

Shabbat Shuvah - Vayeilech 5780
Outer Work and Inner Work
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The *haftarah* we read today emphasizes repentance. The prophet Hoshea speaks of verbal and behavioral acts that were necessary for our ancestors to renew their relationship with God. Yet his message does not ignore the inner, transformative work that also is part of the process of *t'shuvah*. I'd like to share some thoughts about the process of *t'shuvah* that I find helpful in the interlude between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, that speak to the tension between *acting* better on the outside and actually *being* better on the inside.

The word *t'shuvah* is usually translated as “repentance” but actually means “return,” as in, returning to relationship with one’s best self, with the Source of all Truth and Meaning (which I call God), and returning to relationships with others. Our understanding of what is expected of us in the process of *t'shuvah* comes to us from the medieval scholar, Moses Maimonides, also known as the RaMBaM, which is an acronym for his name: Rabbi Moses, or Moshe, ben Maimon. He codified earlier rabbinic writings on the subject to offer a fleshed-out and more or less definitive guide as part of his master work, the *Mishneh Torah*.

In Chapter 2 of his Laws of *T'shuvah*, Rambam defines thus: “Complete *t'shuvah* is when a person again is in a position to commit a sin they had committed earlier, they are capable of doing it again, but nonetheless they refrain, repentant. They refrain not because they are afraid of the consequences, and not because they are too weak to carry out the act...But if a person only repented in old age, when the person lacks the power to do what they would have done earlier, that is not ideal *t'shuvah* but it nonetheless counts...Even if a person was a sinner their whole life and then repented on the day of their death, their sins are forgiven.

Rambam is essentially saying that there are two different types of *t'shuvah*: *t'shuvah g'murah*, complete *t'shuvah*, which is the ideal, and “regular” *t'shuvah*, which is not subject to any performance test. *T'shuvah g'murah*, the ideal kind, requires clear action, or, more to the point, decisive *inaction*. Regular *t'shuvah* is more about remorse and a change in perspective--an internal process.

So, if both kinds count, then why should we need to qualify them? Is it just splitting hairs, or does the difference *make* a difference?

What is happening here is that Rambam is attempting to synthesize two, earlier ideas, emerging from different sources, and not intended to be harmonized. He gets “*t’shuvah g’murah*,” the complete, performative kind, from the Talmud, in Yoma, where Rav Yehudah defines *t’shuvah* as “a case where a person encounters a sin for a second time and is spared, for example, [if he had committed a sexual sin with a particular woman], the same opportunity presents itself again, with the same woman, in the same period of his life, in the same place, [and he abstains] (Bavli Yoma 86b). Rav Yehudah says nothing about “complete” *t’shuvah*. *T’shuvah* is *t’shuvah*--refraining from doing the bad thing the next time around, and that is it. Rav Eitan Tucker of the Hadar Institute points out that this standard seems like it would be unattainable in many cases, because one would have to be in the exact same situation again in order to prove success. Rather, according to Rav Eitan, Rav Yehudah seems to be making a point, implicitly saying that it is very difficult to take back what we have done. We may say all we want about how contrite we are, but in reality, who knows if we’d do the same thing again? We don’t often get a chance to prove ourselves. If you had committed a sin against Rav Yehudah and offered a verbal apology, he probably would have thought, “well, that’s a nice thing to say, but it doesn’t prove anything. Bottom line, you did a bad thing, and if I gave you the chance, you might very well do it again.”

Rambam seems to respond to that tension. He wants to find a way for people to do *t’shuvah* and so he channels earlier rabbinic sources, not from the Talmud Bavli but from the literature of the Land of Israel, where there seemed to be a different sense of what *t’shuvah* is. Rabbi Shimon taught that a person could do *t’shuvah* at the end of a long life of wickedness (Tosefta (Lieberman) Kiddushin 1:15-16). A midrash asks, “what is the punishment for a sinner?” and God answers, “Let the person do *t’shuvah* and be atoned for. [Perhaps there may not be a punishment]” (Pesikta deRav Kahana #24, Shuvah). These sources speak to interior work, mental and emotional change, without a performance test. As Rav Eitan summarizes those earlier sources, “The heart of *t’shuvah* is a change of heart.” This view feels more like home to me. I know that I have made the same mistakes multiple times. It is too hard to be accountable to every earlier moment and always correct what I messed up the last time. Only after a process of introspection and a deep commitment to bringing myself to my life in a different way from the inside will my behavior change meaningfully on the outside. And I want the opportunity to be recognized for that growth, to know that when I evolve, it matters.

The Rambam could have chosen just one view. He often does that. But here, it seems that he wants to offer us a different possibilities for how we can change. He places the talmudic view--the performative one--first, as the ideal, but he immediately follows it with

the earlier approach, as if to say that remorse, return, and atonement more often are processes that can take a long time to complete.

You know that many people come to religion for comfort, seeking refuge from life's messiness. But anyone who lives into the *Aseret Y'mei T'shuvah*--the 10 days of Repentance, in which this Shabbat falls, knows that we come so that we can thrive and flourish in our lives, and sometimes that demands a certain, generative discomfort. The greatest teaching that Judaism offers the world is that we don't believe that everything that happens in life is "meant to be," but rather, that things do NOT have to be as they are. Nothing is inevitable, *and* we are not our deeds. We carry a vision of how good--how just, compassionate, and flourishing--the world can be, and, on a micro level, how good and flourishing *we* can be. We are called to show up in a world that is broken, holding onto a vision of the greatest possible good for the world and for ourselves.

Hopefully, we hold onto that vision throughout our lives, seeing it more and more clearly as we learn from our experiences. *T'shuvah* is not only the work of these 10 days, but the work of a lifetime. Our core commitment as Jewish people is to live with sacred intention in the tension between what is real right now and what is possible.

May we hold each other and help each other in that sacred space, in this sacred home in the days ahead, and the days that follow.