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## Maimonides on Teshuvah: The Ways of Repentance

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# Maimonides on *Teshuvah*

*The Ways of Repentance*

Henry Abramson

Fifth Edition  
תשע"ז 2017

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בס"ד

לאבי מורי

יעקב דוד בן אליהו ע"ה

איש חסד ואמת

To my father and teacher

**Jack David Abramson**

A Man of Compassion and Integrity

1928-2014

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## Preface in Lieu of Approbation

This book, like its author, is in a state of becoming. I first wrote *Maimonides on Teshuvah* in 2012 as a personal experiment, elevating a yearly habit of reviewing *The Ways of Repentance* before the High Holidays by translating it into English. There was no need for a new translation as Rabbi Eliyahu Touger's fine work was already available, but I had been interested in the developing technologies of web-based publishing and thought it would be a fun thing to do. Surprisingly, a fair number of readers enjoyed my translation, perhaps because I offered it as a free download during the period immediately prior to Rosh Hashanah.

In subsequent years I refreshed the translation and expanded the commentary. I came to view the evolving manuscript as an expression of my personal *teshuvah*, measuring change that was sometimes incremental, sometimes tectonic. The text became something of a spiritual journal that I shared with stranger-friends who received free yearly updates of the ebook. I am grateful for the comments they have shared, which have enriched my understanding of both the text and my self.

By long-standing Jewish literary convention, a Rabbinic approbation called a *haskamah* would appear at this point, assuring would-be readers of the scholarship and piety of the author. I'm not certain of either attribute, and feel uncomfortable asking my Rabbinic friends for such a seal of approval. Who am I, after all, to write a commentary on the eternal words of Maimonides? Furthermore, even if the thoughts I record this year have some value, it would be unfair to request an approbation to cover future years.



Readers should therefore approach this book with appropriate caution. My credentials to write a book of this nature are minimal.

My commentary is not a learned work with deep Rabbinic insights, nor is it a thoroughly modern, low-calorie approach to *teshuvah*. It is written in the spirit of Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook's perceptive insight that "it is impossible to fulfill the obligations of the heart unless one assembles a book for one's self...that contains the teachings that inspire one's soul" (*Musar Avikha*). I have tried to express myself in the sterile language of third-person academic scholarship. The syntax and vocabulary of this style helped me obscure the profound regret and heartache that drives much of my personal *teshuvah*. It is my hope that sensitive readers will recognize themselves in my questions on Maimonides, and we may strengthen each other thereby.

The fifth edition (5777/2017) includes some significant changes. In connection with a learning project at the Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst, the text is divided into forty units from Rosh Hodesh Elul through Yom Kippur. I have added a brief tribute to my father, to whom this work is dedicated.

י"א אב תשע"ז

שלוש שנים אחר פטירת אבי מורי יעקב דוד בן אליהו ע"ה

August 3, 2017

Three years after the passing of my father and teacher  
Jack David Abramson, of blessed memory

HMA  
Cedarhurst, NY

## Introduction

The railroad tracks ran parallel to Ambridge Drive, literally across the street from my father's clothing store and the small apartment that was my childhood home. The locomotive crawled by several times a day, sounding its ear-splitting horn as it approached the unprotected intersection with the street. Even without boxcars, the train was so heavy that its passage shook the dishes in my mother's china cabinet, a basso profundo roar that reverberated up and down my spine.

The sheer mass and power of the locomotive inspired respect, even fear. As a child, I often spent summer mornings placing pennies on the track, carefully noting the exact location of the coins by counting railroad ties from the street or marking the spot with a spray of purple fireweed. After the locomotive made its thunderous passing, I would hunt down the coins, now flattened almost beyond recognition, just a hint of Queen Elizabeth's crown or a bit of the Canadian maple leaf testifying to their original status as currency.

Imponderable though it was, the train was no match for the switches. Located about half a kilometer away, across from the IGA store, two parallel half-rails gracefully curved off the tracks, waiting patiently for the engineer to throw a lever and bring them into contact with the westward rails. Separated from the main line by tiny gaps no bigger than a finger, these tapered rails had the power to lead the massive beast away from its initial trajectory and cast it into the distant railway yards.

Sometimes, when I am not in a particularly charitable mood, I see myself as that locomotive, carrying an

unimaginable weight of inertia through my quotidian life, mindlessly reacting to others around me according to long-established maladapted patterns. Attempts to alter my behavior often feel quixotic and powerless, like pennies on the track, all efforts crushed and destroyed by their very first encounter with the weight of habit. Encouragement comes when I remind myself of those switches along the way, discreetly placed at key intervals, waiting for the signal from the engineer to connect them to the iron path and forever alter the train's trajectory to a bold, unanticipated destination.

Maimonides' *The Ways of Repentance* was one of the switches in my life. Reading it, and reviewing it, has helped me become the driver of my own locomotive, orienting my path whenever I found myself wandering away from my desired destination.

Moses Maimonides is one of the towering figures of Jewish intellectual history. Among observant Jews he is known as "the Rambam," an acronym for his Hebrew name, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Moses son of Maimon). In this work I will use the name "Maimonides," Greek for "son of Maimon," a term more familiar to secular audiences. His reputation is encapsulated in the phrase inscribed on his tombstone in Tiberias, Israel: "from Moses to Moses, there was no one like Moses."

Born in Cordoba, Spain in 1135 or 1138, his family fled persecution and settled in Egypt, where he rose to prominence as a physician. He was an indefatigable advocate for Jewish causes around the world, working to rescue Jews taken captive during the Crusades and writing letters offering guidance and support to far-flung communities. His most famous works include *The Guide for the Perplexed*, a philosophical treatise explaining the

foundations of Judaism, and the *Mishneh Torah*, a massive compendium of Jewish law, based on Biblical and Talmudic sources. *The Ways of Repentance* (*Hilkhot Teshuvah*) is taken from that multi-volume work.

The title *Mishneh Torah* may be translated as “the repetition of Torah,” in the sense that it represents an ambitious restatement of the entirety of Jewish law, derived from both the Written Torah (the Five Books of Moses) and the Oral Torah (essentially, the Talmud). Maimonides’ stated goal was to collate and organize the thousands of details related to Jewish practice and thought scattered throughout these ancient sources and present them in a clear, straightforward fashion in a single work. In a massive effort of prodigious scholarship, he organized all Jewish law into a single code, one of the first in Jewish history. Maimonides wrote the text in a clear Hebrew style, free from literary flourishes but with great sophistication, making it accessible to students with even intermediate language skills.

Although the *Mishneh Torah* was destined to become a classic of spiritual genius, it met with strong criticism from Jewish circles in Europe. Maimonides was censured for not providing detailed references to the Talmudic sources that informed his thinking (a lacuna that was later filled by commentators on the *Mishneh Torah*). More seriously, it was alleged that his deep engagement with classical Greek and contemporary Arabic philosophy had tainted the ideological purity of his Judaism. In one of the saddest episodes of Jewish intellectual history, French Jews denounced the work of Maimonides to the Church, and the *Mishneh Torah* was burned in public in 1232.

*The Ways of Repentance*, also rendered as *The Laws of Repentance*, has a place of distinction in the *Mishneh Torah*.

Rabbi Mayer Twersky once pointed out that most of the *Mishneh Torah* is based on laws that exist in definitive place in the Talmud. The laws of the Sabbath, for example, are more or less represented in the Talmudic tractate *Shabbat*, the laws of Rosh Hashanah in tractate *Rosh Hashanah*, and so on. The laws of repentance, on the other hand, are not identified and concentrated in any single book of the Talmud. Maimonides recognized that these important teachings, dispersed throughout rabbinic literature, constituted a distinct group of laws that required a sustained analysis and codification. In this sense, Maimonides literally created the systematic study of repentance in Judaism. Moreover, as Rabbi Eliyahu Touger observed, in order to do this properly Maimonides had to extend the discussion into many theoretical areas such as the question of free will and the nature of the World to Come, making *The Ways of Repentance* a deeply philosophical treatise as well as a legal guide to proper behavior.

This translation is based on the Frankel printing, which has become the standard critical edition. Passages edited out of the traditional edition, mostly due to the pressure of Church censorship, are thus included here, distinguished by the omission of vowels. I have added citations from the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud as necessary in parentheses. Gender-neutral language has been used whenever the translation would not suffer distortion. My intended readers are those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to study Maimonides in the original Hebrew, and therefore my commentary does not treat many of the important but abstruse Rabbinic debates over the meaning of the text in favor of a straightforward, uncomplicated explanation. Maimonides merely numbers his chapters; I have added titles to provide the reader with some sense of their content.

One last word to the reader new to Maimonides: this classic work, almost a thousand years old, has much to offer the modern student of Judaism. The fourth chapter in particular deals with topics that have immediate and direct relevance to contemporary reality, and reads as freshly as the day Maimonides first composed it. Still, he wrote for an audience whose concerns were in many ways quite different from ours. Maimonides lived in a society where adherence to traditional Jewish law was the norm and not the exception, where distinctions of rights and privileges of the sexes were accepted, where polemics between Judaism, Christianity and Islam were prevalent, and philosophical concepts were of deep interest to intellectuals beyond undergraduates in freshman philosophy class. A full appreciation for Maimonides' genius and the spiritual insights of this book will only come after study, meditation, and review.

The material which follows can be challenging. Maimonides demands searing self-examination and presents rigorous criteria for ethical development. Inevitably, we fall short of our own expectations, and there is a risk that we might succumb to excessively negative thought patterns. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, a major 20th century thinker, clarified that this is a fundamental mistake in *teshuvah*. Paraphrasing Deuteronomy 23:4, he wrote that "depressive thoughts may not enter the congregation of those who worship God." He explained that *teshuvah* is an essentially *joyous* activity, that consists of three distinct stages (citing Rabbi Israel Salanter, in *Alei Shor* p. 205):

The key and the beginning is the *feeling* (שהרג) that one has when learning the teachings of the Sages and texts of ethical wisdom, reviewing them time and time again until they act upon a person and

cause one to sense one's own personal flaws. From there one moves to the second level, which is the *conquering of one's inclinations* (כבישת היצר). The third level is *repairing one's inclinations* (תקון היצר) such that a person become *joyous, and delights in the service of God*.

How, exactly, does one manage to balance the serious work of discovering one's character flaws with the putatively joyous activity of *teshuvah*? Rabbi Wolbe cites Rabbi A.A. Kaplan, who compares it to a father dancing while his young son sits on his shoulders. On the one hand, he dances with energy and vigor, wishing to please his beloved child, but at the same time he retains full consciousness of the precious weight on his shoulders, careful never to endanger his balance with a misplaced step. So too, we should enjoin the activity of *teshuvah* with seriousness, yet remain confidently joyful that the resulting improvements in our character will be meaningful, beneficial, and lasting.

יפה שעה אחת בתשובה  
ומעשים טובים בעולם הזה  
מכל חיי העולם הבע

רבי עקיבא

A single hour of *teshuvah*  
and good deeds in this world  
is better than all of the world to come

Rabbi Akiva





# The Ways of Repentance

## הַלְכוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה

מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה אַחַת, וְהִיא שֶׁיִּשׁוּב הַחוּטָא מִחֻטָּאוֹ לְפָנֵי ה',  
וַיִּתְוַדֶּה.

וּבְאוֹר מִצְוָה זוֹ וְעִיקָרִים הַנִּגְרָרִים עִמָּה בְּגִלְגָּלָהּ, בְּפָרְקִים  
אֵלֶּיךָ.

One positive commandment, which is that the sinner should repent of his sin before God and confess.

The explanation of this commandment and the essential principles that may be derived from it are explained in the following chapters.

### *Commentary*

This entire book is a sustained discussion of a single commandment (number 73 out of 613 in Maimonides' *Book of Commandments*), which is to repent, specifically through confession. The details of this effort will be spelled out over the next ten chapters.

Hidden within Maimonides' sparse, undecorated prose is an allusion to the more expansive nature of this work. Although the *Mishneh Torah* focusses on practical applications of Jewish thought, the subject matter of this book demands extensive discussion of more philosophical topics. Later chapters will deal with issues such as the nature of free will, the concept of reward and punishment, and the Jewish vision of the World to Come. Maimonides

Day 1

ל' אב  
ראש חודש  
אלול

Tuesday,  
August 22,  
2017

alludes to the larger subject matter of repentance with the phrase “and the essential principles that may be derived from” the commandment to repent.

The Hebrew word for “repentance” is *teshuvah*, a term that is difficult to render in English with precision. The essential meaning is derived from the root “to return.” Depending on the context, however, it can easily be translated as response, reply, or retort, terms quite different in nuance than “repent.” In all cases, it represents a reaction to stimuli: a question requires a response, a home awaits a return. In the context of this work, the closest English term would be “repentance,” which preserves the “returning” essence of *teshuvah*: repentance in the Jewish sense implies a return to an ideal state of closeness with God and with our highest, most noble priorities in life.

In composing *The Ways of Repentance*, Maimonides quietly demonstrated his bold intellectual creativity. The concept of repentance is central to Jewish thought, but Maimonides was the first thinker in two thousand years of Torah scholarship to codify its practice in such a pragmatic, comprehensive manner. His groundbreaking effort is still greater when one considers the scope of the overall project of the *Mishneh Torah*, covering absolutely every aspect of Jewish teachings on human life, including commandments relevant to the distant past (such as sacrificial laws which cannot be practiced if the Temple is not standing, see *Sefer Ha-Korbanot*), the future messianic period (*Hilkhot Melakhim u-Milhamot*), and even areas not normally subject to human legislation, such as opinions and character traits (*Hilkhot De’ot*).

The laws of repentance appear early in the overall work in the section Maimonides called “The Book of Knowledge” because these teachings are, as he indicated in his

introduction, “essential to the Law of Moses our Teacher, and every person must know them before anything else.” The sequence is also significant: the *Mishneh Torah* opens with the Laws of the Foundations of Torah, covering basic elements of Judaism such as monotheism, followed by the Laws of Opinions, which covers the famed “middle path” of character traits. The Laws of Torah Study are next, but then the progression is interrupted by a long discussion of the laws related to idolatry. The juxtaposition of deepened awareness of Judaism and Torah with forbidden worship is jarring but hardly unintentional: spiritual growth is proportionately related to spiritual challenge, as the Talmud states, “one who is greater than his fellow—his desire to do evil is similarly greater (see *Sukkah* 52a). Maimonides then brings the fallen reader back to center with our book, *The Ways of Repentance*, which concludes the the section entitled The Book of Knowledge.



## Chapter One: Confession

### 1.1

כל המצוות שבתורה, בין עשה בין לא תעשה--אם עבר אדם על אחת מהן, בין בזדון בין בשגגה--כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו, תיב להתדות לפני הא-ל ברוך הוא: שְׁנֵאָמַר "איש או-אשה כי יעשו מכל-חטאת האדם למעול מעל בה' ואשמה הנפש ההיא והתודו, את-חטאתם אשר עשו" (במדבר ה, ו-ז), זה ודוי דברים. ודוי זה מצות עשה.

כיצד מתודה--אומר אגא ה' חטאתי עויתי פשעתי לפניך, ועשיתי כך וכך, והרי נחמתי ובשתי במעשי, ולעולם איני חוזר לדבר זה. זה הוא עיקרו שלודוי; וכל המרבה להתדות ומאריך בעגנו זה, הרי זה משבח.

וכו בעלי חטאות ואשמות--בעת שמביאין קרבנותיהם על שגגתו או על זדונו, אין מתכפר להו בקרבנם, עד שיעשו תשובה, ויתודו ודוי דברים: שְׁנֵאָמַר "והתודה אשר חטא עליה" (ויקרא ה, ה).

וכו כל מחיבי מיתות בית דין, ומחיבי מלקות--אין מתכפר להם במיתתם או בלקיתם, עד שיעשו תשובה ויתודו. וכו החובל בחברו או המזיק ממונו--אף על פי ששלם לו מה שהוא חייב לו--אין מתכפר לו, עד שיתודה וישוב מלעשות כזה לעולם: שְׁנֵאָמַר "מכל-חטאת האדם" (במדבר ה, ו).

Every commandment in the Torah, whether a commandment to perform some act or a commandment to refrain from some act-- if a person transgresses one of these commandments, whether unintentionally or intentionally, he must confess before God when he does *teshuvah* for his sin. This is as it is written (Numbers 5:6-7): *a man or woman who commits one of the sins of humanity, transgressing against God, the soul bears guilt; they must confess the sin they committed.* This is called

the “confession of words.” This confession is a positive commandment.

How should a person confess? He should say, “Please, God, I have sinned, I have wronged, I have rebelled before you, and I have done such-and-such. Behold, I regret and am ashamed of my deeds, and I will never return to that act again.” this is the essence of confession, and anyone who expands on such a confession, going into greater detail, deserves praise.

Thus when people who sinned and are guilty, and brought sacrifices for their unintentional or intentional sins, they did not receive atonement through their offerings until they did *teshuvah*, and confessed the confession of words, as it is written (Leviticus 5:5) *and he will confess regarding that which he sinned*.

So too, one who was condemned to be executed by the court, or condemned to receive lashes, would not receive atonement through death or lashes if he did not also do *teshuvah* and confess. Furthermore, anyone who harms another person physically or financially, even though he may repay what he owes, he will not receive atonement until he confesses and repents of ever doing this again, as it is written (Numbers 5:6) *of all the sins of humanity*.

### *Commentary*

It is hard to understand why Maimonides began this book with a discussion of confession. His logical, orderly style usually begins with general concepts and definition of key terms, and there is no shortage of appropriate initial topics. He could have begun with a definition of *teshuvah*, but he

leaves that till Chapter Two. Alternatively, this book could have begun with the importance of *teshuvah* (Chapter Three) or the value of *teshuvah* (Chapter Seven) or even the purpose of *teshuvah* (Chapter Ten). Granted, Maimonides seems to count “confession” as the sole, concrete action associated with the commandment of *teshuvah* (although passages elsewhere in his work suggests that he may consider *teshuvah* a commandment unto itself), but why begin the book by discussing one element of *teshuvah* rather than a more general principle?

The *confession* is a verbal articulation of the consciousness of past wrongs. This confession is entirely private, conducted solely between an individual and God. No human being need hear this confession, unless it involves a sin against another person that requires financial or other restitution (more on this in Chapter Two). A cursory overview of the commentaries reveals certain basic elements to the process of *teshuvah*, including regret (*haratah*), confession (*vidui*), and abandonment of sin (*azivat ha-het*), sometimes in combination with resolution for the future (*kabalah al ha-atid*). Rabenu Yonah of Girona (d. 1263), an early critic of Maimonides who ultimately came to revere his work, argued in his magisterial *Sha'arei Teshuvah* that there are actually twenty distinct stages to the process known as *teshuvah*, and *thirteen* of those steps precede confession! Once again: why does Maimonides begin with confession?

It is true that Maimonides was a rationalist whose verbal economy is legendary among Yeshiva students. Perhaps he chose to consider the earlier stages of regret a necessary but not sufficient cause for the process of *teshuvah*, which begins in truth with the first confessional articulation. Saying it out loud, in other words, is what makes it real. No matter how profound the regret, *teshuvah* doesn't start



until we acknowledge, at least to ourselves, that we have done wrong. As the Talmud puts it, “words of the heart are not words” (דברים שבלב אינן דברים).

But is this really true? Is regret without confession devoid of value for *teshuvah*? The *locus classicus* for *teshuvah* is the amazing story of Elazar ben Durdaya, recorded in the Talmudic tractate *Avodah Zarah* (17a). After a life of extreme profligacy, a passing comment from a woman of ill repute forced Elazar ben Durdaya to confront the unfortunate trajectory of his life. As the story goes, he beseeched a series of unusual agents to intercede to on his behalf: the mountains and valleys, heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, stars and the constellations, yet each refused in turn, claiming “before we ask for you, we must ask for ourselves.” Finally, Elazar ben Durdaya came to a monumental realization and pronounced a fundamental axiom of self-improvement: “the matter depends on me alone.” He lowered his head and uttered a piercing cry of such agony that his soul departed on the spot. His efforts were rewarded with a Heavenly voice that proclaimed, “Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya has earned a place in the World to Come.”

The plain reading of the story is that Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya achieved his personal redemption through regret *without* confession (a number of other examples of redemption without verbal confession are provided by Rabbi Shalom Tsvi Shapiro in his commentary *Meshiv Nefesh* 1:3). Must one therefore go through the tedious, onerous chore of confession in order to receive Divine forgiveness? Certainly God knows our sins--shouldn't our simple act of heartfelt regret be sufficient? Maimonides even provides support for this proposition below (1.4), at least in the context of relatively minor transgressions: "if a

person feels shame, he is forgiven even before he moves from that spot." Why all the emphasis on confession?

Confession represents a purely personal articulation of our wrongdoing. God, the Knower of all Secrets, does not need our confession to learn about our sins. Confession is rather an opportunity for us to get acquainted with our darker sides, analyzing the content of our actions and determining our level of culpability. Did we "sin," "do wrong," or "rebel"? There are finer points of agency to all of our transgressions, and it is incumbent upon us to analyze them thoroughly as part of the *teshuvah* process. In some cases, deeper reflection may reveal that we are holding ourselves to a greater degree of blame than we truly deserve. More likely, we may discover the uncomfortable truth that we have been holding ourselves to an unacceptably lenient standard, finding excuses for behavior that we would consider intolerable in others. In either case, the *teshuvah* process requires a slow and methodical introspection.

While the Temple stood in Jerusalem, atonement for sins involved the ritual offering of sacrifices. Providing these sacrifices, whether simple flour or expensive livestock, would not grant the forgiveness associated with a complete *teshuvah* if the penitent failed to confess. This is not surprising: some people find it easier to assuage their inchoate feelings of guilt by writing a check to a deserving charity, or doing a good turn for someone they have personally wronged, thinking that the positive deed cancels out an earlier negative act. While admirable, this approach to *teshuvah* is ultimately insufficient. Without personally realizing the full extent of the wrong, and articulating it to ourselves in a confession, we cannot take these matters to heart and effect permanent change.

An anonymous 18th century commentary entitled *Yad Ha-Ketannah* (“the small hand,” a self-deprecating allusion to “the strong hand,” an alternate title for Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*) sheds light on this phenomenon. Attributed to Rabbi Dov Berish Gottlieb, the *Yad Ha-Ketannah* argues that confession is a necessary but not sufficient cause for *teshuvah*. The articulation of awareness of sin, through actual speech and not merely silent meditation, represents a physical embodiment of the will that breaks through barriers to *teshuvah*. “Like a man trapped by the hardness of his heart, even though his essential will is to repent,” confession opens up the conduits of *teshuvah* like turning on a tap: the water waits at the edge of the valve, under pressure but unable to escape until the valve is opened. Merely thinking, even concentrating with all one’s mental energy, will not result in a cool glass of water. The tiny physical act of turning a faucet, however, will generate an abundance of liquid to slake the thirst.

Confession, a purely private act, represents the first shift in balance that allows *teshuvah* to take place. An inarticulate cry of despair, like the one uttered by Rabbi Eliezer ben Durdaya, may be sufficient to generate Divine forgiveness, but without charting a path forward it cannot be translated into effective *teshuvah* for life. Maimonides will continue the discussion by describing the particulars of confession in this and the following chapter.

Perhaps it is indeed possible to receive Divine forgiveness without confession, as we appear to see from the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya. Note, however, that ben Durdaya *dies* immediately after experiencing his profound regret. Our goal is to *live* after *teshuvah*. In order to live, we must chart a path forward. Confession is an essential element of finding that path. Indeed, finding our path is central to our spiritual lives: Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook,

one of the most evocative writers on the subject of *teshuvah*, describes that “the soul is agonized by remaining in one place and not ascending, for it needs to continually ascend from level to level...the pain of standing still penetrates to the very depths of the soul, a tremendous suffering...a complete reversal of the natural instinct and essence of the soul” (*Orot ha-Teshuvah* 15:3).

## 1.2

Day 2

א' אלול  
ראש חודש  
אלול

Wednesday,  
August 23,  
2017

שְׁעִיר הַמִּשְׁתַּלַּח--לְפִי שֶׁהוּא כַּפָּרָה לְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל, כּוֹהֵן גָּדוֹל מִתְּוֵדָה עָלָיו עַל לְשׁוֹן כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל: שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְהִתְוַדָּה עָלָיו אֶת-כָּל-עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" (ויקרא טז, כא).

שְׁעִיר הַמִּשְׁתַּלַּח מְכַפֵּר עַל כָּל עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבִּתּוֹרָה, הַקְּלוֹת וְהַחֲמֹרוֹת, בֵּין שֶׁעֶבֶר בְּזָדוֹן בֵּין שֶׁעֶבֶר בְּשִׁגְגָה, בֵּין שֶׁהוֹדַע לוֹ בֵּין שֶׁלֹּא הוֹדַע לוֹ--הַכָּל מִתְּכַפֵּר בְּשֶׁעִיר הַמִּשְׁתַּלַּח: וְהוּא, שֶׁעֲשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה; אֲבָל אִם לֹא עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה, אִין הַשֶּׁעִיר מְכַפֵּר לוֹ אֲלֹא עַל הַקְּלוֹת.

וַיִּמָּה הֵן הַקְּלוֹת, וַיִּמָּה הֵן הַחֲמֹרוֹת: הַחֲמֹרוֹת הֵן הָעֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁחֵיבִין עֲלֵיהֶן מִיתַת בַּיִת דִּין אוֹ כְּרַת; וְשִׁבְעַת שָׁוָא וְשִׁקְר--אֵף עַל פִּי שְׂאִין בְּהַ כְּרַת, הַרִי הִיא מִן הַחֲמֹרוֹת. וְשֶׁאֵר מִצְּוֹת לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה, וּמִצְּוֹת עֲשֶׂה שְׂאִין בְּהֵן כְּרַת--הֵן הַקְּלוֹת.

The High Priest utters the confession over the goat that is sent away, which acts as an atonement for all Israel. He does this with reference to the entire Jewish people, as it is written (Leviticus 16:21), *and he will confess over it all the sins of all the children of Israel.*

The goat that is sent away atones for all sins in the Torah, the lighter ones and the stricter ones, whether one transgressed them intentionally or unintentionally, whether one was aware of them or not. All sins receive atonement through the goat that is sent away. This is true as long as a person does *teshuvah*. Without *teshuvah*, the goat atones for lighter sins only.

What are these lighter sins, and what are the stricter sins? The stricter sins are those for which a person would be subject to the death penalty by a human court or

excision. False oaths and lies, even though they do not carry the penalty of excision, are included in the category of stricter sins. All other negative commandments, as well as positive commandments that do not carry the penalty of excision, are included in the category of lighter sins.

### *Commentary*

The Torah describes an ancient ritual wherein a goat was selected through lottery and sacrificed in expiation of sins committed by the Jewish people as a whole (see Leviticus 16:5-34). The English term “scapegoat” is derived from this ritual, although in Hebrew the term is simply “the goat that is sent away.”

In *The Guide for the Perplexed* (III:46), however, Maimonides clarifies that the requirement of confession remained in place even during the Temple period. The ritual of the goat that is sent away provided a communal structure for *teshuvah*, but the obligations of personal *teshuvah*, including the self-examination that results in confession, remained mandatory. Just as today, Jews of ancient times confronted sin in an immediate, personal manner, no matter how messy and embarrassing.

The Hebrew language possesses many words for “sin.” Maimonides included three basic words in the previous *halakhah*, and they are central to confession: sin, wrong, and rebellion (חטא, פשע, ועון). The English terms are not precise equivalents. Sin, for example, refers to transgressions that are committed by accident, lacking human intention. “Wrong,” on the other hand, carries a higher level of human intent. Finally, “rebellion” refers to a transgression committed with an acute level of awareness

minus physical temptation; acts performed with the sole intent of angering the Creator.

We have sinned, we have wronged, we have rebelled. Confession demands a thorough review of one's choices, analyzing and testing our behavior, and comparing the results with our ideal selves. This internal reflection is the very first step in the process of *teshuvah*, as the prophet Jeremiah writes in Lamentations 3:40: *let us search our ways and examine them, and return to God*. First we must "search our ways," and once we have identified those choices that give us pause we must "examine them," and this will ultimately lead to a "return to God."

The classic work *Mesilat Yesharim* by Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto (1700-1738) compared the unexamined life to "a blind man walking along a river—danger is more likely than rescue." One cannot really fault the blind man for falling in the river, yet the consequence of his misstep is so serious that blame becomes irrelevant. His lack of sight demands an inversely proportionate enhancement of vigilance simply to ensure his safety! He must devote resources to researching his route, perhaps find a sighted companion, use a cane, listen carefully to the sound of flowing water, and so on. He would also do very well to heed the teaching of the Sages and learn to swim. Otherwise, how could he possibly hope to avoid danger, especially if the river is part of his daily travel?

### 1.3

בְּזָמַן שֶׁאֵין בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קַיָּם, וְאֵין לָנוּ מִזְבֵּחַ כַּפָּרָה--אֵין שָׁם אֵלָא תְּשׁוּבָה. הַתְּשׁוּבָה מְכַפֶּרֶת עַל כָּל הַעֲבֵרוֹת: אֲפִלוּ רָשָׁע כָּל יָמָיו, וְעָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה בְּאַחֲרוֹנָה--אֵין מְזַכְרִין לוֹ שֵׁם רָשָׁעוֹ, שְׁנֵאמַר "וְרָשַׁעַת הָרָשָׁע לֹא-יִכָּשֵׁל בָּהּ, בְּיוֹם שׁוּבוֹ מִרָשָׁעוֹ" (יחזקאל לג, יב). וְעֲצָמוֹ שְׁלִיּוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר לְשָׁבִים, שְׁנֵאמַר "כִּי-בְיוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם" (ויקרא טז, ל).

Day 3

ב' אלול

Thursday,  
August 24,  
2017

Now that the Temple no longer exists, and there is no altar of atonement, only *teshuvah* remains. *Teshuvah* atones for all sins. Even a person who is wicked all his life, but repents at the very end, is never considered wicked, as it is written (Ezekiel 33:12), *the wicked person will no longer stumble in his wickedness on the day he does teshuvah*. The essence of Yom Kippur atones for those who repent, as it is written (Leviticus 16:30), *for on that day, it will give you atonement*.

#### Commentary

Yom Kippur. One day a year, mass collective *teshuvah*, followed by forgiveness. Surrounded by family and friends, we purge our regrets and communally resolve to improve ourselves. Using the fast as a lever, together we reach ever-higher levels of spiritual excellence. Cleansed, renewed and restored, we begin the New Year auspiciously, as free of sin as newborns.

Unfortunately, as Maimonides will explain in the next *halakhah*, some types of transgression carry over from one year to the next. Despite reaching profound depths of regret, achieving a full and detailed confession and articulating a heartfelt apology, and filled with absolute



resolve never to repeat the sin, one may still have to do *teshuvah* for many more Yom Kippurs to come.

*Teshuvah*, explains Rabenu Yonah, is like laundering a greasy stain on an otherwise pristine white garment. One wash will remove the surface soil, but the cloth remains discolored. Clean enough to wear, at least in some contexts, but the stain is a visible embarrassment. Only with repeated and aggressive washing may some stains be removed completely.

Thus we can go through the motions of Yom Kippur, even shed a few tears, but painful experience teaches that we emerge from the holiday transformed in only incremental amounts. We may utter beautiful pieties, yet with a little bit of life stress and our true selves snap right back into place. This is especially true for character traits, as Maimonides will explain in 7.3, we must do *teshuvah* for character flaws just as much as we do for moral lapses and failings.

Growing up in Florida, my children identified a certain type of fascinating flora they called “air plants.” Known scientifically as *epiphytic bromeliads* (I looked it up), their seeds are carried on the wind and they take root and grow in the nooks and crannies of trees of unrelated species, where they produce an impressive burst of languid foliage. They are typically not a parasitic species, relying on the tree only for structural support while they derive their nutrients from the atmosphere.

It’s tempting to think of character flaws as our personal set of epiphytic bromeliads. We are not of the same species. The breeze brought them our way and we are powerless to remove them. They are even beautiful in a bizarre kind of way. Perhaps our Yom Kippur *teshuvah* should consist of a

basic survey of the foreign plants growing on our trunks, and maybe trimming a few of them back a bit?



By US Forest Service - Southern Region (bromeliads on tree trunks Luquillo EF) [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

The analogy, of course, is inadequate. First of all, the comparison completely ignores the *wrongs* and *rebellions*—transgressions that we committed with full intent and capacity. These aren't like air plants that made their way to us on the breeze; they come directly from the roots. Secondly, let's not forget the fact that the air plants found shelter in the little gaps that opened up in the concentric rings of bark, for example, of a cypress palm. Without those gaps, the seeds of the epiphytic bromeliads would have slid harmlessly to the ground as if they had encountered the smooth trunk of a royal palm, or even a concrete light post.

The unintentional sins are known as *shegagot*. They are like the air plants—avoiding them is as hopeless as a tree

trying to avoid the wind. All we can do is attend to our vigilance, which is like the bark of the tree. If our vigilance against accidental wrongdoing is strong, we will easily resist the occasional thoughtless temptation that comes our way. Note as well that not every epiphytic plant is harmless. Many are invasive parasites, overwhelming and strangling their hosts like Georgian kudzu. *Shegagot*, unchecked, have the power to destroy us.

One last point about Yom Kippur. Maimonides' reference to Yom Kippur, here and throughout *The Ways of Repentance*, is distinguished by an unusual omission, noted in the classic Hasidic work *Tanya* by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. Nowhere does Maimonides mention the fast itself, perhaps the most memorable feature of that holy day! The reason for this, according to *Tanya*, is because Maimonides wishes to counter the mistaken impression that the fast is an act of *teshuvah* sufficient in itself to effect atonement. In reality, *teshuvah* is all about regret, confession, and abandonment of sin. The purpose of the fast is to accept upon one's self a mitigated punishment rather than suffer the full measure of consequences for our actions, which is explained in the next *halakhah*.

## 1.4

אף על פי שהתשובה מכפרת על הכל, ועצמו שליום הכפורים מכפר--יש עברות שהן מתכפרין בשעתן, ויש עברות שאין מתכפרין אלא לאחר זמן. כיצד: עבר אדם על מצות עשה שאין בה כרת, ועשה תשובה--אינו יז משם עד שמוחלין לו מיד, ובאלו נאמר "שובו בנים שובבים, ארפה משובתיכם" (ירמיהו ג, כב).

עבר על מצות לא תעשה שאין בה כרת ולא מיתת בית דין, ועשה תשובה--תשובה תולה ויום הכפורים מכפר, ובאלו נאמר "כי-ביום הזה יכפר עליכם לטהר אתכם מכל חטאתיכם לפני ה' תטהרו" (ויקרא טז, ל).

עבר על כרתות ומיתות בית דין, ועשה תשובה--תשובה ויום הכפורים תולין, ויסורין הבאין עליו גומרין לו הכפרה, ולעולם אין מתכפר לו כפרה גמורה, עד שיבואו עליו יסורין; ובאלו נאמר "ופקדתי בשבט פשעם; ובנגעים עונם" (תהילים פט, לג).

במה דברים אמורים, בשלא חלל את השם בעת שעבר. אבל המחלל את השם--אף על פי שעשה תשובה והגיע יום הכפורים והוא עומד בתשובתו ובאו עליו יסורין, אינו מתכפר לו כפרה גמורה עד שימות, אלא תשובה ויום הכפורים ויסורין שלשתן תולין ומיתה מכפרת, שנאמר "ונגלה באזני ה' צבאות: אם-יכפר העון הזה לכם, עד-תמתון" (ישעיהו כב, יד).

Even though *teshuvah* effects atonement for everything and the essence of Yom Kippur atones, there are certain sins that receive atonement immediately, and there are sins that only receive atonement after time passes. How is this so? If a person transgresses a positive commandment that does not carry the penalty of excision, and then he repents, he does not move from that spot before he is immediately forgiven. Regarding

these people it is written (Jeremiah 3:22), *return, returning children, I will heal you in your return.*

If a person transgresses a negative commandment that does not carry the penalty of excision or capital punishment at the hands of a human court, and then he does *teshuvah*, his *teshuvah* remains suspended until Yom Kippur provides atonement. Regarding these people it is written (Leviticus 16:30), *for on that day it will give you atonement, to purify you from all your sins, before God you will be purified.*

If a person transgresses a commandment that carries the penalty of excision or capital punishment at the hands of a human court, and then he does *teshuvah*, then the *teshuvah* and Yom Kippur are suspended, and suffering comes to him to complete the atonement. He will never receive complete atonement until he endures suffering. Regarding such people it is written (Psalms 89:33), *I will remember their sins with the staff, and their transgressions with lashes.*

Under what conditions does this apply? When the sin did not involve the desecration of the Divine Name. If the sin did involve the desecration of the Divine Name, then even though a person did *teshuvah*, and went through Yom Kippur while he remained steadfast in his *teshuvah*, and he experienced suffering, he nevertheless will not receive complete atonement until he dies. Rather, all three factors (*teshuvah*, Yom Kippur, and suffering) are suspended, and death provides atonement, as it is written (Isaiah 22:14), *and it was revealed to my ears by*

*the Lord of Hosts: you will not receive atonement for this sin until you die.*

### Commentary

The Hebrew term, *kaparah*, basically means "forgiveness." There are other Hebrew words that signify forgiveness, but they all have various shadings of meaning. *Kaparah* is derived from the root כפר, which means "deny, contradict, repudiate." *Kaparah* is thus the fullest level of forgiveness, a level in which the past misdeed is completely obliterated (the passage in *Tanya* cited above derives it from the word קינח, meaning "to wipe away," removing completely the soil of sin). It therefore stands to reason that *kaparah* is not easily attained. A human relationship, for example, can handle a lot of stress. One party might wrong the other, but with an acceptable *apology* and proper *restitution*, the relationship returns to normal. Sometimes, however, the harm is so awful that an apology and restitution cannot repair the breach immediately, but *time* will ultimately effect the necessary healing. Still other incidents may be so grievous, or smaller incidents might be repeated so often, that even an apology, restitution, and time cannot bring the wronged party to a full level of forgiveness.

Maimonides classified, in his characteristically analytical style, the various categories of atonement and how they relate to the process of *teshuvah*. The lightest form of sin is the transgression of a positive commandment, meaning the failure to perform some act that does not have financial or other repercussions for other people (if the act did have financial or other repercussions, then the damage done to another person would have to be addressed before atonement could take effect, as will be discussed below in

2.9). For example, one is required to recite a blessing after eating bread (Deuteronomy 8:10: *when you have eaten, and are satisfied, then you will bless*). If a person accidentally omitted this prayer and only recalled it after the passage of a significant amount of time, then a simple recognition of this omission through *teshuvah* would be sufficient to provide complete and immediate atonement. Maimonides provides the citation from Jeremiah 3:22 to prove this point. The passage is often translated as *return, O backsliding children*, but in this context it seems clear that the word “backsliding” (*shovavim*, derived from the same root as the word *teshuvah*) would be better rendered as “returning.” The sense of the verse is that even while a person is still in the process of doing *teshuvah*, God will immediately forgive such transgressions.

A second type of sin is the transgression of a negative (i.e. “thou shalt not”) commandment that does not carry the punishment of excision or capital punishment. It is more serious than the omission of a positive commandment. An example of this type of transgression would be eating forbidden food. If a person were to regret eating forbidden food, and go through the process of *teshuvah*, then atonement would be held in abeyance until Yom Kippur.

Still more serious sins carry the penalty of excision or capital punishment. Such transgressions require three elements to effect atonement: *teshuvah*, the passage of Yom Kippur, and personal punishment through suffering.

The most serious of all transgressions is one that involves “desecration of the Divine Name” (*hilul HaShem*): acts that inspire public condemnation of God, Judaism or the Jewish people. Sometimes these desecrations of the Divine Name are large in nature, for example if a well-known Jewish individual is convicted of a major crime, Heaven forbid,

but even more private acts may fall under this category, such as a Rabbi who does not stand by his word in a minor business transaction. The *teshuvah* process for a person who commits a transgression of this nature includes four elements that are prerequisites for atonement: *teshuvah* itself, followed by Yom Kippur and suffering, concluding with death. Some transgressions literally require a lifetime of atonement.

Unlike most sins, which are easier to define, Desecration of the Divine Name is a sin that varies according to the status of the person. The higher the status, the more serious the transgression. The Talmud (*Yoma* 86a) records the opinion of the great sage Rav: “for example, if I were to purchase meat and not pay immediately.”



## Notes to Self

1) Confession is the starting point of *teshuvah*. Articulating a full awareness of wrongdoing requires forethought and preparation. The liturgy provides a framework to remind us of the various categories of our failings. Some commentators emphasize the value of recitation of the confessional texts, especially in a communal setting, but the full, transformational power of *teshuvah* can only be accessed through confession with intent.

2) Keep track of the air plants. A personal spiritual journal is helpful, especially with regular review. Be sure to include personal victories as well as failures, like “I managed to control my temper.”

3) Remember that regret and the experience of personal suffering is part of the *teshuvah* process.

4)

## Chapter Two: Forgiveness

### Introduction

In a brilliant essay, first delivered as a Yiddish-language sermon in mid-century New York and then published in a collection entitled *On Teshuvah*, Rabbi J.D. Soloveitchik (“the Rav”) asked the question posed above: why did Maimonides begin with a discussion of *confession*, rather than *teshuvah* itself? Wouldn’t it have been more logical—and, indeed, more Maimonidean—to begin with the question, “what is *teshuvah*?”

Day 4

ג' אלול

Friday,  
August 25,  
2017

The essay, entitled “*Kaparah ve-Taharah*,” described a twofold *telos* for the *teshuvah* process. On the one hand, we wish to achieve forgiveness for our sins, which was described above as *kaparah* proper. *Kaparah* represents an erasure of the transgression, a repair of the relationship between the subject and the object of the original offense. A worthy goal, to be sure, yet even after *kaparah* is attained, the penitent remains unchanged. He or she is still the same person he or she was prior to the original wrong. Chastened, perhaps, but not improved in any significant way.

*Taharah* is the second goal of the *teshuvah* process. Roughly translated as “purity” or “cleanliness,” *taharah* represents the inner transformation of the penitent. During the *teshuvah* process we seek forgiveness from God and from our fellow human beings, which is *kaparah*. Long after this precious forgiveness is granted, however, we still have to live with ourselves and the consciousness of our transgressions. Receiving forgiveness from *ourselves* can be far more complex, demanding an inner metamorphosis

that renders us more resistant to sin. This internal purification is *taharah*.

The first chapter of Maimonides' work thus began the process by describing the immediate step necessary to achieve *kaparah*, as a sort of first-aid triage for those most injured and in need of forgiveness. The second and following chapters will slowly move us deeper into the task of *kaparah* and introduce as well the holy task of self-actualization known as *taharah*.

## 2.1

איזו היא תשובה גמורה--זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו, ואפשר בידו לעשות, ופרש ולא עשה מפני התשובה, לא מיראה ולא מכשלונו כוח. כיצד: הרי שבא על אשה בעברה, ולאחר זמן נתיחד עמה והוא עומד באהבתו בה ובכוח גופו, ובמדינה שעבר בה, ופרש ולא עבר--זה הוא בעל תשובה גמורה. הוא ששלמה אומר "וזכר, את-בוראיך, בימי, בחורתיך עד אשר לא יבואו ימי הרעה והגיעו שנים אשר תאמר אין לי בהם חפץ" (קהלת יב,א).

ואם לא שב אלא בימי זקנותו, ובעת שאי אפשר לו לעשות מה שהיה עושה--אף על פי שאינה תשובה מעלה, מועלת היא לו ובעל תשובה הוא. אפלו עבר כל ימיו, ועשה תשובה ביום מיתתו ומת בתשובתו--כל עוונותיו נמחלין: שנאמר "עד אשר לא-תחשך השמש והאור והירח והכוכבים ושב העבים אחר הגשם" (קהלת יב,ב), שהוא יום המיתה--מכלל שאם זכר בוראו ושב קדם שימות, נסלח לו.

What is complete *teshuvah*? When a man finds the opportunity to sin, and he has the power to sin, yet he holds back and does not sin out of *teshuvah*. He does not refrain from sinning out of fear or out of weakness. For example, a man once had an inappropriate relationship with a particular woman and later finds himself alone with her again. He still desires her, and is physically able to act on this desire, and they are in the same place where they used to meet. If he holds back and does not sin, he is a complete Master of *Teshuvah*. This is what Solomon said (Ecclesiastes 12:1), and remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the onset of the evil days, the arrival of those years when you will say, "I do not find pleasure in them."

What if he does not repent until his old age, when he is no longer able to do what he used to do? Even though this is not a high level of *teshuvah*, he is credited for his effort, and he is a Master of *Teshuvah*. Even if he sinned all his life, and did *teshuvah* on the day of his death, dying while in a state of *teshuvah*, all of his sins are forgiven, as the previously cited verse continues, *before the sun darkens, and the light, and the moon, and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain*, which is a reference to the day a person dies. The meaning is that if a person remembers his Creator and repents before he dies, he is forgiven.

#### Commentary

Since a major goal of *teshuvah* is the eradication of harmful patterns of behavior, the measurement of effective *teshuvah* is straightforward: when confronted with opportunity, will a person refrain from wrongdoing, or will those negative impulses reassert themselves and overpower one's resolve to change? Maimonides calls the person who successfully overcomes such a challenge a "complete Master of *Teshuvah*" (*ba'al teshuvah gemurah*).

The *yetser ha-ra* expresses itself, according to the sixteenth century kabbalist Rabbi Chaim Vital, in four distinct aspects, corresponding to the four elements understood by medieval thinkers as the basis of all existence: fire, air, water and earth (see *Sha'arei Kedushah*, Chapter Two). The *yetser ha-ra* of fire is related to the character deficiencies of arrogance and anger. Just as a flame always reaches upward, ever beyond its station, so too does the person with this *yetser ha-ra* suffer few insults to his or her self-image. Air, on the other hand, retains the ephemeral quality of fire but is associated with rapid movement, and

thus the person whose *yetser ha-ra* is influenced by air will favor the sins associated with speech: gossip, flattery, ridicule and so on. Water is associated with the *yetser ha-ra* of hedonism. The most fecund, life-affirming of the elements, the person with this *yetser ha-ra* is caught up in the endless pursuit of sensual pleasure. Finally, and perhaps the most seriously, the *yetser ha-ra* of earth is connected with heaviness and gravity. The most sedentary of all, the person afflicted with the *yetser ha-ra* of earth is prone to laziness and depression. Unfortunately, most of us participate in aspects of each of these four elements.

Maimonides contrasted the “complete Master of *Teshuvah*” mentioned in the previous passage with the “Master of *Teshuvah*” described here. The litmus test of the “complete Master of *Teshuvah*” is fundamentally retrospective in nature: one has to wait for the test to be completed to be sure that the *teshuvah* process has been effective. Given the shape-shifting nature of the *yetser ha-ra*, initial successes provide no permanent assurance that the challenge has been met, and indeed a temporary success may provide a false sense of self-assurance that undermines future resolve. To extend Maimonides’ metaphor, the “complete Master of *Teshuvah*” may refrain from wrongdoing with the same woman in the same place, but is that any guarantee that he may not transgress if one of the variables is altered however slightly? What if he meets another woman, or if he meets the same woman in a different environment? To be a “complete Master of *Teshuvah*,” one must maintain a permanent state of vigilance. The Master of *Teshuvah* is distinguished from the complete Master of *Teshuvah* because he or she lacks the ability to commit the same act again, and the profundity of his or her *teshuvah* may only be measured by the One who Knows all secrets.

*Teshuvah*, by its very nature, places us in an existential modality of permanent ambiguity. We can never really know if our *teshuvah* is so complete that we would never sin again. Thus the Rabbis maintained a healthy degree of respect for the *yetser ha-ra*, as Rabbi Nehorai says in Pirkei Avot 4:14: "do not rely on your own understanding." Self-righteous hubris is a dangerous psychological trap for the incomplete Master of *Teshuvah*, as many of us have learned from painful experience. Confessions, resolutions, and months of incident-free encounters mean little to the *yetser ha-ra*, which is ever-ready to reassert itself at the moment of opportunity.

## 2.2

ומה היא התשובה--הוא שיעזב החוטא חטאו, ויסירנו ממחשבתו ויגמר בלבו שלא יעשהו עוד, שנאמר "יעזב רשע דרכו, ואיש און מחשבתיו" (ישעיהו נה,ז).

Day 5

ד' אלול

Saturday,  
August 26,  
2017

וכן יתנחם על שעבר, שנאמר "כי-אחרי שובי, נחמתי, ואחרי הודעי, ספקתי על-ירך" (ירמיהו לא,יח); ויעיד עליו ידע תעלומות שלא ישוב לזה החטא לעולם, שנאמר "ולא-נאמר עוד אלהינו, למעשה ידינו וגו'" (הושע יד,ד). וצריך להתודות בשפתי, ולומר ענינות אלו שגמר בלבו.

What is *teshuvah*? *Teshuvah* is when a person abandons sin, banishes it from thought, and resolves in his heart never to commit this act again, as it is written (Isaiah 55:7), *the wicked will abandon his way, and the sinner his thoughts*.

He will also regret his past, as it is written (Jeremiah 31:18), *for after I did teshuvah I felt regret, and after I gained knowledge, I slapped my thigh*. The One who Knows All Secrets will testify that he will not ever return to this sin, as it is written (Hosea 14:4), *and we will no longer call the work of our hands 'our god.'* The sinner must articulate the resolutions of his heart with an oral confession.

### Commentary

Maimonides now brings us to the central question of this book: what is *teshuvah*? We have previously noted the strange displacement of this question from its logical place at the beginning of *The Ways of Repentance*. Rabbi



Soloveitchik took one approach to this question that has bothered many of the commentators. He argued that there are two aspects to the commandment of *teshuvah*, paralleling the distinction between *kaparah* and *taharah*. On the one hand, there is an element of *action* (פעולה), a physical, concrete translation of the Divine command into human behavior. The *action* of *teshuvah* is confession. As a physical act, audibly verbalizing the acknowledgment of sin, this is how one actually performs the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*; hence *The Ways of Repentance* begin with confession rather than *teshuvah* proper.

At the same time, there is a *fulfillment* (קיום) of the commandment, which is separated in time and space from the initial *action*. One may confess, for example, an angry outburst. That's very nice, and indeed essential, but it hardly represents what we understand by *teshuvah*. Where is the personal transformation? Where is the creation of a new person, fully resolved and on guard against repeated transgression? *Teshuvah* requires fundamental and sustained inner work. This is the *fulfillment* aspect of the commandment.

Maimonides subtly structured the book to place the central question—what is *teshuvah*?—only after the *actionable* aspect of *teshuvah* was introduced in Chapter One. Why, however, did he not immediately begin Chapter Two with this question? Don't we want to know the definition of *teshuvah* itself before we learn about the Master of *Teshuvah* and the Complete Master of *Teshuvah*?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his masterful *A Letter in the Scroll*, posits a rather amazing feature of the Jewish faith: the *process* of asking the question can be, in itself, the answer.

## 2.3

כָּל הַמְתוּדָה בְּדַבְרִים, וְלֹא גָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ לַעֲזֹב--הָרִי זֶה דּוֹמָה לְטוֹבֵל  
וְשָׂרָץ בְּיָדוֹ, שֶׁאִין הַטְּבִילָה מוֹעֵלָת, עַד שֶׁיִּשְׁלִיךְ הַשָּׂרָץ; וְכֵן הוּא  
אוֹמֵר "וּמִדָּה וְעֵזֵב, יִרְחָם" (משלי כח, יג). וְצָרִיךְ לְפָרֵט אֶת  
הַחֲטָא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "אֲנִי, חֲטָא הָעַם הַזֶּה חֲטָאָה גְדוֹלָה, וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם  
אֱלֹהֵי זָהָב" (שמות לב, לא).

A person who confesses with words, but does not resolve in his heart to abandon the sin: behold, he is like one who immerses in a *mikvah* while holding a lizard in his hand. The immersion will have no effect until he releases the lizard! Similarly it is written (Proverbs 28:13), *and one who confesses and abandons [sin] will receive mercy*. He must also detail the sin, as it is written (Exodus 32:31), *please, the people sinned a great sin; they made for themselves a god of gold*.

### Commentary

Maimonides borrowed a pungent Talmudic image to illustrate the phenomenon of one who confesses without intent to change. Three pieces of contextual information make the passage comprehensible. First, a person may contract a form of ritual impurity by coming into contact with certain types of dead creatures such as rodents, insects or lizards. Second, a person who is ritually impure may remedy that status by immersing in a special pool called a *mikvah*. Third, when a person immerses in a *mikvah*, the water must be able to touch any part of a person's body. One who immerses must be completely unclothed, including the removal of small bandages, make-up, and so on. How absurd would it be, then, for a person to take the time and trouble to immerse in the *mikvah* and expect to achieve a status of ritual purity, while

at the same time preserving contact with the thing that caused the defilement in the first place? How can a person become ritually pure while insisting on holding onto the dead lizard? The sage Rav Adar bar Ahavah stated, “even if he were to immerse in all the waters of the world, nothing would change.” On the other hand, “were he to cast off the lizard, then immediately upon immersing in a minimal amount of water, he would be transformed.”

Once again, Maimonides emphasized the need for profound articulation of the sin. The proof text used here is also quite illustrative. There would be no need for Moses to explain what the people had done, as God was perfectly aware of the incident with the golden calf. Rather, the point was for Moses to identify the sin and call it by its name, such that he could take responsibility on behalf of the Jewish people for their behavior. So too we must clearly label our own wrongdoings, not for anyone else, but for our own sake. Only by understanding the specifics of our errors can we hope to correct them in the future.

It’s worth reiterating the fact that Jewish confession is an intensely private affair, conducted solely between a Jew and God. Many transgressions should not be mentioned at all in a public form, either because of the embarrassment they may cause others or because such confessions might even motivate others to transgress (see below, 2.5).

## 2.4

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני ה', בבכי ובתחנונים, ועושה צדקה כפי כוחו, ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו. ומשנה שמו, כלומר שאני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותו המעשים; ומשנה מעשיו כלן לטובה, ולדרך ישרה. וגולה ממקומו--שגלות מכפרת עוון, מפני שגורמת לו להכניע ולהיות ענו ושפל רוח.

Day 6

ה' אלול

Sunday,  
August 27,  
2017

The paths to *teshuvah* include the following. The Master of *Teshuvah* will perpetually cry out to God with tears and petitions. He will give as much to charity as he can afford. He will distance himself from the thing that brought him to sin. He will change his name, as if to say, "I am another person, I am not the person who behaved that way." He will change his behavior, and put himself entirely on the good and correct path. He will exile himself from his home, for exile atones for sin, since it causes him to be lowly, humble, and of contrite spirit.

### Commentary

Maimonides provided a list of five behaviors essential to *teshuvah*, taken from a Talmudic passage. The penitent will engage in prayer, give charity, avoid temptation, change his or her name, and leave his home. This is not a "checklist," rather a statement of "best practices." The sixteenth-century commentator Rabbi Avraham Hiyah di Boton (*Lehem Mishnah*) clarifies that any one of these approaches to *teshuvah* is effective, regardless of the others: "each one of them has the power to avert the evil decree--but the complete Master of *Teshuvah* will exemplify them all."

## 1. Prayer.

*Teshuvah* seems like a solitary enterprise, sinking to the bottom of the ocean in a pressurized suit to investigate the roots of our darkest fears and insecurities, revisiting our worst moments. Prayer is the tether, the oxygen line that connects us to the surface. There is work to be done in the dark crevasses of our soul, difficult and even frightening labor, but we can't forget to breathe.

## 2. Charity.

*Teshuvah* can degenerate into self-absorption, a kind of pyrrhic narcissism. It's all very pleasant to contemplate our failures in air-conditioned leisure, but what of the needs of others? Prayer connects us to our Parent in Heaven; charity connects us to our siblings on Earth. How can we ask for the assistance of our Parent if we will not render aid to our siblings?

## 3. Avoidance of temptation.

*Teshuvah* demands a huge expenditure of spiritual energy, like climbing out of a deep hole in the ground, dirty, bruised and exhausted. One who has gone through the process will have a healthy respect for undiscovered sinkholes, and take every precaution not to come too close to the edge of the abyss.

## 4. Change of name.

*Teshuvah* is transformative. King Saul was told that when he encountered a band of prophets, "the spirit of the Lord will come mightily upon you, and you will become another man" (I Samuel 10:6). Sometimes we reflect this

inner aspiration with an external alteration to our names, and sometimes we alter our names in the sense of changing our reputations: “I am not the man who behaved that way.”

## 5. Leaving home.

*Teshuvah* requires displacement. Our spiritual inertia, sadly, allows us to settle in the hollows and crevices, where we enjoy “a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands” (Proverbs 6:10). Inner tranquility, a character trait highly praised in many contexts, is not of value when one embarks on a personal journey of *teshuvah*.

I have strong feelings about this last strategy for *teshuvah*. The term “exile” is a little strong, since we have been blessed to have been born in a time and place of great peace and prosperity—as a historian, I appreciate how rare that is, especially for Jews. Still, I remember the profound displacement in my childhood, moving from a tiny town of 5,000 to the major metropolis of Toronto (and back again). Later, as an adult, my wife and I have experienced the dislocation of moving our family to twelve different communities over the course of the past twenty-eight years (three continents and five countries, six if you count revolutions). Some of those moves were fairly short in duration, but others represented attempts to set down roots. Some of them were voluntary, some were coerced by circumstances. All of them were difficult.

Slowly, feelings of displacement fade, and eventually an abiding sense of placehood returns, but exile, even a small exile, is an asset to *teshuvah*.

## 2.5

וּשְׁבַח גָּדוֹל לְשֵׁב שְׂיִתְוֹדָה בְּרַבִּים וַיִּדְיַע פְּשָׁעָיו לָהֶם, וּמִגְלָה עֲבֵרוֹת שְׂבִינו לְבִין חֲבָרוֹ לְאַחֲרִים, וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם אֲמַנֶּם חֲטָאתִי לְפָלוֹנִי וְעִשִׂיתִי לוֹ כֶּךָ וְכֶךָ, וְהִרִינִי הַיּוֹם שֶׁב וְנַחֵם. וְכָל הַמִּתְגַּאֵה וְאִינוֹ מוֹדִיעַ, אֲלֵא מִכְסָּה פְּשָׁעָיו--אִין תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ גְּמוּלָה, שְׁנֹאמֵר "מִכְסָּה פְּשָׁעָיו, לֹא יִצְלִיחַ" (משלי כח, יג).

בְּמָה דְּבָרִים אֲמוֹרִים, בְּעֲבֵרוֹת שְׂבִין אָדָם לְחֲבָרוֹ. אֲבָל שְׂבִינו לְבִין הַמְּקוֹם--אִינוֹ צָרִיךְ לְפָרְסָם עֲצֵמוֹ, וְעִזּוֹת פָּנִים הִיא לוֹ אִם גְּלָם: אֲלֵא שֶׁב לְפָנֵי הָאֵל בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וּפּוֹרֵט חֲטָאִיו לְפָנָיו, וּמִתְוֹדָה עֲלֵיהֶן בְּפָנֵי רַבִּים סֵתֵם. וְטוֹבָה הִיא לוֹ שֶׁלֹּא נִתְגַּלָּה עֲוֹנוֹ, שְׁנֹאמֵר "אֲשֶׁרִי נִשְׁוִי-פְּשָׁע; כִּסּוּי חֲטָאָה" (תהילים לב, א).

It is very praiseworthy to confess in public and let one's sins be known to others, revealing one's transgressions against other people, saying "I have sinned against this person, committing this act, and today I regret it." Anyone who is arrogant and will not admit his sin, attempting to hide his transgression, does not perform complete *teshuvah*, as it is written (Proverbs 28:13), *one who hides his transgressions will not succeed*.

Under what type of circumstances does this apply? When dealing with transgressions between people. Transgressions against God, however, should not be made public, and it would be brazen to do so. On the contrary, one must specify one's sins against God only in private, and use generic language when confessing in public. It is better for a person not to reveal his sins, as it is written (Psalms 32:1), *praiseworthy is the one who bears his transgression, whose sin is hidden*.

## Commentary

A considerable amount of Rabbinic ink has been spilled in the commentaries on this passage. The Ra'avad (Rabbi Avraham ben David, 12th-century Provence), one of Maimonides' most persistent and perceptive critics, argued that this rule of public confession applies to transgressions that are well known to the general populace: "just as the sin is public, so too should the *teshuvah* be public." The *Kesef Mishnah* expanded on this notion, maintaining that Maimonides' intent here was to limit public confession to those transgressions which are universally known, for "if someone was previously unaware of this person's transgression and only now learned of it through the public confession, the Name of Heaven would be profaned thereby." The tension in this discussion is exemplified by the two seemingly contradictory proof texts that Maimonides provided: on the one hand, "one who hides his transgressions will not succeed," and on the other hand, "praiseworthy is the one who bears his transgressions, whose sin is hidden."

One who wishes to perform effective *teshuvah* must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of public confession very carefully. Public confession can have a strong cathartic effect, allowing a person to "get it off his chest." At the same time, Maimonides pointed out that a public transgression can also be an expression of personal arrogance: "look how good I am at doing *teshuvah*!" Moreover, one must assess what impact this public confession might have on others: will one's spouse or children be embarrassed by this public statement? What about the feelings of the people who were wronged? How



would they like others to know that they suffered a financial or other loss? In many cases a public confession may do more harm than good. Private apologies are another matter altogether, and will be discussed below in 2.9.

Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto provided a litmus test for misplaced piety in *Mesilat Yesharim*. He devoted several pages to *mishkal ha-hasidut*, literally “weighing piety,” and offered a useful rule to guide those who might take on pious stringencies such as (misplaced) public confessions. He wrote, “one who strives for true piety must weigh out one’s actions according to the effects they will have on others and in the context of time, society, matter and place. If refraining from a given pious practice will ultimately accrue more to the Holy One than taking on the stringency, then one must abandon it, and not perform it.” Put in another way, the great Rabbi Yisrael Salanter is reputed to have said, “not everything thought need be said, not everything said need be written down, not everything written down need be published, and not everything published should be read.”

The *Yalkut Shimoni*, a medieval collection of midrash, relates a beautiful Rabbinic observation on this topic (see commentary on Hosea 14). If a person were to slander another in public and then ask for forgiveness, the offended party would be within his rights to demand that the slanderer first speak to everyone that heard his original poisonous message, and only then ask for forgiveness. God, on the other hand, does not demand this from us: “come back to Me privately,” says the Midrash, “just the two of us, and I will accept your *teshuvah*.”

## 2.6

אף על פי שהתשובה והצעקה יפה לעולם, בעשרת הימים שבין ראש השנה ויום הכפורים היא יפה ביותר, ומיד היא מתקבלת, שנאמר "דרשו ה', בהמצאו; קראהו, בהיותו קרוב" (ישעיהו נה,ו). במה דברים אמורים, ביחיד; אבל בצבור--כל זמן שעושי תשובה וצועקין בלב שלם הן נענין, שנאמר "כה' אלהינו, בכל-קראנו אליו" (דברים ד,ז).

Day 7

ו' אלול

Monday,  
August 28,  
2017

Even though *teshuvah* and crying out in prayer are always good, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are exceptionally valuable. During those days one's prayers are accepted immediately, as it is written (Isaiah 55:6), *seek out God when He is found, call out to Him when He is close*. This applies when one is praying alone. When one is praying in a community, however, any time that people do *teshuvah* and cry out with a full heart, they are answered, as it is written (Deuteronomy 4:7), [*a people to whom God is close*] *as is the Lord our God whenever we call out to Him*.

### Commentary

Rabbi Uziel Milevsky, my teacher of blessed memory, once related to me a deep concept based on a Talmudic reading of a biblical verse: do not read "there is no rock (*tsur*) like our God," (I Samuel 2:2), rather "there is no artist (*tsayar*) like our God" (Berakhot 10b). Rabbi Milevsky explained that the entirety of human existence is a type of Divine artistry, meant to illustrate the nature of our relationship with God. In other words, aspects of our mundane, quotidian condition are fundamental clues as to how God relates to humanity. This is especially evident in the parallels between the parent-child relationship and the

God-human relationship. In other words, if we can develop a more profound self-consciousness of who we are when we communicate with our children, we can gain some insight into how God communicates with us.

In most communication, timing is everything. I know that if my kids want something from me, especially if it requires my full and undivided attention, there are two basic ways to get it. They can either cry out in distress, in which case I will drop everything and run to address the crisis, or they can wait until that moment in the day when I am most relaxed and ready to listen to them properly (in Miami, that moment was right after dinner, but with our New York work ethic dinner is far too late, so they have to wait until the weekend—luckily, my kids are older now and can handle the change).

It would be incorrect (and very un-Maimonidean) to argue that God has moods in the same way that a human being has moods. Nevertheless, the Jewish tradition essentially argues that there are two paths to effective prayer, and they are similar to the way my children might attempt to get my attention and response. We can either call out to God in distress, pushing the “panic button” at any time day or night, and God will immediately respond, as a parent would rush to the bedside of a small child who wakes from a frightening dream. This requires a lot of effort on our part, reaching deep into ourselves and evoking the most sincere and heartfelt supplications, a spiritually exhausting endeavor. Alternatively (or additionally), we can rely on timing, and approach God when we know the time is propitious. Our Sages teach that this optimal time is the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*, which begin on the first day of Rosh Hashanah and end on Yom Kippur. Amazingly, even this rare time is recreated whenever one joins the community in prayer. I find this astounding.

## 2.7

יום הכפורים--הוא זמן תשובה לכל, ליחיד ולרבים, והוא קץ מחילה וסליחה לישראל; לפיכך תיבין הכל לעשות תשובה ולהתודות ביום הכפורים. ומצות זו יום הכפורים שיתחיל מערב היום קדם שיאכל, שמא יחנק בסעודה קדם שיתודה. ואף על פי שהתודה קדם שיאכל, חוזר ומתודה בלילי יום הכפורים ערבית; וחוזר ומתודה בשחרית, ובמוסף, ובמנחה, ובנעילה. והיכן מתודה? יחיד, אחר תפלתו; ושליח צבור, באמצע תפלתו בברכה רביעית.

Yom Kippur is a day of *teshuvah* for all, both individuals and communities. It is the ultimate day of forgiveness and pardon for the Jewish people. Therefore, everyone is obligated to do *teshuvah* and confess on Yom Kippur. The commandment to confess begins on the eve of Yom Kippur, before the meal prior to the fast, lest one choke before one has the opportunity to confess. Even though a person confessed before that afternoon meal, he must confess again during the evening prayer of Yom Kippur, and then confess again at the morning prayer, the additional *musaf* prayer, the afternoon prayer, and the concluding *ne'ila* prayer. How is this done? An individual confesses at the end of the prayer, and the prayer leader confesses in the middle of the prayer during the fourth blessing.

### Commentary

Extending the discussion from the previous passage, if a child wants to petition a parent, it would be wise for the child to clear himself or herself of any potential wrongdoing before the request is made. For example, I've already mentioned that when my children were young,

they knew that I was most approachable immediately after the evening meal. Confession immediately preceding and during Yom Kippur has many parallels to this human relationship, although the nature of our transgressions might be far more serious, and the consequences much more troubling.

Yes, if the children wanted something from me, especially something unique or unprecedented, they needed to engage in some preparation before asking. I still think that's a useful model for how we need to relate to God. I wonder, however, how God feels about our confession? Presumptive of me to ask, but that is also part of Rabbi Milevsky's teaching: by reflecting on God's perspective, we learn more about ourselves.

What should my mindset have been when my kids petitioned me for one thing or another? I can see the 2012 version of myself: imperial, handing out favors from my lofty throne. Instead of judging their requests from my exalted parental status, I should have inwardly thought, "thank you, God, for the privilege of these precious souls. Please, God, give me the wisdom to raise them correctly, to love and nurture them according to their needs. Please, God, let me not err in judgement as I struggle to guide them through the challenges of their lives."

The Hebrew word for confession (וודוי) is derived from the root "to admit" (הודאה). Ironically, this root also produces the term for "thanks" (תודה). How grateful am I for these precious children.

There is no rock like our God—there is no artist like our God.

## 2.8

הַדּוּי שֶׁנֶהְגוּ בּוֹ כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל "אֲבָל חָטָאנוּ וְגו'", וְהוּא עֵיקַר הַדּוּי. עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁהִתְדָּה עֲלֵיהֶן בְּיוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים זֶה חוֹזֵר וּמִתְדָּה עֲלֵיהֶן בְּיוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים אַחַר, אֲף עַל פִּי שֶׁהוּא עוֹמֵד בְּתִשׁוּבָתוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "כִּי-כִשְׁעִי, אֲנִי אֹדְעֵ; וְחַטָּאתִי נִגְדִי תָמִיד" (תהילים נא,ה).

Day 8

ד' אלול

Tuesday,  
August 29,  
2017

The customary prayer among all Israel begins *but we have sinned*, etc. This is the essence of the confession. The sins that one confesses on one Yom Kippur will be confessed again on a Yom Kippur in the future, even though one remains in a state of *teshuvah*, as it is written (Psalms 51:5), *for I am aware of my sins, and my transgressions are before me always*.

### Commentary

As William Faulkner famously wrote, "the past is never dead. It's not even past."

When I was studying in *yeshivah*, one of my worst personal challenges was the unending demand to review my studies (*hazarah*). Unlike graduate school, where one was expected to assimilate information quickly and move on, the traditional Talmudic curriculum values a regimen of going over the same material over and over again, confident that such study has an incremental, cumulative effect on the student. As I grow older I am slowly seeing the value of this approach (even the book you are reading now is an expression of commitment to *hazarah*). As the Talmud puts it, "one cannot compare someone who learned a chapter 101 times, to someone who only learned it 100 times" (*Hagigah* 9b, see *Tanya* 15).

I now understand that there is such a thing as *hazarah* for *teshuvah*. It's more than "an useful exercise." You can't compare someone who did *teshuvah* 101 times, to the same person who did *teshuvah* only 100 times.

How much time need we spend each day in *teshuvah*? Rabbi Yaakov Keller, in his recently published commentary on *Mesilat Yesharim*, noted that the question was once put to the great Alter of Novardok (Rabbi Yosef Yozel Horowitz, 1847-1919). He responded, "as long as it takes to turn around a wagon." His answer expresses more than a quaint, antiquated measurement of time. Turning around a wagon—for our times, perhaps we might say executing a three-point turn—represents a realization that we having moving in the wrong direction, and putting in motion the very first steps necessary to correct our error.

## 2.9

אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים מכפרין אלא עברות שבין אדם למקום, כגון מי שאכל דבר אסור או בעל בעילה אסורה וכיוצא בהן. אבל עברות שבין אדם לחברו, כגון חובל חברו או המקלל את חברו או גזלו וכיוצא בהן--אינו נמחל לו לעולם, עד שיתן לחברו מה שהוא חייב לו וירצהו.

אף על פי שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא חייב לו, צריך לרצותו ולשאל ממנו שימחל לו; ואפלו לא הקניט את חברו אלא בדברים, צריך לפיסו ולפגע בו עד שימחל לו.

לא רצה חברו למחל לו--מביא לו שורה של שלושה בני אדם מרעיו, ופוגעין בו ומבקשין ממנו. לא נתרצה להן, מביא לו שניה ושלישית. לא רצה, מניחו והולך לו; וזה שלא מחל, הוא החוטא. ואם היתה רבו--הולך ובא אפלו אלף פעמים, עד שימחל לו.

Neither Rosh Hashanah nor Yom Kippur atones for anything but sins between a human being and God (for example, eating forbidden foods or engaging in [consensual] illicit relations). Sins between one human being and another (for example, harming, cursing or stealing from another person) are never forgiven until one repays the debt and placates the injured party.

Even though the monetary debt is paid, one still needs to placate the injured party and ask for forgiveness. Even if the wrong was only a matter of an argument, one must appease the injured party, requesting repeatedly until forgiveness is granted.

If forgiveness is not forthcoming, one should return with a delegation of three people, friends of the injured party,



and ask again. If he or she refuses to forgive, the petitioner must return even a second and a third time. If the offended party still refuses to forgive, he or she should be left alone and one should move on. The fact that forgiveness is withheld makes the offended party the sinner. If the offended party is one's teacher, one should return a thousand times until forgiveness is granted.

### *Commentary*

Sins against another human being act as a kind of a lien on atonement: until the human debt is paid, the divine debt remains outstanding. Moreover, even if financial restitution is made, the human debt remains outstanding if the offended party has not granted forgiveness. The monetary debt may be settled, but atonement will not take effect until both parties have come to an emotional resolution as well.

The Rabbinic commentaries argue about Maimonides' reference to asking for forgiveness three times. Maimonides evidently based his ruling on a Talmudic passage (*Yoma* 87b), where Rav sought Rabbi Hanina's forgiveness a total of thirteen times, ignoring the teaching of Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina that explicitly forbids a person to seek forgiveness more than three times. The Talmud concludes that "Rav was different," an enigmatic passage that elicits a brief comment from Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105): "he treated himself stringently."

A deeper look into the complex reasoning of the commentators is beyond the scope of this short work, but it is interesting to observe the psychological dynamic at play in this question. Since "Rav was different," that means that there is a natural and appropriate limit to the

number of times an average person should ask for forgiveness. One, two, and even three times fall within that norm, but beyond that one enters the realm of diminishing returns. When does the constant request for forgiveness become self-degradation? On the other hand, some relationships demand even a thousand requests. That might only apply to one's teacher, but perhaps it has relevance for a parent, a spouse, a sibling, or a child.

Ultimately, the decision to return to ask for forgiveness more than three times may be a personal matter. Rashi's observation that Rav treated himself stringently might be interpreted as an opportunity for any of us to adopt a similar posture, depending on the importance of the relationship we wish to heal. If we fail to receive the forgiveness we seek, there will come a point where we will have to abandon further attempts. Maimonides' language is unusually colloquial here. He writes that the offended party "should be left alone," and the petitioner should simply "move on." We don't have the power to repair every relationship. If our best efforts fail despite repeated attempts, we must simply "move on."

My inspiration, in this *halakhah* and in so many other things, is my wife Ilana. A neighbor once took offense with Ilana over some small incident at synagogue, and she bore a grudge against my wife for over a year. Ilana, to her credit, followed Maimonides' advice and was, after great effort, able to effect a rapprochement.

## 2.10

Day 9

ח' אלול

Wednesday,  
August 30,  
2017

אָסוּר לְאָדָם שְׂיֵהֶיָה אַכְזָרִי וְלֹא יִתְפַּיֵס, אֲלֵא יֵהִיָה נוֹחַ לְרִצּוֹת וְקִשָּׁה לְכַעַס, וּבְשַׁעָה שְׂמִבְקֵשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ הַחוּטָא לְמַחֵל, מוֹחֵל בְּלִבָּב שְׁלֵם וּבִנְפֶשׁ חַפְצָה; וְאִפְלוּ הֵצֵר לוֹ הַרְבֵּה וְחֻטָּא לוֹ הַרְבֵּה, לֹא יִקָּם וְיִטַּר. זֶה הוּא דִרְכָּם שְׁלִזְרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלָבָם הִנְכוּן. אֲבָל הַגּוֹיִים עֲרִלֵי לֵב אֵינָן כֵּן, אֲלֵא "וְעִבְרְתוּ שְׂמֵרָה נְצַח" (עמוס א,יא); וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר עַל הַגְּבֻעוֹנִים לְפִי שְׁלֵא מְחִלוּ וְלֹא נִתְפַּיִסוּ, "וְהַגְּבֻעוֹנִים לֹא מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה" (שמואל ב כא,ב).

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and not be appeased. Rather, one should be quick to forgive and slow to anger. When the sinner asks him for forgiveness, he should forgive him with a full heart and generous spirit. Even if the sinner seriously aggrieved and harmed him, he should not take vengeance nor bear a grudge. This is the way of the seed of Israel, and their hearts are true. Other nations of uncircumcised hearts are not like this; rather they preserve their anger forever. This is what is said of the *givonim*, who would not forgive nor be appeased, and the *givonim* were not of the Jewish people.

### Commentary

This passage also flows from the Talmudic story mentioned previously. For thirteen years Rav visited Rabbi Hanina on the eve of Yom Kippur, begging his forgiveness, yet Rabbi Hanina did not grant it. Why did Rabbi Hanina refuse to grant the forgiveness for so many years? The Talmud answers that Rabbi Hanina experienced a dream that indicated that Rav would ultimately take his position in the Academy. The Talmud thus provides a nuanced

view into the mind of Rabbi Hanina, cautioning we lesser beings regarding the dangerous pursuits of honor and power. Our refusal to forgive may say much more about our own nature than it does about the specific offense that we are refusing to forgive. Maimonides connects this behavior with the actions of the Givonim, an ancient people whose contact with the Jews was characterized by an unhealthy attachment to prior wrongs (see Joshua 9-10 and II Samuel 21).

The classic work on forgiveness in the Jewish tradition is undoubtedly Rabbi Moshe Cordovero's *Tomer Devorah*, a deeply mystical yet surprisingly accessible work authored in sixteenth-century Safed. The first chapter describes thirteen distinct modalities of Divine forgiveness, and suggests how we might incorporate them as models in our mundane interactions on the human level. In my experience, certain tactics work best for specific people and situations, and it's useful to have a working knowledge of all thirteen levels in order to apply them as needed.

My personal favorite, for example, is level six, which Rabbi Cordovero terms "for [God] desires kindness," based on a verse in the book of Micah. Rabbi Cordovero analyzes a complex Midrash that describes a moment of Divine anger, prompting the dispatch of the archangel Gabriel to annihilate the Jewish people. Gabriel is instructed to take some sort of highly destructive material out from under the Holy of Holies in the Temple, but at the last moment he is confronted with the image of a human hand, glowing in the fire itself. Gabriel is told to wait while God contemplates the image of the hand, a symbol of human kindness. Ultimately, God rescinds his order and recalls Gabriel, because despite their failures, the Jews nevertheless perform acts of selflessness to help one another. Like a parent angry at his children, God

nevertheless forgives them because they at least demonstrate sibling loyalty.

Translating this to the human dimension, Rabbi Cordovero suggests that we create mental placeholders that remind us of redeeming acts of kindness. For example, when a wife is confronted with her husband's complete inability to perform some simple household task, she should focus on something about his character or behavior that she admires—the fact that he helps get the kids ready for school while she has her first cup of coffee in the morning, for example. She should take some iconic avatar of that behavior (perhaps her favorite coffee cup) and mentally place it where she can bring it to the forefront of her consciousness when necessary. Just as God placed an image of a human hand under the Holy of Holies so that it would be discovered when Gabriel was sent to release the powers of destruction, the wife should recall her coffee cup and remind herself of her husband's small yet significant acts of kindness. This will allow her a small toehold to restrain her anger and express herself calmly and compassionately, even doling out a measure of forgiveness to her husband (this example, by the way, is completely theoretical—with the exception of the occasional carpool, I am generally uninvolved with getting the kids successfully off to school).

The ability to forgive, to extend healing to a relationship, is not easily acquired. Most of us struggle for years to forgive adequately, returning again and again to the scene of a crime long past, reliving its original pain and its bitter aftertaste of resentment and anger. With regards *teshuvah*, the failure to forgive weighs us down like a rock around the neck, forcing us to stoop as we struggle to make our way forward. Let us release the rock, stand up tall, and walk with dispatch.

## 2.11

הַחֹטֵא לְחֵבְרוֹ, וּמֵת חֵבְרוֹ קִדָּם שְׂיִבְקֶשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ מַחִילָה--מִבֵּיא  
עֲשָׂרָה בְּנֵי אָדָם וּמַעֲמִידוֹ עַל קִבְרוֹ, וְאוֹמֵר לְפָנֵיהֶם חֲטָאתִי לַה'  
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלְפָלוֹנֵי זֶה שָׁעֲשִׂיתִי לוֹ כַּךְ וְכַךְ. וְאִם הָיָה תָיִב לוֹ  
מִמֹּוֹן, יִחְזִירוּ לְיוֹרְשָׁיו; לֹא הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ לוֹ יוֹרֵשׁ--יִנְיָחֵנוּ בְּבֵית דִּין,  
וְיִתְּנָהּ.

If a person wrongs someone who died before the sinner could ask for forgiveness, he should bring ten men to his grave and say before them, "I sinned before the Lord God of Israel and this person through this wrongful act." If the sinner owes money to the deceased, he should pay it to his inheritors. If he does not know who they are, he should leave it with the Jewish court, and confess.

### Commentary

Even the curtain of death does not preclude the possibility of *teshuvah*. I suspect that, for most children whose parents have passed, this is a yearly phenomenon as we recall the multiple injuries we inflicted on our parents.

Can the deceased forgive us? A basic principle in the Jewish view of the afterlife is that once there, a person can no longer perform commandments (more on this below in Chapter Eight). Is it a commandment to forgive? If so, what possible good would it do to visit the grave and ask forgiveness from the deceased?

Rabbi Cooperman asked this question of Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky (*Shuvi Nafshi ad loc.*), citing Ecclesiastes 9:5-6: "The dead know nothing—their loves, their hatreds, their jealousies are gone, and they have no share in all that transpires under the sun." Rabbi Kanievsky answered that

according to the Kabbalah, there is in fact a part of the soul that remains at the grave, and that earth-bound aspect of the soul requires appeasement. The emphasis is not so much on the *request*, but on the *place*: one must specifically travel to the grave to ask for forgiveness from the dead.

A less mystical interpretation might emphasize the impact of asking for forgiveness on the supplicant rather than the deceased. Simply making the effort of gathering a *minyan* to formally beg forgiveness imposes a burden on the living, a sacrificial act that is part of the *teshuvah* process. I am reminded of something I once saw in *Zikhron Meir* by Rabbi Aharon Levin. When a deceased person's body is prepared for burial, the Holy Society (*hevra kadisha*) customarily places broken shards of pottery on the eyes of the deceased. Rabbi Levin notes several reasons for this practice, but the one that impressed me the most was the notion that the broken pottery, a symbol of the fragility of human life, is not intended for the deceased at all. Rather, the custom is intended for the benefit of the *hevra kadisha* members themselves.

Just as the *hevra kadisha* members must reflect on the fleeting nature of human existence, perhaps the supplicant must reflect on the gravity of his offense by requesting forgiveness from the deceased. The impact of the ritual is perhaps not directed at the deceased, it is rather intended solely for the living.

## Notes to Self

- 1) How amazing it is that prayer with the community is as powerful as the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*! Cherish each opportunity.
- 2) Which of the four types of *yetser ha-ra* best describes me? Fire (arrogance and anger) air (sins of speech), water (the pursuit of sensual pleasure) and earth (laziness, depression)?
- 3) Let go of the lizard and step into the *mikvah*.
- 4) Consider the five basic paths to *teshuvah*: prayer, charity, avoidance, change of name and exile.
- 5)





## Chapter Three: Change

### *Introduction*

In this chapter Maimonides outlined the cosmic significance of human choice and behavior. It begins with a discussion of the impact of a single person's *teshuvah*, and then moves on to clarify the types of attitudes and activities that impede the power of that *teshuvah*. This chapter also marks the beginning of a theme that will continue through the next four chapters: the potential for *change*.

Day 10

ט' אלול

Thursday,  
August 31,  
2017

There is a famous story, perhaps apocryphal but nevertheless instructive, about the great Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (Poland, 1838-1933). He is known by the title of his first great work: *Chofetz Chaim*. As a young man, the story goes, he said to himself that he would one day change the world. When that proved difficult, he resolved to change Poland. That also seemed beyond his reach, so he determined to change his village. He eventually despaired of this as well, and decided that he would change his family. Even that modest goal seemed too great, so he resolved that he would only change himself. Ironically, it was his seemingly small decision to change himself that created an intellectual and spiritual ripple of such magnitude that it ultimately changed his family, his village, Poland, and even the world as a whole.

### 3.1

כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מִבְּנֵי הָאָדָם, יֵשׁ לוֹ זְכוּיּוֹת וְעוֹנוֹת. מִי שֶׁזְכוּיּוֹתָיו יִתְרוֹת עַל עוֹנוֹתָיו, צָדִיק; וּמִי שֶׁעוֹנוֹתָיו יִתְרוֹת עַל זְכוּיּוֹתָיו, רָשָׁע; מְחַצָּה לְמַחַצָּה, בֵּינוֹנִי.

וְכֵן הַמְּדִינָה--אִם הָיוּ זְכוּיּוֹת כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ מְרֻבּוֹת עַל עוֹנוֹתֶיהֶם, הָרִי זֶה צְדִיקָת; וְאִם הָיוּ עוֹנוֹתֶיהֶם מְרֻבִּין, הָרִי זֶה רָשָׁע. וְכֵן כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ.

Every single human being has both merits and demerits. One whose merits exceed his demerits is righteous, and one whose demerits exceed his merits is wicked. If they are equal in number, he is an "intermediate."

It is so with the nations. If the merits of the inhabitants of a nation exceed their demerits, the nation is righteous. If its demerits are more numerous, the nation is wicked, and so with the entire world.

#### *Commentary*

Maimonides presents what seems like a very simple accounting process: at the end of the Jewish year, we tally up all moral assets and liabilities, and calculate whether or not we generated a spiritual profit. Traditional Jewish theology recognizes the importance of Rosh Hashanah as the annual day of reckoning, when people and nations are divided into three categories: the righteous, the wicked, and the "intermediates." The significance and depth of this designation is continued below.

### 3.2

אדם שעוונותיו מרבין על זכויותיו--מיד הוא מת ברשעו, שנאמר "על רב עונגך" (ירמיהו ל,יד; ירמיהו ל,טו; הושע ט,ז). וכן מדינה שעוונותיה מרבין--מיד היא אובדת, שנאמר "זעקת סדם ועמרה כירבה" (בראשית יח,כ). וכן כל העולם כלו, אם היו עוונותיהם מרבין--מיד הו נשחתיו, שנאמר "וירא ה', כי רבה רעת האדם בארץ" (בראשית ו,ה).

ושקול זה אינו לפי מנין הזכויות והעוונות, אלא לפי גדלו: יש זכות שהיא כנגד כמה עוונות, שנאמר "יען נמצא-בו דבר טוב" (מלכים א יד,יג); ויש עון שהוא כנגד כמה זכויות, שנאמר "וחוטא אחד, יאבד טובה הרבה" (קוהלת ט,יח). ואין שוקליו אלא בדעתו שלא-ל דעות, והוא היודע היאך עורכין הזכויות כנגד העוונות.

A person whose demerits exceed his merits dies immediately in his wickedness, as it is written (Jeremiah 30:14), *[I struck you down...] because of your many sins*. So too will a nation whose demerits are excessive be destroyed immediately, as it is written (Genesis 18:20) *the cry of Sodom and Gemorah, for it is great*. So too the entire world. If its demerits are excessive, it will be destroyed immediately, as it is written (Genesis 6:5) *for God saw that the evil of humanity was great*.

This measurement is not made in terms of the number of merits and demerits, rather according to their significance. There are some merits that are equivalent to many demerits, as it is written (I Kings 14:13) *for there is found in him a good thing*. There can be some demerits that are equivalent to many merits, as it is written (Ecclesiastes 9:18) *one sinner destroys much good*. This assessment may only be made in the Mind of the All-

Knowing God, who knows how to evaluate merits and demerits.

### Commentary

Rabbi Abraham ibn Daud (“the Ra’avad,” Provence c. 1125-1198) was one of Maimonides’ earliest critics, and his sharp and often biting commentary is printed on the same page as Maimonides’ text in the standard editions of the *Mishneh Torah*. “This is not so,” he challenged, “for we see many wicked people who go on living.” The Ra’avad quoted the key Talmudic texts that formed the basis of Maimonides’ argument, and clarified that “wicked people are immediately sealed for death, meaning, they do not live out their years to the length that had been decreed for their generation.”

This discussion is part of a much larger question that, in my humble opinion, is really the *only* question. In Hebrew, it is expressed in three simple words: *tsadik ve-ra lo*, or “a righteous person who suffers.” Why do the wicked flourish and the righteous suffer? It is a conundrum that has occupied the best minds of the Jewish people for thousands of years, yet the answer may lie beyond the realm of human comprehension. Cataloging the many approaches to the problem of *tsadik ve-ra lo* is outside the scope of this short work, but fundamental to all is the principle that both Maimonides and the Ra’avad defended: nothing is hidden from the True Judge.

Perhaps the second most widely cited Jewish source on the topic of “why do the righteous suffer” is Nahmanides’ *Sha’ar ha-gemul*, a section of a larger work entitled *Torat Ha-Adam*. Nahmanides, a near contemporary of Maimonides, details many of the complexities of Jewish eschatology in

this work, including the specific meanings of the various terms used for the afterlife and the stages of the unfolding of the Messianic era. *Sha'ar ha-gemul* also engages in a sustained analysis of the question of Divine reward and punishment for human activity. For Nahmanides, the conundrum is solved through a deceptively simple calculus.

Every act of ethical-religious value, whether positive or negative, is deserving of either reward or punishment. The allocation of the consequence of human behavior may be expressed in this world, the next world, or both. The reason the righteous suffer in this world is because they are receiving the punishment for their few and minor misdeeds in this world, allowing them to enter the next world with a clean, purified record of positive acts for eternal reward. Using the same logic, the wicked prosper in this world because they are reaping the benefits of the isolated positive acts they may have performed, but they will experience punishment in greater measure in the afterlife. On balance, it is certainly advantageous to account for sins in this world with comparatively brief, mundane suffering, thus answering the question of why the righteous suffer: they experience pain in this world as an act of Divine compassion, allowing them to enjoy a far greater reward in the next world without the burden of their minor sins.

Consider this analogy, taken from my personal occupational experience: a student progresses through four years of undergraduate study, completing all courses with great success, and enters the job market. After a grueling series of interviews and tests, he is offered an entry-level position at a major firm, offering a generous salary and excellent benefits, pending confirmation of his academic degree. Many qualified applicants are waitlisted for this

job, and the graduate must submit all documents within a limited time frame. When he visits the registrar to order his transcripts, however, he learns that there is a bursar hold on his documents because he has neglected to pay a ten-dollar fine for overdue library books! He immediately and gladly pays the fine, acknowledging his error and grateful that his transcripts will now be processed in a timely fashion.

So too, Nahmanides would argue, the righteous gladly accept suffering in this world, trusting that the reason for their pain is just, and that they will ultimately benefit from the experience. The prosperity of the wicked is really the other side of the equation, like a student who abuses library privileges without heed to the consequences after graduation.

Nahmanides' logic is, of course, unassailable. At the same time, it is difficult to relate to his theology on a visceral level. His model makes perfect sense when we speak of relatively minor suffering, like a library fine that holds up the release of a student's transcripts. It's hard—perhaps even wrong—to maintain this approach when confronted with more profound suffering.

If *Sha'ar ha-gemul* is the second most commonly cited Jewish source on the question of why the righteous suffer, the primary locus of discussion has to be the Book of Job, perhaps the most challenging work of the entire Hebrew bible. The story is simple: Job is a wealthy, apparently pious man with a large family. The *satan*—we will have more to say about this individual later—argues before God that Job's religiosity is based solely on his prosperity. In what seems to be a terrifying Heavenly experiment, God sends Job a number of awful tribulations, from the destruction of his flocks to the death of his seven children.

Job maintains steadfast in his faith in God's justice throughout the experience, even when his own distraught wife challenges him to utter a curse in protest and die (the biblical text reads "bless God and die," an euphemism to express the ugly thought in an indirect manner). Finally, apparently urged by the *satan's* observation that Job will be moved if God were to "touch his bone and his flesh—he will certainly curse Thee to Thy face," God afflicts Job with a painful skin disease, and is reduced to scraping boils off his skin with a piece of broken pottery before he finally succumbs to his wife's entreaty and curses the day of his birth.

All this occurs within the first two chapters of the book. The next thirty-odd chapters, beginning with Job's curse, constitute an extended, highly philosophical debate between Job and a number of associates who have come to visit him in his mourning. Moved by his suffering, the so-called "comforters of Job" offer a series of theological solutions to explain the sources of Job's distress, maintaining throughout that God's justice is supreme and cannot be questioned. Job systematically counters their arguments, protesting innocence and implicitly questioning the awful Divine punishment he suffers. The book comes to a climax as Job demands that God personally appear and provide an explanation. God complies.

Speaking from a whirlwind, God rebukes all parties concerned, both Job for his impudence ("Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" 38:2) and the comforters for their specious speculations ("My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends; for ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath." 42:7). Yet God's dramatic response to Job remains extremely difficult to understand, leaving the



reader unsettled and unnerved. Job witnesses the return of his health and his wealth is doubled. He is blessed with more offspring—the same number as before the strange experiment—but he is left to mourn the passing of the children of his youth.

The book of Job encapsulates the Jewish approach to the topic known to philosophers under the term "theodicy," or the Justice of God. We are troubled, full of consternation over the question, "why do the righteous suffer?" After much impassioned debate, our only response is silence, trusting in an invisible Divine plan. "Once have I spoken," says Job in response to God's rebuke, "even twice, but I will speak no more."

### 3.3

כָּל מִי שֶׁנֶחֱמַח עַל הַמַּצְוֹת שֶׁעָשָׂה, וְתָהָה עַל הַזְכוּיוֹת,  
וְאָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ וּמָה הוּעֵלְתִי בַעֲשִׂיתִי, אוֹלֵי לֹא עָשִׂיתִי אוֹתָם--  
הָרִי זֶה אֲבָד אֶת כְּלֹ, וְאִין מְזַכֵּרִין לוֹ שֵׁם זְכוּת בְּעוֹלָם:  
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְצַדִּיק הַצַּדִּיק לֹא תִצְלַנּוּ בְיוֹם רָשָׁעוֹ" (ראה  
יחזקאל לג, יב), אִין זֶה אֵלָא בְּתוֹהָה עַל הַרְאֻשׁוֹנוֹת.

Day 11

י' אלול

Friday,  
September 1,  
2017

כְּשֵׁם שֶׁשׁוֹקֵלִין עוֹנוֹת אָדָם וְזְכוּיוֹתָיו, בְּשַׁעַת מִיתָתוֹ--כֵּן  
בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה, שׁוֹקֵלִין עוֹנוֹת כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מִבְּאֵי  
הָעוֹלָם עִם זְכוּיוֹתָיו בְּיוֹם טוֹב שֶׁלְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה: מִי שֶׁנִּמְצָא  
צַדִּיק, נֶחְתָּם לְחַיִּים; וּמִי שֶׁנִּמְצָא רָשָׁע, נֶחְתָּם לְמִיתָה. וְהַבִּינוּנִי,  
תּוֹלִין לוֹ עַד יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים: אִם עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה, נֶחְתָּם לְחַיִּים; וְאִם  
לֹא, נֶחְתָּם לְמִיתָה.

Anyone who regretted performing a positive deed and doubted its value, saying "what good has it done me to do these things? If only I had not done them!" Behold, this person loses everything, and gains no merit at all. This is as it is written (Ezekiel 33:12) *the righteousness of the righteous will not save him on the day of his wickedness*. This refers only to one who regrets his earlier good deeds.

Just as the demerits of a person are measured against his merits on the day of his death, so too every year the demerits of every human being in the world are measured against his merits on the holy day of Rosh Hashanah. A person who is found righteous is sealed for life. A person who is found wicked is sealed for death. The "intermediate" is kept waiting until Yom Kippur. If he repents, he is sealed for life, and if not, he is sealed for death.

## *Commentary*

This passage alone is worth the entire book: never regret doing the right thing.

A colleague of mine once told me how she had charitably prepared a meal for a family on the eve of the Sabbath. It was nearly candle lighting time, so she rushed to pack it in her car and drive the short distance to the home of the recipient. On the way failed to come to a complete stop at the corner of her suburban street, and a waiting policeman gave her a hefty ticket. One can only imagine how she felt! Here she was, doing a very admirable thing by helping out a family in need, and for this she received a significant financial penalty! Maimonides declared that we should never regret performing acts of kindness, even when they produce unintended consequences.

At first glance, the placement of this ruling seems strange. In the precious passage (3.2), Maimonides began describing the accounting process of positive vs. negative deeds, continuing the topic in the following passage (3.4). Why did Maimonides interrupt the logical flow by mentioning the effects of misplaced regret?

Deeper reflection suggests a possible answer. After delivering a sobering message of severe judgement, the reader may panic—what merits do I have to ensure a positive outcome? Maimonides quickly reassures the reader with the sure-fire method of amassing merit: stop regretting all the good things you've done! Eliminate misplaced regret! Jettison your remorse over well-intentioned mistakes, and credit yourself for attempting to do good in the world. By eliminating regret for doing the right thing, a person's spiritual balance sheet will be

flooded with value in recognition of all the positivity he or she has contributed to the universe.

This has got to be the easiest way to begin preparations for the High Holy Days. Guilt is certainly a major, healthy element of the *teshuva* process. Engaging in guilt-feelings over unappreciated acts kindnesses, however, is highly corrosive to the process. Most of us have enough things in our past that deserve regret; let us focus our energies on those unfortunate choices and abandon the misplaced shame we feel for trying to do right in the world.

### 3.4

אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזרת הכתוב, רמז יש בו: כלומר עורו עורו ישנים משינתכם, והקיצו נרדמים מתרדמתכם; וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה, וזכרו בוראכם. אלו השוכחים את האמת בהבלי הזמן, ושוגים כל שנתם בהבל וריק אשר לא יועיל ולא יציל--הביטו לנפשותיכם, והטיבו דרכיכם ומעלליכם; ויעזב כל אחד מכם דרכו הרעה, ומחשבתו אשר לא טובה.

לפיכך צריך כל אדם שיראה עצמו כל השנה כלה, כאלו חציו זכאי וחציו חייב; וכו' כל העולם, חציו זכאי וחציו חייב: חטא חטא אחד--הרי הכריע עצמו והכריע את כל העולם כלו לכף חובה, וגרם להם השחיתה; עשה מצוה אחת--הרי הכריע את עצמו והכריע את כל העולם כלו לכף זכות, וגרם להו תשועה והצלה. זה הוא שגאמר "וצדיק יסוד עולם" (משלי י, כה), זה שצדק עצמו הכריע את כל העולם כלו והצילו.

ומפני ענין זה, נהגו כל בית ישראל להרבות בצדקה ובמעשים טובים ולעסק במצוות, מראש השנה עד יום הכפורים, יתר מכל ימות השנה. ונהגו כלם לקום בלילה בעשרת ימים אלו, ולהתפלל בבתי כנסיות בדברי תחנונים ודברי כבושין עד שיאור היום.

Even though the blowing of the shofar is a decree of the Torah, the reason for the commandment is an allusion: awaken, awaken, you who are deep in your sleep. Rise from your unconsciousness and examine your actions. Return in *teshuvah* and remember your Creator. You who forget the truth amidst wasted time, spending all your years in meaningless and empty pursuits that neither help nor rescue. Look into yourselves and improve your ways and deeds. Abandon, all of you, your wrong path and harmful plan.

Therefore every year a person should regard himself as being half praiseworthy and half blameworthy, and so too the world as half praiseworthy and half blameworthy. If one were to commit a single sin, one would tip one's self and the entire world to the side of guilt, and cause its destruction. If one were to commit one positive deed, one would tip the entire world to the side of merit, and bring about its salvation and rescue. This is the meaning of the verse (Proverbs 10:25): *a righteous person is the foundation of the Universe*, which refers to the one who rights himself and tips the balance of the entire world, thus rescuing it.

Thus during the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur all Jews engage in additional charitable activities, performing more good deeds and involving themselves in more commandments, than during the rest of the year. It is customary for Jews to rise at night during these ten days to recite prayers of penitence and petition in the synagogues until daybreak.

### *Commentary*

The shofar is a call to war, an alarm, a jolt of urgency. Sounded with skill, the shofar can evoke a surprisingly wide spectrum of tones for such a simple instrument, from a shrill scream of agony to an angry blast of impatience, from plaintive cry to wail of despair. The cycle of 100 blasts blown on the High Holidays take us through all these emotions, inspiring us to deeper levels of self-analysis and a profound commitment to self-transformation.

In the beginning of this chapter, Maimonides seemed to define the "Intermediate" as someone who had precisely

the same number and value of merits and demerits. Here, he advocated that we consider ourselves as such a person, yet he did not use the term Intermediate. This apparently small omission is fraught with meaning, because the Intermediate is defined in the Talmud (Berakhot 61b) in a rather different way.

Contemplating the three-fold categorization of people, the great sage Rabah remarks that the Intermediate is “like me.” His student Abaye responds, “the Master does not allow anyone to live!” In other words, if the pious Rabah is only an Intermediate, what about the rest of us? Surely we must all be in the category of “the wicked!” Rabbi Yosi ha-Glili thus clarifies that a righteous person is someone whose will is determined by the Good Inclination (*yetser ha-tov*), and a wicked person is someone whose will is determined by the Evil Inclination (*yetser ha-ra*, see 2.1). One whose will is determined by both is called an Intermediate. In other words, contra Maimonides' reading, the Intermediate is not someone whose deeds are equally divided between those which are praiseworthy and those which are blameworthy. The Intermediate is rather a state of mind, a condition of volition: the wicked are motivated by their baser impulses exclusively, the righteous by altruism alone, and the rest of us—suddenly a much larger set than ever before—are Intermediates.

Maimonides' reading is fundamentally prospective, meaning, one should consider one's self balanced on a knife's edge of great change. A single movement in one direction or the other might release a cascade of events that extends far beyond one's immediate reach. This is clearly Maimonides' intent, and feeds into his closing reference to The Ten Days of *Teshuvah*. These days have a special spiritual dynamic of their own, as Jews rush to seek out

additional opportunities to gain merit before the awesome holy day of Yom Kippur.



Day 12

מ"א אלול

Saturday,  
September 2,  
2017

בְּשַׁעַה שְׁשׂוּקְלִין עוֹנוֹת אָדָם עִם זְכוּיוֹתָיו, אִין מַחְשְׁבִין  
עָלָיו תַּחֲלַת עוֹן שְׁחָטָא בּוּ וְלֹא שְׁנִי, אֲלֵא מִשְׁלִישִׁי וְאַלְךָ.  
אִם נִמְצְאוּ עוֹנוֹתָיו מִשְׁלִישִׁי וְאַלְךָ מְרַבִּין עַל זְכוּיוֹתָיו,  
אוֹתָן שְׁנֵי הָעוֹנוֹת מְצַטְרְפִין וְדָנִין אוֹתוֹ עַל הַכֹּל.

וְאִם נִמְצְאוּ זְכוּיוֹתָיו כְּנֶגֶד עוֹנוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר מְעוֹן שְׁלִישִׁי  
וְאַלְךָ, מְעַבִּירִין כָּל עוֹנוֹתָיו רֵאשׁוֹן רֵאשׁוֹן: לְפִי שְׁהַשְׁלִישִׁי  
נִחָשֵׁב רֵאשׁוֹן, שְׁכָבֵר נִמְחָלוּ הַשְּׁנָיִם; וְכֹן הַרְבִּיעִי הָרִי הוּא  
רֵאשׁוֹן, שְׁכָבֵר נִמְחָל הַשְּׁלִישִׁי; וְכֹן עַד סוּפֹן.

בְּמָה דְבָרִים אֲמוּרִים, בְּיַחֲדִי, שְׁנֵאמָר "הוּ-כָל-אֱלֹהִים, יַפְעַל-א-ל--  
פְּעָמִים שְׁלוֹשׁ, עִם-גָּבֵר" (איוב לג, כט). אֲבָל הַצְּבוּר--תּוֹלִין לָהֶן  
עוֹן רֵאשׁוֹן וְשְׁנֵי וְשְׁלִישִׁי, שְׁנֵאמָר "עַל-שְׁלֹשָׁה פְּשָׁעֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל,  
וְעַל-אַרְבָּעָה לֹא אֲשִׁיבֵנו" (עמוס ב, ו). וְכִשְׁמַחְשְׁבִין לָהֶן עַל דְּרָךְ  
זֶה, מַחְשְׁבִין לָהֶן מְרַבִּיעִי וְאַלְךָ.

הַבֵּינֵנוּנִים--אִם הִיא בְּכֹלל מַחְצָה עוֹנוֹת שְׁלֵהֶן שְׁלֵא הַנִּיחַ תְּפִלִּין  
מְעוֹלָם--דְּנִין אוֹתוֹ כְּפִי חֲטָאִיו, וְיֵשׁ לוֹ חֶלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא; וְכֹן כָּל  
הַרְשָׁעִים שְׁעוֹנוֹתֵיהֶם מְרַבִּין--דְּנִין אוֹתָן כְּפִי חֲטָאוֹתֵיהֶם, וְיֵשׁ  
לָהֶן חֶלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא: שְׁכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶן חֶלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא,  
אִף עַל פִּי שְׁחָטָאוּ--שְׁנֵאמָר "וְעַמְךָ כָּלֵם צְדִיקִים, לְעוֹלָם יִירְשׁוּ  
אֶרֶץ" (ישעיהו ס, כא); אֶרֶץ זֹו מְשַׁל--כְּלוּמַר אֶרֶץ הַחַיִּים, וְהוּא  
הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. וְכֹן חֲסִידֵי אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם, יֵשׁ לָהֶן חֶלֶק לְעוֹלָם  
הַבָּא.

When the demerits of a person are calculated against his merits, sins that a person commits once or even twice are not included. Only those which are committed three times or more are calculated. If it turns out that these thrice-repeated sins are greater than a person's merits, those two earlier occasions are included and one is judged for them all.

If one's merits are equal to the thrice-repeated sins and onward, then the sins are evaluated individually. The third transgression is considered the first, because the earlier two occasions have already been forgiven. So too, the fourth transgression is considered the first, because the third has already been forgiven, and so on.

Under what circumstances does this apply? To an individual, as it is written (Job 33:29) *for all these things God does, twice or thrice, with a man*. Regarding a community, however, the first, second and third occasions are left hanging, as it is written (Amos 2:6) *three sins of the Jewish people [I will discount], but from four I will not turn away*. These sins are judged, the fourth and later occasions are also judged.

Regarding the intermediate, if there are included among the half of his demerits the omission of wearing *tefilin*, he is judged according to the nature of his sin, but he still has a place in the world to come. So too all wicked people, whose sins are excessive, are judged according to those sins, yet they retain a share in the World to Come, for all Israel has a share in the world to come, even though they sin, as it is written (Isaiah 60:21) *and your people are all righteous, they will forever inherit the land*. The land is an allegory for the Land of Life, which is the World to Come. The righteous people of the nations of the world have a place in the World to Come in a similar manner.

## Commentary

Continuing the discussion of the metaphysical accounting of positive and negative deeds, Maimonides read significant leniencies into the Divine reckoning process. As in a human court, repeat offenders are treated with greater severity, but there is a surprisingly high threshold for culpability for first offenders. For Maimonides, the Talmudic basis of this generous system does not imply that a person may transgress twice without fear of punishment, as will be clarified at the beginning of the next chapter. Rather, Maimonides argues that God allows for human weakness by gracing us with two opportunities to do *teshuvah* for our misdeeds before a penalty is assessed. Our failure to take advantage of Divine leniency to correct our behavior contributes to our culpability.

Maimonides' description of God's calculus of reward and punishment is inspiring for those of us who truly yearn for the atonement that *teshuvah* can provide. God will find ways to minimize the consequences of our wrongdoing, considering every possible accounting advantage to bring us success.

Maimonides identified two especially potent tactics to gain merit: the wearing of *tefilin* (phylacteries), even once, and the association with a community. Placing the "frontlets between the eyes" and the "sign upon the hand" is, on the surface, a purely ritual act that may seem to the outside observer as a token identification of affiliation with Judaism and its traditions. One who straps these prayer boxes to his head and arm for a few brief moments has not, one might think, rushed into a burning building to save children trapped inside, nor discovered the cure to some

terrible disease, and yet this person has earned a share in the World to Come. Why is this so?

Perhaps the reason might derive from the nature of the *devekut*, or “cleaving,” that *tefilin* symbolize. *Tefilin* represent a three-fold unification of human energy, by harnessing the mind (the box on the head), the body (the box on the arm), and the emotions (the box on the bicep is tilted inward, toward the heart). Perhaps effecting this closeness to the Divine, or even expressing the desire for such a union through the donning of *tefilin*, is sufficient merit to earn life in the World to Come.

### 3.6

Day 13  
י"ב אלול  
Sunday,  
September 3,  
2017

וְאֵלֵּי שְׂאִין לָהֶן חֶלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, אֲלֵא נִכְרְתִין וְאוֹבְדִין,  
וְנִדְוָנִין עַל גְּדֹל רָשָׁעִם וְחֲטָאתָם, לְעוֹלָם וּלְעוֹלָמֵי עוֹלָמִים:  
הַמֵּינִים, וְהַאֲפִיקוֹרוֹסִים, וְהַכּוֹפְרִים בַּתּוֹרָה, וְהַכּוֹפְרִים  
בַּתְּחִית הַמֵּתִים, וְהַכּוֹפְרִים בְּבִיאַת הַגּוֹאֵל, וְהַמְשַׁמְדִים,  
וּמַחְטִיאֵי הַרְבִּים, וְהַפּוֹרְשִׁים מִדְרָכֵי צְבוּר, וְהַעוֹשֶׂה  
עֲבֹרוֹת בְּיַד רָמָה בְּפִרְהֶסְיָה כִּיהוֹיָקִים, וְהַמוֹסְרִים,  
וּמַטִּילֵי אֵימָה עַל הַצְּבוּר שֶׁלֹּא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, וְשׁוֹפְכֵי דָמִים,  
וּבַעֲלֵי לְשׁוֹן הָרַע, וְהַמּוֹשֵׁךְ עֲרֻלְתּוֹ.

These are the people who do not have a share in the World to Come; rather they are cut off and lost, and judged according to the severity of their wickedness and sins for all time. The *minim*. The *apikorsim*. Those who deny Torah. Those who deny the resuscitation of the dead. Those who deny the coming of the Redeemer. The apostates. Those who cause others to sin. Those who separate from the ways of the community. One who sins in a haughty and public manner like Jehoiachim. The informers. Those who provoke needless fear in the community. Those who shed blood. Those who spread gossip. Those who deny the covenant.

#### Commentary

By way of preface, it should be noted that many contemporary Rabbinic authorities blunt the impact of this section of Maimonides' work. He wrote in an era when all Jews belonged to strong communities, when deviant behaviors and outward displays of antinomian attitudes were met with effective coercive power from the leadership of the Jewish community. Public disavowal of group norms was countered by the threat of ostracism,

financial penalty and even corporal punishment. Viewed from a twenty-first century perspective, we may see such power of Jewish leadership as extreme, but this communal structure effectively maintained the integrity of the Jewish population and preserved this ancient culture in deeply threatening environments.

During the eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries, some European Jews explored the possibility of living outside the boundaries of traditional Judaism, either as completely anonymous, secular citizens of the modern state or by altering traditional Judaism to bring it into accord with contemporary sensibilities. The traditionalists resisted fundamental changes to Judaism, but they rapidly dwindled in numbers such that they were the minority among Jews by the late twentieth century.

Jews who followed these new antinomian movements were often considered *tinokot she-nishbu*, literally “kidnapped children.” This Talmudic term refers to people who were raised without the benefit of traditional Jewish education, and as such cannot be held blameworthy for their non-observance of Jewish ritual. Even if they later received this education as adults, their childhood experiences in a secular environment are considered so crucial to their development that they are not considered culpable for transgressing Jewish law in many areas.

### 3.7

חַמְשָׁה הֵן הַנִּקְרָאִין מִיָּנִים: הָאוֹמֵר שֶׁאֵין שָׁם אֱלֹהִים, וְאֵין לְעוֹלָם מְנַהִיג; וְהָאוֹמֵר שֶׁיֵּשׁ שָׁם מְנַהִיג, אֲבָל הֵם שְׁנַיִם אוֹ יוֹתֵר; וְהָאוֹמֵר שֶׁיֵּשׁ שָׁם רֶבּוֹן אֶחָד, אֲלָא שֶׁהוּא גּוֹף וּבִעַל תְּמוּנָה; וְכֵן הָאוֹמֵר שֶׁאֵינוֹ לְבַדּוֹ רִאשׁוֹן וְצוּר לְכָל; וְכֵן הָעוֹבֵד אֱלֹהִים זוֹלָתוֹ, כְּדִי לְהִיּוֹת מְלִיץ בֵּינוֹ וּבֵין רֶבּוֹן הָעוֹלָמִים. כָּל אֶחָד מִחֲמָשָׁה אֵלֵינוּ מִן.

There are five types of *minim*. One who says that there is no God, that the world has no master. The one who says that there is a master, but that there are two or more of them. The one who says there is one master, but he is a physical being. And similarly the one who says he was not the first Creator of all. One who worships another god in order that he will act as an intercessor between him and the Master of the Universe. Each one of these five is called a *min*.

#### Commentary

Judaism is a profoundly monotheistic religion, and will not tolerate any dilution of this central article of faith. In this respect it is similar to Islam, but perhaps less similar to Christianity (especially considering the Catholic concept of the trinity) both of which have their intellectual roots in the Jewish tradition. Maimonides' definitions of the "*minim*" (literally, "types," meaning types of heretical thinkers) however, do not necessarily apply to non-Jews. These theologies are proscribed for Jews, the intended audience of these words.

The first category of *min*, the one who believes there is no god, is not normally considered the most common form of Jewish heresy; rather it is generally dismissed as a kind of intellectual laziness: *an unlettered and ignorant man does not*

*know this*, as the Psalmist records (92:7). Far more common (and, in a strange way, more tolerated) is the heretical notion that God exists, but is unjust. This position will be discussed below.



Day 14

י"ג אלול

Monday,  
September 4,  
2017

שְׁלוּשָׁה הֵן הַנִּקְרָאִין אֶפִיקוֹרוּסִים: הָאוֹמֵר שֶׁאֵין שָׁם נְבוּאָה כָּלֵל, וְאֵין שָׁם מִדַּע שְׁמַגִיעַ מִהַבּוֹרָא לְלֵב בְּנֵי הָאָדָם; וְהַמְכַחֵשׁ נְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּנוּ; וְהָאוֹמֵר שֶׁאֵין הַבּוֹרָא יוֹדֵעַ מַעֲשֵׂה בְּנֵי הָאָדָם. כָּל אֶחָד מִשְׁלוּשָׁה אֱלוֹ אֶפִיקוֹרוּס.

שְׁלוּשָׁה הֵן הַכּוֹפְרִים בַּתּוֹרָה: הָאוֹמֵר שֶׁאֵין הַתּוֹרָה מֵעַם ה', אֶפְלוּ פְסוּק אֶחָד, אֶפְלוּ תְּבֵה אַחַת--אִם אָמַר מֹשֶׁה אָמְרוּ מִפִּי עֲצָמוֹ, הֲרִי זֶה כּוֹפֵר בַּתּוֹרָה; וְכֵן הַכּוֹפֵר בְּפְרוּשָׁה, וְהַיֵּא תּוֹרָה שֶׁבַעַל פֶּה, וְהַכַּחֵשׁ מִגִּידָהּ, כְּגוֹן צְדוּק וּבִיתוֹס; וְהָאוֹמֵר שֶׁהַבּוֹרָא הַחֲלִיף מִצְוָה זֹה בְּמִצְוָה אַחֶרֶת, וְכִבֵּר בְּטֵלָה תּוֹרָה זֹה, אִף עַל פִּי שֶׁהִיא הֵיטָה מֵעַם ה', כְּגוֹן הַנוֹצְרִים וְהַהֲגָרִים. כָּל אֶחָד מִשְׁלוּשָׁה אֱלוֹ כּוֹפֵר בַּתּוֹרָה.

There are three kinds of *apikorsim*. One who says that there is no prophecy at all, and that there is no knowledge of the Creator that reaches the heart of a human being. One who denies the prophecy of Moses our Teacher. One who says that the Creator is unaware of the deeds of humanity. Each of these three is an *apikoros*.

There are three kinds of deniers of Torah. One who says that the Torah does not come from God, even a single verse, even a single word. If he says that Moses wrote it on his own, behold this is a denier of Torah. One who denies the interpretation of Torah, which is the Oral Torah, and contradicts its teachers, as did Zadok and Boethus. One who says that the Creator exchanged one commandment for another, making the earlier Torah irrelevant, even though it came from God, like the

Christians and the Muslims. Each of these three is a denier of Torah.

### *Commentary*

The term *apikoros* refers to the followers of the Hellenistic thinker Epicurus (341-270 BCE), the author of one of the more popular philosophies circulating in ancient Israel. It is often used as a blanket term for Jewish heresies, which accept at least the concept of monotheism, but deny key aspects of the Rabbinic tradition.

Central to Maimonidean thought is the validation of the the absolute authority of the Written Torah and the interpretive tradition represented in the Oral Torah. Zadok and Boethus are representative of ancient Jewish schools that denied the concept of an afterlife. Zadok in particular is considered the father of the Sadducees, a group that capitulated to Roman rule in order to gain control of the Temple in ancient Jerusalem.

Judaism also rejects the notion that Divine Revelation somehow needs updating in order to remain relevant. There can be no New Testament for Maimonides, and the Koran does not correct “errors” found in the Hebrew Bible. The reference to Christianity and Islam at the end of this passage is not present in the standard edition of the *Mishneh Torah*. Like many similar references, it was probably removed centuries ago under pressure of Church censorship. This translation is based on the superior Frankel edition, which incorporates textual variations found in other versions of the *Mishneh Torah*. Maimonides’ use of the term “Hagarites” (*hagarim*) for Muslims is a little oblique (Hagar was the mother of Ishmael, considered the

father of the Arab peoples), and may also have been a way of avoiding scrutiny by Muslim readers.

שנים הן המשמדים: המשמד לעברה אחת, והמשמד לכל התורה כלה. המשמד לעברה אחת--זה שהחזיק עצמו לעשות אותה עברה בזדון ונתפרסם בה והרגל, אפלו היתה מן הקלות, כגון שהחזק תמיד ללבש שעטנז או להקיף פאה, ונמצא כאלו בטלה מצוה זו מן העולם אצלו--הרי זה משמד לאותו דבר: והוא, שיעשה להכעיס. והמשמד לכל התורה, כגון החזר לדתי הגוים בשעה שגזרין שמד וידבק בהן, ויאמר ומה בצע לי להדבק בישראל שהן שפלים ונרדפים, טוב לו שידבק באלו שידן תקיפה--הרי זה משמד לכל התורה כלה.

There are two types of apostates: an apostate for a single sin, and an apostate for the entire Torah. An apostate for a single sin is one who has intentionally habituated himself to a particular transgression. He is well-known for this sin, which he regularly commits, even if it might be one of the lighter sins such as wearing clothing made out of wool and linen, or cutting the hair on the sides of his head in the forbidden manner, as if he considers the commandment irrelevant. This person is called an apostate for such a thing, providing he is doing it to anger God. An apostate for the entire Torah is like someone who turns to the religion of the nations during a time of forced conversion, joining them and saying "what does it benefit me to be part of the Jewish people, who are lowly and persecuted? It would be better for me to join with these people who are more powerful." Behold, this is an apostate for the entire Torah.

### *Commentary*

Rabbi Eliyahu Touger notes that Maimonides' choice of sins (wearing wool and linen combinations, or shaving

one's temples) are both transgressions that convey no material benefit, thus illustrating a key element of this apostasy. In order to be considered an expression of heresy rather than simple human weakness, they must be done for the sole purpose of angering God, not for personal pleasure, and with full consciousness of the consequences of such behavior. Few people would meet the Talmudic threshold of culpability today.

Writing three hundred years before the Spanish Inquisition and wide-scale coerced conversion of Iberian Jewry to pro-forma Catholicism, Maimonides' words on Jews who leave their ancestral faith seem quite harsh. Elsewhere in his works, Maimonides writes with considerable compassion for Jews who return to their communities after forced conversion to Islam, ruling that they should be accepted as full members of the Jewish people despite their unfortunate experience. Maimonides seems to draw a distinction between Jews who choose to outwardly adopt another faith to avoid persecution, and those who convert for personal advantage.

In one of our weekly learning sessions, my son-in-law Chaim Yaakov noted that Maimonides considers the abandonment of the Jewish people to be functionally equivalent to abandoning the Torah as a whole. It would seem, therefore, that supporting the Jewish people is equivalent to supporting the Torah as a whole. It reminds me of the famous "press release" that Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson made when he took over leadership of the Lubavitch Hasidic movement in 1951: love of God, love of the Torah, and love of the Jewish people are one and the same thing.

### 3.10

מִחֲטֵי־הָרַבִּים: אֶחָד שֶׁהֲחֵטִיא בְּדָבָר גָּדוֹל, כִּי־רַבָּעַם  
וְצָדוֹק וּבִיתוֹס; וְאֶחָד שֶׁהֲחֵטִיא בְּדָבָר קָל, אִפְלוּ לְבַטֵּל  
מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה. וְאֶחָד הָאוֹנֵס אֲחֵרִים עַד שֶׁיִּחָטְאוּ כַּמְנַשֶּׁה,  
שֶׁהָיָה הוֹרֵג יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד שֶׁיַּעֲבֹדוּ עֲבוֹדַת זָרָה; אוֹ שֶׁהֲטָעָה  
אֲחֵרִים וְהִדִּיחֵם כִּישׁוּעַ.

Day 15

י"ד אלול

Tuesday,  
September 5,  
2017

Those who cause others to sin: it matters not whether the sin is large, such as that of Jeroboam and Zadok and Boethus, or whether the sin is small, even to nullify a positive commandment. It matters not if one forces others to sin like Manasseh, who would kill a Jew who did not worship an idol, or if one tempts or persuades others like Jesus.

#### Commentary

Jeroboam and Manasseh were Jewish kings who promoted idol worship (see I Kings 12 and II Kings 21). Zadok and Boethus were leaders of ancient Jewish movements that denied the concept of life after death, introduced above. The reference to Jesus is not present in the standard edition of the *Mishneh Torah* (see 3.8 above). Maimonides understands Jesus as a Jew who tempted Jews to turn away from traditional observance of the commandments.

To the best of my knowledge, Maimonides does not refer to Mohammed anywhere in the *Mishneh Torah*. There are some veiled allusions, such as the reference to the "Hagarites" in 3.8, and elsewhere "Ishmaelites," but there is no mention of Mohammed parallel to the direct reference to Jesus here. This could be the result of careful self-censorship of Maimonides or his copyists, realizing that a controversial passage might make it impossible to

produce the *Mishneh Torah* for a wider audience in Islamic lands. Later publishers, working in Christian Europe, were often constrained to edit their work for comparable criticisms of Christianity in order to meet the censor's approval.

A figure apparently referring to Jesus occurs in a few scattered passages in the Talmud, which constituted the basis of medieval Jewish understanding of the roots of Christianity. As one might expect, the overall impression associated with Jesus—sometimes called “that man”—is generally negative, although there is a fascinating passage in tractate Sotah 47a. In the context of a discussion of pedagogy, the Talmud argues that a Rabbi should draw his pupils “close with the right hand, and push them away with the left,” meaning, he should use his stronger right hand to express affection and love, while his left pushes them away, maintaining professional distance. The Talmud warns teachers never to “push away with both hands,” and uses the story of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahayah and his pupil, apparently Jesus, as a cautionary illustration.

The story relates that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahayah and his student were at an inn, and received very courteous hospitality from the female innkeeper. The Rabbi commented to his student, “how pleasant is this woman,” using the Hebrew term “na’ah” to refer to her personal quality. This word for “pleasant,” however, may also mean “beautiful,” and it was in this sense that Jesus understood his Rabbi, and he responded, “well, her eyes are a bit too round.” Incensed that his student would think that he was referring to her physical appearance, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahayah excoriated Jesus, sending him out of his presence. Jesus attempted several times to regain his teacher's favor, to no avail, as Rabbi Yehoshua insisted on “pushing him away with both hands.” Finally, Jesus

approached one last time while the Rabbi was reciting the Shema prayer. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perahayah relented, thinking his pupil had been adequately chastened, but since he was in the middle of a prayer that could not be interrupted, he held up his hand in a gesture that meant “wait a moment and we shall speak.” In a tragically ironic parallel to the first misunderstanding that generated the initial rebuke, Jesus took his Rabbi’s gesture as a rebuff, and left him for good. Christianity, according to this story, grew from that unfortunate miscommunication.

The story is fascinating and instructive on several levels. Beyond the sage pedagogic and psychological advice, it’s interesting to note the nuanced appreciation for the initial formation of a distinct Christian community. The defection of Jews from the traditionally observant community to form the nucleus of the daughter faith, however, is something that Maimonides would not condone.



### 3.11

הפּוֹרֵשׁ מִדְּרָכֵי צְבוּר: אִם עַל פִּי שְׁלֵא עֶבֶר עֲבֵרוֹת, אֲלֵא נִבְדֵּל מֵעֵדֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאִינוּ עוֹשֶׂה מִצְוֹת בְּכֻלָּן וְלֹא נִכְנַס בְּצַרְתָּן וְלֹא מִתְעַנֶּה בְּתַעֲנִיתָן, אֲלֵא הוֹלֵךְ בְּדַרְכּוֹ כְּאֶחָד מִגּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ, וְכֵאלוֹ אִינוּ מֵהוּ--אִין לוֹ חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

הַעוֹשֶׂה עֲבֵרוֹת בְּיַד רָמָה כִּיהוֹקִים: בֵּין שְׁעֵשֶׂה קְלוֹת, בֵּין שְׁעֵשֶׂה חֲמוּרוֹת--אִין לוֹ חֵלֶק; וְזֶה הוּא הַנִּקְרָא מְגַלֶּה פָּנִים בַּתּוֹרָה, מִפְּנֵי שְׁהַעִיז מִצָּחוֹ וְגִלָּה פָּנָיו וְלֹא בּוֹשׁ מִדְּבַרֵי תּוֹרָה.

One who separates from the ways of the community, even if he does not sin but only separates from the congregation and does not perform commandments together with them, refraining from sharing in their suffering with them and fasting with them, instead going about as if he were not Jewish, and not one of them: he has no portion in the World to Come.

And one who commits a sin in a haughty manner like Jehoiachim, whether he commits one of the light sins or whether he commits one of the severe sins, he has no share. This is what is meant by "he reveals his face before the Torah," because he hardens his forehead and shows his face without embarrassment before the words of Torah.

#### *Commentary*

Maimonides is clearly speaking of a person who intentionally chooses to remove himself from the Jewish people at the time of their distress. To be considered culpable, he or she must be fully aware of the ramifications

of this decision, and as mentioned above (3.6), this status is rare in the modern period.

Still, while legal culpability may be far off, the general principle bears greater scrutiny. Why would “separating from the community” constitute such a serious transgression? What’s wrong with a lifestyle of privacy and isolation, if that’s what one wishes? Furthermore, readers familiar with the *mussar* tradition and certain strands of Hasidic thought will recall the value of *hitbodedut*, a type of secluded, daily meditation, a behavior that is highly praised for its connection to spiritual growth. The term itself translates as “aloneness.” What could be so terrible about separating from the community?

The great sage Hillel famously noted in Pirkei Avot: “do not separate from the community, and do not say ‘when I am free I will study’—perhaps you will never be free.” Why are these two dicta (separating from the community and putting off Torah study) proximate, if not to compare them to each other? One should not delay learning Torah, hoping for greater leisure and opportunity in the future, because perhaps that time will never come. So too one should not separate from the community, because one never knows when one will have need of the community, perhaps desperately.

The second part of this *halakhah* also relates to communal involvement. Committing some wrong in public, showing not only disregard for the commandment itself but also for the community of believers, is an especially egregious sin. Maimonides refers to Jehoiachim, a Jewish king who burned works of prophecy (see Jeremiah 36). This was a public act of defiance, an act so serious that the other specifics of the sin become irrelevant. It is a reflection of what the Hebrew idiom terms “hard-face-ness” (*azut*

*panim*), perhaps the etymological root of the English term “brazen-faced” or simply “brazen,” from the hardness of brass.

One of the most misrepresented passages in the Talmud refers to a man who has an uncontrollable desire to visit a prostitute (Moed Katan 17a). Without approving this behavior in the least, the Rabbis nevertheless recognize that an individual may be subject to a desire that overwhelms his ability to resist temptation, and transgression is inevitable. Under those circumstances, the Talmud says that he should wear dark clothes and go to a faraway location before he indulges his *yetser ha-ra*. The meaning of the passage is not in any way an approval of such conduct—nothing could be further from the truth! What it means, however, is that if one absolutely cannot help but succumb to this addictive behavior, then at the very, very least one must show deference to communal standards and attempt to hide the behavior by disguising his appearance and going to a location where he will not be recognized. These precautions do not minimize the severity of the transgression or its punishment, but at least they address to some degree the possibility of desecrating the Divine Name.

### 3.12

שְׁנַיִם הֵם הַמוֹסְרִים: הַמוֹסֵר חֲבֵרוֹ בְּיַד גּוֹיִם לְהַרְגוֹ אוֹ לְהַכּוֹתוֹ,  
וְהַמוֹסֵר מִמּוֹן חֲבֵרוֹ בְּיַד גּוֹיִים אוֹ בְּיַד אֲנָס שֶׁהוּא כְּגוֹי--שְׁנֵיהֶם,  
אֵין לָהֶן חֵלֶק.

There are two types of informers. One who hands over his fellow to non-Jews for execution or physical punishment, and one who hands over the wealth of his fellow to non-Jews, including a Jewish extortionist who is effectively like a non-Jew. Both of these have no share.

#### Commentary

The Hebrew term for “informer” (*moser*) literally translates as “one who hands over,” meaning one who takes the person or property of a Jew and illegally hands it over to another. Informing is thus a serious type of theft, not to be confused with reporting a criminal to recognized and appropriate authorities for lawful restitution and punishment. Maimonides, writing in the twelfth century, nevertheless intimates this distinction between legitimate and illegitimate informing by including the phrase “for execution or physical punishment.” Handing over a Jew for legal due process, when the laws of the state are in conformity with the dictates of *halakhah*, is not under discussion here. For example, in many countries, people who work with children have a duty to report suspected child abuse to their superiors at work and ultimately to state authorities. Even though the consequences of erroneous accusations can be devastating, nevertheless the grave risk of harm to a minor demands a response.

For most of us, this type of *halakhah* seems to be purely theoretical in nature. How often do we find ourselves in a

position that we might be considered an “informer”? Further introspection, however, reveals a much more disturbing reality.

We began this chapter with a reference to the saintly Rabbi Yisrael Meir ha-Kohen, known commonly by the title of his first major work, “Chofetz Chaim” (unlike the secular world, where the term “eponymous” always refers to authors or artists naming their work after themselves, in the Jewish world authors become so identified with their ideas that they lose their given names and are simply known by the titles of their books). In this classic and highly influential text, the Chofetz Chaim demonstrates with unassailable proof that what passes for “harmless” gossip is in reality completely forbidden by the Torah.

In many ways, relating disparaging information about another person falls within the parameters of Maimonides’ assertion in this *halakhah*. How many times have we needlessly spoken ill of others, causing them directly or indirectly to lose opportunities for financial or other advancement? Wouldn’t that fall within the category of “handing over wealth”? Even more seriously, if our speech negatively affects their well-being, wouldn’t that also be related to “handing over one’s fellow for execution?” Sounds far-fetched, but it’s not—don’t we use the term character *assassination* for this very purpose?

There are, of course, exceptions to this prohibition, and even times (such as in the case of potential child abuse) when one would be required by Jewish law to speak out. Maimonides will discuss the laws of forbidden speech in a later chapter, and we will return to the thought of the Chofetz Chaim for additional clarification (see below, 4.5).

### 3.13

מטילי אימה על הצבור שלא לשם שמים: זה הרודה צבור  
בחזקה והם יראים ופוחדים ממנו הרבה, וכונתו לכבוד עצמו  
ולכל הפציו, לא לכבוד שמים, כגון מלכי הגויים.

One who spreads fear in the community for the wrong reasons refers to one who rules over the community with force, making people fear and tremble before him. He does this with the intention of self-aggrandizement. His actions are not at all for the sake of Heaven, and he behaves like the kings of the nations.

#### *Commentary*

Maimonides' jaundiced view of non-Jewish kings may have been inspired by the flight and suffering his family endured after their expulsion from Spain at the hands of the Almohads. His disdain extended to Jewish communal leaders who take advantage of their position of authority to wield power in an inappropriate manner, using fear to intimidate less powerful people.

3.14

Day 16  
ט"ו אלול  
Wednesday,  
September 6,  
2017

כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מֵאַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֲנָשִׁים אֵלוּ שְׁמֵנֵינוּ--אֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל, אִין לָהֶן חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. וַיֵּשׁ עֲבֵרוֹת קְלוֹת מְאֹלָה, וְאֵף עַל פִּי כֹן אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים שֶׁהָרִגִיל בָּהֶן אִין לוֹ חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, כְּדִי לְהִתְרַחֵק מֵהֶן וּלְהִזְהַר מֵהֶן.

וְאֵלוּ הֵן: הַמְכַנֶּה אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ, וְהַקּוֹרֵא לְחֲבֵרוֹ בְּכַנּוּיוֹ, וְהַמְלַבֵּין פְּנֵי חֲבֵרוֹ בְּרַבִּים, וְהַמְתַּכְפֵּד בְּקִלּוֹן חֲבֵרוֹ, וְהַמְבַזֶּה תַלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים, וְהַמְבַזֶּה רַבּוֹתָיו, וְהַמְבַזֶּה אֶת הַמוֹעֲדוֹת, וְהַמְחַלֵּל אֶת הַקִּדְשִׁים.

בְּמָה דְּבָרִים אֲמוּרִים שֶׁכָּל אֶחָד מֵאֵלוּ אִין לוֹ חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, בְּשִׁמְתַת בְּלֹא תְשׁוּבָה. אֲבָל אִם שָׁב מִרְשָׁעוֹ, וּמַתּוּ וְהוּא בַעַל תְּשׁוּבָה--הֲרִי זֶה מִבְּנֵי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שְׂאִין לָךְ דְּבַר שְׁעוּמֵד בְּפָנָי הַתְּשׁוּבָה: אֲפֹלוּ כִּפּוּר בְּעִיקּוֹר כָּל יָמָיו, וּבְאַחֲרוֹנָה שָׁב--יֵשׁ לוֹ חֵלֶק, שְׁנֵאָמַר "שְׁלוֹם שְׁלוֹם לָרְחוֹק וְלִקְרוֹב, אָמַר ה'--וּרְפָאתֶיךָ" (ישעיהו נז, ט).

כָּל הַרְשָׁעִים וְהַפּוֹשְׁעִים וְהַמְשַׁמְדִים וְכִיוּצָא בָּהֶן שֶׁחֲזָרוּ בַתְּשׁוּבָה, בִּין בְּגִלּוּי בִין שֶׁחֲזָרוּ בְּמִטְמוֹנוֹת--מִקְבָּלִין אוֹתָם, שְׁנֵאָמַר "שׁוֹבוּ בָנִים שׁוֹבְבִים" (ירמיהו ג, כב): אֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁעֲדִין שׁוֹבֵב הוּא, שֶׁהֲרִי בַּסֵּתֵר בְּלִבְדָּ חוֹזֵר וְלֹא בְּגִלּוּי--מִקְבָּלִין אוֹתוֹ בַתְּשׁוּבָה.

Each one of these twenty-four people that we have listed, even though they are of Israel, they have no share in the World to Come. There are also lesser sins than these that the Sages have warned that habitual transgression also removes a person from the World to Come, and therefore a person should take special care to distance himself from them.

These are they: one who creates a disparaging nickname for another, and one who calls another by such a name.

One who embarrasses another in public, and one who seeks honor through the downfall of another. One who disdains the scholars, and one who disdains his teachers. One who disdains the holidays, and one who desecrates holy things.

What sort of circumstance are we discussing that each one of these people would not have a share in the World to Come? When such a person dies without repenting. If he repented of his wicked ways before he died, however, he is a Master of *Teshuvah*, and he is among those who have a share in the World to Come, for nothing can stand against *teshuvah*. Even one who denies the essence of Judaism all his life, and at the end he repents, has a share, as it is written (Isaiah 57:19), *shalom, shalom to the far and to the near, says God, and I will heal him*.

All of the wicked and the sinners and the apostates and their like who repent, whether publicly or privately, are accepted, as it is written (Jeremiah 3:22), *return, returning children*. Even though he is still returning, for he is only returning in secret and not in public, his *teshuvah* is accepted.

### *Commentary*

Eliyahu Touger cites a teaching from Maimonides' son, also a well-known scholar: "the reason these individuals will not receive a portion in the world to come is not because of the severity of the sins they committed, but rather because this course of behavior will prevent a person from acquiring the merits necessary to acquire a portion in the world to come." These twenty-four attitudinal postures are caustic and self-defeating, and



separating from these patterns of behavior is essential to the process of *teshuvah*.

Nicknames can be hurtful, and even if a person has grown used to them, they often represent a diminution of a person's essence. Names, in Judaism, are considered the expression of prophecy given to parents: shall we deny that prophecy by substitution?

In a letter entitled "Kiddush HaShem" cited by Eliyahu Touger, Maimonides writes: "It is not proper to drive away those who profane the Sabbath...rather, we must draw them close and urge them to perform *mitzvot*. Our Sages of blessed memory explained that even if a person voluntarily sinned, when he comes to a synagogue to pray, we should accept him and not deal scornfully with him. They based their statements on the words of Solomon (Proverbs 6:30): "Do not scorn the thief when he comes to steal:" interpreting it as "Do not scorn the sinners of Israel when they secretly come to steal *mitzvot*."

Maimonides began this chapter with a statement of the world-altering potential contained within the *teshuvah* of a single individual, and concluded with a discussion of the seemingly minor indiscretions that can undermine a person's efforts to change. This topic will receive further attention in the following chapter. He did not end the discussion, however, until he added a major qualifier to the words: nothing can stand against *teshuvah*. No transgression is so great that it cannot be cleansed through *teshuvah*.

## Notes to Self

- 1) Try to be mindful of every moment, recalling the metaphysical implications of every choice.
- 2) Recalling and regretting prior actions is an essential part of the *teshuvah* process, but be aware of the unanticipated negative consequences of misplaced regret. The positive motivation behind the good deed is something to be cherished, not rejected. Feel good about trying to do good, even if it didn't work out.
- 3) Don't be a petty bureaucrat, ruling like a tyrant over people who ask for some help.
- 4)



## Chapter Four: Impediments

### *Introduction*

Maimonides' bold approach to the codification of Jewish law in the *Mishneh Torah* remains unparalleled even eight centuries after its first appearance, an illustration of the epitaph engraved on his Tiberias tombstone: "from Moses to Moses there was no one like Moses." This encomium expresses the thought that in the two millennia that separated the biblical Moses and Maimonides there arose no comparable master of Jewish law, and since the appearance of the *Mishneh Torah*, no scholar has managed to encompass the scope of Jewish thought in a similarly comprehensive manner. Another example of Maimonides' exhaustive and encyclopedic scholarship is found in this chapter, which goes beyond the proscription of forbidden behavior and extends into the realm of thought and attitude. Ironically, it is this type of material, treated only sparsely by later codes of Jewish law, which proves most modern and relevant for contemporary readers.

Day 17
ט' אלול
Thursday, September 7, 2017

In this chapter, Maimonides briefly outlined twenty-four impediments to *teshuvah*. Each of them represents a behavior pattern or tendency that generates resistance to the mental dynamic required for personal growth. One who would follow the difficult path of *teshuvah* must first undertake a serious spiritual accounting to determine the degree to which any of these mental obstacles are present.

A dynamic tension pervades Maimonides' teachings on *teshuvah*: as we saw in the previous chapter, he describes the utter damnation of sinners of various stripes, only to proclaim the universally redemptive power of *teshuvah*.

The opening passage of this chapter similarly indicates that God does not allow people who commit certain sins to do *teshuvah*, yet the last passage in this chapter reads “all of these things, even though they are impediments to *teshuvah*, they cannot deny *teshuvah*. If a person does *teshuvah* for these things, behold he is a Master of *Teshuvah* and has a share in the World to Come.” Why does Maimonides present us with such an obvious contradiction?

Rabbi Eliyahu Touger cites a passage from one of Maimonides’ earliest works that offers some resolution. A close read of his commentary on a tractate dealing with Yom Kippur (Yoma 8:7) indicates that Maimonides’ meaning is not that God rejects the *teshuvah* of such a person, rather it is that God does not provide additional assistance to help that individual through the difficult *teshuvah* process. This unusual withholding of aid is a possible exception to the Talmudic rule (Shabbat 104a), “one who wishes to be purified receives [Heavenly] assistance.” *Teshuvah* is always possible, for anyone and for any transgression. Unfortunately, certain types of transgressions make *teshuvah* more difficult than others.

## 4.1

עֲשָׂרִים וָאַרְבָּעָה דְּבָרִים מַעֲכָבִין אֶת הַתְּשׁוּבָה. אַרְבָּעָה מֵהֶן עֲוֹן גָּדוֹל; וְהַעֲוִשָׁה אֶחָד מֵאַרְבַּעַתָּו--אִין הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְסַפֵּיק בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה, לְפִי גְדֹל חַטָּאוֹ. וְאֵלוֹ הֵן: (א) הַמַּחְטִיא אֶת הָרַבִּים; וּבְכָלֵל עֲוֹן זֶה, הַמַּעֲכָב אֶת הָרַבִּים מִלַּעֲשׂוֹת מִצְוָה. (ב) וְהַמְטָה חִבְרוֹ מִדֶּרֶךְ טוֹבָה לְדֶרֶךְ רָעָה, כְּגוֹן מִסִּית וּמְדִיחַ. (ג) וְהַרְוָאָה בְּנֵי בְּתָרְבוֹת רָעָה, וְאִינוּ מִמַּחֶה בְּיָדוֹ--הוֹאִיל וּבְנֵי בְּרִשׁוֹתָיו אֵלֹו מַחֶה בּוֹ הִיָּה פּוֹרֵשׁ, וְנִמְצָא כְּמַחְטִיא אוֹתוֹ; וּבְכָלֵל עֲוֹן זֶה כָּל שְׂאֵפֶשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ לְמַחֹת בְּאַחֲרִים בֵּין רַבִּים בֵּין יְחִידִים וְלֹא מַחֶה, אֲלֵא יִנִּיחַ אוֹתוֹ בְּכַשְׁלוֹנּוֹ. (ד) וְהַאוֹמֵר אַחְטָא וְאַשׁוּב; וּבְכָלֵל זֶה הַאוֹמֵר אַחְטָא, וְיוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר.

4.1 There are twenty-four things that impede *teshuvah*. Four of them are serious sins, and God does not allow the one who commits them to do *teshuvah* because of their severity. These are they:

- 1) One who causes many to sin, and this category includes one who prevents others from doing good.
- 2) One who tempts another away from the good path; for example, one who incites or instigates.
- 3) One who sees his child moving in a bad direction and does not rebuke him. Since his child is under his authority, if he were to rebuke him, the child would in turn reform himself, and therefore it is as if the parent caused the child to sin. Also included in this category is one who has it within his power to rebuke others, whether individuals or many people, and fails to rebuke them, rather leaving them to the consequences.

4) One who says, "I will sin and I will repent," and included in this category is one who says, "I will sin, and Yom Kippur will provide atonement."

### Commentary

Maimonides' list of twenty-four impediments to *teshuvah* is divided into five categories: four impediments that "impede *teshuvah*" (4.1), five that "close the door to the ways of *teshuvah*" (4.2), five that "prevent a person from doing complete *teshuvah*" (4.3), five that "a person cannot normally rectify through *teshuvah*" (4.4), and five that "a person is drawn after them perpetually, and it is difficult to separate from them" (4.5).

Looking at our initial category, we discover a fascinating distinction between the first three and the last. Impediments 1, 2, and 3 all involve a pragmatic difficulty: if Reuven is somehow the cause of the wrongs committed by others, how can he possibly catalog all the sins for which he is responsible? For example, let us say that Reuven is a person of some prominence, and he chooses to eat in a non-kosher restaurant. Other Jews, witnessing his example, may end up dining there as well. Reuven can do *teshuvah* for his lax attention to the dietary laws, but how can he possibly repent for all the meals eaten by others as a consequence of his own choices?

The second impediment is similar, although more focused. Reuven, consciously or otherwise, set an example that led many to consume non-kosher food. Shimon, on the other hand, specifically invited Levi to a non-kosher restaurant, arguing and coaxing him to abandon his attachment to the Jewish tradition of keeping kosher. Unlike Reuven, Shimon knows exactly who he tempted, but can he possibly keep

track of every bit of non-kosher food that Levi ate ever after, or the Jews that Levi invited out to non-kosher meals?

The third impediment expresses the same notion, but in a passive context. What if one does not actively cause others to sin, but condones this behavior by remaining silent? If one has a position of authority—like a parent over a young child—then this behavior would be tantamount to encouraging the child to do wrong. Children, engaging in normal experimental behaviors, will look to their parents (consciously or otherwise) to gauge the reactions, and will modify their choices as required. If the parent remains nonplussed, the child may easily think, “he’s okay with this,” and assume the inappropriate behavior is within acceptable bounds and continue (or, more likely, behave in a still more egregious manner in order to find the true limits of acceptable behavior). The parent must make the difficult choice between allowing the child room to experiment and learn on his or her own, or confronting the child at every turn, smothering his or her natural creativity and spirit. This thought is frequently on my mind.

The final impediment, at first glance, seems to be wholly unlike the previous three, which seem to focus on the culpability one has for the sins of others. The fourth impediment refers to one’s self. How does saying “I will sin and I will repent,” or “I will sin and Yom Kippur will provide atonement” fit with the other three? A moment’s reflection reveals Maimonides’ apparent intent: one may also fail to rebuke one’s self, choosing immediate gratification over reasoned behavior by displacing culpability to a future moment. The final impediment is failure to hold one’s self to account.



## 4.2

Day 18

י"ז אלול

Friday,  
September 8,  
2017

ומהו חמשה דברים הו נועליו דרכי התשובה בפני עושיהו; ואלו הן: (א) הפורש מן הצבור--לפי שבזמן שיעשו תשובה, לא יהיה עמהו ואינו זוכה עמהו בזכויות שעושיין. (ב) והחולק על דברי חכמים--לפי שמחלקתו גורמת לו לפרש מהו, ואינו יודע דרכי התשובה. (ג) והמלעיג על המצוות--שכיון שנתבזו בעיניו, אינו רודף אחריהן ולא עושה; ואם לא יעשה, במה יזכה. (ד) והמבזה רבותיו--שדבר זה גורם להו לדחפו ולטרדו כישוע וכגיחזי, ובזמן שנטרד לא ימצא מלמד ומורה לו דרך האמת. (ה) והשונא את התוכחות--שהרי לא הניח לו דרך תשובה, שהתוכחה גורמת לתשובה, שבזמן שמודיעין לו לאדם חטאיו ומכלימין אותו, חוזר בתשובה כמו שכתוב בתורה: "זכר, אל-תשכח" (דברים ט, ז), "ממרים הייתם" (דברים ט, ז), "ולא-נתן ה' לכם לב וכו'" (דברים כט, ג), "עם נבל, ולא חכם" (דברים לב, ו). וכן ישעיהו הוכיח את ישראל ואמר "הוי גוי חטא" (ישעיהו א, ד), "ידע שור קנהו וכו'" (ישעיהו א, ג), "מדעתך, כי קשה אֶתָּה" (ישעיהו מח, ד); וכן צוהו הא-ל להוכיח לחטאים שנאמר "קרא בגרון אל-תחשך" (ישעיהו נח, א). וכן כל הנביאים הוכיחו לישראל, עד שחזרו בתשובה. לפיכך צריך להעמיד בכל קהל וקהל מישראל חכם גדול וזקן וירא שמים מנעוריו ואהוב להם, שיהא מוכיח לרבים ומחזירן בתשובה. וזה ששונא את התוכחות, אינו בא למוכיח ולא שומע דבריו; לפיכך יעמד בחטאותיו, שהו בעיניו טובים.

And among them are five things that close the doors to the ways of *teshuvah*, and these are they:

1) One who separates from the community, for at the time that they repent, he will not be among them and will not receive merit along with them.

2) One who quarrels with the words of the wise, for his dispute will cause him to separate from them, and he will not know the ways of return.

3) One who ridicules the commandments. Since they are insignificant in his eyes, he will not seek to fulfill them, and if he does not fulfill them, what will be his merit?

4) One who demeans his teachers, for this causes them to push him off and distance him as Jesus and Gehazi. When he is ostracized he will not find a teacher to show him the true path.

5) One who hates rebuke, for he does not allow himself a way to do *teshuvah*. Rebuke is a cause for *teshuvah*, for when a person is informed of his misdeeds, and feels ashamed, he will repent, as it is written in the Torah (Deuteronomy 9:7), *remember, and do not forget...you were rebellious, and God did not give you a heart (2:6) a foolish, unwise people*. Similarly, Isaiah rebuked the Jewish people, saying (Isaiah 1:4) *O sinful people (1:3) the ox knows its master (48:4) I know that you are difficult*. God commanded him to rebuke those who transgress, as it is written (58:1), *call out from your throat, do not hold back*. Thus did all the prophets rebuke the Jewish people so that they would return in *teshuvah*. Therefore every single Jewish community must appoint a great sage, elderly and God-fearing from his youth, well-loved by the people, who will rebuke the community and cause them to return in *teshuvah*. One who hates rebuke will not participate in this rebuke, will not hear his words, and therefore will remain in his sin, considering his behavior good.

## Commentary

The first set of impediments dealt with the failure to rebuke; the second set discusses the failure to accept rebuke. Avoidance of legitimate criticism constitutes an abandonment of the impetus for self-improvement. *Teshuvah* requires a certain level of psychological heroism, a commitment to endure the internal humiliation that is the inevitable result of self-analysis in order to reach a higher level of spiritual personhood.

Rabbi Hillel Cooperman discusses a difference of opinion among contemporary scholars regarding the status of the sage appointed to rebuke the community. The last century, and in particular the last fifty years, has witnessed a surge of returnees to traditional Judaism. Known as “Masters of *Teshuvah*,” few of them would claim to have reached the full meaning of the term in the Maimonidean sense—the Israeli term “*hozrei ba-teshuvah*,” or “returnees in *teshuvah*” is probably more appropriate for most—but many have nevertheless attained awesome prowess in learning and formidable spiritual greatness.

May such a person, who was not observant of Jewish law in his or her youth, be appointed as the one to rebuke the community? Maimonides, writing in an era where observance was the norm rather than the exception, employs language that suggests not: “elderly and God-fearing from his youth.” Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, a prominent Israeli scholar, holds that a contemporary Master of *Teshuvah* should ideally not take such a position, since a portion of the community will unfortunately not pay heed to rebuke from someone who only adopted observance later in life (if there is no other appropriate

candidate, however, Rabbi Kanievsky indicates that a Master of *Teshuvah* is acceptable).

Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman, a leading authority in contemporary *halakhah*, rules differently. Maimonides' teaching, argues Rabbi Shteinman, is merely intended as a suggestion, not a binding law. In fact, a Master of *Teshuvah* may be even more effective in giving gentle reproof, having potentially greater understanding of the challenges and temptations of secular life.

### 4.3

Day 19

י"ח אלול

Saturday,  
September 9,  
2017

ומהו חמשה דברים העושה אותן אי אפשר לו שישבו תשובה גמורה, לפי שהן עונות שבין אדם לחברו, ואינו יודע חברו שחטא לו, כדי שיחזיר לו או ישאל ממנו למחל לו; ואלו הן: (א) המקלל את הרבים--לא קלל אדם ידוע, כדי שישאל ממנו כפרה. (ב) והחולק עם גנב--לפי שאינו יודע גנבה זו שלמי היא, אלא הגנב גונב רבים ומביא לו והוא לוקח; ועוד שהוא מחזק יד הגנב, ומחטיא אותו. (ג) והמוצא אבדה ואינו מכריז עליה עד שיחזירה לבעליה--לאחר זמן, כשיעשה תשובה אינו יודע למי יחזיר. (ד) והאוכל שר עניים ויתומים ואלמנות--אלו בני אדם אמלליו הו ואינו ידועים ומפרסמים, וגולים מעיר לעיר, ואין להם מכיר, כדי שידע שר זה שלמי הוא ויחזירנו לו. (ה) והמקבל שחד להטות דין--אינו יודע עד היכן הגיעה הטתה זו וכמה הוא כוחה כדי שיחזיר, שהדבר יש לו רגלים; ועוד שהוא מחזק יד זה, ומחטיא אותו.

There are five things that prevent a person from complete *teshuvah*, since they are sins between one person and another, and one cannot know whom he has harmed such that he might repay him for his loss, or beg forgiveness. These are they:

- 1) One who curses a large number of people, without specifying a particular individual, such that he might later beg his forgiveness.
- 2) One who shares stolen property with a thief. Since he does not know the origin of the stolen property [to return it], as the thief sold him property taken from many people. Furthermore, he supports the thief and his sinful behavior.

3) One who finds lost property and does not announce it, so that the property may be returned to its owner. He may later do *teshuvah*, but he will not know who should receive the lost object.

4) One who consumes extorted property owned by the poor, orphans and widows. These are downtrodden people, they are not well known, and they wander from city to city, and there is no one who will say, "whose property is this?" such that it will be returned.

5) One who accepts a bribe to pervert justice. He does not know how far the implications of this judgment will reach, nor the extent of its impact, such that he might rectify it, for there was some basis for the judgment. He also supports the person who offered the bribe.

### *Commentary*

One who wishes to do *teshuvah* for any of these transgressions faces a practical difficulty. As described above (2.9), atonement is only possible after a person has adequately addressed whatever damage has been caused, financial or otherwise. In each of the cases described here, this is impossible. For example, if Reuven disparages Shimon, Reuven may address his wrongdoing in part by approaching Shimon and apologizing. If Reuven disparages the people of New York, on the other hand, how can he approach every single New Yorker and apologize? Similarly, if a man buys property from a professional thief, who steals from many people, how can he identify the original true owner of the object such that he might return it or otherwise compensate him? On a more granular level, purchasing property that was not

stolen per se, but was unfairly extorted from a poor debtor, would make restitution and subsequent *teshuvah* difficult. These types of transgressions place a person in a logical bind, holding onto a sin they no longer wish to maintain yet unable to release it properly.

These impediments are similar to 4.1 in one sense: both sets of impediments describe situations where a person cannot properly catalog the scope of one's wrongdoing. In 4.1, the penitent cannot easily quantify the wrongs done by others as a result of his or her actions, and in 4.3, the penitent commits transgressions that harm an unknown number of people. Given the similarities between 4.1 and 4.3, why did Maimonides interrupt them with 4.2, which deals with the impediments associated with resistance to criticism?

There is no question that Maimonides intended this sequence. His source for these laws is a passage in the Talmudic commentary of Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi at the end of the eighth chapter of tractate Yoma. The twenty-four impediments listed there, however, do not correspond to the order that Maimonides imposed on them in his *Ways of Repentance*. Maimonides also adds the various classifications—four are “serious,” five “close the doors to the ways of *teshuvah*,” and so on. Clearly, Maimonides adapted the passage from Rabbi Alfasi with a specific intent in mind.

Perhaps the meaning of Maimonides' sequence is that if one ignores the impact one's actions have on others (4.1), and one disregards reproof (4.2), then one is likely to commit incalculable wrongs against others (4.3). The remainder of the chapter follows this path, exploring the widening gyre of harmful behavior and its implications for *teshuvah*.

The eleventh-century *Duties of the Heart* by Rabenu Bachya ibn Pakuda provided beautiful examples of how God assists those who wish to do *teshuvah* for transgressions that would be impossible to atone for otherwise (*Sha'ar ha-Teshuvah*). "If he sinned with money, for example if he defrauded or robbed but did not have the money to make restitution, then God will give him the money he needs to pay the debt he owes his fellow and receive his forgiveness. If he caused his fellow some damage, either to his person or to his name, and his fellow refuses to forgive him, then the Blessed Creator will inject in his heart thoughts of forgiveness and love, until he forgives him...if the victim of the theft is far away, God will engineer a meeting between them so the thief can beg for and receive forgiveness. And if he does not know from whom he stole, or how much he stole, God will provide him with sufficient wealth to provide a public benefit, such as building a bridge or digging wells that many may use, providing water along the highways where water is not plentiful, or such things that are good for the community, such that the victims of his theft will receive benefit along with everyone else."



#### 4.4

Day 20

י"ט אלול

Sunday,  
September 10,  
2017

ומהו חמשה דברים העושה אותן אין חזקתו לשוב מהו, לפי שהו דברים קלים בעיני רב האדם, ונמצא חוטא והוא ידמה שאין זה חטא; ואלו הן: (א) האוכל מסעודה שאינה מספקת לבעליה--שזה אבק גזל, והוא מדמה שלא חטא ויאמר כלום אכלתי אלא ברשותו. (ב) והמשתמש בעבוטו שלעני--שהעבוט שלעני אינו אלא כגון קרדם ומחרשה, ויאמר בלבו אינן חסרים, והרי לא גזלתי אותו. (ג) והמסתפל בעריות--מעלה על דעתו

שאין בכך כלום, שהוא אומר וכי בעלתי או קרבת; והוא אינו יודע שראית העינים עוון גדול, שהיא גורמת לגופו שלעריות, שנאמר "ולא-תתורו אחרי לבבכם" (במדבר טו,לט). (ד) והמתכבד בקלון חברו--אומר בלבו שאינו חטא, לפי שאין חברו עומד ולא הגיעה לו בשת, ולא בישו אלא ערך מעשיו הטובים וחקמתו למול מעשה חברו או חכמתו, כדי שיראה מפללן שהוא מכבד וחברו בזוי. (ה) והחושד כשרים--אומר בלבו שאינו חטא, לפי שהוא אומר מה עשיתי לו, וכי יש שם אלא חשד שמא עשה או לא עשה, והוא אינו יודע שזה עוון שמשים אדם כשר בדעתו כבעל עברות.

And there are five things that we assume a person cannot normally rectify through *teshuvah*, because they are things that most people do not take seriously, and people sin without realizing it. These are they:

1) One who eats as a guest at the table of a host who cannot afford the meal. This is a minor form of theft. The guest feels that it is no sin, saying, "I did not eat anything without the permission of the host."

2) One who uses the collateral of a poor person, such as a shovel or a plow deposited to secure a loan, saying, "I

did not take anything away from the pledge, I did not steal anything at all.”

3) One who ogles a woman, thinking to himself that this means nothing. He says, “did I have relations with this woman, or even draw close to her?” He does not realize that what the eye sees can be a great sin, since it may lead to inappropriate relations, as it is written (Numbers 15:39), *do not seek after your heart*.

4) One who honors one’s self through the downfall of another, saying that it is no sin because the other person is not present, and will not hear and be embarrassed. Instead, one merely praises one’s own good deeds and intelligence in contrast to the deeds and intelligence of the other person, with the intent that people should notice who deserves honor and who deserves disdain.

5) One who suspects the innocent, saying that this is no sin. “What did I do to him? Did I do anything other than suspect him? Perhaps he did something wrong, perhaps he did not.” One does not realize that it is a great sin to consider a decent person to be a sinner.

### *Commentary*

In his classic 18<sup>th</sup> century work *Mesilat Yesharim*, Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto describes a series of levels of self-development for the spiritually sensitive individual. It is an uncommonly perceptive book which his near contemporary the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) is said to have studied 101 times. The third level, “Cleanliness,” discusses the types of behaviors which, while not forbidden by the letter of the law, are nevertheless inappropriate for

someone who wishes to reach the higher levels of ethical refinement. Maimonides provides several examples of the level of Cleanliness in this *halakhah*.

A Master of *Teshuvah* must reach a higher level of spiritual sensitivity, developing an ability to see beyond what is technically permissible and adopting a more stringent standard of personal integrity. In the first example provided, the host gives every indication that the guest should partake in the meal, and there would be no transgression to do so. The Master of *Teshuvah*, on the other hand, will recognize that the host's generosity may be motivated by a sense of shame, and the host may have difficulty offering this hospitality. It may be necessary to partake in the meal to address the host's sense of self, but the guest must take pains to consume only what is necessary for this purpose, and then perhaps to find some way to compensate the host such that he feels no embarrassment and suffers no loss.

Taking the concept still further, the prohibition would apply even if the poor person had no financial loss whatsoever, for example if the poor person left a shovel as a pledge against a loan. The creditor is not permitted to use the shovel; he is merely allowed to keep it in his possession until the loan is paid. Using the shovel to dig a hole would not have any monetary impact on the debtor, since the shovel remains unchanged after its work is done, but using it without permission represents an infringement of the creditor's authority over his property. The creditor may feel embarrassed to insist on his rights. More importantly, Maimonides seems to imply that the prohibition would apply even if the debtor was completely unaware that his creditor was using his property—there may be no impact on the *shovel*, but there will be an impact

on the *creditor*, who dulls his spiritual sensitivity by choosing to take advantage of his power over the debtor.

The impact on the human agent, rather than the inanimate object, is really the point of this section of the *halakhah*. Consider the impediment to *teshuvah* of ogling an attractive person. Maimonides ignored the issue of the feelings of the person under scrutiny because if that were the message in this *halakhah*, Maimonides would have discussed how the woman (or man) would have been hurt, even slightly, by receiving inappropriate attention. Rather, Maimonides focussed only on the impact that staring has on the one who *commits* the act, even if the object of the stare is completely unaware of the situation.

Finally, suspecting the innocent does not represent a physical crime, since no damage was done to the person under suspicion. Still, the Master of *Teshuvah* will recognize the harmful nature of this pattern of thought and the impact it will have on the relationship, and will attempt whenever possible to view others favorably. This is not to say that one need ignore indications that a particular person is dishonest, and subsequently enter into potentially harmful business transactions with such a person. It does mean, however, that every person deserves the opportunity to be treated with dignity. We have all done shameful things in our lives, and we may not be entirely trustworthy when it comes to certain types of temptations. Nevertheless, we hope that our past transgressions are not the first thing people think of when they meet us; we hope that others will recognize our common humanity and treat us with compassion and respect.

Maimonides placed these impediments in a clear sequence, describing increasingly finer and finer levels of ethical

awareness. Partaking of a meal when the host cannot afford it implies a small financial loss to the victim, as the host is coerced into providing the food out of embarrassment. Using the debtor's shovel does not necessarily imply a loss, since it is unlikely (although not impossible) that the shovel will be damaged through use. Staring at another person certainly lacks a financial element, although it may make the object of unwanted attention uncomfortable. Finally, merely suspecting a person of wrongdoing, especially if one does not share that suspicion, is a transgression committed solely on the level of thought, with no physical or emotional implication for the victim whatsoever. Each type of behavior, however, represents an impediment to *teshuvah*.

The effect on the agent, rather than the object of the action, reminds me of an interaction I had with my father when I was about eight or nine years old. We were visiting my uncle Myer and aunt Toba in Montreal. Myer took us out to a horse race, and offered to place a two dollar bet on my behalf, inviting me to choose a horse. My father wouldn't allow him. I asked my father, "are you worried that I will lose?" He responded, "No. I'm worried that you will win."

## 4.5

וּמְהוּ חֲמֻשָּׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹשֶׂה אוֹתוֹ יִמְשַׁךְ אַחֲרֵיהֶן תָּמִיד, וְהוּ קָשִׁים לְפָרֵשׁ מֵהֶן; לְפִיכֵן צָרִיךְ אָדָם לְהִזָּהֵר מֵהֶן שֶׁמָּא יִדְבֵּק בָּהֶן, וְהוּ כָּלֹו דְּעוֹת רְעוֹת עַד מְאוֹד; וְאֵלוֹ הֵן: (א) רְכִילוֹת. (ב) וּלְשׁוֹן הָרַע. (ג) וּבַעַל חֲמָה. (ד) וּבַעַל מַחְשָׁבָה רָעָה. (ה) וְהַמְתַּחֲבֵר לְרָשָׁע--מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא לָמַד מִמַּעֲשָׂיו, וְהוּ נִרְשָׁמִים בְּלִבּוֹ; הוּא שֶׁאִמְר שְׁלֹמֹה "וְרָעָה כְּסִילִים, יְרוּעַ" (משלי יג, כ). וּכְבָר חֲבַרְנוּ בְּהַלְכוֹת דְּעוֹת דְּבָרִים שֶׁצָּרִיךְ כָּל אָדָם לְנַהֵג בָּהֶן תָּמִיד, קַל וְחֹמֶר לְבַעַל תְּשׁוּבָה.

Day 21

כ' אלול

Monday,  
September 11,  
2017

And there are five things that, if a person does them, he will be drawn after them perpetually, and it becomes very difficult to separate from them. Therefore a person must be very wary of them, lest he become addicted, for they are extremely harmful. These are they:

- 1) Tale-bearing.
- 2) Gossip.
- 3) Frequent anger.
- 4) Habitually unkind thoughts.
- 5) Willful association with a bad person, since one will learn from his actions and they will make an impression on his heart.

This is as Solomon said (Proverbs 13:20), *the friend of fools will be harmed*. These behaviors have already been explained in the Laws of Opinions (*Hilkhot De'ot*) in the section regarding the behaviors that a person must always adopt. This is especially true for the one who wishes to do *teshuvah*.

## Commentary

Maimonides' final list of impediments is puzzling. Earlier *halakhot* in this chapter seem to represent a gradual increase, level after level, of spiritual refinement. The chapter began with transgressions such as influencing others to commit transgressions, followed by the deleterious impact of refusing to accept criticism, and two more *halakhot* treating behaviors so ephemeral that the victim may not even be aware that he or she was involved at all. Why did Maimonides conclude the chapter by returning to two transgressions, tale-bearing and gossip, that are prohibited on a biblical level?

As mentioned above (3.12), the boundaries of prohibited speech were heroically delineated in the classic late nineteenth-century work *Hafets Haim* by Rabbi Yisrael Meir ha-Kohen (known popularly as “the Chofetz Chaim”). The Chofetz Chaim began this work with a comprehensive listing of the sources for the prohibition, written primarily for the highly educated Rabbinic reader, devastating any possible objection to the classification of forbidden speech as a minor transgression. Reading his work a century and a half later, his learned and complex introduction seems excessive, but that is a reflection of how influential his thought has become. In the 1870s, he needed to convince even the Rabbinic elite of the seriousness of gossip and tale bearing, but now his research has become as axiomatic as Einstein's theory of relativity. Maimonides certainly shares this view of gossip and tale bearing, devoting nearly an entire chapter to these prohibitions elsewhere in the Mishnah Torah (*De'ot* chapter 7).

Perhaps Maimonides includes these otherwise serious transgressions here, not as a reflection of their severity, but

as an expression of their addictive nature. Tale-bearing and gossip are so prevalent that one may think they are like speeding five or ten miles over the limit—since everyone does it, one is tempted to think that perhaps it’s not so consequential. In fact, one might argue that driving at the speed limit constitutes a hazard to others, since the speed of traffic is already beyond the law, and in a similar manner one might want to say that a little “harmless” gossip is considered part of normal human conversation. If one were to refuse to share a juicy personal tidbit or two at someone else’s expense, wouldn’t that constitute antisocial behavior? Maimonides clarified that even this is no justification for defaming another person.

The list of addictive behaviors includes anger and unkind thoughts, difficult to police since these are entirely internal phenomena. We may have a proclivity to such thought patterns, but if we don’t address them, who will?

Perhaps this is why Maimonides concluded his list with the willful association with a bad person. We are helplessly influenced by those around us, for good or otherwise. If we choose to associate regularly with people who model shameful behaviors, should we be surprised if we adopt them ourselves? Note that Maimonides did not advocate shunning people with stunted or undeveloped ethical sensitivity, he merely warns against “willful” association. The Hebrew term used here is reflexive (המתחבר), implying a deeper level of commitment, beyond mere acquaintance.



## 4.6

כָּל אֱלוֹ הַדְּבָרִים וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן--אִף עַל פִּי שְׁמַעְכֶּבִּיּוֹן אֶת הַתְּשׁוּבָה,  
אֵינָן מוֹנְעִין אֶת הַתְּשׁוּבָה; אֵלָּא אִם עָשָׂה אָדָם תְּשׁוּבָה מֵהֶן--הָרִי  
זֶה בְּעַל תְּשׁוּבָה, וַיֵּשׁ לוֹ חֶלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

All of these things, even though they are impediments to *teshuvah*, they cannot deny *teshuvah*. If a person does *teshuvah* for these things, behold he is a Master of *Teshuvah* and has a share in the World to Come.

### Commentary

Is the list of twenty-four impediments to *teshuvah* listed here exhaustive, or is it merely suggestive? Do these impediments constitute classifications of difficulties faced by the would-be Master of *Teshuvah*, or are they a series of boxes that one may check off and consider the overall task complete? I don't know. On first reading, some of them seem so specific and even minute. Still, if we consider something like "shared stolen property with a thief," would that not apply to some types of intellectual content inappropriately copied and pasted from the web without attribution? With just a bit more introspection, and some insight from the words of the Sages, the list might very well be comprehensive if we examine it in sufficient detail.

Nevertheless, Maimonides leaves us with a message of hope. Despite the dire warnings found at the beginning of the chapter ("one who says I will sin, and I will repent," for example), he ends with the overall message of consolation and reassurance. Nothing stands before *teshuvah*.

## Notes to Self

1) Establish a regular schedule of *mussar* study. It's very difficult to do *teshuvah* without probing and testing one's behavior, and a *mussar* text is the best way to start. If you can identify your main challenges in *teshuvah*, choose a book that specializes in that subject. Here's a list of my favorite books, organized by topic:

### *General Teshuvah*

Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, *Mesilat Yesharim* ("The Path of the Just"). Favorite translator: Avraham Shoshana.

Anonymous, *Orhot Tsadikim* ("The Ways of the Righteous"). Favorite translator: Avrohom Yachnes.

Rabenu Yonah, *Sha'arei Teshuvah* ("The Gates of *Teshuvah*").

### *Forgiveness*

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah* ("The Palm Tree of Devorah"). The first chapter is the longest and the most important. I translated it myself with a commentary under the title *The Kabbalah of Forgiveness*.

### *Speech*

Rabbi Yisrael Meir ha-Cohen, *Sefer Hafets Hayim* ("One Who Desires Life"). Hard to translate well, since it's a deeply *halakhic* text. Several good anthologies are available.

## *Anger*

Rabbi Avraham Yelin, *Sefer Orah Apayim* ("The Book of Patience") I think it's hilarious that the surname of an author of a book on anger is pronounced like "yelling."

## *Holiness*

Rabbi Hayim Vital, *Sha'arei Kedushah* ("The Gates of Holiness"). Phenomenal work in the genre of Kabbalistic Musar, emerging from the 16th century Safed Circle.

## Chapter Five: Freedom

### *Introduction*

The possibility of change is predicated, first and foremost, on the notion that a human being has the power to choose. Any limitation on this power is also a limitation on the concept of reward and punishment, for how could a person be held responsible for actions that are out of his or her control? Maimonides therefore turns his attention to a theological and philosophical treatment of the concept of free will in Judaism. For much of the *Ways of Repentance*, we have experienced Maimonides as a legislator and moralist. In this brief chapter we get a glimpse of Maimonides as a philosopher, the author of the *Guide for the Perplexed*.

In this chapter, Maimonides will focus on two possible objections to the notion of human freedom, one psychological and the other metaphysical.

Day 22

כ"א אלול

Tuesday,  
September 12,  
2017

## 5.1

רשות כל אדם נתונה לו. אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק, הרשות בידו; ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע, הרשות בידו. הוא שכתוב בתורה "הן האדם היה באחד ממנו, לדעת טוב ורע" (בראשית ג, כב)-- כלומר הן מין זה שלאדם היה אחד בעולם, ואין לו מין שני דומה לו בזה הענין, שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע ועושה כל מה שהוא חפץ, ואין לו מי שיעכב על ידו מלעשות הטוב או הרע. וכיון שכן הוא, "פן-ישלח ידו" (שם).

Power is granted to every human being. If one wishes to turn to the good path and become righteous, it is within his power to do so. If one wishes to turn to the evil path and become wicked, it is within his power to do so. This is written in the Torah (Genesis 3:22), *the human has become one of us, knowing good and evil*. That is to say, the human being is unique in the world, incomparable to any other species, in this way: a human being knows and can understand the concepts of good and evil and can act on his or her will, without anyone to prevent the performance of good or evil acts. Since this is so [the verse continues] *lest he stretch out his hand [and take from the tree of life.]*

### Commentary

Fundamental to Judaism as a faith, and indeed to any system of human organization from the family unit to the modern state, is the concept that an individual has the power to choose his or her actions. Without this axiom, there can be no justification for praise or blame, reward or punishment, growth or decay. It is, according to the 19th century Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, the primary feature of

human existence that we share with the Divine. The power to choose is the meaning of the phrase “made in God’s image.” The power to act on our rational, moral sensibility is the aspect of our existence that truly distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin further explains the awesome power inherent in this ability to choose. With free will, the impact of human action literally has the power to create or destroy worlds. A fuller discussion of this kabbalistic concept is beyond the scope of this work on *teshuvah* (interested readers should consult Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin’s *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*), but even on a physical level the truth of this assertion is evident. The twentieth century witnessed the development of military technologies that made the unthinkable frighteningly possible: we now have the power to actually end all life on this planet. At the same time, advances in medical technology have brought us tantalizingly close to the unimaginable power of creating life *ex nihilo*, and of preserving life well beyond the years allotted to us through normal human aging.

Our powers are truly awesome, in the sense of inspiring awe, even terror. As a people, we have the ability to wreak horrible destruction on our shared home, should we abuse the abilities that we have developed through our power to choose. While we revel in our scientific and technological prowess, we must remain thoroughly grounded in an ethical consciousness, and not become drunk with possibility. Ethical awareness begins with *teshuvah*.

## 5.2

אל יַעֲבֹר בְּמַחְשַׁבְתְּךָ דְּבַר זֶה שְׂאוֹמְרִים טַפְשֵׁי הָאָמוֹת וְרַב גַּלְמֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁהִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא גּוֹזֵר עַל הָאָדָם מִתְחַלֵּת בְּרִיתוֹ לְהִיּוֹת צַדִּיק אוֹ רָשָׁע. אֵין הַדְּבָר כּוֹ, אֵלֶּא כָּל אָדָם וְאָדָם רְאוּי לְהִיּוֹת צַדִּיק כְּמֹשֶׁה רַבְּנּוּ אוֹ רָשָׁע כְּיִרְבָּעָם, אוֹ חֲכָם אוֹ סָכָל, אוֹ רַחֲמָן אוֹ אַכְזָרִי, אוֹ כִּילִי אוֹ שׁוֹעִ; וְכֵן שְׂאָר כָּל הַדְּעוֹת.

וְאֵין לוֹ מִי שְׂיִכְפְּהוּ וְלֹא גּוֹזֵר עָלָיו, וְלֹא מִי שְׂמוֹשְׁכוֹ לְאַחַד מִשְׁנֵי הַדְּרָכִים, אֵלֶּא הוּא מַעְצְמוֹ וּמִדְּעָתוֹ נוֹטֵה לְאִיזָה דְרָךְ שְׂיִרְצָה. הוּא שְׂיִרְמְיָהוּ אוֹמֵר "מִפִּי עָלִיוֹן לֹא תֵצֵא, הָרְעוֹת וְהַטּוֹב" (איכה ג, לח)--כְּלוֹמַר אֵין הַבּוֹרָא גּוֹזֵר עַל הָאָדָם לֹא לְהִיּוֹת טוֹב, וְלֹא לְהִיּוֹת רָע.

וְכִיּוֹן שְׂכֵן הוּא, נִמְצָא זֶה הַחוּטָא הוּא הַפְּסִיד עַל עַצְמוֹ; וְלִפְיֶכֶךְ רְאוּי לוֹ לְבַכּוֹת וּלְקוֹנֵן עַל מָה שֶׁעָשָׂה לְנַפְשׁוֹ, וְגַמְלָה רָעָה. הוּא שְׂכָתוֹב אַחֲרָיו "מָה-יִתְאוּנֵן אָדָם חֵי, גָּבֵר עַל-חַטָּאוֹ" (איכה ג, לט). וְחִזֵּר וְאָמַר הוּאִיל וְרִשׁוּתֵנוּ בְּיַדֵּינוּ, וּמִדְּעָתֵנוּ עֲשִׂינוּ כָּל הָרְעוֹת, רְאוּי לָנוּ לְחִזֵּר בְּתִשׁוּבָה וְלַעֲזֹב רִשְׁעֵנוּ, שֶׁהָרִשׁוּת עִתָּה בְּיַדֵּינוּ. הוּא שְׂכָתוֹב אַחֲרָיו, "נַחֲפָשָׂה דְרָכֵינוּ וְנַחֲקָרָה, וְנִשׁוּבָה עַד-ה'" (איכה ג, מ).

Do not let a certain notion enter your mind, one held by the foolish members of the nations of the world and the majority of unrefined Jews, that the Holy One who is Blessed makes a decree at the beginning of a person's life that determines if one will become righteous or wicked. This is not so. Rather, every person may become as righteous as Moses our Teacher or as wicked as Jeroboam. One may become wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, greedy or generous, and so with all personal qualities.

There is no one who will force him, nor issue a decree against him, nor drag him to one extreme or another;

rather he himself, knowingly and wittingly, inclines to whatever path he chooses. This is as Jeremiah says (Lamentations 3:38), *from the mouth of the Most High issues neither evil nor good*, meaning, the Creator does not decree that a person become good or evil.

Since this is the case, the sinner only harms himself, and therefore it is appropriate for a person to weep and lament his sins, over what he has done to himself and the unfortunate consequences he has wrought. This is as it is written (Lamentations 3:39), *what shall a living person lament? A man his sins*. Jeremiah repeats that since the power is in our hands, and we willingly did all these bad things, then we should certainly return in *teshuvah*, and abandon our wickedness, for the power is now in our hands. This is what he then writes (Lamentations 3:40), *let us search our ways and examine them, and return*.

### *Commentary*

Maimonides addressed the psychological objection to the concept of freedom of choice, and thoroughly rejected the notion that people are born with absolutely predetermined intellectual and emotional handicaps or advantages that determine without exception their destiny. Without denying the complexity of the human mind, and the possibility that people are born with different personal challenges or assets, he unequivocally affirmed that choice is fully possible for everyone. He emphasizes this point with the startling assertion that everyone might become as “righteous as Moses.” The notion that people might be as evil as Jeroboam, described above in 3.1, is unfortunately not so surprising.



Rabbi Eliyahu Touger cites several passages from other parts of Maimonides' massive *oeuvre* that appear to contradict this statement. Elsewhere, Maimonides agreed that some people may find certain challenges easier to overcome than others, or be drawn to a particular type of activity over another. The resolution of this contradiction may lie in the Talmudic teaching that even the most inappropriate or illegitimate temptation may be directed, through conscious and disciplined thought, to a socially valid and valued outlet. For example, Ravi Ashi of the Talmud stated (*Shabbat* 156a) that a person born under the constellation of Mars will become a shedder of blood: "a surgeon, a robber, a butcher or a *mohel*." The urge to shed blood will demand expression, and the person affected with this desire must master sufficient self-control that the urge is expressed (and even utilized) in an approved manner. He may sublimate his urge to shed blood into socially accepted professions such as medicine, meat preparation, even a religious occupation such as performing ritual circumcisions, or he may simply surrender himself to the most obvious outlet for his desire by becoming a robber. Maimonides' argument may be understood as an exhortation for people to direct their inclinations to these positive manifestations of an otherwise potentially harmful nature.

Maimonides traced the process of *teshuvah* through three consecutive verses in Lamentations. First comes the recognition that human beings are in control of their own choices (3:38), followed by the logical assertion that we should be held responsible for our behavior (3:39), and finally we must take this to heart and resolve to change (3:40).

וְעִיקַר זֶה עִיקַר גְּדוֹל הוּא, וְהוּא עֲמוּד הַתּוֹרָה וְהַמְצוּוֹה--  
 שְׁנֵאמַר "רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם, אֶת-הַחַיִּים וְאֶת-הַטּוֹב,  
 וְאֶת-הַמָּוֶת, וְאֶת-הָרָע" (דְּבָרִים ל,טו), וְכַתּוּב "רְאֵה, אֲנִי  
 נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה" (דְּבָרִים יא,כו): כְּלוֹמַר  
 שֶׁהָרְשׁוּת בְּיַדְכֶם; וְכֵן שִׁיחַפֵּץ הָאָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת מִמַּעֲשֵׂה בְנֵי  
 הָאָדָם--עוֹשֶׂה, בֵּין טוֹבִים בֵּין רָעִים. וּמִפְּנֵי זֶה הָעֲגִינוּ  
 נֹאמַר "מִי-יִתֵּן וְהָיָה לְבַבְכֶם זֶה לָהֶם" (דְּבָרִים ה,כה)--  
 כְּלוֹמַר שְׂאִין הַבוֹרָא כּוֹפֵה בְּנֵי הָאָדָם וְלֹא גּוֹזֵר עֲלֵיהֶן  
 לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹבָה אוֹ רָעָה, אֲלֵא לְבָם מְסוּר לָהֶם.

Day 23

כ"ב אלול

Wednesday,  
 September 13,  
 2017

This great point is essential. It is a pillar of the Torah and commandments, as it is written (Deuteronomy 11:26) *see, I have placed before you this day life and good, and death and evil*, and it is written, *see, I have placed before you this day blessing and cursing*. This means that the power is in your hands, and everything that a person wishes to do, any human act, is within one's power, whether it is good or evil. It is therefore written (Deuteronomy 5:26) *if only they would control their hearts*, meaning, the Creator does not force human beings, nor does God decree upon them that they must do good or evil, rather, every choice is given to them.

### Commentary

Accepting the concept of free will is essential for the entire belief system of Judaism to function. God somehow relinquishes control over the freedom of human choice, without diminishing the infinite scope of omnipotence. The philosophical objection to the concept of free will is the subject of the remainder of this chapter. How can an omnipotent, omniscient Deity truly allow human beings

the freedom to choose their actions? Does not the assertion that God knows what a person will choose *ipso facto* deny the very possibility of real choice?

Judaism does have a concept something like “fate,” which it calls *mazal*, and this will form the basis of the discussion in the following *halakhot*. Nevertheless, the Talmud is replete with examples of people who triumphed over what might have been unavoidable fate. One passage (Shabbat 156b) describes a conversation between the Sage Shmuel and a certain Chaldean astrologer named Ablat. When a common laborer passed by the two scholars, Ablat proclaimed to Shmuel that the man would be bitten by a snake and killed. Shmuel disagreed, arguing that the workman possessed a fine character that would protect him from such an unfortunate decree. Later, the workman walked past them on his way home, and Ablat stopped him and examined the contents of his satchel, which contained a dead poisonous snake. Shmuel asked if he had done anything special that day, and the man replied that he had shared his lunch with a fellow worker in such a way that would protect him from embarrassment. This act of kindness was used as an illustration of the concept expressed in Proverbs 10:2: “charity saves from death.”

## 5.4

אלו היה הא-ל גוזר על האדם להיות צדיק או רשע, או אלו היה שם דבר שמושך את האדם בעיקר תולדתו לדרך מן הדרכים, או למדע מן המדעות, או לדעה מן הדעות, או למעשה מן המעשים, כמו שבזדים מלבם הטפשים הוברי שמים--היאך היה מצוה לנו על ידי הנביאים עשה כך ואל תעשה כך, הטיבו דרכיכם ואל תלכו אחרי רשעכם, והוא מתחלת בריתו כבר נגזר עליו, או תולדתו תמשך אותו לדבר שאי אפשר לזוז ממנו. ומה מקום היה לכל התורה כלה, ובאיזה דין ואיזה משפט נפרע מן הרשע או משלם שכר לצדיק--"השפט כל-הארץ, לא יעשה משפט?" (בראשית יח, כה).

ואל תתמה ותאמר היאך יהיה האדם עושה כל מה שיחפץ, ויהיו מעשיו מסורין לו, וכי יעשה בעולם דבר שלא ברשות קונו ובלא חפצו, והכתוב אומר "כל אשר-חפץ ה', עשה: בשמים ובארץ" (תהילים קלה,ו). דע שהכל בחפצו יעשה, ואף על פי שמעשינו מסורין לנו.

כיצד: כשם שחפץ היוצר להיות האש והרוח עולים למעלה, והמים והארץ יורדים למטה, והגלגל סובב בעגול, וכן שאר בריות העולם להיות כמנהגו שחפץ בו--ככה חפץ להיות האדם רשותו בידו, וכל מעשיו מסורין לו, ולא יהיה לו לא כופה ולא מושך, אלא הוא מעצמו ובדעתו שנתן לו הא-ל עושה כל שהאדם יכול לעשות.

לפיכך דניו אותו לפי מעשיו: אם עשה טובה, מטיבין לו; ואם עשה רעה, מריעין לו. הוא שהנביא אומר "מידכם, היתה זאת" (מלאכי א, ט) לכם; "גם-המה, בחרו בדרךיהם" (ישעיהו סו, ג). ובענין זה אמר שלמה "שמח בחרו בילדותיך . . . ודע, כי על-כל-אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט" (קוהלת יא, ט)--כלומר דע שיש בידך כוח לעשות, ועתיד אתה לתן את הדין.

If God had decreed that a person would be righteous or wicked, or if there would be something that would draw a

person from the very beginning of life to one of these two paths, to adopt a certain personality trait or quality or act in a certain way (as some unintelligent people fool themselves with horoscopes), then how could God command us through the prophets to “do this” or “do not do that,” or “improve your ways and do not follow the path of the wicked” if a person were, from the moment of creation, already subject to a decree or the like that preordains some inclination, and that the person is unable to change this? What place would there be for the entire Torah, and by what logic or justice would the wicked be deserving of punishment or the righteous of reward? Will the Judge of the entire Universe not be just?

Do not be confused and ask, “how could it be that a person could do whatever he pleased, and his actions are entirely within his control? Is there anything in the Universe that is not under the control of the Creator, and not according to God’s will? Is it not written (Psalms 135:6) *whatever God wants God does, whether in Heaven or on earth?*” Know that all God desires, God does; nevertheless, our actions are within our control.

How is this so? Just as the Creator willed that fire and wind should rise, and water and earth should descend, and that constellations should encircle the globe, and all other creations of the Universe behave in the manner that God willed, so too did God will that a human being have power and control over his actions. There would be nothing that would coerce or entice except for his own self, his own mind, which was given to him by God to do whatever he is able to do.

Therefore a person is judged according to his actions. If he does good, then he is rewarded; if he does evil, he is punished. This is what the prophet said (Malachi 1:9), *from your own hands has this come to pass*, for they chose their path. In this manner Solomon said (Ecclesiastes 11:9), *rejoice, young man, in your youth, and know that all these things will be brought before divine judgment*. That is to say, know that the power to choose is within your control, and in the future you will be required to provide an accounting.

### Commentary

Maimonides continued his philosophical assault on fatalism, affirming God's intent to allow complete freedom of choice for humanity, even though we may not be able to comprehend the logical mechanism behind the apparent contradiction between free will and predeterminism. The problem, simply stated, is as follows: if God knows what a person will choose, then what choice does a person have? One may have the illusion of free will, but if our choice is already known, then it is already predetermined, and no choice at all. On the other hand, if we truly do have free will, then how can God be omniscient? If we have not yet chosen our future, God's knowledge would somehow be lacking, an intolerable theological assertion. The following *halakhah* will continue this discussion.

Jewish astrology is a phenomenon which has deep roots in the Talmud, including the passage cited in 5.2 regarding the influence of Mars (not to mention the common expression *mazal tov*, which literally translates as "good constellation"). On one level, astrology would seem to favor the notion of predeterminism over human choice, arguing that our lives are determined by the paths of the

stars and planets. Maimonides dismissed this notion, a reflection of his overall approach to Judaism, which appears to favor rationalism over mysticism. The Sages of the Talmud, however, debated the meaning and significance of astrology at some length. Some took the position that the stars dictate a person's destiny, especially with regard to personal traits and inclinations, whereas others argued that the concept applied to nations only, and still others dismissed the idea entirely. Maimonides' position in this book clearly falls in the last category. Elsewhere in his writings he seemed to take a more moderate position with regard to the influence of inherited qualities, but he consistently communicated the message that whatever the challenge, every person has the power to overcome.

The Talmudic page cited above contains another amazing story of how acts of kindness have the power to alter destiny. A certain astrologer told Rabbi Akiva that his daughter would die on her wedding day. Rabbi Akiva went ahead with the celebration nonetheless, and the young woman was married without incident. The morning after the wedding, she retrieved a brooch that she had placed in a crevice of the stone wall of their home, and found that the pin had entered the eye of a poisonous snake that was hiding there, killing it instantly. Her father asked how this came about, and she described that when the celebration was well underway, a beggar came to the door. Seeing that everyone was busy with the party, the bride attended to the poor man herself, and at some point she took off the brooch and placed it in the wall. Rabbi Akiva used this as another example of "charity saves from death," and in our context, it is an illustration of the power of kindness over destiny.

The Talmud (Bava Batra 16a) describes the role of the *yetser ha-ra* (the “evil inclination,” introduced in Chapter Two) as a tempter whose activity is sharply circumscribed. The *yetser ha-ra* is told to “break the barrel, yet save the wine,” meaning, push a person to his or her limit, but hold back from completely destroying the person. Knowing this strategy helps us control our innate desire to do wrong; we have the power to withstand anything. No matter how great the temptation, we can resist; no matter how powerful the urge, we can refrain; no matter how terrifying the risk, we can act. The *yetser ha-ra* does not have the Divine authority to push us past our absolute limit. There are notable exceptions to this rule, and they will be addressed in Chapter Six.

Ultimately, the freedom to choose our behavior becomes the sole justification for both punishment and reward. Were God to give the *yetser ha-ra* free reign, we could not be held culpable for our actions. By placing his power within the tightly circumscribed definition of “break the barrel, yet save the wine,” we retain our own power of choice, no matter how hard it may be to exercise it.



Day 24

כ"ג אלול

Thursday,  
September 14,  
2017

שְׁמָא תֵאמֵר וְהִלּוּא הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹדֵעַ כָּל מַה שְׁיִהְיֶה קֹדֶם שְׁיִהְיֶה: יָדַע שְׂזֵה צְדִיק אוֹ רָשָׁע, אוֹ לֹא יָדַע; אִם יָדַע שֶׁהוּא יִהְיֶה צְדִיק, אִי אִפְשָׁר שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה צְדִיק, וְאִם תֵּאמֵר שְׂיָדַע שְׁיִהְיֶה צְדִיק וְאִפְשָׁר שְׁיִהְיֶה רָשָׁע, הֲרִי לֹא יָדַע הַדָּבָר עַל בְּרִיּוֹ.

דַּע שֶׁתְּשׁוּבַת שְׂאֵלָה זֹה "אֲרֻכָּה מֵאֲרָץ, מִדָּה; וּרְחֵבָה, מִנֵּי-יָם" (איוב יא, ט), וְכַמָּה עֵיקָרִים גְּדוּלִים וְהַרְרִים רָמִים תְּלוּיִים בָּהּ; אֲבָל צְרִיךְ אַתָּה לִידַע וְלִהְבִּין בְּדָבָר זֶה שְׂאֵנִי אוֹמֵר.

כָּבֵר בְּאֲרֻנוֹ בְּפֶרֶק שְׁנֵי מֵהַלְכוֹת יְסוּדֵי הַתּוֹרָה שֶׁהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ בְּדַעַה שֶׁהִיא חוּץ מִמֶּנּוּ כַּבְּנֵי אָדָם שֶׁהוּא יוֹדֵעַתָּם שְׁנַיִם, אֲלֵא הוּא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ וְדַעַתּוֹ אַחַד; וְאִין דַּעַתּוֹ שֶׁלְאָדָם יְכוּלָה לְהַשִּׁיג דָּבָר זֶה עַל בְּרִיּוֹ. וְכַשֵּׁם שֶׁאִין כּוֹחַ בְּאָדָם לְהַשִּׁיג וְלִמְצֹא אֲמַתַּת הַבּוֹרָא, שְׂנֵאֲמֵר "כִּי לֹא-יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם, וְחַי" (שְׁמוֹת לֶג, כ)-- כִּךְ אִין כּוֹחַ בְּאָדָם לְהַשִּׁיג וְלִמְצֹא דַעַתּוֹ שֶׁלְבוֹרָא: הוּא שֶׁהִנְבִּיא אוֹמֵר "כִּי לֹא מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם, וְלֹא דַרְכֵיכֶם דַּרְכֵי נֹאם ה'" (ישעיהו נה, ח). וְכִינּוֹן שְׁכֵן הוּא, אִין בְּנוֹ כּוֹחַ לִידַע הַיֶּאֱכָר יוֹדֵעַ הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כָּל הַבּוֹרָאִים וּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם.

אֲבָל גַּדַע בְּלֹא סִפְקָא, שְׂמַעֲשֵׂה הָאָדָם בְּיַד הָאָדָם; וְאִין הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מוֹשֵׁכוֹ, וְלֹא גּוֹזֵר עָלָיו לֹא לַעֲשׂוֹת כִּךְ וְלֹא שֶׁלֹּא לַעֲשׂוֹת כִּךְ. וְלֹא מִפְּנֵי קִבְלַת הַדָּת בְּלִבְדָּ גַדַע דָּבָר זֶה, אֲלֵא בְּרֵאיוֹת בְּרוּרוֹת מִדְּבַרֵי הַחֻקִּים. וּמִפְּנֵי זֶה נִאֲמָר בְּנִבְאוּתָא שְׂדַנִּין אֶת הָאָדָם עַל כָּל מַעֲשָׂיו כְּפִי מַעֲשָׂיו, אִם טוֹב וְאִם רָע. וְזֶה הָעֵיקָר, שְׂכָל דְּבַרֵי הַנְּבּוּאָה תְּלוּיִין בּוֹ.

Perhaps you will say, "but does the Holy One who is Blessed not know all that will occur in the future, and before that God knows that a certain person will become righteous or wicked? Does God know this or not? If God knows that he will become righteous, then it would be

impossible for that person not to become righteous. And if you will counter by saying that God knows that he will become righteous, but there is a possibility that the person might nevertheless become wicked, then God would not know the matter with certainty.”

Know that the answer to this question is as broad as the earth, and as deep as the sea. Many great principles and high mountains depend on it. Yet you must know and understand what I say.

I have discussed this in the second chapter of the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, that the Holy One who is Blessed does not perceive knowledge as something outside of himself, in the manner that human beings know things as being different from themselves. Rather, the Blessed God and God’s knowledge are one thing. This is something that the human mind cannot grasp with clarity. Just as a human being does not have the power to understand and comprehend this truth about the Creator, as it is written (Exodus 33:20), *for no person may see Me and live*, so too it is not within the power of a human being to understand and comprehend the Mind of the Creator. This is what the prophet wrote (Isaiah 55:8), *for My thoughts are not like your thoughts, and your actions are not like My actions, says God*. Since this is so, we do not have the power to know how it is that God knows all creations and their actions.

We know with a certainty, however, that a person’s actions are within his power to control, and the Holy One who is Blessed does not entice him, nor decree upon him to perform any particular act, whether to do something or

refrain from doing something. We know this not only from received wisdom, but also from clear logical proof. Because of this the prophet said that a person is judged according to his actions, whether good or evil, and this is an essential point upon which all prophecy depends.

### *Commentary*

Maimonides proceeded to focus on the problem of predestination and free will directly. If human beings have the power of choice, then does that not detract from God's omnipotence, or more precisely, his omniscience? If we have free will to choose whatever course of action we wish, then how can God know that choice in advance? Conversely, if we maintain that God's omniscience is total and there is no future event outside this divine awareness, then how can we argue that our choice is truly free? If it has already been defined in the mind of God, with perfect accuracy, then how can we maintain the fiction of free will?

Maimonides' answer to the question of free will and predeterminism touches upon some of the deepest aspects of his theology, discussed in detail in an earlier section of the *Mishneh Torah* and in *The Guide for the Perplexed*. In *The Ways of Repentance*, Maimonides concentrated only on the aspects of this idea that are relevant to the topic at hand, and alludes to the basic concept that the identity of God is inseparable from the knowledge of God. Humans understand knowledge as something outside of ourselves that we grasp and perhaps incorporate, but that knowledge is distinct from our identity, and exists independently of ourselves. God's knowledge, however, is not distinct from God, which is a concept that we are unable to grasp.

Perhaps we might compare this to a dream—just as a dream is, in some sense, identical with the dreamer, so too is God’s knowledge identical to God. A human dreamer experiences the dream as an expression of reality, even if it does not conform to our expectations for daytime reality. The dreamer makes choices and experiences the consequences and feels as if he or she is doing so out of free will, even though the dream is entirely housed and controlled by his or her own mind. The dreamer is the dream itself. God, argued Maimonides, apprehends all reality in an enhanced yet similar manner—God is the Knower, the knowledge, and the object of knowledge, all at the same time. We cannot grasp precisely what this means, but we get a hint of it through our experience of dreams.

We should not perceive this mystery as a retreat from logic. Consider, for example, that we withhold information about basic human biology from children until they are sufficiently mature to grasp this knowledge in a healthy and positive manner. Children who are exposed to adult information at too young an age may suffer long-lasting psychological harm, and responsible parents take care to ensure that their children learn such things at the appropriate time and in the appropriate context. Is it so strange, then, to imagine that God withholds certain information from us for our own benefit? Perhaps it is only with great spiritual maturity that we can access this information and process it properly.

In a fascinating Talmudic passage (Hagigah 14b), four Rabbis enter the “orchard,” a metaphor for the deepest mysteries of Judaism. Ben Zoma cannot stand it, and he dies. Ben Azai cannot stand it, and he goes mad. Elisha ben Abuya refuses to accept it, and he rejects his faith. Only Rabbi Akiva, perhaps because he himself was a

complete Master of *Teshuvah*, returned whole from that experience.

Freedom is granted, and we are responsible for our choices. This concept is at the foundation of Jewish philosophy. We must not think, however, that this freedom is a right. In reality, it is a gift, a privilege granted to us by a kind God who wants us to develop to our fullest potential. This will be the topic of the following chapter.

## Notes to Self

1) Repeated failures have the potential to drain all the energy out of one's *teshuvah* efforts. It's important to keep in mind the fundamental principle that we are the sole authors of our own destinies. I like to think on that locomotive back in my home town, ponderously making its way along the tracks, completely unstoppable—but for the modest switches down the line, against which the massive train has no power. Don't focus on the train—focus on the switches.

2)



## Chapter Six: Privilege

### Introduction

We tend to think of *teshuvah* as an obligation, perhaps a chore, when it is actually a privilege. Transgression is inevitable, *there is no person who is righteous in the world, who does not sin* (Ecclesiastes 7:20), and thus the requirement for *teshuvah* is a necessary aspect of the human condition. Why should we therefore think that simply because we *need* to do something, we will *be able* to do that thing? Put in other words, Reuven may *need* to apologize to Sarah, but Sarah has no similar *need* to accept his apology. If a human being, which is a finite creature dependent on many factors to sustain life, has no intrinsic *need* to accept *teshuvah*, how much more so would the Sovereign who reigns over sovereigns be free of any necessity to consider our repentance. *Teshuvah* is not a right, it is a privilege.

In this chapter, Maimonides discussed the awesome power of the privilege of *teshuvah*, circumstances under which that privilege may be withheld, and the dire consequences of losing this essential connection with the Divine.

Day 25

כ"ד אלול

Friday,  
September 15,  
2017



## 6.1

פְּסוּקִים הַרְבֵּה יֵשׁ בַּתּוֹרָה וּבַדְּבָרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים שֶׁהֵן נִרְאִין כְּסוֹתְרֵינוּ עֵיקָר זֶה, וְנִכְשְׁלֵינוּ בְּהֵן רַב הָאָדָם; וְיַעֲלֶה עַל דַּעְתָּם מֵהֵן שֶׁהַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא גּוֹזֵר עַל הָאָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹבָה אוֹ רָעָה, וְשֶׁאֵין לְבוּ שְׁלֹאָדָם מְסוּר לוֹ לְהַטּוֹתוֹ לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִרְצֶה. וְהִרְיֵנִי מִבְּאֵר עֵיקָר גָּדוֹל שֶׁמִּמֶּנּוּ תִּדַע פְּרוּשׁ כָּל אוֹתָן הַפְּסוּקִים.

בְּזִמְנוֹ שֶׁאָדָם אֶחָד, אוֹ אֲנָשֵׁי מְדִינָה חוֹטְאִים, וְעוֹשֶׂה הַחוֹטָא חֲטָא שֶׁעָשָׂה מִדַּעְתּוֹ וּבְרָצוֹנוֹ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוֹדַעְנוּ--רְאוּי לְהַפְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ; וְהַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹדֵעַ הֵיאָךְ יִפְרַע. יֵשׁ חֲטָא שֶׁהִדִּין נוֹתֵן שֶׁנִּפְרָעִין מִמֶּנּוּ עַל חֲטָאוֹ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, בְּגוֹפוֹ אוֹ בְּמִמוֹנוֹ אוֹ בְּבָנָיו הַקְּטָנִים: שֶׁבָּנָיו שְׁלֹאָדָם הַקְּטָנִים שֶׁאֵין בָּהֶם דַּעַת וְלֹא הִגִּיעוּ לְכָלֵל מַצּוֹת, כְּקִינִינְיוֹ הֵן--כְּתוּב "אִישׁ בְּחֲטָאוֹ, יוֹמֵת" (מַלְכִים ב יד); וְרֵאָה דְבָרִים כַּד, טז), עַד שֶׁיַּעֲשֶׂה "אִישׁ".

וְיֵשׁ חֲטָא שֶׁהִדִּין נוֹתֵן שֶׁנִּפְרָעִין מִמֶּנּוּ לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, וְאֵין עוֹבֵר עָלָיו שׁוֹם נֹזֵק בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. וְיֵשׁ חֲטָא שֶׁנִּפְרָעִין מִמֶּנּוּ עָלָיו בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, וְלְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

There are many verses in the Torah and the prophetic sections of the Bible that appear to contradict this basic principle. Many people have erroneous interpretations of these verses and think that they indicate that the Holy One who is Blessed decrees that a person should commit some evil act or some good deed, and that it is not within a person's power to incline to whatever he wishes. I will explain a basic point that will allow for the correct interpretation of these verses.

When a given person sins (or the people of a given nation sin), and he sins knowingly and willingly as we have discussed, he is deserving of punishment and the Holy One who is Blessed knows how to mete out

appropriate punishment. There are sins that deserve punishment in this world, whether in terms of ill health or financial stress, or in terms of his young children. Young children who have not reached the age of majority and the responsibility of keeping the commandments, are still considered part of his household, as it is written (Deuteronomy 24:16) *in his sin will a man die*, which refers only to a person who has become an adult.

There are sins that are logically punished only in the World to Come, and carry no consequence in this world. Other sins deserve punishment both in this world and in the World to Come.

### *Commentary*

This *halakhah* contains one of the most difficult passages in *The Ways of Repentance*. Logic would dictate, and even a cursory familiarity with Judaism teaches, that children cannot be held responsible for their parents' behavior. How is it that Maimonides explicitly placed the responsibility for the well-being of a child on the behavior of the parent? The very same verse quoted here begins with the phrase, *parents will not die because of their children, and children will not die because of their parents*. Elsewhere, however, the Torah states (Exodus 34:7) that God *visits the iniquity of the parents on the children*, a concept that supports the statement of Maimonides here. How can these statements be resolved?

Rabbi Eliyahu Touger cites other Talmudic passages that limit the extent of this alarming idea. It is written in tractate Sanhedrin (27b) that a child may not be punished for a parent's transgressions unless the child also commits

that same transgression. This is the meaning of the verse in Deuteronomy that says children will not die because of their parents, which refers to children who are now adults. Indeed, a child who labors under challenges of a difficult parental history may be held to a higher, more demanding standard of behavior if that child, now an adult, fails to learn the harmful nature of their parents' example.

Minor children, on the other hand, do not necessarily enjoy special protection from the consequences of their parents' behavior. Harsh as it may seem, sometimes parents receive retribution through their children, one of the most horrible punishments imaginable. A biblical example of this is recorded in the book of Samuel II 11-13, where no less a figure than King David is held accountable for his problematic relationship with Bathsheba, and his punished fourfold through his children: the death of the unnamed infant child that Bathsheba bore from their encounter, the rape of his daughter Tamar by David's son Amnon, the revenge killing of Amnon by David's son Absalom, and the rebellion of Absalom and his ultimate death at the hands of David's soldiers.

Theologically, this concept remains deeply disturbing. Further exploration of the idea, however, is beyond the scope of this work, and falls within the category of *tsadik ve-ra lo*: "why do the righteous suffer," the most difficult question in all of Judaism (see 3.2). The inscrutability of God, described in a more academic and distant manner in the previous chapter, is far more difficult to assimilate when it is expressed in the suffering of a child.

The central thrust of this *halakhah*, however, is clear. After reiterating the validity of human freedom of choice, Maimonides affirms that we are held accountable for our

harmful actions. Punishment for those negative choices is meted out in this world and in the next.

## 6.2

בְּמָה דְּבָרִים אֲמֹרִים, בְּזִמְן שֶׁלֹּא עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה; אֲבָל אִם עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה, הַתְּשׁוּבָה כְּתָרִיס לְפָנֵי הַפְּרָעָנוֹת. וְכַשֵּׁם שֶׁאָדָם חוֹטֵא בְּרָצוֹנוֹ וּמִדַּעְתּוֹ, כֵּךְ הוּא עוֹשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה בְּרָצוֹנוֹ וּמִדַּעְתּוֹ.

Under what circumstances does this apply? This applies to a person who does not do *teshuvah*. If, however, he did *teshuvah*, then this *teshuvah* is like armor against punishment. Just as a person commits a sin knowingly and willingly, so too does he do *teshuvah* knowingly and willingly.

### Commentary

Maimonides was unwilling to step too far from the concept of the redemptive power of *teshuvah*, repeating once again the caveat that repentance has the ability to change any situation, no matter how dire. In this chapter, which will explore elements of punishment, Maimonides added the evocative image of “armor against punishment.”

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter commented briefly on the metaphor. Armor protects a soldier against serious harm, but it does not protect against the blow itself. A Kevlar vest may prevent a projectile from entering the body, but the massive amount of kinetic energy represented by the speeding bullet must be absorbed somehow—the Kevlar merely redistributes the energy over a larger surface, knocking the soldier down and likely leaving behind a cracked rib and bruising. Infinitely preferable to having the bullet penetrate soft tissue, but painful and damaging nonetheless.

*Teshuvah*, similarly, blunts the force of the punishment but does not eliminate it altogether. Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto explained that through *teshuvah*, a person's punishment is not removed entirely; rather it is commuted to a lesser expression of impact. The Talmud, for example, stated that if one reaches into one's pocket expecting to find three coins and instead finds only two, this is considered a punishment. Rabbi Luzzatto explained that minor inconveniences should be cherished and welcomed, because they represent the commutation of a much more grievous sentence that could have been imposed, but *teshuvah* acted as armor against the true punishment.

The essential kindness, continued Rabbi Luzzatto, is the fact that God allows people a certain amount of time to do *teshuvah*. If the universe were guided solely by justice, without the sweetening effect of mercy, then we would receive punishments immediately upon transgressing, the proverbial "lightning from heaven" effect. God, as it were, pauses before executing judgement, allowing us to take stock of our own actions and hopefully address them in *teshuvah*. Punishment is inevitable and just, but with *teshuvah* we have an opportunity to protect ourselves from its awesome, even lethal, capacity.

Day 26

כ"ה אלול

Saturday,  
September 16,  
2017

ואפשר שיחטא האדם חטא גדול או חטאים הרבה, עד שיתן הדיו לפני דיו האמת שיהיה הפרעון מזה החוטא על חטאים אלו שעשה ברצונו ומדעתו, שמונעין ממנו התשובה ואין מניחין לו רשות לשוב מרשעו, כדי שימות ויאבד בחטאים שעשה. הוא שהקדוש ברוך הוא אומר על ידי ישעיהו, "השמן לב-העם הזה ואזניו הכבד ועיניו השע פן יראה בעיניו ובאזניו ישמע ולבבו יבין ונשב-- ורפא לו" (ישעיהו ו,י). וכן הוא אומר "ויהיו מלעבים, במלאכי האלהים, ובוזים דבריו, ומתעתעים בנבאיו: עד עלות חמת-ה', בעמו--עד-לאין מרפא" (דברי הימים ב לו,טז)--כלומר חטאו ברצונם והרבו לפשע, עד שנתחילו למנע מהו התשובה שהיא המרפא.

לפיכך כתוב בתורה "ואני, אחזק את-לב-פרעה" (ראה שמות ד,כא; שמות יד,ד): לפי שחטא מעצמו תחלה והרע לישראל הגרים בארצו, שנאמר "הבה נתחכמה לו" (שמות א,י), נתן הדיו למנע ממנו התשובה, עד שנפרעו ממנו; לפיכך חזק הקדוש ברוך הוא את לבו.

ולמה היה שולח לו ביד משה ואומר לו שלח ועשה תשובה, וכבר אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא שאין אתה משלח, שנאמר "ואתה, ועבדיך: ידעתי . . ." (שמות ט,ל), "ואולם, בעבור זאת [העמדתך]" (שמות ט,טז)--כדי להודיע לבאי העולם, שבזמן שמונע הקדוש ברוך הוא התשובה לחוטא, אינו יכול לשוב, אלא ימות ברשעו שעשה בתחלה ברצונו.

וכן סיחון לפי עוונות שהיו לו נתחייב למנעו התשובה, שנאמר "כי-הקשה ה' אליהך את-רוחו, ואמץ את-לבבו" (דברים ב,ל). וכן הכנעניים לפי תועבותיהם מנע מהו התשובה עד שעשו מלחמה עם ישראל, שנאמר "כי מאת ה' היתה לחזק את-לבם לקראת המלחמה את-ישראל, למען החרימם" (יהושע יא,כ). וכן ישראל בימי אליהו לפי שהרבו לפשע, מנע מאותו המרבים

תשובה, שְׁנֵאֵמַר "וְאִתָּהּ הִסְבַּת אֶת-לִבְּךָ, אַחֲרֵינִית" (מלכים א יח, לז), כְּלוֹמַר מְנַעַת מִהוֹן הַתְּשׁוּבָה.

נִמְצְאָתָּ אוֹמֵר שְׂאִין הָא-ל גִּזְרָה עַל פְּרַעָה לְהִרְעוֹ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלֹא עַל סִיחּוֹן לְחֹטֵא בְּאַרְצוֹ, וְלֹא עַל הַכְּנַעֲנִיִּים לְהִתְעִיב, וְלֹא עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעַבְדַּ עֲבוּדָה זָרָה; אֲלֵא כֻּלּוֹ חֹטְאוֹ מֵעֲצָמוֹ, וְנִתְחַיְבוּ כֻּלּוֹ לְמַנַּע מִהוֹן הַתְּשׁוּבָה.

It is possible that a person could commit a sin of such magnitude, or a great number of sins, that the True Judge would properly decree that the punishment for these harmful acts, committed willingly and knowingly, would be the removal of the privilege of *teshuvah*. The person would thus be prevented from doing *teshuvah*, and would not have the power to return from his wickedness, and he would die and be lost because of his sins. This is what the Holy One who is Blessed said through the prophet Isaiah (6:10), *make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and their eyes weak, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and their hearts will understand, do teshuvah and be healed*. Similarly it is written (II Chronicles 36:16), *they ridiculed the messengers of God, disdained His words and insulted His prophets until the anger of God rose upon the people, without possibility of healing*. That is to say, they sinned willingly and to such an egregious extent that they deserved to have this healing *teshuvah* withheld from them.

Therefore it is written in the Torah (Exodus 14:4) *and I will harden the heart of Pharaoh*, since he sinned on his own at the beginning, harming the Jews who lived in his land, as it is written (Exodus 1:10) *let us deal craftily with them*. The Judgement was issued that *teshuvah* would be



withheld from Pharaoh until he received his punishment. Therefore the Holy One who is Blessed hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Why then did God send Moses to tell Pharaoh to send out the Jews and do *teshuvah*, when God had already told Moses that Pharaoh would refuse? This is as it is written (Exodus 9:30) *I know that you and your servants [still do not fear God]*. Yet (Exodus 9:16) *because of this* it was worthwhile to inform all humanity that when the Holy One who is Blessed withholds *teshuvah* from a sinner, he will not be able to repent. He will die in his wickedness, which originally began with his willful choice.

The same is true of Sihon. Because of the many sins he committed he was not permitted to do *teshuvah*, as it is written (Deuteronomy 2:30) *for God, your God, hardened his spirit and strengthened his heart*. And so too the Canaanites, because of their despicable acts, *teshuvah* was withheld from them to the extent that they warred with the Jews, as it is written (Joshua 11:20), *for it was from God that they hardened their hearts to go out to war with Israel, in order that they be destroyed*. So too the Jewish people, during the time of Elijah, because of their many sins, those people who sinned were not allowed to do *teshuvah*, as it is written (I Kings 18:37), *and you have turned their hearts away*, meaning, you have prevented them from doing *teshuvah*.

Thus God did not decree that Pharaoh harm the Jewish people, nor Sihon to sin in his land, nor the Canaanites to commit despicable deeds, nor the Jewish people to worship idols. All of them sinned on their own, and all of

them deserved to have the privilege of *teshuvah* withheld from them.

### Commentary

Maimonides provided several biblical examples of the Divine withholding of the privilege of *teshuvah* to indicate that it is, in fact, a privilege. This may be easier to grasp in terms of the teaching cited above (4.1), that a person who says “I will sin, and I will do *teshuvah*,” which Maimonides considered a major obstacle to *teshuvah*.

The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is the *locus classicus* to illustrate this concept of the withholding of *teshuvah*. How could God punish Pharaoh fairly if he received Divine strength to withstand the first few plagues and maintain opposition to obviously overwhelming force? Certainly any rational person would have recognized the futility of opposing God. If Pharaoh could not make the rational decision because of this “hardening of his heart,” then how could he be held blameworthy? The answer is that Pharaoh originally exhibited such intransigence and cruelty that he himself determined his own punishment, which entailed the terrible consequence of the loss of the privilege of *teshuvah*. Having lost that privilege, he no longer merited the means of his own redemption. This is like a captain of a ship who foolishly jettisons his lifeboats before setting off to sea. Caught in the hurricane, and tossed overboard, what can he do to save himself?

## 6.4

Day 27

כ"ו אלול

Sunday,  
September 17,  
2017

וּבַעֲנֵנוּ זֶה שׁוֹאֲלֵינוּ הַנְּבִיאִים וְהַצְּדִיקִים בְּתַפְלוּתֵיהֶם מֵה' לְעֲזָרָם עַל דְּרֹךְ הָאֱמֶת, כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר דָּוִד "הוֹרְנִי ה', דְּרֹכְךָ" (תהילים פו,יא)--כְּלוֹמַר אֵל יִמְנְעוּנִי חֲטָאֵי דְרֹךְ הָאֱמֶת, שֶׁמִּמֶּנָּה אֲדַע דְּרֹכְךָ וַיְחַד שְׁמֶךָ. וְכֵן זֶה שֶׁאָמַר "וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִּסְמְכֵנִי" (תהילים נא,יד), כְּלוֹמַר תִּנְיֹחַ רוּחִי לַעֲשׂוֹת חֲפְצָה וְאֵל יִגְרַמוּ לִי חֲטָאֵי לְמַנְעֵנִי הַתְּשׁוּבָה, אֲלֵא תִהְיֶה הַרְשׁוֹת בְּיָדִי, עַד שֶׁאֲחֲזֹר וְאָבִין וְאֲדַע דְּרֹךְ הָאֱמֶת. וְעַל דְּרֹךְ זֶה, כָּל הַדּוּמָה לְפִסּוּקִים אֵלֶּה.

In this manner the righteous ones and the prophets prayed that God help them along the path of truth. This is as David said (Psalms 86:11) *show me, God, Your path*, meaning "may my sins not keep me from the path of truth, upon which I will come to know Your way and the Unity of Your Name." Similarly, he said (Psalms 51:14) *and rest a spirit of generosity upon me*, meaning, "let my spirit do Your will, and may my sins not cause me to be held back from *teshuvah*, rather let me have the power to return, and understand, and know the path of truth." In this manner, all similar verses.

### Commentary

*Teshuvah* is a commandment that admits of no surrogate. It is highly personal and cannot be performed adequately without complete commitment. It can be exhausting, even depressing. Accordingly, the process tends to produce a phenomenon of *teshuvah* fatigue, where the penitent despairs of effecting any real change, and the impetus for movement loses immediacy. The constant inward-focused self-analysis is draining, and in our exhaustion we enter into a thousand little rebellions against ourselves and the system that demands our *teshuvah*.

It's counterintuitive, but our spiritual lassitude may actually serve as an indication that we're making progress. Inner resistance suggests that we are pushing up against the barrier of our past behaviors, that we have reached the point where so many times before we have thrown up our hands in despair and turned back. It is right here, right now that we have the opportunity, with just a tiny little push, to extend the reach of our self-control, planting our flag just a little bit further along in uncharted territory.

We are not so arrogant, so full of hubris, to think we can achieve this without Divine assistance. King David, whose personal and awesome *teshuvah* is a model for all generations, gives us guidance through the text of his Psalms, especially Psalm 51.

ומה הוא זה שאמר דָּוִד "טוב וְיִשֶׁר ה'"; על-כֵּן יוֹרָה חֲטָאִים, בְּדַרְךְ. יְדַרְךְ עֲנוּיִם, בְּמִשְׁפָּט; ויִלְמַד עֲנוּיִם, דְּרַכּוֹ" (תהילים כה, ח-ט). זֶה שֶׁשָּׁלַח לָהֶם נְבִיאִים מוֹדִיעִים לָהֶם דְּרַכֵי ה', וּמְחַזְרִין אוֹתָן בְּתִשׁוּבָה. וְעוֹד שֶׁנִּתְּנוּ בָהֶם כּוֹחַ לִלְמַד וּלְהִבִּין, שְׁמֵדָה זֹו בְּכָל אָדָם, שֶׁכָּל זָמַן שֶׁהוּא נִמְשָׁךְ בְּדַרְכֵי הַחֲכָמָה וְהַצָּדִק, מִתְאַוֶּה לָהֶן וְרוֹדֵף אוֹתָן. וְהוּא שֶׁאֲמְרוּ חֲכָמִים בָּא לְטָהָר, מְסִיעִין אוֹתוֹ--כְּלוֹמֵר יִמְצָא עֲצָמוֹ נֶעְזֵר עַל הַדְּבָר.

וְהִלּוּא כְּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה "וְעַבְדוּם, וְעִנּוּ אֹתָם" (בראשית טו, יג), הָרִי גָזַר עַל הַמְצָרִיִּים לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע; וְכְתוּב "וְקָם הָעַם הַזֶּה וְזָנָה אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהֵי נְכוֹ-הָאָרֶץ" (דברים לא, טז), הָרִי גָזַר עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲבֹד עַבְדוּת זָרָה. וְלָמָּה נִפְרַע מֵהֶן: לְפִי שֶׁלֹא גָזַר עַל אִישׁ פְּלוֹנִי הַיְדוּעַ, שִׁיְהִיָּה הוּא הַזָּנָה; אֲלֵא כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מֵאוֹתָן הַזָּנִים שֶׁעַבְדוּ עַבְדוּת זָרָה--אֵלוֹ לֹא רָצָה לַעֲבֹד, לֹא הִיָּה עוֹבֵד. וְלֹא הוֹדִיעוּ הַבוֹרָא, אֲלֵא מִנְהֵגוֹ שְׁלַעוֹלָם. הֵא לָמָּה זֶה דוֹמָה--לְאוֹמֵר הָעַם הַזֶּה, יְהִיָּה בְּהֵן צְדִיקִים וְרָשָׁעִים. לֹא מִפְּנֵי זֶה יֹאמֵר הַרְשָׁע כְּבָר נִגְזַר עָלָיו שִׁיְהִיָּה רָשָׁע, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוֹדִיעַ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמֹשֶׁה שִׁיְהִיָּה רָשָׁעִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, כְּעִנּוּ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "כִּי לֹא-יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיוֹן, מִקְּרֹב הָאָרֶץ" (דברים טו, יא).

וְכֵן הַמְצָרִיִּים, כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מֵאוֹתָן הַמְצָרִים וְהַמְרִיעִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, אֵלוֹ לֹא רָצָה לְהִרְעֵ לָהֶם, הַרְשׁוֹת בְּיָדוֹ--שֶׁלֹא גָזַר עַל אִישׁ יְדוּעַ, אֲלֵא הוֹדִיעוּ שֶׁסוּף זָרְעוּ לְהַשְׁתַּעֲבֹד בְּאָרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם. וְכָבֵר אֲמַרְנוּ, שֶׁאִין כּוֹחַ בְּאָדָם לִידַע הַיֶּאֱכָר יְדַע הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא דְבָרִים שֶׁעֲתִידִין לְהִיּוֹת.

And that which David said (Psalms 25:8-9), *good and true is God, therefore God teaches sinners the way and guides the humble*, means that God sends prophets to teach them the ways of God and causes them to do *teshuvah*. Furthermore, God gave them the power to learn and understand, for this is a human quality: when a person is drawn toward the ways of wisdom and righteousness,

one will desire them and pursue them. This is what the Rabbis of blessed memory said: "one who comes to purify, receives assistance." Meaning, he will find assistance in this endeavor.

But is it not written in the Torah (Genesis 15:13) *and they will make them labor, and they will oppress them*, that the Egyptians were ordered to do this evil? It is also written (Deuteronomy 31:16) *and the people will rise and defile themselves by following the gods of a strange land*. Behold, it was decreed that Israel would serve idols, so why were they punished for this? The answer is because the decree that the Jews would serve idols was not binding on any specific individual. If any given person among those who wished to serve idols were to refuse, he could have refused. The Creator was simply informing Moses in a general manner about the workings of the world, as if to say, "there will be people who will be righteous, and there will be people who will be wicked." This teaching of the Holy One who is Blessed to Moses does not imply that any given person is under a decree to be wicked. Similarly, it is written (Deuteronomy 15:11), *for there will never cease to be poor people in the land*.

So too with the Egyptians, who did evil to the Jewish people. If any one of them did not want to harm the Jews, the choice to refrain would be within his power, as the decree was not placed on any specific individual. God informed Abraham that in the future his children would be enslaved in a land that was not theirs. We have already discussed that a human being does not have the power to know how God knows things that will come about in the future.

## Commentary

One should not think that God withholds the privilege of *teshuvah* in a capricious or cruel fashion. On the contrary, God implants in all people a natural desire for the opposite, described by the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume as the “sentiment of benevolence.” When we encounter things that are wise and righteous, we naturally appreciate them and wish to learn more of them. True, *teshuvah* is a privilege, but we all start out with this privilege granted, and with a healthy desire to keep that privilege intact. God also wishes to encourage us on our personal spiritual journeys, and will provide assistance along the way, physical and otherwise. The nature of this Divine assistance will receive greater treatment in Chapter Nine.

Returning to the concept introduced in the previous chapter, the notion of pre-determinism does not provide refuge for one who commits wrongful acts. Maimonides asserted that scriptural verses that imply otherwise are not correctly interpreted; they are general statements that are relevant on a collective level without implications for any specific individual. Maimonides’ closing comment means that the reality of poverty will always exist, but that does not mean any specific person will necessarily labor under the decree of indigence.

Maimonides concludes this chapter by reiterating that every person has the potential for spiritual greatness. The following chapter will discuss pragmatic strategies to develop these powers, such that a person may become a Master of *Teshuvah*.

## Notes to Self

1) My grandmother of blessed memory used to say, “a change is as good as a rest.” When we experience *teshuvah* fatigue, switch to something else, like learning some Torah on a topic unrelated to *teshuvah*.

2) The Talmud asserts that the *yetser ha-ra* is bigger than we are, full stop (Sukkah 52). We simply can't beat it on our own. We need help, but God is there for us. As the great medieval commentator Rashi puts it (Numbers 3:16), God tells Moses, “you do your part, and I'll do mine.” We put in our best effort, no matter how overwhelming the challenge, and God will do the rest.

3)





## Chapter Seven: *Teshuvah*

### *Introduction*

Ironically, it is here, in the seventh chapter of *The Ways of Repentance*, that Maimonides addressed the meaning of a *teshuvah* in a direct and sustained manner. The previous six chapters dealt with foundational concepts that were preparatory in nature, ideas that required fleshing out before Maimonides could speak directly to the idea of *teshuvah*. The value of confession, the philosophical foundations of change, and impediments to *teshuvah* were necessary precursors to the chapter that finally deals directly with *teshuvah*.

Day 28

כ"ז אלול

Monday,  
September 18,  
2017

*Teshuvah* is an unique commandment in many ways, as Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook observed in the introduction to his *Orot Ha-Teshuvah*. "On one hand," he wrote, "it is the easiest of commandments, for even thinking of *teshuvah* is itself *teshuvah*. On the other hand, it is the most difficult, for one has not yet realized it in the world and in life."

Maimonides hinted at the essence of *teshuvah* at several points throughout this work, and now it is finally time to return to the nature of the Master of *Teshuvah* in a more concrete fashion.

## 7.1

הואיל וְרִשׁוּת כָּל אָדָם נְתוּנָה לוֹ כְּמוֹ שֶׁבְּאַרְנוֹ, יִשְׁתַּדֵּל הָאָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה וְלִנְעַר כַּפָּיו מִחַטָּאָיו, כְּדִי שְׂיָמוּת וְהוּא בְּעַל תְּשׁוּבָה, כְּדִי שְׂיִזְכֶּה לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

Since the power of *teshuvah* is granted to everyone, as we have described, a person should strive to do *teshuvah* and cleanse his hands of sin, in order that he die as a Master of *Teshuvah* and merit the life of the World to Come.

### Commentary

When does the process of *teshuvah* end? When can we stop and congratulate ourselves on a job well done? When may we savor the victory of overcoming such a daunting challenge? Much as we might look forward to that sweet pleasure, *teshuvah* is an essential aspect of life itself. There are perhaps rest stops along the way when we may sit for a moment and look back along the path, but our journey of self-actualization lasts only as long as we draw breath. As Rabbi Yerucham Bensinger once expressed it to me, in his classic monotone, “you will have plenty of time to rest—later.”

Death is the ultimate motivator--we know that the clock is running, and are therefore called upon to complete as much of the task as possible before we are called to a higher judgement. Rabbi Tarfon poetically expressed this concept in *Pirkei Avot* (2:15): “The day is short, the work is great, the laborers are sluggish, the reward is abundant, and the Employer is demanding.”

Earlier in that chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Eliezer advises his students to “repent one day before death,” a point that Maimonides emphasized in the following *halakhah*. The commentators point out that since this day is unknown to us all, we must therefore spend every day in *teshuvah*. A life so lived is not one of constant hand-wringing and wailing, rather it is a conscious decision to live, fully and most completely, in a state of harmony with self, family, community, and God. A life of *teshuvah* requires a sober commitment to self-control and periodic self-analysis, a determination to be cheerful in the face of adversity and courageous in the presence of threat. This is the nobility of a Master of *Teshuvah*.

## 7.2

לְעוֹלָם יִרְאֶה אָדָם אֶת עֲצָמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא נוֹטֶה לְמוֹת, וְשָׂמָא יָמוֹת  
בְּשַׁעְתּוֹ וְנִמְצָא עוֹמֵד בַּחֲטָאִיו; לְפִיכָךְ יָשׁוּב מִחֲטָאִיו מִיָּד, וְלֹא  
יֵאמֵר כְּשֶׁאֲזַקִּין אָשׁוּב--שָׂמָא יָמוֹת קָדָם שְׂיִזְקִין. הוּא שְׂשַׁלְמָה  
אוֹמֵר בְּחֻמְתּוֹ "בְּכָל-עֵת, יִהְיֶה בְּגָדֶיךָ לְבָנִים וְשֶׁמֶן עַל רֹאשְׁךָ אַל  
יִחָסֵר" (קוהלת ט, ח).

A person should always consider himself as if he were close to death, as if his time had come, and that he remains immersed in his previous wrongdoing. He should therefore do *teshuvah* for his sins immediately, and not say, "when I become old I will do *teshuvah*." Perhaps he will die before he becomes old. This is as Solomon said in his wisdom (Ecclesiastes 9:8) *let your clothes be white at all times, and let oil not be absent from your head*.

### Commentary

Maimonides adapted a saying of Hillel (*Avot* 2:5), "do not say, 'when I am free I will study--' perhaps you will not be free." Applied to *teshuvah*, the message is similar: do not put off the painful but cleansing process of *teshuvah*. Like an apology, it is best done promptly and with sincerity. The metaphor taken from Ecclesiastes likens wrongdoing to a stain on a white garment, which is easiest to remove when the stain is fresh. In this manner, the anointing oil, a symbol of Divine favor, will remain on one's head at all times.

Earlier, Maimonides wrote: "even though *teshuvah* and crying out in prayer are always good, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are exceptionally valuable" (2.6). Recognizing the arduous nature of the

*teshuvah* process, Maimonides first introduces the reader to a time-limited period for *teshuvah*, but here in the seventh chapter he emphasizes the real point: real *teshuvah* is perpetual, a choice for life.

More than this—the Master of *Teshuvah* will actively stimulate *teshuvah* by maintaining awareness of his or her mortality. How does one contemplate the day of one's death without sliding into despair or desperation? Maimonides will provide some relief, but not until he discusses the next, crucial *halakhah*.

### 7.3

וְאֵל תֹּאמַר שְׂאִין הַתְּשׁוּבָה אֵלָא מֵעֲבֻרוֹת שְׂיִישׁ בְּהוֹן מַעֲשֵׂה, כְּגוֹן זְנוּת וְגִזְל וְגִנְבָה. כְּשֵׁם שְׂצָרִיךְ אָדָם לָשׁוּב מֵאֵלּוּ--כִּךְ הוּא צָרִיךְ לְחַפֵּשׂ בְּדַעוֹת רְעוֹת שְׂיִישׁ לוֹ, וְלָשׁוּב מֵהוֹן: מוֹ הַכַּעַס, וּמוֹ הָאִיבָה, וּמוֹ הַקְּנָאָה, וּמוֹ הַתְּחָרוֹת, וּמוֹ הַהֲתַל, וּמִרְדִּיפַת הַמָּמוֹן וְהַכְּבוֹד, וּמִרְדִּיפַת הַמַּאֲכָלוֹת, וְכִיּוֹצֵא בְּהוֹן--מוֹ הַכֹּל צָרִיךְ לְחַזֵּר בְּתְשׁוּבָה. וְאֵלּוּ הָעוֹנוֹת, קָשִׁים מְאֹדָה שְׂיִישׁ בְּהוֹן מַעֲשֵׂה, שְׂבִזְמָן שְׂאָדָם נִשְׁקַע בְּאֵלּוּ, קָשָׁה הוּא לְפָרֵשׁ. וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר "יַעֲזֹב רָשָׁע דְרָכּוֹ, וְאִישׁ אֶן מַחְשְׁבֹתָיו" (ישעיהו נה, ז).

Do not think that *teshuvah* is only relevant for sins that involve a physical act, such as illicit sexual relations, theft or fraud. Just as a person must do *teshuvah* for acts of this nature, so too must a person examine his harmful attitudes and do *teshuvah* for them as well. He must do *teshuvah* for anger, strife, jealousy, mockery, the pursuit of money and honor, pursuit of fine food and so on. These sins are even more serious than those which have a physical action, for when a person is immersed in such thoughts, it is difficult to separate from them. Thus it is written (Isaiah 55:7), *let the wicked abandon his way, and the sinful man his thoughts.*

#### Commentary

Maimonides, as described above in the introduction to Chapter Two, took a comprehensive approach to Jewish law. Whereas other medieval codifiers tended to be more conservative and record legislation only when it pertained to measurable, empirical behavior, Maimonides ruled on the inner world of the mind as well. What is an appropriate thought, and what types of thinking are

destructive? Maimonides emphasized that one must do *teshuvah* for harmful attitudes as well as harmful acts.

As a matter of legislation, Judaism generally regards thought as morally neutral (with some possible exceptions such as thoughts of idolatry), but holds a person responsible if he or she acts on those thoughts. Fantasizing about an act of violence, for example, would not be punishable by Jewish law if one never carried out that act. Still, such thoughts are not totally without consequence, for two reasons. First, if one ultimately followed through and acted on the basis of that thought, then the punishment for such a premeditated crime would be more severe. Second, and more seriously, Maimonides taught that these thoughts carry an internal contagion, a type of addiction that infects one's life and makes it difficult to break free to engage in more productive thought.

On a deeper level: doing *teshuvah* for one's actions is much simpler than doing *teshuvah* for one's thoughts. The former represents repentance for the actions one has taken; the latter is a lament for the person one has become. "Any struggle against one's nature," writes Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto in this context, "is a brutal struggle."

Sometimes—often, actually—I think of my father, and wonder what he would say of a particular choice I made or action I took. For the most part I imagine he approves, but there are certainly things I regret, and I can picture him saying, "now what did you do that for, Henry?" On the other hand, I don't think he ever expressed any disapproval of who I was as a person. I think he was generally happy with me, although from my teenage years on I think my choices mystified him. Still, even the thought of experiencing his disapproval of the person I have become is deeply unsettling.



Maimonides urged us to reach deeper than merely cataloging our deeds and words. *Teshuvah* applies to thoughts as well. What kinds of thoughts occupy us? Meaningful, creative, compassionate thoughts, or selfish, superficial notions? Our secret inner lives, shared with no one, are not exempt from the searing light of *teshuvah*.

At this point, thankfully, Maimonides pivoted away from the burden of *teshuvah* and offers some welcome words of encouragement.

## 7.4

אל ידמה בעל תשובה שהוא מרחק ממעלת הצדיקים, מפני העוונות והחטאות שעשה. אין הדבר כן, אלא אהוב ונחמד הוא לפני הבורא, וכאלו לא חטא מעולם; ולא עוד אלא ששכרו הרבה, שהרי טעם טעם החטא ופרש ממנו וכבש יצרו. אמרו חכמים, מקום שבועלי תשובה עומדין בו, אין צדיקים גמורין יכולין לעמד בו: כלומר מעלתו גדולה ממעלת אלו שלא חטאו מעולם, מפני שהן כובשיו יצרים יתר מהן.

Day 29

כ"ח אלול

Tuesday,  
September 19,  
2017

A Master of *Teshuvah* should not think that he is far from the level of the righteous because of past sins, committed intentionally or otherwise. This is not so. Rather, the Master of *Teshuvah* is beloved and cherished by the Creator as if the sins had never happened at all. Furthermore, the reward is greater, for the Master of *Teshuvah* had tasted the taste of sin and separated from it, conquering human nature. The Sages taught that in the place where the Masters of *Teshuvah* stand, not even the completely righteous can stand, meaning, their level is greater than the level of those who never sinned, because they conquered their evil inclinations to a greater degree.

### Commentary

The mandate to change seems overwhelming. How can a person overcome years of ingrained behavior, especially the thoughts and attitudes that have acquired the inertia of habit? Maimonides offered comfort and encouragement with his citation of Rabbi Abahu's assessment of the Master of *Teshuvah* in the Talmud (Berakhot 34b): "in a

place where the Masters of *Teshuvah* stand, not even the completely righteous can stand.”

Scholars of Maimonidean thought know that what he omitted is often as revealing as what was set to the page. Here, for example, Maimonides described Rabbi Abahu’s opinion, but he does not mention the counter-opinion of Rabbi Yohanan, who holds that the reward for the Masters of *Teshuvah* is great, but cannot be compared with the reward for the completely righteous who never sinned at all. By ignoring that passage altogether, Maimonides comes down clearly in favor of Rabbi Abahu’s teaching on the subject of *teshuvah*: even the completely righteous cannot stand in the place where the Master of *Teshuvah* stands.

Perhaps this passage is the necessary response to the conditions described in 2:1: a Master of *Teshuvah* is someone who firmly resolves to resist his or her evil inclination, but a *complete* Master of *Teshuvah* is only someone who has failed in the past, and was subsequently tested and successfully withstood temptation. Our passage clearly refers to the latter Master of *Teshuvah*, since it describes one who “tasted the taste of sin and separated from it.”

Success is not the determining factor distinguishing the simple Master of *Teshuvah* from the complete Master of *Teshuvah*. The key to reaching this higher status is the experience of prior failure. One simply cannot compare a person who fails and then succeeds to someone who merely succeeds.

כָּל הַנְּבִיאִים, כָּלֵן צוּו עַל הַתְּשׁוּבָה; וְאִין יִשְׂרָאֵל נִגְאָלִין, אֲלֵא בַתְּשׁוּבָה. וְכִבֵּר הַבְּטִיחָה תּוֹרָה שְׁסוּף יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה בְּסוּף גְּלוּתוֹ, וּמִיַּד הֵן נִגְאָלִין, שְׁנֵאמֵר "וְהָיָה כִּי-יָבֹאוּ עֲלֶיךָ כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה, אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי, לְפָנֶיךָ; וְהִשְׁבַּתָּ, אֶל-לְבָבְךָ בְּכֹל הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הִדִּיחָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁבָתָּ עַד-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ כִּכֹּל אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי וְגו' וְשָׁב ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת-שְׁבוּתְךָ וְרִיחַמְךָ וְשָׁב וְקִבַּצְךָ מִכֹּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפִּיצְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה." (דברים ל,א-ג).

All the prophets commanded regarding *teshuvah*, and the Jewish people will not be redeemed except through *teshuvah*. The Torah has promised that in the end the Jews will do *teshuvah*, at the end of their exile, and they will immediately be redeemed, as it is written (Deuteronomy 30:1-3) *and it will be that when all these things come to pass, the blessing and the curse that I set before you, and you will take them to heart, among all the nations in which you are dispersed, and you will return to the Lord your God and listen to His voice...and the Lord your God will return you and have mercy on you, returning and collecting you from all the nations where God had dispersed you.*

### Commentary

The Maimonides who comforted thousands with his far-flung correspondence, from the embattled Jews of Yemen to the abused convert Ovadya, recorded here his words of comfort for the Jewish nation as a whole. Just as the complete Master of *Teshuvah* is elevated by the experience of prior failure, so too will the people as a whole one day know the exaltation of complete *teshuvah*. National failures

and other spiritual setbacks that plagued the Jewish people in the past will be transformed in the Messianic future by a massive, national *teshuvah*.

*Teshuvah* is the prerequisite for the promised redemption. A general hermeneutic rule of Hebrew prophecy is that negative pronouncements are essentially conditional, and may be altered by *teshuvah*. For example, Jonah received the prophecy that Nineveh was to be destroyed, and was commanded to relay his prophecy to the inhabitants of that great city. The people of Nineveh responded immediately with *teshuvah*, and the prophecy was reversed (much to Jonah's chagrin). On the other hand, prophecies that are positive in nature, promising reward, are never conditional, and will absolutely come to pass. Maimonides' citation of this Biblical passage indicates his conviction that the Jewish people will ultimately do national *teshuvah* and earn the promised redemption.

The role of the prophet as rebuker is echoed in an interesting passage of Rabenu Bachya's *Duties of the Heart*. He catalogs several types of *teshuvah*. The purest form is represented in a person who comes to the realization that his or her behavior is wrong, and independently resolves to change. Paraphrasing his words slightly, the first level is like a runaway who realizes how he was once part of a home where he was loved and cherished, and therefore turns back.

The second level, less exalted, is a person who grasps this truth by hearing the speech of a prophet or the words of the Torah. Rabenu Bachya compares this person to a runaway who meets someone else from his home, who convinces the runaway to return.

The third level occurs when the runaway observes how other runaways are harmed and abused, and decides based on this experience to return to the safety of home.

The fourth and lowest level is a runaway who falls into bad company and endures those abuses first hand. Ultimately he is rescued and returned to his home, for his benefit but against his will.

In the end, we all come home. Ideally, we will recognize the value of home on our own accord.

## 7.6

גְּדוּלַת תְּשׁוּבָה שֶׁמְקַרְבֶּת אֶת הָאָדָם לְשִׁכְנָה--שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "שׁוּבָה, יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַד, ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ" (הושע יד,ב), וְנֹאמַר לֵב שִׁבְתָּם עָדִי נָא ה', וְנֶאֱמַר "אִם-תָּשׁוּב יִשְׂרָאֵל נָא-ה' אֵלַי תָּשׁוּב" (ירמיהו ד,א): כְּלוּמַר אִם תִּחְזֹר בְּתִשׁוּבָה, בִּי תִדְבַּק.

הַתְּשׁוּבָה מְקַרְבֶּת אֶת הָרְחוּקִים: אֲמַשׁ הָיָה זֶה שְׁנׁוּי לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם, מִשְׂקָץ וּמְרֻחָק וְתוֹעֵבָה; וְהַיּוֹם הוּא אֶהוּב וְנֶחְמָד, קְרוֹב וְיָדִיד. וְכֹן אֵתָּה מוֹצֵא שֶׁבְּלִשׁוֹן שֶׁהַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְרַחֵק אֶת הַחֲטָאִים--בָּהּ מְקַרֵּב אֶת הַשָּׂבִים, בֵּין יָחִיד בֵּין רַבִּים: שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְהָיָה בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יֹאמַר לָהֶם, לֹא-עָמִי אַתֶּם, יֹאמַר לָהֶם, בְּנֵי אֵל-לִחִי" (הושע ב,א), וְנֶאֱמַר בִּיכְנִיָּה בְּרִשְׁעָתוֹ "כִּתְבוּ אֶת-הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה עֲרִירִי גֵבֵר לֹא יִצְלִיחַ בַּיָּמָיו וּגְמִ" (ירמיהו כב,ל), "אִם-יִהְיֶה כְּנִיָּהוּ בְּנֵי-יְהוֹנָדָה מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה, חוֹתֵם עַל-יַד יְמִינִי" (ירמיהו כב,כד). וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁשָּׁב בְּגִלוֹתוֹ נֶאֱמַר בְּזִרְבָּבֶל בְּנוֹ "בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נָא ה' צְבָאוֹת אֶקְחֶךָ זִרְבָּבֶל בְּנֵי-שְׂאֵלֵתִיאל עַבְדִּי, נָא-ה', וְשִׁמְתִּיךָ, כְּחוֹתֵם" (חגיגה ב,כג).

*Teshuvah* is great because it brings a person closer to the Divine Presence, as it is written (Hosea 14:2) *return, Israel, to the Lord your God*, and it is written (Amos 4:6) *they have turned their heart to me, says the Lord*, and it is written (Jeremiah 4:1) *if you return, Israel, says the Lord, it is to Me that you return*. Meaning, if you return in *teshuvah*, you will cleave to Me.

*Teshuvah* draws close those who are distant. Once, this person was hateful before God: despised, distanced, and repudiated. Now, he is beloved, cherished, embraced and held dear. So too will you find that the expressions that the Holy One who is Blessed uses to push away the sinner are transformed for those who draw close through *teshuvah*, whether individuals or communities, as it is

written (Hosea 2:1) *in the place where God will say to them, "you are not my people," God will say to them, "You are the children of the Living God."* And it is said regarding Coniah in his wickedness (Jeremiah 22:30) *write this man as cursed, let him not succeed in his days... (22:24) if Coniah the son of Jehoiachim, King of Judah, were the seal on my right hand [I would cut it off].* Once he did *teshuvah* in his exile, it is said regarding Zerubavel his son (Haggai 2:23), *on that day, says the Lord of Hosts, I will take you, Zerubavel, son of Shaltiel My servant, says the Lord, and I will place you as My seal.*

### Commentary

Maimonides is generally regarded as a rationalist, dismissing certain elements of Jewish mysticism as folk superstition and promoting spiritual advancement through philosophical inquiry. From time to time, however, elements more familiar to kabbalistic thought seem to appear in his writings. The contrast between Maimonides the thinker and Maimonides the mystic seems less pronounced when one considers the intellectual journey of his illustrious son Avraham, who succeeded his father as head of the Jewish community at the tender age of 19. Like his father, Avraham was an able administrator and prolific author. He valiantly defended his father's rationalistic perspective from rabbinic attacks long before Maimonides' books were burned in 1232, yet at the same time Avraham composed his own works with deep mystical content.

One glimpses a hint of suggested mysticism in Maimonides' reference to "drawing close to the Divine Presence." Known in Hebrew as the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence refers to the indwelling, immanent and earthly



experience of God. The Kabbalists describe the highest point of worldly spiritual achievement as an *unio mystica* with the *Shekhinah*, using the terminology of marriage to express this religious bliss. Maimonides' spare prose here evokes a similar tone, using for example the term "cleave" (*devekut*), first used in the Torah as a description of the relationship between Adam and Eve. We will return to this topic in the final chapter of *The Ways of Repentance*.

Maimonides once again emphasized here the complete turnabout effected by *teshuvah*. Once repudiated, the penitent is now beloved; once displaced, the Master of *Teshuvah* is now at home. Maimonides uses the biblical example of Coniah, once excoriated to the point that he was metaphorically removed from God's presence as a king might remove his signet ring, yet was eventually redeemed through *teshuvah*. His son Zerubavel was restored to his father's former position.

## 7.7

כַּמָּה מַעֲלָה מַעֲלַת הַתְּשׁוּבָה: אָמַשׁ הִיָּה זֶה מִבְּדֵל מֵה' אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם, הֵיוּ מִבְּדֵלִים, בֵּינְכֶם, לְבֵין אֱלֹקֵיכֶם" (ישעיהו נט,ב). צוּעַק וְאִינוּ נִעְנָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "גַּם כִּי-תִרְבוּ תִפְלָה, אִינְנִי שָׁמַע" (ישעיהו א,טו). וְעוֹשֶׂה מִצְוֹת וְטוֹרְפִין אוֹתוֹ בַּפְּנִי, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "מִי-בִקֵּשׁ זֹאת מִיָּדְכֶם, רְמַס חֲצָרִי" (ישעיהו א,יב), "מִי גַם-בְּכֶם וַיִּסְגֹּר דְלֹתַיִם וְלֹא תֵאִירוּ מִזִּבְחֵי חֲנָם אֵין לִי חֶפֶץ בְּכֶם אִמַר ה' צַבֻּקוֹת וּמִנְחָה לֹא אֲרָצָה מִיָּדְכֶם" (מלאכי א,י), "עֲלוֹתֵיכֶם סָפוּ עַל-זִבְחֵיכֶם, וְאָכְלוּ בָשָׂר" (ירמיהו ז,כא).

Day 30  
כ"ט אלול  
ערב ראש השנה  
Wednesday,  
September 20,  
2017

וְהַיּוֹם הוּא מְדַבֵּק בְּשִׁכְנָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְאַתֶּם, הַדְּבָקִים, בַּה', אֱלֹקֵיכֶם" (דברים ד,ד). צוּעַק וְנִעְנָה מִיָּד, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְהִיָּה טָרִם-יִקְרָאוּ, וְאִנִּי אֶעֱנֶה" (ישעיהו סה,כד). וְעוֹשֶׂה מִצְוֹת וּמִקְבְּלִין אוֹתוֹ בְּנַחַת וְשִׂמְחָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "כִּי כָּבֹד, רָצָה הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂיךָ" (קוהלת ט,ז). וְלֹא עוֹד אֵלָא שְׂמֵתָאִים לָהֶם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְעֲרַבְהָ, לָה', מִנְחַת יְהוָה, וִירוּשָׁלַם--כִּימֵי עוֹלָם, וְכִשְׁנַיִם קִדְמִנִית" (מלאכי ג,ד).

How great is the power of *teshuvah*! Once this person was separated from the Lord, the God of Israel, as it is written (Isaiah 59:2), *your sins separate you from your God*. He would cry out but would not be answered, as it is written (Isaiah 1:15), *even if you multiply your prayers, I will not listen*. He would perform commandments and they would be torn up in his presence, as it is written (Isaiah 1:12), *who wishes this from your hands, trampling in My courtyard?* (Malachi 1:10) *If there were one of you to shut My doors, such that you would not light My altar needlessly! I have no desire for you, says the Lord of Hosts, and I wish no offering from your hands.* (Jeremiah 7:21) *Add offerings to your sacrifices, and eat your meat.*

Today, however, he is bound up with the Divine Presence, as it is written (Deuteronomy 4:4) *and you, who cleave to the Lord your God*. He cries out and is answered immediately, as it is written (Isaiah 65:24), *it will be that even before you call out I will answer*. He will perform commandments and they will be accepted with pleasure and joy, as it is written (Ecclesiastes 9:7), *for God has already approved your acts*. Furthermore, he desired them, as it is written (Malachi 3:4), *the offering of Judah and Jerusalem is as sweet to God as in the days of old and the early years*.

### Commentary

Note the symmetrical relationship describing the person before and after *teshuvah*. Initially, the unrepentant individual is separated, his or her prayers are ignored, and his or her good deeds are rejected with prejudice. After *teshuvah*, however, the penitent is drawn close, his or her prayers are welcomed and accepted (indeed, they are answered even before they are expressed), and his or her good deeds are received with pleasure. What a remarkable transformation! The Master of *Teshuvah* moves from the dungeon of utter rejection to the very innermost chambers of the Sovereign.

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, in his remarkable work of Kabbalistic ethics entitled *Tomer Devorah* (The Palm Tree of Devorah), described this as the seventh of thirteen levels of forgiveness utilized by God in his relationship with human beings. "God," writes Rabbi Cordovero, "does not behave as human beings behave. When one person angers another, forgiveness is usually partial and they do not love each other as they once did. When a person sins and repents, however, God holds him in even higher regard." Rabbi

Cordovero goes on to explain this phenomenon further in the context of the Talmudic passage cited in 7:4: in the place where penitents stand, not even the completely righteous can stand. Imagine, he wrote, the Hebrew letter *he* (ה), which is shaped like a covered porch. People are like a dot placed in the central hollow of the *he*, and when they sin, they drop out the open bottom. *Teshuvah* is the difficult process of raising one's self back into the *he* again.

It is impossible, however, to climb back into the center of the *he* using the direct path straight upward, because the path has been made too slippery by the initial descent. The only way the Master of *Teshuvah* can gain access to the *he* is by finding footholds on the short left leg of the letter, and making the arduous ascent back up into the small opening just under the roof of the letter. It is this uppermost location, writes Rabbi Cordovero, that is reserved for Masters of *Teshuvah* by virtue of their efforts to regain entry. Righteous people who have never experienced the fall out of the letter cannot access this highest level, and therefore "in the place where penitents stand, not even the completely righteous can stand." All this is an illustration of the concept discussed here: God does not merely restore love for the Master of *Teshuvah* to the status quo before the sin—God actually intensifies that love, cherishing and valuing the penitent to an even greater degree.

## 7.8

בְּעֵלֵי תְּשׁוּבָה, דְּרָכָו לִהְיוֹת שְׂפִלִים וְעֲנוּיִם בְּיוֹתֵר: אִם חָרְפוּ אוֹתָו הַכְּסִילִים בְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם הָרָאוּשׁוּנִים, וְאָמְרוּ לָהֶן אֲמַשׁ הֵייתָ עוֹשֶׂה כֵּךְ וְכֵךְ, וְאֲמַשׁ הֵייתָ אוֹמֵר כֵּךְ וְכֵךְ--אֵל יִרְגִישׁוּ לָהֶן. אֲלֵא שׁוֹמְעִין וְשׂמְחִין וְיודְעִין, שְׁזוֹ זְכוּת לָהֶן; וְשִׁכַל זְמַן שֶׁהֶן בּוֹשִׁין מִמַּעֲשֵׂיהֶם שְׁעָבְרוּ וְנִכְלְמוּ מֵהֶן, זְכוּתָו מְרַבָּה וּמַעֲלָתָם מִתְגַּדֶּלֶת.

וְחָטָא גָּדוֹל הוּא לומר לְבַעַל תְּשׁוּבָה, זָכַר מַעֲשֵׂיךְ הָרָאוּשׁוּנִים, אוֹ לְהַזְכִּירָם בְּפָנָיו כְּדִי לְבִישׁוֹ, אוֹ לְהַזְכִּיר דְּבָרִים וְעֲנִינִים הַדּוֹמִין לָהֶן כְּדִי לְהַזְכִּירוֹ מֵהַ עֲשָׂה. הַכֹּל אָסוּר וּמְזַהֵר עָלָיו בְּכֹלל הַוְנִית דְּבָרִים שֶׁהִזְהִירָה עָלֶיהָ תּוֹרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְלֹא תוֹנֶנּוּ אִישׁ אֶת-עַמִּיתוֹ" (ויקרא כה, יז).

It is the way of Masters of *Teshuvah* to be modest and exceptionally humble. If foolish people insult them regarding their earlier actions, saying "once you used to do this or that, once you used to say this or that," the Masters of *Teshuvah* will not become angry. Rather, they will listen with joy, knowing that they earn great merit by doing so, for any time that they are embarrassed and ashamed of their past deeds, their merit rises and their personal quality is exalted.

It is also completely sinful to say to a Master of *Teshuvah*, "remember your earlier deeds," or to remind them in order to provoke shame, or even to allude to these things in order to embarrass them. All of this is forbidden and people are warned. These statements are included in the Torah's prohibition of oppressive speech, as it is written (Leviticus 25:17), *a person must not oppress another*.

## Commentary

The Master of *Teshuvah* faces considerable pressure from his or her peer group and even family. Sometimes he or she will be ridiculed for their behavior, and this phenomenon exists even among those who are very observant. Sometimes others perceive the spiritual progress of the Master of *Teshuvah* as a personal rejection. When a young man or woman decides to observe the Jewish dietary laws, for example, this can cause a lot of strife in the family home. Will not the parent see this as a rejection of all the love invested in the child through years of careful food preparation? Maimonides' emphasis on the humility of the Master of *Teshuvah* is especially important, because he or she must learn to accept rebuke appropriately, understanding the root cause of the opposition and treating friends and family with respect.

Maimonides wrote of the embarrassment and shame that Masters of *Teshuvah* feel for their past deeds. It is interesting to note that Maimonides concluded this chapter with a seemingly contradictory note. After extolling the virtues of the Master of *Teshuvah*, Maimonides emphasized the inherent humility of the penitent, noting the shame he or she feels for past behavior. This shame, however, is entirely inward-directed, and relates only to the healthy, empowering aspect of demanding personal accountability. The Master of *Teshuvah* feels pain for the damage this originally caused to his or her relationship with God, but he or she is unintimidated by what other people might think of this behavior for which the penitent has already atoned.

Imagine, by comparison, a white-collar criminal who is found guilty through due process. He pays full restitution

to the victims of his crime, including punitive damages, and is sentenced to prison for a number of years. When he ultimately completes his sentence and is released, how should he react to people who scorn him for his past? He has, after all, paid his debt to society. His criminal record is a permanent part of his biography, and it has consequences, but gratuitous social abuse is not acceptable. The rehabilitated ex-convict, now law-abiding citizen, should view such maltreatment as a reflection on those who would speak that way, not on himself. So too, the Master of *Teshuvah* should reserve his ongoing regret for prior wrongs for his relationship with God, and remain tranquil before those who would degrade him for his past.

Rabbi Luzzatto writes: “it is impossible for a person not to have shortcomings, regardless of whatever level of personal development he has otherwise attained. Whether these failings are a result of his nature, or his immediate or extended family, or whatever circumstances shaped him, or his choices in life. *There is no righteous person on earth who does good and does not sin* (Ecclesiastes 7:20). These flaws prevent a person from self-aggrandizement, even if he is a person of great accomplishments, for the flaws are large enough to obscure them.”

A Master of *Teshuvah* understands this concept well, and transforms it into personal humility.

## Reflections and Practical Applications

- 1) Which type of runaway am I?
- 2) When I return, I will not be estranged for wandering. On the contrary, I will be loved to an even greater degree than we were on the day I left.
- 3)





## Chapter Eight: Future

### *Introduction*

The logic of *teshuvah* demands that there be a just reward for those who complete the difficult journey of self-transformation. Maimonides therefore followed his discussion of the Master of *Teshuvah* with a description of the World to Come in Jewish theology.

Maimonides' views on the afterlife have occasioned a tremendous amount of Rabbinic controversy. Sharply criticized for an apparent deviation from some well-accepted norms, he later wrote a treatise on the subject of the afterlife that mollified many detractors, but left later scholars puzzling over Maimonides' true intent.

Day 31

א' תשרי  
ראש השנה

Thursday,  
September 21,  
2017

## 8.1

הטובה הצפונה לצדיקים, היא תי העולם הבא; והם החיים שאין עמהו מות, והטובה שאין עמה רעה. הוא שכתוב בתורה, "למען ייטב לך, והארכת ימים" (דברים כב,ז): מפי השמועה למדו "למען ייטב לך" לעולם שכלו טוב, "והארכת ימים" לעולם שכלו ארוך; וזה הוא העולם הבא.

שכר הצדיקים--הוא שיזכו לנעם זה, ויהיו בטובה זו; ופרעון הרשעים--הוא שלא יזכו לחיים אלו, אלא יכרתו וימותו. וכל מי שאינו זוכה לחיים אלו, הוא המת שאינו חייה לעולם, אלא נכרת ברשעו, ואובד בבהמה. וזה הוא הכרת הכתוב בתורה, שנאמר "הכרת תכרת הנפש ההיא עונה בה" (במדבר טו,לא); מפי השמועה למדו "הכרת" בעולם הזה, "תכרת" לעולם הבא; כלומר שאותה הנפש שפרשה מן הגוף בעולם הזה--אינה זוכה לחיי העולם הבא, אלא גם מן העולם הבא נכרתה.

The good that is set aside for the righteous is the World to Come. It is a life where there is no death, a good that has no evil. This is what is written in the Torah (Deuteronomy 22:7), *in order that it benefit you, and your days be long*. From this we learn that *in order that it benefit you* means a world that is entirely good, and that *your days be long* means a world that is infinitely long. This is the World to Come.

The reward of the righteous is that they merit this benefit, they enjoy this good. The punishment of the wicked is that they do not merit this life, they are rather cut off and experience death. Anyone who does not merit this life simply dies, ceases to live altogether, and is cut off in his wickedness and destroyed like an animal. This is the "excision" that is described in the Torah, as it is written (Numbers 15:31), *this soul shall certainly be cut off*. From

this we learn that one may be cut off in this world, and cut off in the next world as well. A soul that separates from its body in this world will not merit the World to Come; rather the soul will be cut off from that World as well.

### *Commentary*

Maimonides paraphrased a longer Talmudic discussion to establish an example of a scriptural basis for the existence of the World to Come, describing the reward that awaits the righteous, regardless of the quality of Divine service that a person undertakes. Later, Maimonides will discuss a form of *teshuvah* that is done solely for the sake of the love of God, known as “service out of love” (Chapter Ten).

Maimonides’ words on the concept of excision (*karet*) are brief, and have occasioned considerable debate among the commentators. This passage in particular seems to indicate that Maimonides does not expect retribution for the wicked other than their complete loss of existence through excision. While horrendous, this punishment does not seem adequate for some truly evil individuals. In order for the logic of reward and punishment to retain validity, the punishment must be commensurate with the crime, and the mere cessation of consciousness hardly seems appropriate for people who inflict terrible suffering on others.

Elsewhere in his writings Maimonides expanded this discussion of reward and punishment. Rabbi Eliyahu Touger identifies three different levels of punishment in Maimonides’ work, expanding on the atonement process described above in Chapter 1. Those guilty of minor transgressions that do not receive atonement during a person’s lifetime are punished with a temporary exposure

to *gehinom*, a kind of purgatory, for less than twelve months, after which they enter the World to Come. Those who commit more serious offenses that deserve excision, and have not received atonement for these acts in this world, end their existence immediately through excision, as described here: their punishment is the complete denial of the World to Come. Finally, a third category of individuals experience eternal punishment in *gehinom*.

More recent academic scholarship has portrayed Maimonides' hesitancy to dwell on the concept of *gehinom* as a reflection of his general rationalist view of the afterlife, in which all physical pleasures are subordinated to spiritual contemplation of the radiance of Divine wisdom. If reward is entirely intellectual, should punishment also not be of the same category? For our purposes, studying the phenomenon of *teshuvah*, an extended discussion of the various interpretations of Maimonides is out of place, but interested readers may find the insightful treatment of this topic in Moshe Halbertal's biography of Maimonides enlightening. For our part, we will follow Maimonides' discussion in this chapter, which moves away from punishment and concentrates rather on eternal reward.

## 8.2

העולם הבא--אין בו גוף וגויה, אלא נפשות הצדיקים בלבד, בלא גוף כמלאכי השרת. הואיל ואין בו גויות, אין בו לא אכילה ולא שתיה ולא דבר מכל הדברים שגופות בני האדם צריכין להן בעולם הזה. ולא יארע בו דבר מן הדברים שמארעין לגופות בעולם הזה, כגון ישיבה ועמידה ושינה ומיתה ועצב ושחוק וכיוצא בהן. כך אמרו חכמים הראשונים, העולם הבא--אין בו לא אכילה ולא שתיה ולא תשמיש, אלא צדיקים יושבין ועטורתיהם בראשיהם ונהנין מזיו השכינה.

הרי נתברר לך שאין שם גוף, לפי שאין שם אכילה ושתיה. וזה שאמרו צדיקים יושבין, על דרך החידה--כלומר נפשות הצדיקים מצויין שם, בלא עמל ולא יגע. וכן זה שאמרו עטורתיהם בראשיהם--כלומר דעה שידעו שבגללה זכו לחיי העולם הבא, מצויה עמהן, והיא העטרה שלהן, כענין שאמר שלמה "בעטרה, שעטרה-לו אמו" (שיר השירים ג,יא). והרי הוא אומר "ושמחת עולם, על-ראשם" (ישעיהו נא,יא), ואין השמחה גוף כדי שתנוח על הראש; כך עטרה שאמרו חכמים כאן, היא הדעה.

ומה הוא זה שאמרו, ונהנין מזיו השכינה--שידעין ומשיגין מאמתת הקדוש ברוך הוא, מה שאינן יודעין והן בגוף האפל השפל.

In the World to Come there is no physical existence, rather the souls of the righteous exist without physical form like the ministering angels. Since one has no body, there is no eating nor drinking nor any of the other physical activities that the body would need in this world. The soul does not experience the various things that affect the physical body, such as sitting or standing, sleeping or death, sadness or joy and so on. Thus the early Sages said, "the World to Come has no eating nor drinking nor marital relations, rather the righteous sit with

crowns on their heads and enjoy the radiance of the Divine Presence.”

Thus it is clear to you that there is no body, since there is no eating nor drinking. The phrase “the righteous sit” is merely a figure of speech, meaning the righteous exist there without work or effort. The phrase “with crowns on their heads” refers to the wisdom they earned that allowed them to merit the life of the World to Come. It becomes their crown, as Solomon said (Song of Songs 3:11), *the crown that his mother placed upon him* and (Isaiah 51:11) *and eternal joy will rest upon their heads*. Just as joy is not a physical object that could *rest upon their heads*, so too the crown that the Sages refer to here means knowledge.

And what is the meaning of “they enjoy the radiance of the Divine Presence?” They know and understand the truth of the Holy One who is Blessed, a knowledge that was inaccessible when they existed in a dark and lowly physical form.

### *Commentary*

Jewish texts describe two visions of the afterlife: the World to Come, and the Resuscitation of the Dead (*tehiyat hametim*). The latter clearly implies a physical revival into some corporeal form, and therefore many of the commentators take issue with Maimonides’ insistence that the afterlife is purely spiritual in nature.

Maimonides responded to his early critics with a treatise on the topic of the afterlife in which he affirmed his belief in a physical revival. This Resuscitation of the Dead, for

Maimonides, is part of the unfolding of the Messianic era, but it is entirely distinct from the World to Come, and in fact is secondary to the more perfect nature of this existence after death. Since the topic of discussion in this chapter is the reward for *teshuvah*, Maimonides eliminated the eschatology of the end of days and concentrated on the World to Come.

What greater reward can there be for a person who lives the spiritual life of the mind than to enter a world in which all truth is accessible and revealed? As the Hebrew proverb relates, "there is no joy greater than the resolution of doubt." Maimonides described a world in which all questions are answered.



Day 32

ב' תשרי  
ראש השנהFriday,  
September 22,  
2017

כָּל נֶפֶשׁ הָאֲמוּנָה בְּעֵינֵינוּ זֶה, אֵינָה הַנְּשָׁמָה שֶׁהִיא צְרִיכָה לַגּוּף, אֲלֹא צוּרַת הַנְּפֶשׁ, שֶׁהִיא הַדְּעָה שֶׁהַשִּׁיגָה הַבוֹרָא כְּפִי כוֹחָה וְהַשִּׁיגָה הַדְּעוֹת הַנִּפְרָדוֹת וְשֶׁאֵר הַמַּעֲשִׂים. וְהִיא הַצּוּרָה שֶׁבְּאֲרָנוּ עֵינֵינוּ בְּפֶרֶק רְבִיעִי מֵהַלְכוֹת יְסוּדֵי הַתּוֹרָה; הִיא הַנִּקְרָאת נֶפֶשׁ, בְּעֵינֵינוּ זֶה.

חַיִּים אֵלּוּ--לְפִי שֶׁאִין עִמָּהֶם מוֹת, שֶׁאִין הַמּוֹת אֲלֵא מִמְאָרְעוֹת הַגּוּף וְאִין שֵׁם גּוּף, נִקְרָאוּ צְרוּר הַחַיִּים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְהִיְתָה נֶפֶשׁ אֲדָנִי צְרוּרָה בְּצְרוּר הַחַיִּים אֶת ד' אֲלוֹקֶךָ וְאֵת נֶפֶשׁ אוֹיְבֶיךָ יִקְלַעְנָה וְגו'" (שְׁמוּאֵל א כה, כט). וְזֶה הוּא הַשְּׂכָר שֶׁאִין שְׂכָר לְמַעַלָּה מִמֶּנּוּ, וְהַטּוֹבָה שֶׁאִין אַחֲרֶיהָ טוֹבָה; וְהִיא שֶׁהִתְאָוּוּ כָּל הַנְּבִיאִים.

The term "soul" [*nefesh*] used in this discussion is not the same as the soul [*neshamah*] that is necessary for the body. Rather it is the part of the soul [*nefesh*] that is able to understand the Creator according to its capacity, and grasps the various separate qualities of thinking and other actions. It is the element that was described in the fourth chapter of the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, which is called *nefesh* in that context.

This life admits of no death, as death is one of the things that affect a body, and here there is no body. Therefore this life is called "the bonds of life," as it is written (I Samuel 25:29), *and the soul of my master will be bound up in the bonds of life with the Lord your God, and the soul of your enemies will be cast away*. This is the reward that admits of no higher reward, the good for which there can be no greater good. It is the thing most desired by all the prophets.

## Commentary

The Hebrew language has several words that are commonly rendered as “soul” in English, and they are used in varying contexts throughout the corpus of Rabbinic literature. Maimonides explained here that the term *nefesh* can mean two different things. It can refer to the lowest level of the soul, the part that gives a physical body its animating force. In the context of this work, and specifically describing the experience of the World to Come, the *nefesh* is that aspect of the soul that is able to grasp abstract concepts, and as such it is able to appreciate the spiritual-intellectual nature of the World to Come. Maimonides’ use of terminology for the soul is not necessarily consistent with the usage of later thinkers, particularly the Safed circle and the Hasidic masters.

This is not to say that Maimonides was unaware of the mystical teachings that formed the core of the teachings of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, Rabbi Isaac Luria, and later mystics. The prominent mysticism of Maimonides’ own son Avraham is a testament to the fact that such ideas were circulating at the time. Furthermore, the fact that Maimonides felt the need to distinguish the unusual meaning of mystical terminology indicates that he was aware of the standard definition of words like *nefesh*. The goal of *The Ways of Repentance*, and the *Mishneh Torah* in general, however, is to provide the common reader with a comprehensive, comprehensible overview of the entire body of Jewish law, and as such Maimonides chose not to delve into a discussion of Kabbalah here. Whether or not he harbored mystical beliefs—an argument that runs against the grain of superficial readings of Maimonides, but is not at all impossible—is beyond the scope of our work here.

## 8.4

וּבְמָה שְׁמוֹת קָרְאוּ לָהּ דֶּרֶךְ מִשָּׁל: הַר ה', וּמְקוֹם קֹדֶשׁ, וְדֶרֶךְ  
הַקֹּדֶשׁ, וְחֲצֵרוֹת ה', וְאַהֲלֵהּ, וְנֶעַם ה', וְהִיכַל ה', וּבֵית ה', וְשַׁעַר  
ה'. וְהַחֲכָמִים קָרְאוּ לָהּ דֶּרֶךְ מִשָּׁל לְטוֹבָה זֹה הַמְּזֻמָּנֵת לְצַדִּיקִים,  
סְעוּדָה; וְקוֹרִין לָהּ בְּכָל מְקוֹם, הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

There are many terms that are used to describe this by way of analogy: (Psalms 24:3) *the Mountain of God*, *God's holy place* (Isaiah 35:8), *the holy path* (Psalms 65:5, 92;14) *the courtyards of God* (Psalms 15:1) *the tent of God* (Psalms 27:4) *the pleasant place of God* (Psalms 5:8) *the sanctuary of God* (Psalms 27:4) *the house of God* (Psalms 118:20) *the gate of God*. The Sages used the term "banquet" to describe the good that is reserved for the righteous. It is otherwise known as the World to Come.

### Commentary

Continuing his discussion of terminology, Maimonides identified various references to Divine locations described in the Hebrew Bible as anthropomorphisms for the World to Come. This will be qualified in the 8.6 as purely literary representations, since for Maimonides these experiences are solely intellectual-spiritual in nature.

הַנִּקְמָה שֶׁאֵין נִקְמָה גְדוֹלָה מִמֶּנָּה--שֶׁתִּכְרַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְלֹא תִזְכֶּה לְאוֹתָן הַחַיִּים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "הַכָּרַת תִּכְרַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִיא, עֹנָה בָּהּ" (במדבר טו, לא). וְזֶה הָאוֹבְדָן הוּא שְׁקוּרָאִין אוֹתוֹ הַנְּבִיאִים דֶּרֶךְ מְשָׁל, בְּאֵר שַׁחַת וְאַבְדוֹן וְתַפְתָּה וְעִלּוּקָה; וְכָל לְשׁוֹן כְּלָיָה וְהַשְׁחָתָה קוּרָאִין לוֹ, לְפִי שֶׁהִיא הַכְּלָיָה שֶׁאֵין אַחֲרֶיהָ תִּקּוּמָה לְעוֹלָם וְהַהֶפְסֵד שֶׁאֵינוֹ חוֹזֵר לְעוֹלָם.

The reckoning, for which there is no more serious reckoning, is that the soul be cut off and not merit to share in this World to Come, as it is written (Numbers 15:31), *this soul shall certainly be cut off, it bears its sin*. This is the utter destruction that the prophets described by analogy as (Psalms 55:24) *the pit of destruction*, (Psalms 88:12) *obliterated* (Isaiah 30:33), *place of fire* (Proverbs 30:15) *leech*, and other terms denoting annihilation and destruction, since this is an annihilation for which there is no revival, a loss that cannot ever be compensated.

### Commentary

Maimonides balanced his description of the anthropomorphisms used to describe the World to Come with this list of similar terms used to describe its polar opposite. Note that they are all in keeping with his intellectual view of the afterlife. If the greatest reward is the spiritual enjoyment of Divine radiance is participation in the stimulating conversation of a banquet, then what greater punishment could there be than to lack an invitation? If revelation of wisdom is the greatest reward, then exclusion from that knowledge would be eternal punishment.

Day 33

ג' תשרי

Saturday,  
September 23,  
2017

שְׁמָא תְּקַל בְּעֵינֶיךָ טוֹבָה זֹה, וּתְדַמָּה שְׂאִין שְׂכַר הַמְצוּוֹת  
וְהוֹיֹת הָאָדָם שְׁלָם בְּדַרְכֵי הָאֱמֶת, אֲלֵא לֵהוֹיֹתוֹ אוֹכֵל  
וְשׁוֹתָה מֵאֲכָלוֹת טוֹבוֹת וּבוֹעֵל צוּרוֹת נְאוֹת וְלוֹבֵשׁ בְּגָדֵי  
שֵׁשׁ וְרוֹקְמָה וְשׁוֹכֵן בְּאֶהְלֵי שָׁן וּמִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בְּכֻלֵי כֶסֶף וְזָהָב  
וְדַבְרִים הַדּוֹמִין לָאלוֹ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁמְדַמִּין אֵלֶּיךָ הָעֲרַבִּים  
הַטְּפָשִׁים הָאֲוִילִים הַשְּׁטוּפִים בְּזִמָּה.

אָבֵל הַחֲכָמִים וּבְעֵלֵי דָעָה יִדְעוּ שֶׁכָּל הַדַּבְרִים הָאֵלֶּיךָ דַּבְרֵי  
הַבָּאִי וְהַבֵּל הֵן, וְאִין בְּהֵן תּוֹחֶלֶת. וְאִינָם טוֹבָה גְדוֹלָה  
אֲצִלְנוּ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, אֲלֵא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁאֵנוּ בְּעֵלֵי גוֹף וְגוּיָה; וְכָל הַדַּבְרִים  
הָאֵלֶּיךָ, צָרְכֵי הַגּוֹף הֵן, וְאִין הַנֶּפֶשׁ מִתְאַוֶּה לָהֶן וּמְחַמְדָתָן אֲלֵא  
מִפְּנֵי צָרְךָ הַגּוֹף, כְּדֵי שִׁמְצָא חֶפְצוֹ וַיַּעֲמֵד עַל בְּרִיו. וּבְזִמָּן שֶׁאִין  
שֵׁם גּוֹף, נִמְצָאוּ כָּל הַדַּבְרִים הָאֵלֶּיךָ בְּטָלִים.

הַטוֹבָה הַגְּדוֹלָה שֶׁתְּהִיָּה בְּהַ נֶפֶשׁ בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא, אִין שֵׁם דְּרַךְ  
בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה לְהַשִּׁיגָה וְלִידַע אוֹתָהּ, שֶׁאִין אָנוּ יוֹדְעִין בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה  
אֲלֵא טוֹבַת הַגּוֹף, וְלֵה אָנוּ מִתְאַוִּין; אָבֵל אוֹתָהּ הַטוֹבָה גְּדוֹלָה עַד  
מְאוֹד, וְאִין לָהּ עֵרֶךְ בְּטוֹבוֹת שְׁלֵעוֹלָם הַזֶּה אֲלֵא דְרַךְ מְשֻׁל. אָבֵל  
בְּדֶרֶךְ הָאֱמֶת שֶׁנֶּעֱרַךְ טוֹבַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא כְּמוֹ טוֹבַת הַגּוֹף  
בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה בְּמֵאֲכָל וּבְמִשְׁקָה, אִינוּ כֵּן; אֲלֵא אוֹתָהּ הַטוֹבָה גְּדוֹלָה  
עַד אִין חֶקֶר, וְאִין עֵרֶךְ וְאִין דְּמִיוֹן. הוּא שֶׁאֵמַר דְּוִיד, "מָה  
רַב-טוֹבָךָ, אֲשֶׁר-צָפַנְתָּ לִירְאִיךָ: פְּעַלְתָּ, לַחֲסִים בְּךָ" (תהילים  
לא, כ).

וְכִמָּה תִּמְהַ דְּוִיד וְהַתְּאַוֶּה לַחֲיֵי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "לֹלֵא  
הָאֱמֶנְתִּי, לְרְאוֹת בְּטוֹב-הַ בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים" (תהילים כז, ג).

Perhaps this good will be insignificant in your eyes, and you may think that there is no reward for performing the commandments and remaining on the path of truth except a life of eating and drinking fine foods, and having relations with beautiful people, wearing fine clothes, and dwelling in fine homes, using vessels of silver and gold

and the like. This is what the foolish Arabs think, who are steeped in such thoughts of sensual pleasures.

The Sages and those who are mindful, however, know that all of these physical things are completely empty, and there is no value in them, and they are only good for us in this world because we are physical creatures, and all of these things are necessary for the body. The soul has no desire for them, and only wishes to have them for the sake of the body, in order that it functions properly and with health. When there is no body, however, all of these things will be useless.

The great good that will exist in the World to Come has no connection to this world, that it might be known and understood. In this world, we can only grasp that which is good for the body, and that is what we desire. The supreme good of the World to Come cannot be evaluated in this world except by way of analogy. In truth, however, using a physical metaphor for what is good for the soul in the World to Come by describing what is good for the body in this world, such as food and drink, is not correct. Really, this supreme good cannot be evaluated, measured, or compared to anything else at all. This is what David said (Psalms 31:20), *what a great good You have stored away for those who fear You.*

David had a tremendous desire for the World to Come, as it is written (Psalms 27:13), *had I not believed that I would see the goodness of God in the Land of Life.*

## *Commentary*

Maimonides' disparaging comment about the "foolish Arabs" may be a reference to the widely-quoted (and widely misunderstood) teaching of the 9th century Muslim writer al-Tirmidhi that posits seventy-two virgins awaiting righteous men in the Islamic heaven. Whatever the basis, Maimonides' argument is that the concept of a World to Come as a place of sensual, physical pleasure is foreign to Judaism.

Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto offers a striking parable that underlines Maimonides' comment. A princess is forced into marriage with a common peasant. He loves her dearly and wishes to please her, so he brings her the finest clothing available, the most delicious foods he can prepare. She is grateful, but cannot be satisfied, for no matter what beautiful finery he provides, it cannot compare to the simplest pleasures that she was accustomed to when she lived in the palace.

The soul is like the princess, forced into a union with the mundane world in the form of our physical bodies. Sensual pleasures address the needs and desires of the body, but do not fill the void in the soul, which seeks only spiritual pleasure. The pleasures of learning, of friendship and love, and above all closeness to God—these alone will satisfy the soul.

## 8.7

כָּבֵר הוֹדִיעוּנו חֲכָמִים הָרָאוּנוּ שְׁטוּבַת הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא אִין כּוּחַ  
בְּאָדָם לְהַשִּׁיגָה עַל בְּרִיָּה, וְאִין יוֹדַע גְּדֻלָּה וְיִפְיָה וְעֲצָמָה אֵלָא  
הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְבַדּוּ; וְשִׁכְל הַטּוֹבוֹת שְׁמַתְנַבְּאִין בְּהוּ הַנְּבִיאִים  
לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, אִינּוּ אֵלָא לְדַבְּרִים שֶׁל גּוֹף, שְׁנֵהֲנִין בְּהוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּימוֹת  
הַמֶּלֶךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ, בְּזִמְנו שְׁתַּחֲזֹר הַמְּמִשְׁלָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל.

אָבֵל טוֹבַת חַיִּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, אִין לָהּ עֵרֶךְ וְדַמְיוֹן, וְלֹא דַמּוּהָ  
הַנְּבִיאִים, כְּדִי שְׁלֹא יִפְחַתּוּ אוֹתָהּ בְּדַמְיוֹן. הוּא שְׁיִשְׁעִיהוּ אוֹמֵר  
"עֵין לֹא-רָאָתָהּ, אֱלֹקִים זֹלַתְךָ--יַעֲשֶׂה, לְמַחֲכָה-לוֹ" (ישעיהו  
סד,ג): כְּלוֹמֵר הַטּוֹבָה שְׁלֹא רָאָתָהּ אוֹתָהּ עֵין נְבִיא, וְלֹא רָאָה  
אוֹתָהּ אֵלָא עָשָׂה אוֹתָהּ הָאֱלֹקִים לְאָדָם שְׁמַחֲכָה לוֹ. אָמְרוּ  
חֲכָמִים, כָּל הַנְּבִיאִים כָּלּוּן לֹא נִתְנַבְּאוּ אֵלָא לִימוֹת הַמְּשִׁיחַ, אָבֵל  
הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, "עֵין לֹא-רָאָתָהּ, אֱלֹקִים זֹלַתְךָ".

The early Sages taught that the benefit of the World to Come cannot be clearly understood by human beings, and only God knows its greatness, beauty and power. All the good that the prophets described for the Jewish people was solely in reference to the physical benefits that they would enjoy in the time of the King Messiah, which is the time when sovereignty would be returned to the Jews.

The good of the World to Come, on the other hand, cannot be described in any way, and the prophets consequently refrained from portraying it so it would not be diminished through the comparison. This is what Isaiah meant (Isaiah 64:3), *besides You, O God, the eye has not seen what will be done for one who awaits it*, meaning, the good that was not seen by that prophet, nor seen by any eye except by God alone, who made it for the one who awaits it. The Sages said that the



prophets only spoke of the days of the Messiah, but regarding the World to Come, *the eye has not seen* except for God.

### Commentary

Maimonides described a two-fold end of days. One part features a messianic era when Jews will miraculously regain their homeland and will return to it from their far-flung diaspora. Led by a human king known as the Messiah, they will live free of oppression during that time. This is separate from the World to Come, which is an entirely spiritual world, distinct from the physical world even during messianic days. The sequence of these elements, and their relationship to the concept of the Resuscitation of the Dead, is a matter of dizzying debate among Maimonidean scholars. As Maimonides will clarify in the following *halakhah*, the term “World to Come” does not mean that it will be created at some future point in time, like, for example, the Resuscitation of the Dead will occur after the Messianic period is completed. The World to Come rather exists alongside our physical world, and is called “to Come” because it is experienced only after one’s life in the mundane world ends (see 8.8).

The Talmud has a pithy way of expressing the concept of the value of the World to Come: “there is no reward for performing a commandment in this [mundane] world” (*sakhar mitsvah be-hay alma leika*). An incorrect reading of that phrase might give the reader the erroneous impression that it means “no good deed goes unpunished,” as the English idiom has it. In reality, the concept means that the reward for performing a commandment is so great that this physical world is unable to contain and express it. Certain commandments,

however, are like investments that consist of both principal and interest. Honoring parents, for example, confers great merit in the World to Come (the principal) while generating considerable ancillary benefit in this world as well (the interest).

The Talmud, however, gives us some glimpses into what the World to Come must be like. The fraction of one part in sixty is understood to mean the largest possible minority element that is ignored when taken in context of the whole. For example, if a significant quantity of milk accidentally spilled into a meat-based soup, the resulting mixture would not be kosher. If the ratio of milk to meat was 1:60 or less, however, the milk would be considered nullified by the larger quantity of meat-based soup and the food would remain kosher. It's not that the milk has magically disappeared; it's just that the amount of meat present in the mixture is so overwhelming that the milk is no longer distinguishable. The Talmud uses the measure of 1:60 similarly to describe the World to Come: the pleasure of the Sabbath, for example, is considered one part in sixty of the pleasure of the World to Come. One can only imagine what that means.

זֶה שֶׁקָּרָאוּ אוֹתוֹ חֲכָמִים הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, לֹא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁאִינוּ מְצוּי עִתָּה וְזֶה הָעוֹלָם אוֹבֵד וְאַחַר כֵּךְ יִבּוֹא אוֹתוֹ הָעוֹלָם. אֵין הַדְּבָר כּוֹ, אֲלֵא הָרִי הוּא מְצוּי וְעוֹמֵד, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר [אֲשֶׁר צִפְנַת פְּעֻלַּת] [”מָה רַב-טוֹבָךְ, אֲשֶׁר-צִפְנַת לִירְאִיךָ” (תהילים לא, כ)]. וְלֹא קָרְאוּהוּ הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, אֲלֵא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁאוֹתוֹ הַחַיִּים בָּאִין לוֹ לְאָדָם אַחַר חַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, שֶׁאֵנוּ קִיִּמִּין בּוֹ בְּגוֹף וְנַפְשׁ, וְזֶה הוּא הַנִּמְצָא לְכָל אָדָם בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה.

The Sages did not call this “the World to Come” because it does not yet exist, such that it would only come into being after this world is destroyed. This is not correct. The World to Come exists now, as it is written (Psalms 31:20), *that You have hidden, that You have made*. It is only called the World to Come because it cannot be experienced by a human being until after one has lived in this world, where we live with both a body and a soul. This is the first world for every human being.

### Commentary

The World to Come exists simultaneously with our physical world. Maimonides clarifies that it is referred to as a future world because it will be experienced only after a person has left the physical world and enters this new reality. Our present existence, however, is in the physical world. Maimonides will now leave this topic and return to scriptural sources that describe this-worldly rewards and punishments, and explain how these two worlds are interrelated.

## **Notes to Self**

- 1) Learn to savor the spiritual and intellectual pleasures of study, contemplation, and meditation.
- 2) Imagine the reward of reuniting with loved ones who have passed to the next world.
- 3)



## Chapter Nine: Present

### *Introduction*

In Chapter Nine, Maimonides turned from the World to Come to the present world, and described the purpose of this reality. In particular, Maimonides focussed on the meaning of the difficulties we face in this world as we attempt to engage in the *teshuvah* process.

Day 34  
ד' תשרי  
Sunday,  
September 24,  
2017

Chapter Nine is unusual, consisting of only two long *halakhot*. The central question addressed here is, in many ways, another approach to the main question addressed earlier (3.2) of *tsadik ve-ra lo*, “why do the righteous suffer?” After discussing the notion of the World to Come as an expression of the balancing of the metaphysical scales in the next world, this chapter looks at how this balance is achieved in this world.

מאחר שנודע שמתן שָׁכָרוֹן שְׁלֵמִים וְהַטּוֹבָה שְׁנִזְכָּה לָהּ אִם שָׁמְרָנוּ דְרַךְ ה' הַכְּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה--הִיא חַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שְׁנֵאמַר "לִמְעַן יִיטֵב לָךְ, וְהָאֲרֻכָּת יָמִים" (דברים כב, ז); וְהַנִּקְמָה שְׁנוֹקְמִין מִן הַרְשָׁעִים שְׁעֲזְבוּ אַרְחוֹת הַצְּדָק הַכְּתוּבוֹת בַּתּוֹרָה--הִיא הַכֶּרֶת, שְׁנֵאמַר "הַכֶּרֶת תִּכְרֹת הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַזֵּאת, עֹנֶה בָּהּ" (במדבר טו, לא). מֵהוּא זֶה שְׁכָתוּב בְּכָל הַתּוֹרָה כְּלָהּ, אִם תִּשְׁמְעוּ יִגִּיעַ לָכֶם, וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ יִקְרָא אֶתְכֶם, וְכָל אוֹתוֹ הַדְּבָרִים בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה--כְּגוֹן שֶׁבַע וְרָעַב, וּמִלְחָמָה וְשָׁלוֹם, וּמִלְכוּת וְשִׁפְלוּת, וְיִשִּׁיבַת הָאָרֶץ וְגִלוּת, וְהַצְּלַחַת מַעֲשֵׂה וְהַפְּסָדוֹ, וְשָׂאֵר כָּל דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִית.

כָּל אוֹתוֹ הַדְּבָרִים אֵמֶת הֵיוּ, וְיִהְיוּ, וּבְזִמְנוֹ שָׁאֵנוּ עוֹשִׂין כָּל מִצְוֹת הַתּוֹרָה, יִגִּיעוּ אֵלֵינוּ טוֹבוֹת הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה כְּלוֹ; וּבְזִמְנוֹ שָׁאֵנוּ עוֹבְרִין עָלֶיהוּ, תִּקְרָא אוֹתָנוּ הַרְעוֹת הַכְּתוּבוֹת. וְאִף עַל פִּי כֹּן אֵין אוֹתוֹ הַטּוֹבוֹת, הֵן סוֹף מִתְּנוֹ שְׁכָרוֹן שְׁלֵמִים; וְלֹא אוֹתוֹ הַרְעוֹת, הֵן סוֹף הַנִּקְמָה שְׁנוֹקְמִין מִעוֹבְרֵי עַל כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת. אֲלֵא כֵּן הוּא הַצִּיֵּעַ הַדְּבָרִים.

הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא נָתַן לָנוּ תּוֹרָה זֹאת, עַץ חַיִּים, וְכָל הָעוֹשֶׂה כָּל הַכְּתוּב בָּהּ, וְיִוָּדְעוּ דַּעְיָה גְמוּרָה נְכוֹנָה--זוֹכָה בָּהּ לַחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא; וְלִפִּי גִדְל מַעֲשִׂיו וְגִדְל חֲכָמָתוֹ, הוּא זוֹכָה. וְהַבְּטִיחָנוּ בַּתּוֹרָה שְׂאֵם נַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָהּ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹבוֹת נֶפֶשׁ, וְנִהְיֶה בְּחֲכָמָתָהּ תְּמִיד--שִׁיִּסִּיר מִמֶּנּוּ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הַמוֹנְעִים אוֹתָנוּ מִלַּעֲשׂוֹתָהּ, כְּגוֹן חֵלִי וּמִלְחָמָה וְרָעַב וְכִיּוֹצָא בָּהוּ. וְיִשְׁפִּיעַ לָנוּ כָּל הַטּוֹבוֹת הַמְּחַזְקִים אֶת יְדֵינוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, כְּגוֹן שֶׁבַע וְשָׁלוֹם וּרְבוּת כֶּסֶף וְחֶבֶב--כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא נַעֲסֵק כָּל יָמֵינוּ בַּדְּבָרִים שֶׁהַגּוֹף צָרִיךְ לָהּ, אֲלֵא נִשְׁבַּע פְּנוּיִים לְלַמֵּד בְּחֲכָמָה, וְלַעֲשׂוֹת הַמִּצְוָה, כְּדֵי שְׁנִזְכָּה לַחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. וְכֹן הוּא אוֹמֵר בַּתּוֹרָה אַחֵר שֶׁהַבְּטִיחַ בְּטוֹבוֹת הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, "וְצִדְקָה, תִּהְיֶה--לָנוּ...". (דברים ו, כה).

וְכֹן הוֹדִיעָנוּ בַּתּוֹרָה שְׂאֵם נַעֲזֹב הַתּוֹרָה מִדַּעַתָּנוּ וְנַעֲסֵק בְּהַבְלֵי הַזִּמְנוֹ, כְּעִנְיֵנוּ שְׁנֵאמַר "וַיִּשְׁמֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְעֵט" (דברים לב, טו)--שֶׁדִּין הָאֵמֶת יִסִּיר מִן הָעוֹזְבִים כָּל טוֹבוֹת הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, שֶׁהוּן חֲזָקוֹ

ידיהם לבעט, ומביא עליהן כל הרעות המונעים אותן מלקנות העולם הבא, כדי שיאבדו ברשעים. הוא שכתוב בתורה, "ועבדת את-איביך, אשר ישלחנו ה' בך" (דברים כח, מח), "תחת, אשר לא-עבדת את-ה' בשמחה ובטוב לבב מרב כל" (דברים כח, מז).

נמצא פרוש כל אותן הברכות והקללות, על דרך זו: כלומר אם עבדתם את ה' בשמחה, ושמרתם דרכו--משפיע לכם הברכות האלו ומרחיק הקללות, עד שתהיו פנויים להתחכם בתורה ולעסק בה, כדי שתזכו לחיי העולם הבא, וייתב לך לעולם שכלו טוב ותאריך ימים לעולם שכלו ארוך. ונמצאתם זוכין לשני העולמות, לחיים טובים בעולם הזה המביאין לחיי העולם הבא: שאם לא יקנה הנה חכמה ומעשים טובים--אין לו במה יזכה, שנאמר "כי אין מעשה וחשבון, ודעת וחכמה, בשאול" (קוהלת ט, י).

ואם עזבתם את ה' ושגיתם במאכל ומשקה וזנות ודומה להם--מביא עליכם כל הקללות האלו ומסיר כל הברכות, עד שיכלו ימיכם בבהלה ופחד, ולא יהיה לכם לב פנוי ולא גוף שלם לעשות המצוות, כדי שתאבדו מחיי העולם הבא. ונמצא שאבדתם שני עולמות: שבזמן שאדם טרוד בעולם הזה בחלי ובמלחמה ורעבון, אינו מתעסק לא בחכמה ולא במצוה שבהו זוכין לחיי העולם הבא.

We know that the reward for the commandments and the benefit that one merits if one observes the path of God as described in the Torah is the life of the World to Come, as it is written (Deuteronomy 22:7), *in order to benefit you and lengthen your days*. We also know that the reckoning that awaits the wicked who abandon the ways of righteousness is described in the Torah as excision, as it is written (Numbers 15:31), *this soul shall certainly be cut off, it bears its sin*. What, then, is the meaning of those passages throughout the Torah that use physical terms to describe the reward for people who observe the Torah and the punishment for people who do not? What is the



meaning of physical examples such as satiety or hunger, war or peace, glory or humiliation, dwelling at home or in exile, success or failure, and other aspects of this covenant?

All of these words are true and will come to pass, and observing the commandments of the Torah will result in these rewards in the physical world, while failing to observe them will result in all of these negative consequences. This is true even though these physical rewards are not the essential rewards for the commandments, and these physical consequences are not the punishments for violating the commandments. Rather, the meaning of these words is as follows.

The Holy One who is Blessed gave us this Torah, the tree of life, and all who do what is described therein and know it with a complete knowing, will merit life in the World to Come. This reward is calculated according to the measure of one's deeds and learning. The Torah also promises us that if we do these things joyfully and with generosity of spirit, and always conduct ourselves wisely, then all impediments to observing the Torah will be removed, such as illness, war, famine and the like. We will also receive all the benefits that strengthen our ability to observe the Torah, such as satisfaction, peace, and wealth of silver and gold. We will not spend our days involved in physical necessities, but be free to study wisdom and perform the commandments and thus earn merit for the life in the World to Come. This is what is written in the Torah, after we are promised these worldly benefits (Deuteronomy 6:25), *and this is a charity for us.*

The Torah also warns us that if we knowingly abandon the Torah and engage in meaningless activities, as it is written (Deuteronomy 32:15) *and Jeshurun grew fat and kicked*, the True Judge will remove all the aid that we received in the form of the good things of this world that allowed us to “kick,” and he will replace it with the impediments that make it difficult for us to achieve the World to Come, such that we will be abandoned in our wickedness. This is what the Torah says (Deuteronomy 28:47-48), *and you will serve your enemies that God sends unto you because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy amidst such plenty*.

The explanation of these verses is as follows. God will send you these blessings and keep you from the curses, so that you will be free to grow wise in Torah and delve in it. In this way you will merit the life of the World to Come, and enjoy the world that is entirely good, spending your days in a world that is infinitely long. Thus such people inherit two worlds: good life in this world, which brings them to the World to Come. If one does not acquire wisdom and good deeds, then how will one merit this? This is as it is written (Ecclesiastes 9:10), *for there is no action nor calculation nor thought nor wisdom from the grave*.

But if you abandon God and sink into eating and drinking and fornication and the like, then all these curses will come upon you and remove all the blessings, such that you will waste your days in haste and anxiety, and you will not have a heart that is free nor a body that is healthy in order to perform the commandments, and you will lose the life in the World to Come. Thus these people lose two

worlds, for when a person is harried in this world by illness or war or famine, he cannot occupy himself with wisdom or the commandments, by which he would merit the life in the World to Come.

### *Commentary*

In a significant stylistic departure from the rest of *The Ways of Repentance*, Maimonides addressed a key question in this, the longest single passage in the entire book. He asked: if the reward for adherence to the Torah is purely spiritual, then what is the meaning of all the physical rewards described in the Torah? Are they not somehow demeaning in comparison to the elevated mission of attending the will of God?

Rabbi Touger offers a beautiful parable to explain this concept. God is like an employer who wishes to reward his staff for their productivity. Not only does he offer a generous wage for their labor, he wishes to provide them with a workplace with all the amenities that allows them to do their best work. So too, the reward for human beings lies in the World to Come, but God will provide us with an environment that allows us to make spiritual progress by removing distractions from the lofty goal.

The converse of the previous passage is also true. The employer may decide to use negative reinforcement to deter the staff from unproductive activities, removing privileges and imposing penalties for a poor work ethic. Much of this decision depends on our attitude. Do we serve God “with joy” when we live “amidst such plenty”?

The time to act is now, as there can be no more conferring of merit in the next world. As Reish Lakish, one of the

most famous Masters of *Teshuvah* in the Talmud, put it (Eruvin 3a): “today is the day to do it, and not tomorrow. Today is the day to do it, and tomorrow is the day to receive the reward.”

Maimonides’ comment of wasted days in haste and anxiety is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was when he wrote it down over eight hundred years ago, perhaps even more so. Our technological advances have increased the pervasive reach of communications, creating great advances in productivity but generating incredible losses in other, less well-defined areas of human skill and spiritual advancement. How many deep and nuanced conversations are sacrificed when we jump to answer a specious text message or other electronic correspondence? Our lives today are undoubtedly more complex and our experiences more comprehensive, but we often sacrifice depth for breadth. Focusing on the Torah and its eternal values give us a moment to pause and realign our priorities appropriately.

Day 35

ה' תשרי

Monday,  
September 25,  
2017

ומפני זה התאוּו כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל נְבִיאֵיהֶם וְחַכְמֵיהֶם יְמוֹת  
הַמֶּלֶךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ, כְּדֵי שְׁיִנוּחוּ מִמַּלְכוֹת הַרְשָׁעָה שְׂאִינָה  
מִנַּחַת לָהֶן לְיִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲסֵק בְּתוֹרָה וּבְמִצְוֹת כְּהַגּוֹ,  
וַיִּמְצְאוּ לָהֶן מְרוּגוּעַ וַיִּרְבוּ בְּחַכְמָה, כְּדֵי שְׁיִזְכּוּ לַחַיִּי  
הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

לפי שבאותן הימים תרבה הדעה והחכמה והאמת--  
שנאמר "כי-מלאה הארץ, דעה את-ה'" (ישעיהו יא,ט),  
ונאמר "ולא ילמדו איש את-אחיו ואיש את-רעהו  
וכו'" (ירמיהו לא,לג), ונאמר "והסרתי את-לב האבן,  
מבשרכם" (יחזקאל לו,כו). מפני שאותו המלך שיעמד מזרע  
דוד בעל חכמה יהיה יתר משלמה, ונביא גדול הוא קרוב  
ממשה רבנו; ולפיכך ילמד כל העם ויורה אותם דרך ה', ויבואו  
כל הגויים לשמעו, שנאמר "והיה באחרית הימים, נכון יהיה הר  
בית-ה' בראש ההרים" (ישעיהו ב,ב).

וסוף השָׁכַר כָּלוּ וְהַטּוֹבָה הָאֲחֻרֹנָה שְׂאִיו לָהּ הַפֶּסֶק וְלֹא גִרְעוֹן,  
הוא חיי העולם הבא; אָבֵל יְמוֹת הַמְּשִׁיחַ הוא הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה  
וְעוֹלָם כְּמִנְהַגוֹ הוֹלֵךְ, אֲלֵא שֶׁהַמַּלְכוּת תִּחְזֹר לְיִשְׂרָאֵל. וְכִבֵּר אָמְרוּ  
חַכְמֵים הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים, אִיו בִּין הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה לַיְמוֹת הַמְּשִׁיחַ אֲלֵא  
שְׁעַבַּד מַלְכוּת בְּלָבָד.

Therefore the entire Jewish people, their prophets and sages, desire the days of the King Messiah, such that they could be quit of the evil regimes that do not allow the Jews to study Torah or perform the commandments properly. They will find rest, and increase their wisdom in order that they inherit the life in the World to Come.

In those days knowledge, wisdom and truth will increase, as it is written (Isaiah 11:9) *for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God*, and it is written (Jeremiah 31:33) *and no longer will one man teach his brother, and another*

*man his fellow [because they will all know Me], and it is written (Ezekiel 36:26), and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh. The King that arises will be a descendant of David, a master of wisdom even greater than Solomon, and almost as great a prophet as Moses our Teacher, and therefore he will teach every nation and instruct them in the way of God, and all the nations will come to hear him, as it is written (Isaiah 2:2), and it will be in the end of days, the mountain of the house of God will be established at the peak of mountains.*

In the end the complete reward, the ultimate good that has no end and no diminution, is the life in the World to Come. The days of the Messiah, however, will be in this world, which will function normally with the exception that the Jews will have renewed sovereignty. The early sages taught that there is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except the subjugation of Israel alone.

### *Commentary*

Maimonides' view of the Messianic period is as hotly debated as anything in his entire corpus, and even a summary of the literature would take us too far afield of our essential theme of *teshuvah*. The major point to bear in mind is that there is an arc to history that will culminate in the arrival of the ultimate Redeemer, and we must do our part to perfect the world in preparation for that auspicious day.

## Notes to Self

1) Why does life seem so hard? As a historian, I know that I have merited to spend my life in exceptionally blessed times, free of war and hunger. The task, as the Arizal emphasized, is to serve God with joy. God will reciprocate by giving us the peace and prosperity we need to flourish.

2)

## Chapter Ten: Love

### *Introduction*

After describing the rewards for following the Torah, both in the World to Come and this world, Maimonides devotes the closing chapter to the idea that the true service of God is done without thought of reward, worldly or otherwise.

The tenth and final chapter concludes not only *The Ways of Repentance* but the first book of *Mishneh Torah* as a whole.

Day 36

ו' תשרי

Tuesday,  
September 26,  
2017



## 10.1

אל יאמר אדם הריני עושה מצוות התורה ועוסק בחכמתה, כדי שאקבל הברכות הכתובות בתורה או כדי שאזכה לחיי העולם הבא; ואפרש מן העברות שהזהירה תורה מהן, כדי שאנצל מן הקללות הכתובות בתורה או כדי שלא אכרת מחיי העולם הבא.

אין ראוי לעבד את ה', על דרך (זה) זו: שהעובד על דרך (זה) זו, הוא עובד מיראה; ואינה מעלת הנביאים, ולא מעלת החכמים. ואין עובד את ה' על דרך (זה) זו, אלא עמי הארץ והנשים והקטנים, שמחנכין אותן לעבד מיראה, עד שתרבה דעתן ויעבדו מאהבה.

A person should not say, "behold, I will perform the commandments of the Torah and study its wisdom, in order that I receive the blessings described therein," or "so that I will merit the life of the World to Come." He should not say, "I will separate from the sins that the Torah prohibits in order that I be saved from the curses that are described therein, or that I not be cut off from the life in the World to Come."

It is not fitting to serve God in this manner. This is called serving out of fear, and it is not the level demanded by the prophets and the sages. This way of serving God is only for the unlearned, women and children, who are taught to serve God out of fear until their knowledge matures and they serve out of love.

### *Commentary*

Maimonides' last comment reflects the generally weak state of education for women in his day. The modern reader may be distracted by this passage, historically

relevant but jarring to our sensibilities, yet the underlying point is extremely significant: serving God out of the fear of punishment (or its sister phenomenon, the anticipation of reward) is a poorer form of Divine Service, and should be avoided. A Jew who approaches Judaism in this manner, even though he or she may perform the commandments scrupulously, worships in a manner that is qualitatively deficient. In reality, such service of God is really a service of self. It is worship nonetheless, but it is an immature worship.

Setting aside the gendered aspect of this *halakhah*, the most important point here is the introduction of a higher level of worship, one that reaches beyond the fear that a servant has for a master, and approaches the love that a child has for a parent.

## 10.2

העובד מאהבה, עוסק בתורה ובמצוות והולך בנתיבות החכמה--לא מפני דבר בעולם, לא מפני יראת הרעה, ולא כדי לירש הטובה: אלא עושה האמת, מפני שהוא אמת; וסוף הטובה לבוא בכלל.

ומעלה זו היא מעלה גדולה עד מאוד, ואין כל חכם זוכה לה. והיא מעלת אברהם אבינו, שקראו הקדוש ברוך הוא אוהבי לפי שלא עבד אלא מאהבה. והיא המעלה שצונו בה הקדוש ברוך הוא על ידי משה רבנו, שנאמר "ואהבת את ה' אלהיך, בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך, ובכל מאדך" (דברים ו,ה). ובזמן שיאהב את ה' אהבה הראויה, מיד יעשה כל המצוות מאהבה.

One who serves out of love will be involved in Torah and the commandments, and will pursue conduct in the gentle ways of wisdom, and not for any reason in this world, neither out of fear of punishment nor in order to gain reward. Such a person will simply engage in the truth because it is the truth, and good will result in the end.

This is an extremely high level, and not every wise person reaches it. This is the level of Abraham our Father, whom the Holy One who is Blessed called "my beloved," because he only served out of love. This is the level that the Holy One who is Blessed commanded through Moses our Teacher, as it is written (Deuteronomy 6:5), *and you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*. At the moment that a person loves God with a true love, he will immediately perform all the commandments out of love.

### *Commentary*

God commands this love, but it remains thoroughly within the realm of human choice to reciprocate appropriately. Rabbi Hanina of the Talmud teaches that “everything is in hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven” (Berakhot 33b). If even the fear of God, which is a lower-level relationship, is somehow excluded from God’s infinite power, then how much more so does the love of God, which is a higher-level relationship, depend on human initiative? As Maimonides clarified here, few people will reach this level of closeness with God, yet it remains the true ideal. It’s hard to imagine this level except in glimpses, through one’s peripheral vision. Perhaps while deep in prayer, or at moments of great joy.

Day 37

ז' תשרי

Wednesday,  
September 27,  
2017

וְכִיצַד הִיא הָאֱהָבָה הָרְאוּיָה: הוּא שְׂיֵאָהֵב אֶת ה' אֱהָבָה  
גְדוֹלָה יִתְרָה רַבָּה, עֲזָה עַד מְאוֹד, עַד שֶׁתְּהָא נִפְשׁוֹ  
קְשׁוּרָה בְּאֱהָבַת ה', וְנִמְצָא שׁוּגָה בֶּה תְּמִיד--כְּאֵלוֹ חוֹלֵי  
הָאֱהָבָה, שְׂאִין דַּעְתָּם פְּנוּיָה מֵאֱהָבַת אוֹתָהּ אִשָּׁה שֶׁהוּא  
שׁוּגָה בֶּה תְּמִיד, בֵּין בְּשִׁכְבוֹ בֵּין בְּקוּמוֹ, בֵּין בְּשַׁעָה שֶׁהוּא  
אוֹכֵל וְשׁוֹתָהּ. יִתֵּר מְזֶה תִּהְיֶה אֱהָבַת ה' בְּלֵב אוֹהֲבָיו,  
שׁוּגִים בֶּה תְּמִיד, כְּמוֹ שְׂצֻנּוֹ, "בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ  
וּבְכָל מְאֹדךָ" (דְּבָרִים וָה; דְּבָרִים יָיב; דְּבָרִים לָו). וְהוּא  
שְׂשֻׁלְמָה אוֹמֵר דָּרוֹךְ מְשָׁל, "כִּי-חֹלֵת אֱהָבָה אֲנִי" (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים  
בָּה); וְכֵל שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים מְשָׁל הוּא לַעֲנִין זֶה.

What is this true love? It is a love of God that is exceedingly great, tremendously strong, such that a person's soul is bound up in the love of God, and he thinks of God constantly, like a lovesick man who cannot free his mind out of love for his wife. He thinks of her constantly, whether he is sitting or standing, whether he is eating or drinking. The hearts of those who love God experience this even more strongly, always thinking about how they are commanded with all their heart, all their soul, and all their might. This is what Solomon said in a parable (Song of Songs 2:5), *for I am lovesick*. The entire Song of Songs is a parable for this.

### Commentary

The Sabbath liturgy contains a beautiful sixteenth-century poem attributed to the Kabbalist Rabbi Elazar Azikri of Safed. Set to a haunting melody, Yedid Nefesh ("The Dear One of my Soul") describes the truly overwhelming yearning experienced by those of great spiritual sensitivity:

my soul is sick with love for You/please, God, heal her,  
please/reveal to her the beauty of your radiance.

Day 38

ח' תשרי

Thursday,  
September 28,  
2017

אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים, שְׁמָא תֵאמַר הָרִינִי לְמַד תּוֹרָה בְּשִׁבִיל שְׂאֵהֶיָּה עֲשִׂיר, בְּשִׁבִיל שְׂאֵקְרָא רַבִּי, בְּשִׁבִיל שְׂאֵקְבֵל שְׂכָר בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא; תִּלְמַד לּוֹמַר, "לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־ה'" (דְּבָרִים י"ג; וְעוֹד)--כֹּל שְׂאֵתֶם עוֹשִׂים, לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֵלָא מֵאַהֲבָה.

וְעוֹד אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים, "בְּמִצְוֹתַי, חֲפֹץ מֵאֹד" (תְּהִלִּים קי"ב, א)--"בְּמִצְוֹתַי", וְלֹא בְּשִׂכָר מִצְוֹתַי. וְכֵן הָיוּ גְדוּלֵי הַחֲכָמִים מִצְוִים לְנִבּוֹנֵי תִלְמִידֵיהֶם וּמְשִׁכִּילֵיהֶם בִּיחּוּד, אֵל תִּהְיוּ כְּעֹבְדִים הַמְשֻׁמְשִׁים אֶת הָרֶב עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל טוֹבָה; אֵלָא הָיוּ כְּעֹבְדִים הַמְשֻׁמְשִׁים אֶת הָרֶב עַל מְנַת שְׂלֹא לְקַבֵּל כְּלוּם--אֵלָא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא הָרֶב, רָאוּי לְשֻׁמְשׁוֹ: כְּלוּמַר, עֹבְדוּ מֵאַהֲבָה.

The early sages taught that perhaps a person might say, "I will study Torah in order that I become wealthy, or that I be called 'Rabbi,' in order that I receive reward in the World to Come." Therefore the Torah corrects this attitude with the phrase, "to love the Lord," meaning, everything that you do must be done out of love.

The sages also commented on the verse (Psalms 112:1) *desire the commandments greatly*, meaning the commandments themselves, and not the reward for the commandments. Thus the greatest of the sages command their most understanding and intelligent students not to be like servants who serve the Master on the condition of receiving reward, rather, they should be like servants who serve the Master unconditionally, serving Him only because he is a Master who deserves service, and serve God out of love.

## Commentary

Rabbi Luzzatto speaks at length of this love in *Mesilat Yesharim*. One of my favorite passages comes from Chapter 18: “one who loves the Blessed Creator with a true love will not merely seek to exempt himself by performing the minimal obligations imposed upon him as a Jew. Rather, he will consider himself called as a son to his father, that even if his father were to merely indicate that he has a minimal wish for one thing or another, the son will seek to fulfill that desire as maximally as possible. Even if the father only says a single word, once and with a slight gesture, this son will anticipate the fuller expressions of the father’s will and will endeavor to provide even those aspects of the father’s request that were not explicit. Once the son knows that such a thing would please the father, the son does not wait for the command to be uttered even once. We see this occurring every day between true friends, between husband and wife, and between a parent and a child.”



Day 39

ט' תשרי  
ערב יוה"כFriday,  
September 29,  
2017

כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה כְּדֵי לְקַבֵּל שָׂכָר, או כְּדֵי שְׁלֵא תִגִּיעַ  
עָדָיו פְּרַעֲנוֹת--הָרִי זֶה עוֹסֵק בָּהּ שְׁלֵא לְשִׁמָּה. וְכֹל  
הָעוֹסֵק בָּהּ לֹא לִירְאָה, וְלֹא לְקַבֵּל שָׂכָר, אֱלֹא מִפְּנֵי  
אַהֲבַת אָדוֹן כָּל הָאָרֶץ שֶׁצִּוְהָ בָּהּ--הָרִי זֶה עוֹסֵק בָּהּ  
לְשִׁמָּה. וְאָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים, לְעוֹלָם יַעֲסֹק אָדָם בַּתּוֹרָה, אֲפִלּוּ  
שְׁלֵא לְשִׁמָּה--שֶׁמֶתוֹךְ שְׁלֵא לְשִׁמָּה, בָּא לְשִׁמָּה.

לְפִיכֶן כְּשֶׁמִּלְמַדִּין אֶת הַקְּטָנִים וְאֶת הַנְּשִׂים וְכָל עַמִּי  
הָאָרֶץ, אִין מִלְמַדִּין אוֹתוֹ אֱלֹא לְעַבֵּד מִירְאָה וְכְדֵי לְקַבֵּל שָׂכָר, עַד  
שֶׁתִּרְבֶּה דַעְתּוֹ וַיִּתְחַכְּמוּ חֲכָמָה יִתְרָה, מְגִלִין לְהוֹרֵז זֶה מְעַט  
מְעַט; וּמְרַגְלִין אוֹתוֹ לְעַנְּוֹ זֶה בְּנַחַת, עַד שֶׁשִּׁיגוּהוּ וַיִּדְעוּהוּ  
וַיַּעֲבְדוּ מֵאַהֲבָה.

Anyone who studies Torah in order to receive reward, or in order to avoid punishment, behold this is a person who studies for the wrong reasons. Anyone who studies Torah not out of fear, nor to receive reward, but only out of love, because the Master of all the world commands it, behold this person studies for the right reasons. The sages taught, "a person should always study Torah, even for the wrong reasons, because this will lead him to study for the right reasons."

Therefore when one teaches children or women or other unlearned people, one may teach them to serve out of fear or in order to receive reward until they mature and become much wiser. Then, one will reveal this secret to them slowly, and accustom them to this matter gently, until they understand it and know it and serve out of love.

## Commentary

Maimonides is a pragmatic philosopher, and he recognized the pedagogic value of extrinsic reward. When a person is spiritually immature, the promise of reward (or the threat of mild punishment) is necessary to overcome the resistance of the *yetser ha-ra*.

I am not surprised that Maimonides refers to the level of love of God as a “secret.” It’s out there—one senses it like a sister ship out in the distant fog somewhere, sounding its horn (or was that the wind in the sails?)—but I find it difficult to apprehend and describe.

Day 40

י' תשרי  
יוה"כSaturday,  
September 30,  
2017

דבר ידוע וברור שאין אהבת הקב"ה נקשרת בלבו של אדם עד שישגה בה תמיד כראוי ויעזוב כל שבעולם חוץ ממנה, כמו שצוה ואמר בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך, אלא בדעה שידעהו, ועל פי הדעה על פי האהבה אם מעט מעט ואם הרבה הרבה.

לפיכך צריך האדם ליחד עצמו להבין ולהשכיל בחכמות ותבונות המודיעין לו את קונו כפי כח שיש באדם להבין ולהשיג כמו שביארנו בהלכות יסודי התורה.

### בְּרִיךְ רַחֲמָנָא דְסִיעֵן.

It is clear and well known that the love of God is not bound up in the human heart until one becomes perpetually obsessed with God, abandoning everything in this world except for God, as is commanded *with all your heart and with all your soul*. This is through the knowledge that one acquires, and through love, whether it is little or whether it is great.

Therefore a person should concentrate on understanding and knowing the wisdom and understanding that is given to him by his Creator, according to his human strength to understand and grasp, as we have explained in the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah.

Blessed is the Merciful One for Assistance.

## Notes to Self

Many years ago, my wife Ilana supported the family by working for the Jewish Federation of Westchester, which allowed me to spend my mornings learning Torah in the Kollel and my afternoons working on my dissertation. Technically, I was also responsible for caring for our preschoolers Raphaela and Danit Malka during the afternoons, but in reality I could be found holed up in my home office working on my research, allowing the girls to get into various types of mischief.

One particular day, the girls decided to learn everything there was to know about plumbing in order to redecorate the main bathroom. My suspicions were alerted at least 30 minutes too late, once I realized that sounds of exuberant play were not emanating from their bedroom (sudden silence from children at play is often an ominous indication that they have discovered an activity that is fascinating and forbidden in equal measure). I emerged from the study to investigate, and discovered the floor soaking wet, toilet paper hanging like streamers from the fixtures, and the girls having a thoroughly good time spreading soaps and shampoos everywhere. Naturally, I made this discovery some fifteen minutes before Ilana was to return home from work.

Danit Malka was too young to really be culpable, and so my gaze turned to the ringleader of this troublesome duo: Raphaela, perhaps four years old at the time. And I Was. Angry.

Raphaela sensed my fury immediately. I saw her little face, animated by the joy of unrestrained play, collapse into

terror as she beheld me standing in the doorway amidst the chaos. And then she turned everything around.

I know what I would have done. I would have attempted an escape, or perhaps blamed my sibling, or found some desperate excuse. Raphaela was smarter, of course, because none of those strategies would have worked.

Instead, my precious daughter ran up to my legs and hugged me tight, pressing herself tightly to me, ashamed to even lift her face to gauge my reaction. Danit Malka, sensing the power of the moment, joined Raphaela in what became a group hug.

How could I remain angry? My heart melted. Not only did I lose my anger, my love for them deepened.

The metaphor should be obvious. When we do wrong, we should not attempt a futile escape. We shouldn't proffer weak excuses for our behavior. Rather, we should just confess immediately and return to our Parent who is in Heaven, cleaving to our God in purest *teshuvah*.





## **My Father**

### A Tribute



My father, Jack David Abramson of blessed memory, was a man of compassion and integrity. Born in 1928 to Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, he lived his entire life in the small milling community of Iroquois Falls, Ontario. He was the youngest son of seven siblings, all of whom moved south to pursue careers and build families in Montreal and Toronto. My father chose to stay behind with his parents and eventually took over the family business, a store called Alex Abramson & Son's Men's Wear: my father, with characteristic humility, preferred to remain the anonymous "son." He met my mother at his sister's wedding in Montreal and married her in 1961. I was born two years later, their only child.

My father deeply believed in giving people second chances. He, along with my mother, had a gift for seeing the best in others, and he always extended himself to help



people who were downtrodden or ostracized. He frequently employed young men with juvenile criminal pasts, unmarried mothers shunned by small-town conservatism, and extended informal credit liberally to the unemployed. He owned a few rental properties in town, and often charged rents that did not cover the mortgage, utilities and tax payments.

In some cases he didn't charge rent at all. My father's business acumen was overwhelmed by his instinct to help anyone in need, and my family lived simply and frugally in a small apartment above the men's wear store.



My father taught me to ski, and I met my wife, a ski instructor. My father taught me to read, and I became a professor, then a dean. Sometimes when I speak I hear my father's voice, and it surprises me.

My father never had the benefit of a Jewish education, but he and my mother endured phenomenal self-sacrifice to give me one. Years later, when he was a grandfather many times over, we had a conversation in the dark, sitting in my minivan parked outside the house. He expressed to me the depth of his personal connection with God. It was awesome in the true sense of the word, and strengthens my own faith to this day.

My father was, fundamentally, an optimist. His business decisions were often fueled by a deep-seated sense that patience and persistence would always win in the end—with some belt-tightening austerity, everything would ultimately work out in our favor. It didn't always turn out

that way, but he remained indefatigably independent-minded. My mother supported his decisions absolutely. On the rare occasions when she disagreed with any of his choices, he was quick to comply. My mother's love was his



most cherished achievement; to the end of his life I believe he retained a sense of wonder that he merited such a devoted wife.

My father was sparing in his praise for his only son, always concerned that he might somehow spoil me. On the contrary, he taught me to celebrate my failures, probing them for whatever lessons I might glean from disappointment. His love was

often expressed in unexpected acts of selfless generosity—surprising me with a pair of Rossignol ST Competition skis when my Fischers broke, sending me on a school trip to England as a teenager, helping with the down payment on our house. I know those kinds of things were financially onerous at the time, but my father made them happen. As a father myself, I know how hard it can be to provide for children, and I also know why he did it for me.

I miss you, Dad. I wish I could talk to you sometime. This book is for you. I hope you like it.



## Acknowledgments

*First Edition (2012)*

This translation and commentary was first composed during the summer and fall of 2012. Early in the summer I visited my ancestral home in Iroquois Falls, Ontario, and watched the fascination my young children had for the locomotive that held my attention when I was their age. Like I once did so many years ago, they also placed pennies on the tracks and waited for the train's passage, later hunting for the crushed and misshapen remnants of the coins.

My gratitude goes first and foremost to the Source of All Blessing, above all for sending me a traveling companion and *confidante* in all things, my wife Ilana Tirzah. She is my inspiration and my support, and the mother of our wonderful children Raphaela Meirit, Danit Malka, Aliza Shoshana, Alexander Eliyahu, Boaz Uziel, and Aryeh Yitzhak.

We are blessed to live in the wonderful community of Surfside, Florida, with a flourishing Jewish community. I am personally grateful to Rabbi Moshe Gruenstein of the Young Israel of Bal Harbour and Rabbi Sholom D. Lipskar of the Shul of Bal Harbour for their ongoing spiritual and practical guidance. My adult students, in particular those I meet every Monday night, are a source of great learning for me, as Rabbi Hanina states, "I learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and from my students most of all." I would like to mention several my name: David Brody, David Herman, Bev Kagan, Susan Leaventon and Marc (Menachem) Sternbaum, Kim and Ruthy Marks, Steven Mills, Penny Pasch, Gerardo Rodriguez, Esther

Small, Eileen Yasbin, Geoffrey Weisbaum, and Myriam Winer.

*Pirkei Avot* states that a person should always “acquire a friend.” For most of my adult life I paid insufficient attention to this dictum, and have always concentrated my energies on my wife and children. Since moving to Surfside, however, I have found myself immersed in the Hasidic world of the *farbrengen*, and I must admit that I find the hour or so of fellowship after the Shabbat morning prayers one of the regular highlights of my week. The Torah spoken at that time, and the true “love of one’s fellow Jew,” is something very special, and even transformative. In this context I would like to single out just a few of the men who make that experience as enjoyable and as fulfilling as it is: Isaac Arber, Lazer Milstein, Abraham Gewirtz (and his wife Sandra, whose generous hospitality often includes an incredible banana-spice cake), and Aryeh Wuensch. May we merit sharing many years of *farbrengens*, together with our families.

Finally, my gratitude is extended to you, dear reader. I hope that you found this humble work spiritually meaningful, and that my scholarship was up to your expectations. If, however, you found any errors, whether of fact or interpretation, I would be most delighted if you would bring them to my direct attention at [hmabramson@gmail.com](mailto:hmabramson@gmail.com).

HMA  
Surfside, FL  
Elul 5772  
August 2012

*Second Edition (2013)*

Reviewing this work in the closing weeks of 5773 (2013), I am humbled by two distinct observations. First, I am embarrassed by the numerous errors that escaped my attention, and I have done my best to remove them in this printing. Second, and more seriously, I am awed by the colossal size of the task of *teshuvah*, and how far I must go to become a Master of *Teshuvah* as described by Maimonides. Only here, in the brief acknowledgements section of this small work, may I note with pride some incremental yet important progress.

Over the past year I have had the honor of deepening my connection with the spiritual leaders of the Surfside community, Rabbi Gruenstein and Rabbi Lipskar, and continue to grow under their influence. I am similarly blessed: not only from the relationship of the friends described above, but with two new colleagues who have done much to bolster my personal appreciation of Torah and fellowship: Aaron Balkany and David Herman.

Most importantly, I continue to enjoy the blessings of a wonderful, supportive, and inspiring family: my soul mate Ilana Tirzah, and our children Raphaela Meirit, Danit Malka, Aliza Shoshana, Alexander Eliyahu, Boaz Uziel, and Aryeh Yitzchak.

The first edition of this short work appeared with numerous typographical issues and grammatical infelicities. I am grateful to many readers, in particular my daughter Danit Malka, who combed through the text in anticipation of the second edition. I received the corrections in a timely fashion, but I foolishly set them aside for most of the last year, thinking I would eventually make some time to work through them and improve the

book. In an unfortunate parallel to the *teshuvah* process, I did not feel the urgency of the task until the holy month of Elul returned, and now the comparatively small exercise of literary revision is complicated by the much more daunting task of self-evaluation and personal transformation. Confronted and humbled by my errors, both in print and in person, I struggle to do justice to Maimonides' eternal words. It is my hope that you, dear reader, will overlook such shortcomings with charity, and may you be rewarded in turn with Heavenly blessings for a good, sweet New Year.

Reviewed and revised Elul 5773 (September 2013)  
Surfside, FL

*Third Edition (2014)*

5774 was a year of great change for the Abramson family. Several children moved on with their lives, studying in Israel or advancing their careers. Professionally, I received a promotion to become Dean of the Lander College of Arts and Sciences in Brooklyn, NY, effective July 2015. This wonderful challenge represented a great opportunity on an academic level, but sad on a personal level because it will require us to leave South Florida, our home since 1996. Finally, and most significantly, my father passed away less than a month ago, leaving me changed in ways that I feel deeply but cannot fully comprehend.

I was in New York City on business with my eldest son when I received the call that my father's health had taken a sudden turn for the worse. I had intended to take my son to visit the grave of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, a rare American pilgrimage site, and we did so on our way to get our first connecting flight out of John F. Kennedy airport. I prayed there from the depths of my soul, begging that I be

allowed the privilege of one more conversation with my father. The earliest travel date available was the 9th of Av, the Jewish national day of mourning for the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem. Alexander, Danit Malka and I made the arduous journey while fasting. We arrived at his bedside in Ansonville General Hospital some fifteen minutes before he fell into his final sleep. My prayer was granted, and we shared a few moments of parting communion. I sat by his bedside for two more days as, in his delirium and liminal existence in both worlds, he called out to his long-deceased siblings. Danit Malka and I were by his side when he took his final breath, passing gently into the next world in his sleep.

Although I originally released *Maimonides on Teshuvah* two years earlier, I had strangely omitted a dedication. It now seems fitting that I consecrate it to the memory of my father, Jack David Abramson, הרני כפרת משכבו. May the Torah learned from this small work accrue to the benefit of his everlasting soul.

Reviewed and revised Elul 5774 (September 2014)  
Surfside, FL

*Fourth Edition (2016)*

5775, a year of promise, proved overwhelming. I failed to review and revise *Maimonides on Teshuvah*. It was only in 5776 (2015-2016) that I could collect my thoughts and return to this work. Much of it was written while commuting on the A Train or Long Island Railroad between the Five Towns, where we now live, to my new position in Brooklyn. The transition has not been easy, and as I write these words I am impressed with the profundity of Maimonides' observation (2.4) that "exile atones for sin,



because since it causes one to be lowly, humble, and of contrite spirit.”

On a very positive note, in Elul 5775 we welcomed Chaim Yaakov Singer into our family as the husband of our eldest daughter Raphaela, accentuating the power of the month of *teshuvah* with its great message of growth and renewal. He has been a source of great joy to our family, and I am especially privileged to enjoy learning with Chaim Yaakov Friday afternoons via videoconference. We have studied many great works of Jewish thought, including Maimonides' *The Ways of Repentance*, and my commentary is enriched by his observations.

At work, I am grateful for the support, encouragement, and mentorship I have received from Vice President and Executive Dean Robert Goldschmidt, Vice President and Dean of Faculties Stanley Boylan, and Executive Vice President Moshe Krupka, as well as from many new colleagues and faculty based in the mighty Avenue J campus of Touro College. A word of thanks is due the excellent staff of the Touro College library, and my assistant, Ms. Judy Greenfeld, who ably managed various technical aspects associated with the production of the final manuscript.

In the community, I am grateful for the spiritual leadership of Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, Mora d'Asra at Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst, Assistant Rabbi Ya'akov Trump, and President Aryeh Davis. Together they make YILC a congenial home for both quiet, contemplative prayer and vigorous intellectual inquiry. Newcomers to the Five Towns, we are slowly making friends in the community, and are especially glad to have met the Janashvili family, with whom we shared heated political debate over delicious Shabbat meals. I am especially glad that Bentsion

Janashvili devoted his personal talent to design the evocative cover of Maimonides on Teshuvah. It is rare indeed to find an artist who is as familiar with Maimonides as he is with his craft.

At home—after one’s innermost soul, truly the greatest laboratory for *teshuvah*—my beloved wife Ilana Tirzah and I continue to receive spiritual encouragement from our children, Raphaela Meirit (and Chaim Yaakov!), Danit Malka, Aliza Shoshana, Alexander Eliyahu, Boaz Uziel, and Aryeh Yitzchak. My mother, Mrs. Ethel Abramson, continues to be an inspiration for us all. We have always revered her as a model of human kindness, but in the past two difficult years we have come to understand much more clearly the depth of her character, intelligence and inner strength.

Among the many things that require my repentance, I must include weakly executed past repentance: *teshuvah* for poor *teshuvah*. May this, my yearly meditation on the holy words of the Rambam, serve at least partially as atonement for my many failings, and may I and my family earn merit for whatever small benefit you, dear reader, receive from these thoughts.

Reviewed and revised Adar II-Elul 5776 (February-August  
2016)  
Cedarhurst, NY

*Fifth Edition (2017)*

Writing these acknowledgments year after year gives me pause to reflect on the many kindnesses, and occasional challenges, that my beloved wife Ilana and I have received over the past year. My appreciation for my *Aishes Chayil* grows constantly as I increasingly perceive her deep

reservoirs of faith, strength, and inner beauty. I can only express gratitude to the Master of the Universe for providing Ilana and I with the privilege of knowing the precious souls of our children, each one brilliant in his or her own way: Raphaela and her husband Chaim Yaakov, incorporating two family traditions into something new and old at the same time; Alexander who has chosen to heroically serve the Jewish people in the Israel Defense Forces (may the Almighty protect him along with all those who bravely protect the citizens of Israel), Aliza and Boaz, both exploring their identities in often unpredictable ways, and Aryeh, who this year began to live his life as a man under Jewish law.

In 5777 we welcomed Binyamin Mills to our family as the husband of our beloved daughter Danit Malka. A full-time Torah scholar, he seems exactly the type of man she wished to marry, and we wish them much joy and success over a long and happy marriage, pursuing their common goal of spreading Torah and Hasidic thought far and wide. A special note of gratitude is due once again to Danit Malka, who provided some salient comments on the overall approach to *teshuvah*, drawn from the deep and sweet waters of Hasidic thought.

5777 represented a year of learning much un-learning: many of the things I took for granted had to be re-evaluated and re-assessed, resulting in what the Talmud might call “destruction for the sake of construction.” The process sometimes involved great heartache, and may Hashem protect our family from all trouble and woe. One of the major edits in this year’s review of Maimonides is the elimination of many passages—as the French say, *il faut reculer pour mieux sauter*.

I continue to enjoy the spiritual guidance of Morah D'Asra Moshe Teitelbaum and Rabbi Yaakov Trump at the Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst, and am happy that my family and I have found a place in the Five Towns to learn, pray, and enjoy fellowship with wonderful people. At Touro College, I am especially grateful for the leadership provided by Executive Vice President Rabbi Moshe Krupka, Vice President and Dean of Faculties Stanley Boylan, and Vice President and Executive Dean Robert Goldschmidt. I am also appreciative of the professional assistance of Ms. Jamie Venezia, whose careful and thorough management of administrative tasks and student concerns have significantly improved my creative productivity.

Reviewed and revised Nisan-Tammuz 5777  
(April-June 2017)

## About the Author



Henry Abramson earned his PhD at the University of Toronto in 1995 with a dissertation on the Jews of Ukraine. He studied at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach in Toronto, Jerusalem and Monsey, NY, and has held visiting appointments and doctoral fellowships at Cornell, Harvard, Oxford and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research has been supported by fellowships from the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and he received the Excellence in the Academy Award from the National Education Association. He currently serves as Dean at the mighty Avenue J campus of Touro's Lander College of Arts and Sciences in Brooklyn, New York.