* that comes from a desire to make close that which has been far off, to return to a state of intimacy with all that is Godly within ourselves and the world around us. We do *teshuvah* when we become aware that it is our own negative actions that are getting in the way of this intimacy.

We might also do *teshuvah* motivated by love for ourselves. Here I turn towards my best self, embracing and challenging the negative that is within me while at the same time realizing that it does not define who I am. I am embracing my wholeness in love, with compassion, and I do my *teshuvah* from that place of acceptance.

In the morning service, in Pesukei D'zimra, Psalms of praise, we say this verse from Psalm 34: *Sur mei'rah v'aseh tov*. "Turn from evil, and do good." This one verse encapsulates the dynamic of *teshuvah m'yirah* and *teshuvah m'ahavah*. Rebbe Tzvi Elimelekh of Dinov taught: "It is well known that *sur me'rah*—turn from evil—is achieved by means of *yirah*, fear, and *asei tov*—do good—by means of love." When we turn out of fear, we are turning away from something—*sur mei'rah*, turn away from the negative, away from the bad. When we do *teshuvah* from love, we are turning towards—*asei tov*, do good. This is positive action, moving towards that which is wholesome and Godly.

I came across a beautiful teaching that expands on this by the Hasidic Rebbe known as Chiddushei HaRim, Yitzhak Meir Alter of Ger, the grandfather of the Sefat Emet. Here are his words, as he reflects on this verse, *sur mei'rah v'asei tov*:

"Surely if one has committed, God forbid, an ugly sin, and he concentrates on *sur me'rah*, turning from evil - he is thinking about the ugliness that he committed, and a person exists where his mind is! A person's soul reposes entirely where his mind is, so he is reposing in ugliness. He surely will not do *teshuvah*, because he will be pre-occupied with mental images of the sin, and it will block the emotional wellsprings of his heart. It may drag him down to depression, God forbid.

"Even if someone has not committed a very crude sin, so that her mind will not be preoccupied with such ugliness, and her emotional drive for improvement will not be blocked--it is still not worthwhile to dwell on the sin in an attempt to escape from evil. It is like someone trying to sweep away mud. She pushes the mud this way, she pushes the mud that way--she remains with mud! *I did sin, I didn't sin*--what benefit has Heaven from this preoccupation? While she was thinking about it, she could have been stringing pearls of Torah study and good deeds, so that Heaven could be benefitted!

[Therefore, let us interpret the verse differently]: *Sur m'rah v'aseh tov*: turn away from evil - don't think about it - and do good. If you have committed bundles of sins, commit bundles of good deeds instead." (in Artscroll Yom Kippur: Its Significance, Laws, and Prayers).

I love this teaching. The Chiddushei Harim is not saying that we should ignore our transgressions - not at all. The question is, how do we relate to them? His insight that our "souls repose where our mind is" points to the power of our thinking, and what we choose to cultivate within our minds as we seek to do good. Turning from fear has a quality of clinging to the negative. We get stuck in a place of anxiety, of self-doubt, of harsh judgment. Instead, he teaches, focus on the good. Replace the negative with the positive, and turn our mental and bodily energies towards bringing more good into the world. This is *teshuvah m'ahava*—a turning that stems from an embrace of the good, a love of the world.

I wanted to share some wisdom from my brother, Ted Morrow-Spitzer, that I received many years ago, that connects to this teaching by the Gerer rebbe. It was the late 1980s, and I was living in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, DC. I was a representative on a local neighborhood development association called Mount Pleasant Main Street, and we were tasked with figuring how to enhance the few commercial blocks of our little Main Street. It was a diverse neighborhood, including a lot of Central American immigrants, low-wage lefties like myself, merchants on the main drag who were concerned about their livelihood, and people invested in the historic nature of the neighborhood. The ostensible problem that we were addressing was that there were a number of alcoholic men—many were refugees from the civil war in El Salvador—who hung out on the street in front of the shops and, in the view of many of the merchants, kept customers away.

I brought my brother, an expert on public markets and public spaces, down to help us think it through. And these were his wise words, as I remember them: he told us that the

problem wasn't the alcoholic men on the street. The problem was that there were so few other people on the street, those men became the overwhelming focus of our attention. If we could fill the streets with shoppers, with families out having a good time, what was now perceived as a glaring problem would fade from view.

Worry less about doing away with the negative, my brother was saying, and focus on enhancing the good—very similar to the wisdom of the Chiddushei HaRim. If we look at ourselves and all we focus on is our failings, it will be hard to make change. We'll feel stuck, depressed, immobilized. Instead, we can acknowledge those failings, and turn immediately to do good. The positive actions we take will come to outweigh and outlast any bad that we might have done. "If you have committed bundles of sins, commit bundles of good deeds instead."

Finally, I'd like to consider what it means to transform an intentional sin into a merit. What does this mean, and how is it possible?

One understanding is that when we do *teshuvah* from the place of *ahavah*, of love, as I said earlier, we are moving towards something. In order to get there, we take whatever we have learned from our past mistakes and move to a higher level. We actively transform ourselves in a way that would not have been available to us, if we had not stumbled in the past. It is as if we take the straw of our mistakes and transgressions and weave them into gold.

But since we're not magical beings like Rumpelstilskin, this doesn't happen easily. It's hard work to so fully embrace our missteps, those ways we've hurt ourselves and others, to embrace, learn from, and then actively make repair in such a way as to produce merits—benefit to ourselves, to others, to the world. We are not just turning away from the bad when we engage in this work. We are actively promoting peace, we are actively fostering good, when we have the courage to face ourselves and, with great compassion, do the hard work that is necessary.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, taught that even in our sins reside holy sparks—those bits of holiness that the mystics say fell into the created universe at the moment of the Big Bang, the "shattering of the holy vessels" that could not contain the great divine Light at the moment the universe was created. These holy sparks, these hints of divine light, are hidden in everything in our world—including, says the Baal Shem Tov, our transgressions. What are these sparks, he asks? "They are *teshuvah*," he answers. When we do *teshuvah* for a particular wrongdoing, we release and elevate the spark contained within that transgression. A little piece of *tikkun*, of repair, happens in that moment.

As we enter into the Selikhot liturgy, my prayer for all of us is that we can find the holy sparks within our mistakes, our failures, our wrongdoings. May we learn from our selfishness, and let it spur us to new acts of generosity. May we harvest the energy of our impatience, and turn into a powerful calm. May we feel the suffering we cause when we are unkind, and turn that pain into compassion for ourselves and others. May we find the

sparks within all of our transgressions and with great love, turn towards the good, towards the Godly, towards that pure place that resides in each of our hearts.

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