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Teshuva & The Dilemma of Free Will

Classic Medieval Sources for the New Year:

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Rabbi Simcha Bunim said to his chasidim: Man's great transgression is not the sins that he commits-temptation is strong and his power is weak. Man's great transgression is that at every instant he could turn to God -and that he does not.'

YOUR TEXT NAVIGATOR

Teshuvah, which ostensibly means repentance, is a multi-valenced word. On the one hand, it implies the literal meaning of the Hebrew, which is 'return.' To what are we returning? Judaism conceives of the relationship between man and God as a covenant between two partners, each of whom has a role to play in bringing the world to perfection. When we sin against God or man, we violate this covenant, thereby rupturing normal, covenantal relations. Teshuvah is the process by which this break is repaired and the covenant renewed, 'returning' us to a healthier relationship.

On a personal level, teshuvah is the process of asking for forgiveness from those whom we have wronged: friends, spouses, children and neighbors. Where necessary we must make restitution against those we have harmed. According to one of the greatest thinkers of this century, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, teshuvah is an "opportunity to liberate oneself from the failures of the past and demonstrate that the laws of psychological determinism need not control human destiny." (*The Living Covenant*, Rabbi David Hartman, page 75). Teshuvah is a process, therefore, of self-renewal and self-creation that comes about as a result of reflection and a powerful resolution to effect real change in one's life. Our tradition seeks to apply this process to our lives as individuals, and to our communal and national life. There is a feeling of great power when a Jewish community examines itself and then seeks to change and rectify matters.

Rosh Hashanah is a reminder to begin this process of teshuvah, a process ideally practiced year round. But alas, we are only flesh and blood-we make mistakes and we forget. That is why we have a concentrated time period-10 days-between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur-when we ask God and our fellow man for forgiveness.

The process of teshuvah is often a difficult one that forces us to confront our foibles and faults. One of the greatest scholars, rabbis and philosophers ever produced by the Jewish people, Maimonides, wrote a magnificent treatise on teshuva in his 14 volume work, the *Mishneh Torah*. Let us examine Maimonides' notions of teshuva and try to understand it in

the context of the philosophical notion of free choice. Read the following texts with your study partner. Make sure you examine them carefully, and then discuss its meaning. Can you glean wisdom from these texts for your own life?

Maimonides, *The Laws of Return*, 2:2

What is complete teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin], yet he abstains and does not commit it because of his teshuvah alone and not because of fear or a lack of strength.

For example, a person engaged in illicit sexual relations with a woman. Afterwards, they meet in privacy... while his love for her and his physical desire still persists. Nevertheless, he abstains and does not transgress. This is a complete ba'al-teshuva. *(Note: Another example would be someone who violates the law while trading on the stock market. He is caught and punished. After being released from jail he once again is able to trade stocks, and make lots of money by breaking the law. If he is tempted once again to violate the same law, but refrains from doing so, he is considered a complete ba'al teshuva.)*

If he does not repent until his old age, at a time when he is incapable of doing what he did before, even though it is not a high level of repentance, he is a ba'al teshuvah. (In other words, if he repents when it is no longer possible to commit the original transgression he cannot be classified as a complete ba'al-teshuva).

Even if he transgressed throughout his entire life and repented on the day of his death and died in repentance, all his sins are forgiven as [Ecclesiastes] continues: "Before the sun, the light, the moon, or the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain..." This refers to the day of death. Thus, we can infer that if one remembers his Creator and repents before he dies, he is forgiven."

What constitutes teshuvah? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again as [Isaiah 55: 7] states "May the wicked abandon his ways..." Similarly, he must regret the past as (Jeremiah 31:18) states: "After I returned, I regretted."

A person must reach the level where He Who knows the hidden (God) will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again as (Hosea 14:4) states: "We will no longer say to the work of our hands: 'You are our gods'".

He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart.

YOUR MAIMONIDES NAVIGATOR

1. What is the difference between "teshuvah" and a "complete teshuvah"?
2. Why does Maimonides discuss "complete teshuvah" before "teshuvah"? How do you explain the order he chose?
3. Some commentators find it problematic that one can commit transgressions their entire life and repent right before they die. Do you? What did Maimonides mean by this seemingly extraordinary ruling?
4. Cite the stages that one must go through to repent.

5. We are supposed to "abandon our sins and remove them from our hearts." Discuss this phrase, explain it, and offer examples.
6. Note how the beginning of the first teaching says, "What is complete teshuvah?" Maimonides quoted a question he found in the Talmud (Yorna 86b) but added the word "complete." Originally the question was simply, "What is teshuvah?" What is going on here-why did Maimonides add the word "complete"? What do you think of his definition of "complete teshuvah"? Offer your own definition of a "complete ba'al teshuvah."

Commenting on Hillel's often quoted phrase, 'if not now, when?' (Pirkei Avot 1:14) Rabbi Jonah Gerondi wrote:

Rabbi Jonah Gerondi (a popular medieval Jewish ethicist)

"If not now, when?" i.e., I cannot afford to delay for one or two days my exertions on behalf of the perfection of my soul. ...When perfection of the soul is delayed, the evil inclination grows stronger...and self-improvement becomes difficult ... It may be that one's days will not be prolonged and that one will die before one has rendered his portion of repentance..."

YOUR RABBI JONAH NAVIGATOR

1. Compare and contrast this statement to the ones above by Maimonides. How do you understand the phrases "perfection of the soul" and "self-improvement"?
2. It is human nature to avoid looking at our faults. A true *cheshbon hanefesh* (self-examination of our behavior) may force us to contend with things that we would prefer to avoid. How do you propose to convince others that this is a worthwhile process? Is it possible to avoid the pain?
3. What are some other ways you can understand this famous phrase by Hillel?

Midrash Pesikta Rabbati 44:9 (An early medieval collection of homilies based on Biblical verses)

Repentance requires both a human initiative and a response from God; Consider the parable of a prince who was far away from his father-a hundred day's journey away. His friends said to him: Return to your father. He replied: I cannot, I do not have the strength. Thereupon, his father sent word to him saying: Come back as far as you are able, and I will go the rest of the way to meet you. So the Holy One says to Israel: "Return to me, and I shall return to you" (Malachi 3:7).

YOUR MIDRASH NAVIGATOR

1. This midrash assumes that teshuvah must take place not only between man and man, but also between man and God. How do you understand the idea that we commit transgressions against God?
2. Evaluate the God of this midrash, who meets his son half way. Do you like this solution? Is this an example of a weak God? A clever God?

3. The foundation of this midrash is that there is a relationship between man and God. What do you think of this metaphor? Does it reflect reality, as you understand it? Explain your view.
4. Apply this midrash to human relations. Is this good advice? Offer examples.

Duties of the Heart, Bachya Ibn Pakuda (A popular medieval work of Jewish ethics)

The man who fulfills all the conditions of repentance, whose mind has overcome his desire, who constantly makes a reckoning with himself, fears his Creator and is ashamed before Him. He perceives the greatness of his sins and errors and understands the distinction of Him whose orders he has disobeyed and whose commandments he has failed to perform. He fixes his eyes always on his sins, he faces them continuously, he repents of them and asks God's pardon for them as long as he lives and to the end of his days. This man deserves to be rescued by God....

YOUR DUTIES OF THE HEART NAVIGATOR

1. Is it possible to completely overcome our evil desires?
2. What does Bachya mean by the phrase "fears his Creator"?
3. According to Bachya, a true penitent must always face his transgressions. How can this process produce negative effects? Discuss.

Back to Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva and a difficult philosophical issue-free will. Read this text with your partner(s).

MAIMONIDES HILCHOT TESHUVA 5:1-4 (The Laws of Return)

1. Free will is granted to all men. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his.

This is [the intent of] the Torah's statement (Genesis 3:22): "Here, the human has become like one of us, in knowing good and evil." The species of man become singular in the world with no other species resembling it in the following quality: that he can, on his own initiative, with his knowledge and thought, know good and evil, and do what he desires. There is no one who can prevent him from doing good or bad...
2. A person should not entertain the thesis held by fools ... that, at the time of a man's creation, God decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked.
This is untrue. Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses, our teacher, or wicked like Jerobam. Similarly, he may be wise or foolish merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or acquire any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he makes his own choice."
3. This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and mitzvot as Deuteronomy 30:15 states: "Behold, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil." Similarly, [Deuteronomy 11:26] states "Behold, I have set before you today the blessing and the curse," implying that the choice is in your hands.
4. Were God to decree that an individual would be righteous or wicked or that there would be a quality which draws a person by his essential nature to any particular path [of behavior]... how could He (God) command us to do this or to do that?"

According to this mistaken conception, from the beginning of man's creation, it would be decreed upon him, or his nature would draw him to a particular quality and he could not depart from it. [If this were the case] what place would there be for the entire Torah?

One must know that everything is done in accordance with His will and, nevertheless, we are responsible for our deeds.

How is this apparent contradiction resolved? Just as the Creator desired that the elements of fire and wind rise upward and [those of] water and earth descend downward...He desired that man have free choice and be responsible for his deeds, without being pulled or forced. Rather, he, on his own initiative, with the knowledge that God has granted him, will do anything that man is able to do.

Therefore, he is judged according to his deeds. If he does good, he is treated with beneficence. If he does evil, he is treated harshly...

YOUR MAIMONIDES NAVIGATOR

1. How do you understand the concept of freedom of choice? What does it mean for you in terms of your own life?
2. If all behavior was predetermined and God had a plan for all people and things, then Torah would be superfluous. Why? Explain Maimonides' argument. Do you agree?
3. If everything were predetermined, how would this affect human initiative?
4. Elsewhere, Rambam states another corollary of this philosophical dilemma: If God knows that a person will be righteous, but a person exercises his free will and transgresses, then God's knowledge is incomplete. Is this solution acceptable? Why does Rambam reject it?
5. Instead of saying that God's knowledge is incomplete, he argues that "we do not have the ability to conceive how God knows all the creations and their deeds. However, this is known without any doubt: That man's actions are in his [own] hands and God does not lead him [in a particular direction] or decree that we do anything." (Hilchot Teshuvah 5:5) What do you think of Maimonides' answer-does he successfully answer the potentially damaging statement that God's knowledge is incomplete?
6. Assume for a moment that his answer is not sufficient, and we acknowledge that God's knowledge is incomplete. Why is Maimonides unwilling, to accept this as a legitimate answer?