

Chagim uMoadim

— from the Masorti Movement



ד"ר

Reflections on Teshuvah

The main idea of the Ten Days of Repentance, which begin on Rosh Hashanah is well known. At face value, Teshuvah seems like an obvious concept, but it is far from it. Jonah was the only prophet in the Bible that was successful in his educational mission; no one else, not even Moshe Rabeinu, achieved similar success. As a result of Jonah's success, he preferred to die because he did not agree with the idea of Teshuvah. He claimed that the concept of Teshuvah creates a tremendous imbalance, threatening the very notion of justice and that furthermore, Teshuvah is also philosophically impossible.

In theory, we are conditioned by biological and psychological factors, embedded within our genetic code, and influenced by society and our history as well. If we were to feed all of our personal data into a supercomputer, it should be able to accurately predict our next step in any given situation. However, the Jewish notion of Teshuvah believes in the possibility of ridding ourselves of the burden we carry on our shoulders by saying, "today I choose to change, and the wrongs I did until yesterday will turn into good." As summarized by the Rambam in the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Teshuvah 5.1): "Every man has free will; if he wishes to lean towards the good path and be a just man, he is free to be so. If he wishes to lean towards the wrong path and be evil, he is free to be so."

The verb to "believe" is fitting when discussing Teshuvah. While it is impossible to definitively prove the effectiveness of Teshuvah, it is certainly possible to believe in it. It is a sort of bet on the future-while being aware that we will never be completely sure that we have attained Teshuvah, it still serves us as a postulate for making our lives more meaningful. For this bet to be effective, we must take on an existential attitude towards life. This was brilliantly summarized by the Rambam (Laws of Teshuvah 7:2): "Every man must consider himself as if he were about to die, and for fear of dying in sin, he will repent immediately. He must not say, I will repent when I grow old, lest he dies before growing old."

We should view each of our actions as if it were our last-the one important act that will define the whole of our lives. It may sound exaggerated, but if we aim for the idea of Teshuvah, it should be so. There is no other choice-our tradition believes not only in the possibility of change, but also in our great responsibility to behave in a certain way, considering our next act as the one that will determine what kind of people we will be.

Remember that Teshuvah is a mitzvah that is not bound by the constraints of time. In other words, there is never a specific time for change -every time is the right time. In short, Teshuvah is an attitude towards life. The ten days running from Rosh Hashanah up to Yom Kippur are just a reminder of this. Therefore, the mindset of the ten days of Teshuvah must last us the whole year round. If this is not so and we take this period to be a specific, exclusive and unique time, and then return to our daily lives lacking awareness that we constantly have to change and improve, we will not have fully fulfilled the task commanded by our ancient tradition.

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