

What is *Teshuvah*? A Reconstructionist Approach

From the early Rabbis, *Mishnah Yoma* (c. 200 C.E.)

On Yom Kippur, is it forbidden to eat, drink, bathe, put on any sort of oil, put on a sandal, or engage in sexual relations...A sin offering and an unconditional guilt offering atone. Death, and Yom Kippur, atone when joined with repentance/*teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* alone atones for minor transgressions of positive and negative commandments. As to serious transgressions, *teshuvah* suspends the punishment until Yom Kippur comes along and atones. The one who says, “I shall sin and repent, sin and repent”—they give him no chance to do repentance. The one who says, “I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone”—Yom Kippur does not atone. For transgressions between humans and God, Yom Kippur atones. For transgressions between people, Yom Kippur atones, only if the person regains the good will of his/her fellow...

Said Rabbi Akiva, “Happy are you, O Israel. Before whom are you made clean, and who makes you clean? It is your Father who is in heaven, as it says, “*And I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean*” (Ezekiel 36:25). And it says, “*O Adonai, the hope (mikveh)—of Israel*” (Jeremiah 17:13): Just as the *mikveh* (immersion pool) cleans the unclean, so the Holy Blessed One cleans Israel.

Maimonides, philosopher and rabbi, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Teshuvah* (11th-12th century)

What constitutes *teshuvah*/repentance? That you should abandon your sin, and remove it from your thoughts, and resolve in your heart never to repeat it again...Similarly, you must regret what you have done... And you must verbally confess that which you have resolved in your heart.

The paths of *teshuvah* include:

- a) to constantly call out before God, crying and entreating
- b) to do *tzedakah* according to your ability
- c) to greatly distance yourself from that which caused you to “miss the mark”
- d) to change your name, as if to say, “I am different, not the person who did those deeds”
- e) to change your behavior entirely to the good and the path of righteousness; and
- f) to exile yourself from your place. Exile atones for sin because it causes a person to be submissive, humble, and meek of spirit.

Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between God and human beings; for example, a person who ate forbidden food or engaged in forbidden sexual relations, and the like. However, sins between one person and another (injuring someone, cursing them, stealing) will never be atoned for until you give the other person what you owe him and reconcile with him.

Even if you restore the money you owe [the person you wronged], you must still reconcile with the person you wronged and ask that person to forgive you...

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Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism (mid-18th century)

The great root teaching which the Baal Shem Tov planted for us, [is that] if you see another person doing something ugly, meditate on the presence of that same ugliness in yourself. And know that it is one of God's mercies to bring you this sight before your eyes in order to remind you of that fault in you, so as to bring you back in *teshuvah* . . . Without a doubt, anyone who follows this path and behaves in this way will not judge his fellow unfavorably and in the scale of guilt, for he will see with his own eyes that he is not better than the other person and has the same fault and blemish in himself. And he will repent completely for all the things he has done wrong since coming of age. He will also appreciate the mercies of his Creator, in so reminding him of sins long forgotten. For the truth is that there is nothing that happens in this world without a purpose, and everything that happens before your eyes was sent to you from heaven for you to see.

Rabbi Shefa Gold, contemporary Reconstructionist rabbi (“Facing The Music: A High Holiday Meditation,” 2000)

Teshuvah, a word usually translated as Repentance or Return, also means Response, and in that meaning I find instruction guiding me towards a certain stance in relation to my life. When the “great shofar is sounded” . . . “the still small voice” emerges as my response. The art of response requires Listening which necessitates the ongoing cultivation of a patient, calm receptive presence. I don't mean listening as a passive bystander. The kind of listening I'm talking about is when you allow yourself to be addressed directly; it means “taking it personally”.

When I walk outside and look up at the sky, I can open myself to receive its blue as a gift or as a letter that is addressed to me. Its beauty calls forth a response gratefulness, praise, wonder. Something in me rises to meet that presence which calls to me through the purity of Blue.

And when I encounter suffering in the world, I can let its mystery address me, calling forth compassion from my own depths. Response is an art-form that requires opening, listening and knowing oneself and one's reactions. Respons-ibility is the freedom to respond wisely, rather than be enslaved by patterns of reaction.

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