



***Hilkhot Teshuva 2:1-2***  
***Teshuva Gemura: "Complete" Repentance***  
By David Silverberg

As we have seen in our previous essays, in the first chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva* Maimonides addresses the obligation and indispensability of repentance, emphasizing that it is required by the Torah and a necessary means of earning atonement. In the second chapter, Maimonides turns his attention to defining *teshuva*, and explaining what it is that a sinner must do to fulfill this obligation and earn expiation.

**I. The Structure of *Halakhot* 1-2**

In the opening passage of this second chapter, Maimonides draws a distinction between standard repentance, and what he terms *teshuva gemura*, or "complete" repentance:

What is complete repentance: a person who came upon the matter regarding which he transgressed and has the ability to commit [the act], but he refrained and did not commit [the act] because of *teshuva*, and not out of fear or deficient strength. How is this? Such as a person who had sinful relations with a woman and later was secluded with her, and he retains his love for her and physical strength...but he refrains and does not transgress – this is a person of complete *teshuva*.

Based on a comment in the Talmud (Yoma 86b), Maimonides defines "complete" repentance as refraining from repeating the offense for no other reason and due to no other cause than the desire to repent. When a person finds himself in a situation to repeat the transgression and experiences the same degree of desire and pressure, his refraining serves as an expression of his achievement of "complete" *teshuva*.

Maimonides then proceeds to clarify the status of penitent sinners who can never encounter the same situation in which they had transgressed:

And if he repented only in his elderly years, and at a time when it is impossible for him to do what he had been doing, then even though this is not the highest [level of] repentance it is beneficial for him and he is a person of *teshuva*. Even if his entire life passed and he performed *teshuva* on the day of his death, all his sins are forgiven.

Thus, if a sinner repents at a time when he can no longer encounter the same situation or experience the same desire for the forbidden act, his *teshuva* is nevertheless meaningful, even if it falls short of "*teshuva gemura*."

In the subsequent passage (*halakha* 2), Maimonides presents his definition of *teshuva* itself, and what exactly it entails:

And what is *teshuva*: that the sinner abandons his sin, removes it from his thoughts, and resigns in his heart never to commit it again... He likewise should regret the past... and the Knower of mysteries will testify about him that he will never repeat this sin again...

Maimonides establishes that the process of *teshuva* consists of the "abandonment" of the sin – meaning, the individual's emotional detachment and dissociation from the act committed – a sincere commitment never to repeat the act, and a sense of remorse for what he has done.

One might, at first glance, question the rationale underlying the sequence of presentation in these passages. Seemingly, it would have been more logical to begin this chapter by presenting the basic definition of *teshuva*, outlining these three components of "abandoning" the sin, the commitment to improve, and remorse. Only then, after the essential definition of repentance has been clarified, should Maimonides have then proceeded to distinguish between the two levels of repentance. Why did he choose to first delineate these two categories of *teshuva*, before actually defining the very concept of *teshuva*?

One possible answer emerges from a closer examination of the notion of *teshuva gemura*, and the significance of the distinction drawn between basic *teshuva* and "complete" *teshuva*. Upon reading Maimonides' presentation of these two levels of repentance, the question arises as to what practical difference is yielded by this distinction. It seems fairly obvious that Maimonides would not encourage a sinner to willingly return to that situation or reenact the conditions that led to the given misdeed. Can anybody be so confident in his resolve that he should test himself and thereby achieve *teshuva gemura*? Indeed, later in this chapter (*halakha* 4) Maimonides lists as one of the advisable measures of repentance that one should "distance himself very much from the matter regarding which he had sinned." Certainly, one should not attempt to achieve *teshuva gemura* by knowingly subjecting himself to the same conditions that resulted in the misdeed in the first place. Seemingly, then, whether a sinner achieves *teshuva gemura* or only standard *teshuva* does not necessarily depend on the quality of his *teshuva*; it rather hinges on his return to the same situation in which he had sinned, a condition that lies beyond his control. Why, then, does Maimonides draw this distinction between *teshuva* and *teshuva gemura*?

Rabbenu Nissim of Gerona (Spain, 1290-1380), in his famous compilation of discourses (*Derashot Ha-Ran*, 6), suggests that this distinction relates to the reward earned for *teshuva*. Repentance not only earns an individual atonement for his wrongdoing, but also earns reward insofar as it constitutes the fulfillment of one of the Biblical commands. Herein, Rabbenu Nissim suggests, lies the distinction between

standard repentance and *teshuva gemura*. A sincerely repentant sinner earns complete expiation for his wrongdoing, even if he never proves his sincerity by refraining from the given misdeed when faced with an opportunity to repeat it. As Maimonides writes, "Even if his entire life passed and he performed *teshuva* on the day of his death, all his sins are forgiven." *Teshuva* of this nature indeed has the capacity to earn atonement. *Teshuva gemura*, by contrast, renders the penitent sinner worthy of not only atonement, but also additional reward for properly fulfilling the *mitzva* of *teshuva*. If a person's repentance manifests itself in his withdrawal from sin in similar circumstances as those which led him to sin, then he is rewarded for having achieved the highest degree of *teshuva*.

We might, however, suggest an additional understanding of these two categories of repentance. Possibly, the concept of "*teshuva gemura*" as presented by Maimonides refers not to the preferred or more exalted level of repentance, but rather to a model exemplifying the nature of *teshuva* generally. Maimonides here seeks to emphasize that *teshuva* is a transformative process. It is not accomplished through the mere recitation of a certain text (though, as we have seen in earlier essays, verbal confession is a necessary precondition for repentance) or the performance of some religious ritual. *Teshuva* means changing one's entire outlook on the wrongful act committed, eliminating the deed from the range of acceptable behavior. The culmination of this process occurs when a person encounters the same situation in which he had sinned but heroically withstands temptation and abstains, thereby completing the transformative process of *teshuva*. He has truly become a different person, as he no longer conducts himself as he had previously when he committed the forbidden act. Of course, one does not have to confront such a situation to achieve *teshuva*; the internal transformation required of *teshuva* is accomplished once the sinner has distanced himself emotionally from the forbidden act to the point where he would never repeat it should the opportunity arise. But *teshuva gemura* establishes the theoretical model of repentance: transforming oneself to the point where he would not repeat the wrongful act should the situation present itself.

As a number of writers have noted, Maimonides makes no mention of fasting or self-torture as means of repentance. Even "complete" *teshuva*, the highest standard of repentance, does not require or even encourage ascetic measures. While observing a fast may be beneficial in focusing a person's attention on his frailty and dependence on God, self-inflicted torment is not a necessary ingredient of the *teshuva* process. Repentance means self-improvement and a change of character and lifestyle, such that the offense will never be repeated. Thus, only measures that serve this goal, that assist in changing the individual's character and conduct, are included in the *teshuva* process.

This perhaps helps clarify the significance of *teshuva gemura*. It is not expected that every sinner will return to the same circumstances in which he had committed the offense, nor is this necessarily desirable. However, *teshuva* means preparing oneself for such a possibility by fundamentally changing his mindset and attitude towards the given act. Of course, as Maimonides emphasizes, even if one no longer has the desire or possibility to repeat the act, he nevertheless can and must repent. He, too, must undergo the process of repentance to atone for his offense. The ideal model of repentance,

however, is the process of transformation whereby the sinner changes his outlook such that he would never repeat the misdeed even if the opportunity presented itself.

If so, then we can perhaps explain the arrangement Maimonides chose in presenting these *halakhot*. He opens this chapter with the notion of *teshuva gemura* as it establishes the paradigm of repentance, the objective towards which the sinner must strive as he undergoes the process. In a sense, the discussion of *teshuva gemura* in *halakha* 1 serves as Maimonides' introduction to his definition of *teshuva*, in *halakha* 2. He begins this chapter by informing us the goal and objective of the *teshuva* process – a fundamental transformation of self – before proceeding to describe the process itself – "the sinner abandons his sin, removes it from his thoughts, and resigns in his heart never to commit it again..."

## II. "*But he refrained...because of teshuva...*"

In describing *teshuva gemura*, Maimonides speaks of a sinner who faces the same conditions in which he had previously transgressed and this time refrains "because of *teshuva*." He emphasizes that *teshuva gemura* is achieved when one abstains from repeating the act due solely to *teshuva*, and not to any other factor or consideration.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (*Pachad Yitzchak* – Yom Ha-kippurim, chapter 19) insightfully observed that Maimonides would not credit a penitent sinner with *teshuva gemura* if he abstains out of a sense of *yir'at Shamayim* (fear of God), or out of general loyalty to the Almighty. *Teshuva gemura* is achieved only if the individual refrains "because of *teshuva*," out of a desire to change and improve. If he refrains for the same reason why other committed Jews refrain from sin, out of a general sense of commitment and obligation to the Torah, he has yet to realize the goal of *teshuva gemura*. Once an individual has transgressed, it behooves him to correct his conduct "because of *teshuva*," beyond the normal considerations that animate all conscientious Jews.

Rabbi Hutner explains this condition on the basis of the theme of change and transformation, as discussed above. Since *teshuva* means improving oneself, it demands a concentrated effort to change. If a sinner returns to the same situation and refrains from sin out of a general sense of religious obligation, he has not necessarily undergone a complete transformation. It is still possible that on another occasion he will lack the internal strength to withstand temptation. A person achieves "complete" repentance only when he refrains due to his commitment to change and act differently. By acting upon this commitment and abstaining when the opportunity arose to repeat the wrongful act, the individual has demonstrated his successful transformation and has thus achieved *teshuva gemura*.

## III. Two Models of Repentance

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, as recorded in Pinchas Peli's *On Repentance* (pp. 187-227), addresses the contrast between Maimonides' definition of *teshuva* here in chapter 2 of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, and the implication of his comments in the previous chapter. Here, in chapter 2, Maimonides describes the process of *teshuva* as beginning

with the "abandonment" of the sin, the emotional dissociation from the act, and continuing with the resolution to improve: "...the sinner abandons his sin, removes it from his thoughts, and resigns in his heart never to commit it again." He then adds the element of remorse – "He likewise should regret the past" – as well as the requirement of verbal confession – "and he must verbally confess and declare these concepts."

In the opening passage of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, by contrast, Maimonides rules that a sinner must declare, "Please, O God, I have sinned, acted wrongly and transgressed before You, and I have done such-and-such; behold I regret and am ashamed of my actions, and I will never return to this act." Here, Maimonides reverses the sequence. The sinner must first confess, and then express remorse and, finally, commit himself never to repeat the offense. Whereas in chapter 2 Maimonides speaks first of a commitment to improve, followed by remorse and confession, in chapter 1 he first lists confession and remorse, followed by a commitment to change. Moreover, in chapter 1 he makes no mention at all of "abandoning the sin," which he emphasizes so strongly in his presentation in chapter 2, in which *teshuva* begins when the sinner "abandons his sin" and "removes it from his thoughts."

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested reconciling these two descriptions of *teshuva* by drawing a basic contrast between two kinds of responses to sin that a violator could experience, which could be termed simply as "emotional" and "intellectual." The emotional response, as Rabbi Soloveitchik develops, involves a reaction of utter disgust and revulsion. A sinner will, at times, look upon himself and the act he committed with abhorrence, as something loathsome and repugnant. Rabbi Soloveitchik draws as an extreme example of this response the narrative of Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar (Shemuel II, chapter 13). The verse (13:15) tells that after committing the act, Amnon despised Tamar far more than he had previously felt attracted to her. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that Amnon looked upon his crime as an abomination, as a loathsome, despicable act, and came to despise himself as a result. This hatred was then naturally transferred to Tamar, the young woman who had so enchanted him previously, as she represented the sinful deed. Rabbi Soloveitchik cites in this context as well the *tefila zaka* prayer traditionally recited at the onset of Yom Kippur, in which we exclaim, "We are astonished at ourselves – how was this abomination perpetrated?" Rabbi Soloveitchik rephrases this question as follows: "We are human beings with a sense of beauty, an aesthetic soul, and we are attracted to fine things; how then could we have let ourselves be so attracted to commit an abomination and do contemptible things?" This expresses the sinner's emotional response of astonishment and disgust, the emotional turmoil that erupts within him when he considers what he has done.

The second response to sin, Rabbi Soloveitchik explained, is triggered by the intellect, rather than by an intuitive, emotional sense of revulsion. Often a sinner will acknowledge his error and understand its gravity and potential repercussions, without feeling any horror or revulsion. In such a situation, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes, the sinner

can estimate and imagine to himself the hazards that await him because of his sin; he grasps the dimensions of the sin, its terrible significance, its consequences. He is aware of what he has lost in the wake of sin and of his need for repentance.

All this he knows, understands and apprehends. However, his awareness of sin, as well as his understanding and comprehension of it, is entirely the fruit of mental processes, of his intellect and mind. He knows about everything, but he has no soul pangs. He understands the full nature of sin, its depth and breadth, and knows of its destructive powers, but he feels no contempt and hatred for himself.

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, Maimonides' two descriptions of repentance correspond to these two experiences. In the first instance, where the sinner – like Amnon – feels an instinctive sense of disgust with himself, the central motif of repentance is remorse and contrition. The emotional turmoil and suffering he experiences nearly guarantee that the act will never be repeated; he feels so ashamed and astonished for having acted as he did that there is no need for him to commit himself to improve. It is this kind of sinner whom Maimonides addresses in chapter 1, when he requires that the sinner declare, "I have sinned, acted wrongly and transgressed before You, and I have done such-and-such; behold I regret and am ashamed of my actions, and I will never return to this act." This declaration focuses on his shame and disgust, the natural consequence of which is, "I will never return to this act."

In chapter 2, by contrast, Maimonides speaks of "intellectual" repentance, a sinner who knows, but does not necessarily feel, the severity of his sinful conduct. Such a person must begin the process of *teshuva* by "abandoning" the sin and "removing" it from his thoughts. At the early stages of repentance, he cannot truly feel remorseful, as the appeal and charm of the sinful act remains firmly entrenched within him. He looks upon his conduct not with disgust, but, to the contrary, as an attractive lure that he must struggle to overcome. Repentance in chapter 2 is not a spontaneous response of disgust and self-hatred, but rather the long, complex and grueling battle between one's mind and passions, between his intellectual rejection of sin and his emotional desire for sin. Maimonides thus prescribes first the "abandonment" of the sinful lifestyle, requiring that the violator convince himself of the harmful effects of sin and make a sincere commitment to withstand temptation henceforth. Only then can he express feelings of remorse and contrition. In Rabbi Soloveitchik's words:

Only after a mighty struggle envelops a person's reason and his passions, and only after the intellect together with the will emerges victorious from this struggle, only then does the person begin to recognize, little by little, that the life of sin is one of vanity and emptiness and that it is worthwhile to overcome the charms and pleasures of sin for the sake of the life of purity that follows repentance.

Indeed, as Rabbi Soloveitchik observes, Maimonides speaks in this context of a repentant sinner who "retains his love for her and physical strength," who still feels drawn to sin despite having undergone the process of *teshuva*. *Teshuva gemura* is achieved when an individual succeeds in overcoming these feelings and tendencies for the sake of repentance, purely for the purpose of awarding victory to his mind over his passions. When this struggle is won, and the individual has trained himself to follow reason over

emotion, and virtue over lust, then he is considered to have achieved complete *teshuva*, even while those sinful lusts and emotions persist.