



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

TESHUVAH: CHANGE IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE! SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



We have just entered the month of Elul, 30 days before Rosh Hoshana, which is traditionally a time of “teshuvah” – making changes in our lives to bring us closer to God. The ability to do “teshuvah” and change the course of one’s life is a great gift that God gives us. A passage from the Talmud points to actually something far more mysterious about teshuvah:

SOURCE 1: TALMUD BAVLI, PESACHIM 54a – TESHUVAH WAS CREATED BEFORE THE WORLD.

Seven phenomena were created before the world; and they are: Torah and **Teshuvah (Repentance)**, and the Garden of Eden, and Gehennom, and the Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of Messiah.

וְהָא תְּנִיָּא: שְׁבַע דְּבָרִים נִבְרְאוּ קודֵם שְׁנִבְרָא
הָעוֹלָם, וְאֵלּוּ הֵן: תּוֹרָה, וּתְשׁוּבָה, וְגִן עֵדֶן, וְגִיְהֵנִם,
וְכֶסֶד הַכְּבוֹד, וּבֵית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, וּשְׁמוֹ שֶׁל מָשִׁיחַ

Teshuvah is so vital to mankind; it was created along with the Torah before the world.

Question: What do you think ‘being created before the world’ implies about teshuvah?

- Perhaps one explanation could be that since it’s before nature itself, it is not bound by the laws of nature.
- In the physical world things really don’t change from their basic nature. However, a person can change and transform from the habits that have become natural to them. This is the miracle of teshuvah.
- But maybe there is another way to look at teshuvah which reveals another aspect of it. The fact that teshuvah was created before the world itself implies that a person can do teshuvah even without having sinned.

Consider the following prayer that we say each morning:

SOURCE 2: SIDDUR, MORNING PRAYER; R. MORDECHAI BECHER, GATEWAY TO JUDAISM, P. 136

אלוקי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא, אתה בראתה, אתה יצרתה, אתה נפחתה בי ...

My God, the soul you have given me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me...

Teshuvah, literally translated means “return.” We believe that the soul is intrinsically pure and began its sojourn in this world in a state of purity. Mistakes and wrongdoings are departures from the essential nature of the human soul. Therefore, when a person has done something wrong, the process of teshuvah is really that of **going back to his or her true essence.**

Question: Though we often think about teshuvah as “changing ourselves for the better”, what does this prayer imply about the essence of teshuvah?

Perhaps, what the Talmud and the source above suggests, is that although there is certainly a teshuvah of change – turning back from past mistakes that have defined a person – the essence of teshuvah is just “returning” to whom one really is at their core.

In other words, it’s not so much about change as it is about **“being true to oneself.”**

Let’s take a look at another source from the Siddur, which underscores how important teshuvah is to God:

SOURCE 3: THE SHEMONEH ESREI PRAYER – 4TH BLESSING OF TESHUVAH

Blessed are You, God, Who **desires teshuvah** (repentance).

ברוך אתה ה' הרוצה בתשובה

Of all the central blessings of the Shemoneh Esrei prayer, this is the only one described as being “God’s desire.”

Question: If teshuvah was just a mechanism to clean up mistakes, would it be so desired by God? Why do you think God desires it so much?

Teshuvah actually defines the most fundamental desire of God for the world. Its primary job is not to repair, but to proactively set a course for ourselves to become the people that we were always meant to be.

The month of Elul is very special because it is a spiritually conducive time for this return to occur. There are several verses from the Torah that spell out the acronym Elul from part of the verse. The most famous is “**I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me.**” But there is another verse in **Devarim 30:6** which also contains within it the acronym Elul and can help us understand the real opportunity of the month.

This verse is speaking in the context of the entire Jewish People returning to God at the end of days. Yet, even in our days, during the month of **Elul** there is a powerful spiritual influence available which allows each of us **personally to do teshuvah and return to God.**

SOURCE 4: DEVARIM 30:6 - CIRCUMCISE YOUR HEARTS

Then your God יהוה will **circumcise (remove the “orlah” barrier around) your heart** and the hearts of your offspring—**to love your God יהוה** with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live.

וּמַל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־לִבְּךָ וְאֶת־לִבְּבָנֶיךָ זָרַעךָ
לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל־
נַפְשְׁךָ לְמַעַן חַיֶּיךָ:

Question: How does the verse describe this process of teshuvah; more from the standpoint of changing who we are, or about rediscovering who we are?

The image of circumcision refers to removing internal barriers that will then allow us to **express ourselves from the heart**, as we truly are, without interference. This process of teshuvah is not to change into something else, something better than ourselves. Rather, **it's to rediscover our “hearts” and live more authentically as our true selves.** It's not changing, but returning to whom we really are! This is a very empowering and accessible approach to personal transformation. I am not trying to become something foreign to me, but rather to return to my own heart – the very core of who I am.

Our problem is only that we **forget and get distracted**; it's that **barrier around our hearts that dulls our awareness and sensitivity** to the truths that are ever present right in front of our noses.

REDISCOVERING OURSELVES:

Let's take a look at a practical approach to re-discovering our true selves:

Most often people look to their deficiencies when it comes to Elul and they want to do teshuvah - repair what they see as broken.

Question: What potential problems can you identify that might arise by taking this “let's fix us up” approach to teshuvah?

For many, it can be a depressing process, and not yield a whole lot of change and only reinforces our negative view of ourselves. Weren't we working on the same negative stuff last year and the year before? By focusing on our faults it can make us despair of ever changing. Consider the approach suggested in the next source:

SOURCE 5: R' YITZCHAK BERKOVITS, LECTURE, JERUSALEM - DISCOVER YOUR GREATNESS

People mistakenly think that self-awareness means knowing one's shortcomings. But **more important and fundamental is knowing your strengths**. The form that your greatness will take depends on what strengths God gave you personally. So, therefore:

Step 1: Write down all the strengths that God gave you.

Figure out what strengths you've been given. Ask yourself: **in what way do you think you're special?** We're not talking about skills like playing music or dancing well, but rather **some aspect of your personality** that's expressed as music or dance: sensitivity, creativity, stamina, love of life, making other people happy. Include everything.

The goal is not to become someone else. Who said you're meant to be what you read in the biographies about great people? Granted every Jew is meant to be great, without exception, but **it's your greatness that's required**.

Question: How can the approach described by Rabbi Berkovits above avoid the issue of focusing upon "fix-me-up" teshuvah during Elul?

On the one hand, this is a good psychological approach to teshuvah, because once people feel good about their strengths they are much more likely to be able to tackle their weaknesses. Yet, it also provides a direct approach to get in touch with our authentic selves.

Consider the continuation of Rabbi Berkovits' approach in Source 5b, which focuses on, and then moves on to address our weaknesses:

SOURCE 5b: R' YITZCHAK BERKOVITS, CONT. - REMOVE THE "ORLAH" BLOCKAGE FROM YOUR HEART

Step 2: Write down **what's blocking you** from becoming great in each strength.

You have to answer:

- *What **shortcomings stand in the way** of my developing each of these strengths fully?
- *So why am I **not great in these strengths**? Why am I just potential?

Step 3: Pick one (or two) obstacles to work on.

Once you identify who you are – i.e., what personality strengths you have – and what's holding you back, start working on those blocks. Start with the **easiest obstacle that presents itself in a certain situation**. Then keep a record of your progress (either on paper or mentally). As long as the block is still present, and is a bit of a struggle, do not go further. **Keep at it until the obstacle is removed** and the **strength can come out**. Once it's easy, move on to the next obstacle to actualize the next strength.

In summary: isolate blocks, and when they become easy to deal with, move on. This way you build a momentum. And you'll see that improving your character is exciting.

Question: Certainly, this approach is very practical and very astute from a psychological point of view to promote change. But from the sources we cited above, in what way can you make a case that this approach to teshuvah is more than a good psychological strategy?

God desires our teshuvah, and He created this power to return before the world was created, and before our ability to make mistakes. This means that teshuvah is the "before the fact" go-to power in our spiritual arsenal. **We don't have to make mistakes to find our way back to our true selves.** The door is always open to return from mistakes, but teshuvah can be so much more than a repair mechanism. We can do it now, throughout the year, but especially during the auspicious month of Elul, when God makes it easier for us.