



What Does Teshuva Really Mean?

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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Teshuva is the topic of the time. Repentance is how teshuva is interpreted. Yet, teshuva actually means 'to return,' within the context of returning to G-d. Yet, the thought is rather a strange one. Being, as we say, "m'lo kol ha'aretz k'vodo" (the whole earth is full of His glory) meaning that G-d is everywhere, how then can it be that one can return to G-d when every place is full of G-d? One cannot return to a place that one is already in. How then can one return to G-d?

The truth of this is rather profound, yet it is also very simple. G-d is in every place, whether we are talking about physical places or spiritual places. Even within the domains of evil and the unclean, G-d is there. If it were not for the presence of G-d no place or no thing could ever exist. Profound as it is, G-d is present even within evil. The Bible is clear (ref. Is. 45:7); G-d created evil and allows for evil to exist; G-d provides the necessary life force that enables evil to survive.

The meaning of teshuva can now be explained. Returning to G-d means returning to recognize G-d's presence wherever it is to be found. This means to see with spiritual eyes that whatever transpires, however good or bad it appears, G-d is within this. G-d is to be found even within the depths of the greatest despair and the most destructive evil. This profound truth was exemplified by the Talmudic Sage, Nahum Ish Gamzu, who, whenever something apparently terrible happened, would always say, "gam zu l'tova" (this too is for good).

How can this be? What am I saying? Am I saying that G-d Himself actually allows for evil to exist, for Holocausts to occur, for terrible, unjust and painful events to happen? Do not look to philosophy or religion to answer this question. Life itself has answered it over and over again. Whether we like the answer or not, the answer itself is very clear. G-d's definition of good and evil, right and wrong, is vastly different than ours (ref. Is. 55:8-9). Yes, indeed, the Torah is clear, G-d does allow calamity, indeed, G-d Himself often sends it. Nahum recognized this and embraced it, thus making the best out of even the most horrible of circumstances.



Throughout the Torah and the prophets, G-d Himself warns that He Himself sends punishments. TaNaKh is clear that Nebuchadnezzar, the evil lord of Babylon who destroyed the Holy Temple and Jerusalem and who perpetuated the first of all future Holocausts against the Jews, was an agent of Heaven and as acting on behalf of G-d. The Holy Zohar makes clear that future evil lords who are destined to wage war against Israel are all placed into their positions and given their authority and power by the edict of Heaven, all for the ulterior purpose of manifesting the Divine Plan.

Teshuva, returning to recognize the Way of Heaven within all occurrences, is the essence of Torah observance. Indeed, the Gemara (Macot 24) states that while Moshe Rabbeynu received the Torah from Sinai with 613 commandments, the prophet Habakkuk (2:4) came and summed up the entire Torah into one commandment, "tzadik b'emunato yihyeh" (the righteous will live by his faith).

Faith is the summary of all the Torah. So then, if faith is so essential, what exactly is it? Is faith not just a statement of beliefs held in the heart, or is faith something more than just what is in the heart and mind?

Faith as a belief is one thing, however this is not the Way of Heaven. Faith is not what you believe, it is what you do. A one-time Jew said it most eloquently, "faith without works in dead." Heaven looks upon us and judges us by what we do, not on our personal proclamations of declared principles. Heaven watches us to see if we live up to the lofty principles we claim to embrace. Our judgment, we place upon our own heads, when we proclaim one thing and in turn do something else.

For when Heaven sees that we do not live up to the faith that we proclaim, Heaven sends before us one of equal guilt to our own. Being blind to our own condition, we look upon the other and judge him however we do, most often harshly and without justice or merit. As we judge the other guilty of that which we ourselves are guilty we express the worse type of behavior, hated most by Heaven: hypocrisy. Thus, Heaven judges us by our own hypocritical standards. From our own mouths, lips, head and heart precedes the judgment that seals our own doom.

There is no way for us not to be in the Presence of G-d, and yet there are ways without number for us to blind ourselves to the Divine Presence. Returning to reality, this is the real meaning of teshuva. One of the great visions seen within reality, within the Presence of G-d, is the levels of either sincerity or hypocrisy that exist within the human heart and behavior.



Let me give an example. If you come into my house and know that I have outlined to you specific rules of conduct for you to observe during your stay and you know that my ever watchful eye is upon you and you also know that there will be uncomfortable consequences for your not behaving in the manner expected of you, chances are that you will behave properly and appropriately. While this may be true with regards to being a guest in my house or yours, how many of us pay attention and remember that we are all guests here on Earth, which is the domain and domicile of G-d?

During the time approaching the High Holy Days we make efforts to remind ourselves of G-d's Presence. We act extra religiously, we become more pious. In essence, we are trying to show off to Heaven how good we are and how we deserve the Divine blessing. Yet, once the novelty of the High Holy Day period wears off, either before or soon after the holidays themselves, we usually revert back to our normal ways, feeling secure that we have again "pulled the wool" over the eyes of Heaven and convinced G-d to bless us because of our nominal show of artificial repentance, temporary remorse over our evil ways and our superficial commitment to be ever more religious and pious.

How immature and childish of us to actually believe that we can influence the far superior and more evolved power of Heaven by our primitive shows of ritual stringencies. Again, Heaven knows exactly how we feel and what we think, and nonetheless only judges us by what we do, what we manifest on the outside, as opposed to what is concealed on the inside.

When we act hypocritically Heaven knows. When we commit to a greater level of piety and then only observe it for a time, Heaven watches and judges. We cannot repent for that which we have already repented. When we repent and then return to our former wanton ways, we are making the blemish doubly-bad. We are adding insult to injury and Heaven watches and judges.

A century ago, one of the great Sages of Baghdad stated that one who is strict in honoring Heaven whereas at the same time acts dishonorably towards other human beings and towards oneself is the very definition of a hypocrite. One can be meticulous in the observance of all the commandments and at the same time be guilty of the worst of sins, hypocrisy.

The hypocrite's main blemish is his selfishness and self-centeredness. The hypocrite views the world as revolving around himself. He must be the center of attention; he must be admired by others. He acts hypocritically to get all other eyes to focus on him and to place him at their center, even as he has placed



himself in his own center. What this describes is both a child and a fool. Indeed, such self-centeredness is normal in small children. Yet, Heaven demands that we grow up, mature, and act like adults, both internally and externally.

Drawing selfish attention to ourselves for whatever reasons is not the Way of Heaven. One who lives to fill one's own needs and to please oneself is most displeasing and unacceptable to Heaven. All that such a one does to please Heaven with elaborate strict ritual observances whereas at the same time does not exert equal if not greater effort to serve and help his fellow human being, such a one is rejected and even cursed by Heaven. All Heaven ever wants of us is to learn how to live as full human beings, created as we were in the Image of G-d.

Proper action is what Heaven requires of us. Proper attitude is what pleases Heaven. Heaven does not punish us for a bad attitude as long as our behavior is proper. However, if our behavior is improper, even if our hearts are in the right place, we will still bring down judgment upon our heads. As the old saying goes, "the road to Hell is paved with the best of intentions."

So as we enter this season of preparation for the High Holy Days, it is wise and best for us to reconsider the definition and application of what we call teshuva. Do not fool yourself into believing that you can fool Heaven with half-hearted, hollow and hypocritical behavior. Do not all of a sudden become so strictly religious. You are not fooling Heaven. You are only fooling yourself and those as shallow as you willing to accept the superficial for the real.

Heaven knows what is real. We too can know what is real by how long it lasts. Real teshuva lasts a lifetime. Fake teshuva, the kind that angers Heaven and adds additional judgment upon our heads is but for the moment, for the High holiday period. It is meant to impress others by showing them how pious we have become. For if others are impressed by our strict ritual observances, surely Heaven must be even more so impressed. This is the mentality of the fool, the one who stands no chance of being written in Heaven's Book of Life on Rosh HaShana.

Want to know how to do real teshuva? Stop learning it from books and start learning it from life! Start by being a decent, honest and honorable human being, and don't forget, acting friendly and nice is also part of this. Do not consider yourself in your heart to be closer to G-d, more religious, or better than others. In the end, the one who believes this in their hearts is nothing other than a "holier-than-thou" hypocrite. Do not deceive yourself into believing you are better than



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others because you are stricter in observance in this or that ritual more than another. It is Heaven who knows our inner reality and judges us accordingly. All we ever see is what is on the outside. So simply, do not be a hypocrite.

Read your TaNaKh. Learn from the life lessons of our forefathers (and mothers). Read Agadot (the Talmudic stories about our Sages, such as Any Ya'akov), readily available in numerous translations. Learn from the examples of real servants of Heaven, how they struggled, and how they learned their humanity and how to please Heaven by best serving their fellow human beings. Remember, this world does not revolve around you, it revolves around your service to others. You best emulate the Image of G-d when you are doing as Heaven does, by providing for others. This is the fulfillment of the commandments between fellow human beings (beyn adam l'havero).

Go in peace, prepare yourselves properly. Our world is about to explode in war. You cannot change the world, but you can change your little corner of it. Do this, and do it now. The clock is ticking. Rosh HaShana (Judgment Day) is only a few short weeks away.