

Parashat Vayelech – Shabbat Shuvah 5777, 2016:

*Teshuvah and the Process of Change*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Leah bat Shifra, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *haftarah* contains the famous declaration of the prophet Hoshea, “Return, O Israel, unto the L-rd your G-d (*Shuvah Yisrael od Hashem Elokecha*), for you have stumbled in your iniquity” (*Sefer Hoshea* 14:2), and provides this Shabbat with its name, *Shabbat Shuvah*. Herein, the *navi* (prophet) urges the entire Jewish people to return Hashem, and once again keep His Torah with heartfelt authenticity. This act of returning is known as “*teshuvah*,” and serves as the spiritual and conceptual underpinning of the entire period of the *Yamim Noraim*.

In a well-known passage in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides (the Rambam, 1135-1204) asks, “What is *teshuvah*?” His answer informs this discussion until our own historical moment:

What constitutes Teshuvah? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart never to commit them again as (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 55:7) states: “May the wicked abandon his ways...” Similarly, he must regret the past as (*Sefer Yermiyahu* 31:18) states: “After I returned, I regretted.” ... He must verbally confess and state these matters that he resolved in his heart. (*Hilchot Teshuvah* II: 2, this and all *Hilchot Teshuvah* translations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

In sum, in the Maimonidean exposition, *teshuvah* entails four distinct elements: recognition and rejection of the sin (*hakarah v'azivah*), the determination to never repeat the prohibition (*kabbalah al he'atid*), remorse for performing the forbidden action (*nechamah al he'avar*), and the verbal attestation (*vidui*) of these commitments.

Given this understanding as to what *teshuvah* is, we are prepared to analyze its *mitzvah* status according to the Rambam, i.e. is it or is it not a precept of the Torah? In his introduction to *Hilchot Teshuvah*, Maimonides writes, “[This section] contains one positive commandment, that the sinner should return from his sin before Hashem, and should verbally confess (*v’yitvadeh*).” It appears from this statement that the *mitzvah* is “the sinner should return from his sin before Hashem,” i.e. *teshuvah*, and that *vidui* serves as a handmaiden to this process. The very first *halacha* following this statement, however, stipulates:

If a person transgresses any of the *mitzvot* of the Torah, whether a positive command or a negative command - whether willingly or inadvertently - when he repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess before G-d, blessed be He as (*Sefer Bamidbar 5:6-7*) states: “If a man or a woman commit any of the sins of man... they must confess the sin that they committed.” This refers to a verbal confession. **This confession is a positive command** (*vidui zeh mitzvah aseh*).

Herein, and in seeming opposition to his introductory sentence, the Rambam expressly states that *vidui* is the *mitzvah*. As one might suspect, these apparent differences led to two very different approaches among *meforshei haRambam* (expositors of the Rambam). The *Minchat Chinuch* (Rabbi Yosef ben Moshe Babad, 1800-1875) and the *Avodat HaMelech* (Rabbi Menachem Krakowski, 1869-1929) maintained that the Rambam held that there is no *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* – only *vidui*. In contrast, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik (1853-1918), his son, Rav Moshe (1879-1941), and his grandson, Rav Yosef Dov (1903-1993, known as the “Rav”), opined that in Maimonides’ opinion, *teshuvah* is, in fact, the *mitzvah*, whereas *vidui* serves as a constitutive element of the overall *teshuvah* process. (See Pinchas Peli, ed. of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik’s *Al HaTeshuvah*, pages 15-45)

The Rav *zatzal* has a novel understanding of the Rambam’s conceptualization of the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* that is in consonance with his family’s approach to this issue. In his view, the Rambam perceived *teshuvah* as being similar in kind to the *mitzvah* of *tefillah* (prayer), in the sense that

both of these commandments, at their core, are experiential and personal, rather than physically demonstrative in nature. Thus he states regarding *teshuvah*:

This is a commandment whose essence is [not exhibited] through various actions and performances; rather, it is a process that, on occasion, takes place over a lifetime. It is a process that begins with remorse, with the sense of guilt, with the recognition by man that he has lost the purpose of his life, with the feeling of loneliness, with [the acknowledgement] of error after error [until his life has become] an empty vacuum... and he continues through this very long process until he achieves his goal – the *teshuvah* itself. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Al HaTeshuvah*, Pinchas Peli ed., page 44, this, and all translations, brackets, underlining and parentheses my own)

The Rav continues with his analysis of *teshuvah*, focusing upon its singular ability to alter the very persona of an individual, and the role that *vidui* plays in this undertaking:

*Teshuvah* is not tied to one particular and conclusive act; instead, it develops and grows in a slow and steady fashion until it brings the person to a metamorphosis. And then, [and only then,] after he changes and becomes a different person, is the act of *teshuvah* [ready to take place]. And what is the act of *teshuvah*? One may say that it is *vidui*. (Pages 44-45)

Rav Soloveitchik now expands upon the relationship that obtains between the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* and *vidui*. His words are nothing less than an intellectual and spiritual *tour de force*:

[When the Rambam writes,] “When he repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess,” he is following his general approach in such matters: In *Halacha*, and in regards to the *mitzvah* action [at hand], he presents *teshuvah* in its objective sense, in its demonstrative sense, therefore, he writes [immediately after our law,] “How does one properly fulfill [the action] of *vidui*?” In his prefatory statement to *Hilchot Teshuvah*, however, when he defines the *mitzvah*, he hints at the inner experience of *teshuvah* ... the convulsions of the soul that bring him [to the state wherein] “the sinner will return from his sin before G-d.” Then, when the *teshuvah* has grown to its full power, when he undertakes *teshuvah* [in practice,] “he will confess.” The Rambam, therefore, stresses and states that according to *Halacha*, “this confession is a positive command,” and it is the action (*p’ulah*) of *teshuvah*. The *teshuvah*, itself, however, is its fulfillment (*ki’yumah*) and it is an absolute necessity for *vidui*, for without it, there is no *mitzvah* of *vidui*. (Page 45)

At this point, the Rav concludes his discussion by proving the similarity of *teshuvah* to many other *mitzvot* of the Torah:

*Teshuvah*, in and of itself, therefore, is the fundamental mitzvah, albeit, a spiritually based *mitzvah* that has no physical aspect. There are many other *mitzvot* that are similar in kind, such as *tefillah*, as we have already mentioned, and the *mitzvah* of “and you shall love your fellow Jew as yourself;” for this, too, is a *mitzvah* that is inextricably interwoven with a variety of actions, such as kindness and helping one’s fellow Jew, yet the essence of the love itself is a feeling and in the heart. (Page 45)

In sum, according to Rav Soloveitchik, *teshuvah*, though highly subjective, is “the fundamental *mitzvah*” for the Rambam, rather than *vidui*. Like *tefillah* and the commandment to love one’s fellow Jew, which also involve actions, the essence of the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* resides in our hearts and minds.

We are on the cusp of Yom Kippur, when we will beseech the Almighty, “*S’lach lanu, m’chal lanu, kappeal lanu*” (“Forgive us, waive our deserved punishments, and remove all traces of our sins.”) We know that the fulfillment of these requests is contingent upon our heartfelt *teshuvah*, and sincere desire to reconnect with our Creator. With His help, and through our most powerful efforts, may we return unto Him, and bring the following verse to fruition: “For on this day He shall grant you atonement and purify you [from your sins]; before Hashem, you shall be purified from all your sins.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 16:30) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *g’mar v’chatimah tovah*.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.