

NCSY Torah —————
————— *on One Foot Series*

TESHUVA

תשובה



RETURN

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WHAT IS TESHUVA?

TESHUVA is usually translated “repentance,” but it really means “return.” When we do *teshuva*, we are returning to Hashem. Someone who has decided to improve himself, change his ways and return to G-d is called a *ba'al teshuva* or, if female, a *ba'alas* (or *ba'alat*) *teshuva*. (Plural: *ba'alei teshuva*.)

THE FOUR STEPS OF TESHUVA

1. A person has to abandon his negative behaviors
2. He then has to regret his past indiscretions
3. Next, he must resolve to do better in the future
4. Finally, he must orally express his wrongdoing to Hashem



(That this oral expression, called *vidui*, literally “confession,” is an integral part of the *teshuva* process is seen from *Bemidbar* 5:6-7 “A man or a woman who commits any sin against G-d must confess his sin.”)

ALSO *Teshuva* isn't just for faults in our actions, it's also for bad middos (character traits). One should do *teshuva* for negative qualities such as anger, hatred, greed, gluttony, ego and other characteristics that distance a person from Hashem.

QUICK QUOTES

- The *mishna* in *Pirkei Avos* (“Ethics of the Fathers”) 2:15 says a person should do *teshuva* the day before he dies. But nobody knows when that will be! Therefore, it is appropriate for us to do *teshuva* every day!
- Rav Yisroel Salanter (1810-1883) said that most people start doing *teshuva* the week before Rosh Hashana, while some begin the month before. But he said the best time to start doing *teshuva* is immediately after Yom Kippur. By this he meant that we should do *teshuva* year round, not just in anticipation of the “High Holy Days.”
- Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746) wrote in *Mesilas Yescharim* that we can only improve ourselves with the help of Hashem. If He did not help us, we would never be able to overcome our evil inclinations. We should therefore ask Him to be partners with us in this important undertaking.

- How do we know that G-d will assist us in our efforts to do *teshuva*? Hashem says, “Make for me an opening of *teshuva* no

bigger than the eye of a needle and I will make it into an opening through which wagons and carriages can pass” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:2). We have to take the first step but, once we do, Hashem will do most of the job!



THE RAMBAM

Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (1135-1204), also known as Maimonides or the Rambam, wrote one of the earliest codifications of Jewish law called the Mishneh Torah or the Yad HaChazakah. In it, the Rambam categorized virtually the entirety of Jewish life. Among his words on *teshuva*:

- *Teshuva* atones for all sins. Even if a person was evil his entire life, if he returns to Hashem at the end, nothing of his misdeeds will be held against him.
- Someone who does *teshuva* in words but not in deeds accomplishes nothing.



ing. If one doesn't actually work to discard negative behavior, it's hypocritical. Lip-service is meaningless.

- A person should view both himself and the entire world as half innocent and half guilty. He should then imagine that every *mitzva* he does has the potential to tip the scales to good and that every *aveira* (sin) has the ability to tip the scales to evil. He should then act according to this assumption.
- A person who overcame his faults and bad habits is loved more by Hashem than a righteous person who never sinned. Why is that? Because the *ba'al teshuva* had to work harder to get close to Him.

Yoma 85-86

The tractate of the Talmud called Yoma deals with Yom Kippur. Not surprisingly, the subject of *teshuva* comes up in great detail on these pages.

WHO is a truly regretful person whose return reaches Hashem's throne? Someone who is tempted

to commit the same sin again and manages to overcome the urge to do so.

Yoma 86b

IF ONE returns to Hashem out of fear, his or her sins are forgiven. If one returns out of love, his or her sins are transformed into *mitzvos*.

Yoma 86b

YOM Kippur only atones for sins between a person and Hashem. If a person has wronged his fellow man, he must apologize and ask forgiveness.

Yoma 85b

IT IS ONLY through *teshuva* that Israel can be redeemed.

Yoma 86b

The Aseres Y'mei Teshuva

The *Aseres Y'mei Teshuva* (the Ten Days of Teshuva) last from Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur. These are the first ten days of the month of Tishrei. Even though *teshuva* works at any time, these days, and the entire month of Elul which precedes them, are set aside as especially effective.

During these Ten Days, *teshuva* is immediately accepted by Hashem. For this reason, we make an extra effort to do more *mitzvos* (fulfill more commandments) and give additional *tzedaka* (charity) at this time.



B E W A R E !

There are a number of things that make it really hard to return to Hashem. These are discussed in the Talmud and

elsewhere and are categorized by the Rambam. Actions such as these should be avoided at all costs. They include:

- Intentionally causing others to do things that distance them from G-d
- Doing improper things with the intention that you can just do *teshuva* later
- Separating oneself from the rest of the Jewish community
- Making fun of G-d or the Torah (G-d forbid!)
- Insulting teachers
- Making yourself look big at someone else's expense
- Resenting it when others correct your behavior

One can always get closer to G-d, but these (and similar behaviors) create attitudes in a person that make it much more difficult!



THE TORAH SAYS...

- You will return to Hashem and listen to His voice.
Devarim 4:30
- On this day atonement will be made for you ... from all your sins.
Vayikra 16:30
- But He, being full of mercy, forgives sin and does not destroy.
Tehillim 78:38
- Return, you backsliding children, and I will keep you from backsliding.
Yirmiyahu 2:22
- Return to Me and I will return to you.
Malachi 3:7
- Turn to the One against Whom you have rebelled.
Yeshayahu 31:6
- The place where *baalei teshuva* stand in Heaven cannot be occupied even by the righteous.
Brachos 34b
- G-d said, "I will forgive as you have asked."
Bemidbar 14:20

How Elazar ben Dordaiah Became a Rabbi

Elazar ben Dordaiah indulged his every physical desire. He was told by a woman that he was so depraved that he could never do *teshuva*. This so affected him that he begged the mountains and hills to pray for him. They replied, "Before we pray for you we first must pray for ourselves."

He then approached the Heavens and the earth and asked them to pray for him. They likewise replied, "Before we pray for you we first must pray for ourselves."

He approached the sun and the moon, then the stars and constellations, but they all replied, "Before we pray for you we first must pray for ourselves."

Finally he said, "I now see that I must rely on myself." He began to cry and he cried until he died. So great was his *teshuva* that a Heavenly voice declared, "Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaiah has entered the World to Come." (*Avodah Zarah 17a*)

Elazar ben Dordaiah's return to Hashem was so intense and he reached such a spiritual level that the title "Rabbi" was added to his name by Heaven. This is a classic example of the principle that "some people work their whole lives to earn their reward, while others acquire it in a single moment."