



Just as a person's merits and demerits are weighed at the time of his death, so are the sins of everybody on earth weighed against his merits each and every year on the festival of Rosh Hashanah. A person who is found to be righteous is "sealed" for life, and one who is found to be wicked is "sealed" for death. The one in the middle [whose merits and demerits are equal] is held in abeyance until Yom Kippur – if he repented, he is "sealed" for life; otherwise, he is "sealed" for death. (Hilkhot Teshuva 3:3)

Maimonides here asserts that when a person is determined on Rosh Hashanah to be a *beinoni* – neither "righteous" nor "wicked," but perfectly balanced between the two – his final judgment is delayed until Yom Kippur. In the interim period, he must perform *teshuva* in order to tip the scales in his favor and earn a favorable judgment on Yom Kippur. In the next passage (Hilkhot Teshuva 3:4), Maimonides writes that every person should presume this *beinoni* status, and for this reason we arise early in the morning in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to recite *Selichot* and ask for forgiveness. We must repent during this interim period so as to erase our demerits and thereby earn the status of *tzadikim* ("righteous") by the time our final judgment is rendered on Yom Kippur.

Many writers raise and address the question of why Maimonides hinges the fate of the *beinoni* on his repentance during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* ("Ten Days of Repentance" from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur). If, as Maimonides writes, one's judgment is determined by weighing his *mitzvot* against his sins, then it should suffice for the *beinoni* to perform additional *mitzvot* and ensure to refrain from sin during this period. In this way, the *beinoni* accrues enough merits during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* to outweigh his demerits, and should thus earn *tzadik* status come the final trial on Yom Kippur.

One answer is suggested by Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer (1837-1907), famous student of Rabbi Yisrael of Salant and Rabbi of St. Petersburg, in his work *Kokhvei Or*. Maimonides demands that a *beinoni* perform *teshuva* because the "sin" of failing to repent will, in many cases, overshadow the merits of any *mitzvot* one can perform during this period. Rabbenu Yona Gerondi, towards the beginning of his classic work *Sha'arei Teshuva*, elaborates on the implications of the availability of *teshuva*, and how grievous it is for a sinner not to utilize this extraordinary means of expiation and closeness to God. The fact that God grants us the opportunity to repent lends enormous gravity to the transgression of failing to repent; if God asks us to return and we flatly ignore His call, we have committed a sin even more grievous than the initial transgression.

This is true all the more so during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, when, as Maimonides famously codifies in the previous chapter (Hilkhot Teshuva 2:6), repentance is "especially beneficial and accepted immediately." Maimonides writes that when the prophet Yeshayahu declares, "Seek out the Lord when He is accessible" (Yeshayahu 55:6), he refers specifically to this period of the Ten Days of Repentance. If so, then failing to repent and recommit ourselves to proper observance during this period has the

effect of increasing the burden of sin tenfold, as it signifies our disinterest in the Almighty's invitation to restore our relationship with Him.

Therefore, Maimonides' admonishes the *beinoni* to repent during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, and not merely to increase his *mitzva* performance. Only through genuine *teshuva*, through a sincere process of soul-searching and attempt to grow and improve, can we tip the scales in our favor and stand before the Almighty on Yom Kippur as true *tzadikim*, with a heavy load of *mitzvot* that are no longer counterbalanced by sin.