

TESHUVAH: FREEDOM OR FATE?

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IN UNETANEH TOKEF—ONE of the most poignant, and most disturbing passages of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy—we imagine that each individual's fate is tentatively decided on this day. We ask ourselves: Who will live and who will die? Whose dreams will come true, and whose will be crushed? In this light, the idea of divine judgment and the *teshuvah* (repentance) to which we are called appear to be highly personal phenomena: each of us is called to account for the particular choices we have made. Our own personal relationship with God is in question, and that relationship is shaped by our own deeds.

We find one vision of *teshuvah* that fits this mood in the writings of the Rambam. In his *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, he writes:

משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ה:ב

אל יעבר בַּמַּחֲשַׁבְתָּ דְּדַבֵּר זֶה שְׂאוּמְרִים טָפְשִׁי
אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם וְרַב גְּלָמִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא גֹזֵר עַל הָאָדָם מִתְחַלֵּת בְּרִיתוֹ לִהְיוֹת צַדִּיק אוֹ
רָשָׁע. אִין הַדְּבָר כֵּן אֵלָּא כֹּל אָדָם רָאוּי לוֹ לִהְיוֹת
צַדִּיק כְּמוֹשֶׁה רַבְּנוֹ אוֹ רָשָׁע כְּיִרְבֶּעֶם.

Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 5:2

Don't let the thought occur to you, as the idiots among the nations and the dimwitted among Benei Yisrael say, that God decrees that each individual, from the moment they are created, will be either righteous or wicked. The matter is not so, but rather each person can be as righteous as Moshe or as wicked as Yerovam.

The Rambam opens this section as follows:

משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ה:א

רְשׁוּת לְכָל אָדָם נְתוּנָה. אִם רָצָה לְהִטּוֹת עֲצָמוֹ
לְדֶרֶךְ טוֹבָה וְלִהְיוֹת צַדִּיק הָרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. וְאִם רָצָה
לְהִטּוֹת עֲצָמוֹ לְדֶרֶךְ רָעָה וְלִהְיוֹת רָשָׁע הָרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ.

Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 5:1

Free choice is given to each person. If they want to turn toward the path of goodness and to be righteous, that is in their hands; if they wish to turn toward the path of evil and to be wicked, that is in their hands, too.

According to the Rambam, this freedom is what makes us unique in this world, is part of what it means that we are made in God's image. There is no one but you, the Rambam insists, who makes you do the good or evil deeds for which you are responsible. So what exactly does *teshuvah* look like, for the Rambam?

משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ב:א

אִי זֶה הִיא תְּשׁוּבָה גְּמוּרָה. זֶה שֶׁבָּא לִידּוֹ דְּבַר שֶׁעָבַר
בּוֹ וְאִפְשָׁר בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ וּפְרַשׁ וְלֹא עָשָׂה מִפְּנֵי
הַתְּשׁוּבָה – לֹא מִיִּרְאָה וְלֹא מִכְּשָׁלוֹן כֹּחַ.

Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:1

What is complete repentance (teshuvah gemurah)? This is when one has the chance to transgress in the same way that they once did, and they have the ability to do so, and nevertheless refuses to do so, not because of fear or because of weakness [but because they have repented].

Now, on a superficial reading, one might understand the Rambam here as saying that *teshuvah gemurah* were something that could be achieved, once and for all, as the crossing of a line from one status to another. But perhaps it is not so simple. The Rambam writes that the goal of *teshuvah* is to be able to say:

משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ב:ד
אני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותן המעשים.

Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuvah 2:4

I am someone else entirely, not the same person as the one who did those things.

Once we reflect on the quality of the transformation that the Rambam demands of us, it is clearer that this sort of repentance cannot be achieved once and for all. It consists not merely of facing a parallel situation and behaving differently, but becoming the type of person who would never behave in the same way. It is a far more demanding task, a continual process of self-creation.

We can get a richer sense of what makes this kind of repentance so difficult from the work of the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre, an existentialist preoccupied with the radical implications of human freedom and responsibility, writes that one who wishes to change their ways is continually confronted with “anguish in the face of the past.” Sartre’s own example is that of a “gambler who has freely and sincerely decided not to gamble anymore and who, when he approaches the gaming table, suddenly sees all his resolution melt away.” Sartre writes that while we often talk about such situations as if our souls were a kind of battlefield between conflicting desires, this is just a way of excusing ourselves. “The earlier resolution of ‘not playing anymore’ is always there,” he tells us, “but what [the gambler] apprehends... in anguish” is that this resolution has no power over him. Sartre imagines the gambler’s thoughts: “I should have liked so much to not gamble anymore; yesterday I even had a [sense] of the situation (threatening ruin, disappointment of my relatives) forbidding me to play. It seemed to me that I had established a real barrier between gambling and myself, and now I suddenly perceive that my former understanding of the situation is no more than a memory of an idea, a memory of a feeling. In order for it to come to my aid once more, I must remake it *ex nihilo* and freely.”¹

Repentance, seen in this light, is an act that needs constant reiteration, in which we ceaselessly remake ourselves, hovering, all alone, over an abyss. This is a

vision of *teshuvah* that locates it squarely in our private, personal relationship to God, and makes the movement of repentance heroic, to be sure, but at the same time very fragile, and very lonely.

Yet on Rosh Hashanah we also turn our gaze towards the universal. We proclaim God as “King over all the earth,” and we remember the creation of the world, declaring that the world is born today (היום הרת עולם). In this light, we might think of *teshuvah* as less about the relationships between individuals and God, and more about the singular relationship between God and the world as a whole. A vision of this kind emerges from the pages of Rav Kook’s Orot ha-Teshuvah. Where the Rambam located *teshuvah* in the freedom and will of individuals, Rav Kook sees our personal spiritual journeys as parts of a dynamic of cosmic proportions, in which the primary actor is God.

הרב אברהם יצחק קוק, אורות התשובה ה
(ג) העולם מכרח לבוא לידי תשובה שלמה. אין
העולם דבר עומד על מצב אחד, כי אם הולך הוא
ומתפתח, וההתפתחות האמתית השלמה מכרחת
היא להביא לו את הבריאות הגמורה, החמרית
והרוחנית, והיא תביא את אור חיי התשובה עמה.

**R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook,
Orot ha-Teshuvah 5**

(3) *The world is destined to come to complete repentance. This world does not remain in one condition, but develops continually, and this evolution is destined to bring creation to its fullest potential, both physical and spiritual, and to bring with it the light of repentance.*

(ו) התשובה קדמה לעולם, ולפיכך היא יסוד
העולם. שלמותם של החיים היא דווקא עם המשך
התגלותם על פי טבעם העצמי. וכיון שטבע מצד
עצמו אינו בעל הסתכלות בהבחנה, הרי החטא
מכרח הוא מצד זה. ואין אדם צדיק בארץ אשר
יעשה טוב ולא יחטא. וביטול עצם טבעיותם של
החיים, כדי שיהיה האדם בלתי חוטא, זהו עצמו
החטא היותר גדול. ... על כן התשובה מתקנת את
הקלקול ומחזירה את העולם ואת החיים למקורו.

(6) *Repentance preceded the creation of the world—therefore it is the foundation of the world. The fullness of life comes through*

the continual revelation of its essential nature. And since nature itself cannot see or understand, therefore sin is necessary. There is no person who does only good and sins not. Indeed, to attempt to change the nature of things so that it would be possible for a person to refrain from sin entirely—this would be the greatest sin of all. . . . Repentance repairs this necessary breach, and returns the world and life to its source.

Like many European intellectuals of his day, Rav Kook fixed his gaze on the long arc of human history, emphasized the strange way that opposite forces can play in the progress of the world, and saw things as developing towards an end that was, in some sense, predetermined. Thus, for Rav Kook, we are all on a journey together, whose glorious end has been guaranteed by God. Along this journey, our role is to help reveal the full breadth and depth of existence, a task which, it seems, is impossible without sin and failure coming into the picture—for the values of growth, resilience, and overcoming that *teshuvah* represents are only possible if some breach has taken place.

And according to this vision, it's possible for the work of *teshuvah* to make its way in the world, and for individuals to take part in that work, even if the particularities of their own lives are wanting. This perspective was crucial to Rav Kook's understanding of Zionism, which he saw as a great movement of national repentance and return even though most of its activists were non-religious and even anti-religious. We are all, Rav Kook teaches, carried along by the stream of *teshuvah* to the place God has prepared for us. We just need faith that we will reach our destination in the fullness of time, even if from our current perspective it's hard to see how we could ever get there.

The Rambam and Rav Kook are offering us two very different ways of thinking about failure and repentance. On one hand, a vision of *teshuvah* that focuses on the terrifying freedom and responsibility of the individual, that sees no particular value in sin, and that charges us to create the selves we want to be; on the other, a vision that focuses on the long arc of history as guided by God, that sees each sin as an opportunity for growth and repentance, as a cosmic movement in which we

can participate, even when our own deeds seem not to measure up.

There is much that is compelling about each of these approaches, because there are aspects of our experiences of sin and redemption from sin that point in both directions. We have all faced situations where we struggled and prevailed, or struggled and failed, and known that there was no one but ourselves to whom we could give the credit or the blame; we have all known the anguish of freedom about which Rambam teaches us. And, at other moments, we have all been gripped, along with Rav Kook, by the sense that we are less important as individual actors than as parts of something greater, that our lives are shaped by currents that preceded us and that will go on after we are gone; we have all had the mysterious sense that our moments of failure, and our overcoming of them, provide our lives with a depth and richness they would not have if we had simply remained pure.

Of course, either of these pictures taken in isolation is incomplete. As another Jewish European intellectual put it, we do make our own history, but not simply as we please; we make it under conditions given and transmitted to us by the past²—and, I would add, by God. Our lives are a complex whole, a matrix of individual agency and structural forces that cannot easily be disentangled from one another.

As we move through the Days of Repentance from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, our challenge is to honestly assess which areas of our lives fall into which categories. Where have I been excusing myself, ignoring my own freedom and responsibility by appealing to the idea that I'm constrained by forces beyond my control? And where am I suffering from delusions of grandeur, imputing to myself a power I simply don't have over things far beyond my circle of influence? Where do I need to stand up and refuse to be idle, and where do I need to have faith that God is carrying us all, in the fullness of time, to the place we were promised?

This kind of *heshbon nefesh* (internal accounting and self-improvement) can make for difficult and uncomfortable work, since it often necessitates forming a new picture of ourselves, in which we are both less and more powerful than we have let ourselves believe. But before we can take our first steps along the path that God has prepared for us, we must first be honest about what we cannot do, and what we can. ♦

2 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).