

“repentance,”

_Teshuvah_ is from the Hebrew root שָׁוָה = to return.

**Windows on _Teshuvah_**

Rabbi Shai Held

_Teshuvah_, often translated as “repentance,” is a central theme to the High Holidays and Jewish life throughout the year. The idea that we can sin, work on ourselves, return to the correct path, and then be forgiven is just as essential as it is revolutionary. If it weren’t for this process, we could be stuck in our ways, never changing, never forgiven, always the sinner. But what does _teshuvah_ actually entail? What does the process of repentance look like? In this course, we will explore four windows into this topic that explore _teshuvah_ from different perspectives.

Our first window explores some of the preparatory work that one needs to do before they can do _teshuvah_. How can teshuvah be demonstrated or measured? What level of _teshuvah_ should we be aspiring to? How should we see ourselves in order to best begin this important work?
Central to any discussion of Jewish law and character is Maimonides. He devotes a whole section of his monumental code, the Mishneh Torah, to the laws of teshuvah. Many modern Jews' picture of teshuvah is also—consciously or unconsciously—colored by Maimonides' presentation. In these sources, Maimonides gives us some guidance on how to evaluate ourselves, a necessary step before beginning teshuvah.

As you read this text with your havruta, pay close attention to how many different categories of teshuvah Maimonides discusses and the requirements for each.

SOURCE #1

Maimonides Laws of Teshuvah 2:1

What is complete teshuvah? A man who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it because of his teshuvah alone—and not because of fear or a lack of strength. For example, a person engaged in illicit sexual relations with a woman. Afterwards, they met in privacy, in the same country, while his love for her and physical power still persisted, and nevertheless, he abstained and did not transgress.


This is a complete ba’al teshuvah...

If he does not repent until his old age, at a time when he is incapable of doing what he did before, even though this is not a high level of repentance, he is a ba’al teshuvah.

Even if he transgressed throughout his entire life and repented on the day of his death and died in repentance, all his sins are forgiven… if one remembers his Creator and repents before he dies, he is forgiven.

Questions from Rabbi Shai Held

1. What do you think of Maimonides’ standard for “complete teshuvah”? Is it attainable? Is it supposed to be?

2. Does having such a high standard inspire or discourage teshuvah? How and why?

3. If this complete teshuvah is not possible, then Maimonides offers lower forms of repentance that can be done even on one’s deathbed.

4. Given these kinds of teshuvah do not require the circumstance of the sin repeated, what do you imagine this teshuvah to be like? What happens to the inner and outer life of the penitent?

Now compare the way Maimonides presents teshuvah with one of his key talmudic sources:

SOURCE #2

What is a ba’al teshuvah? Rav Yehudah said: If the object which caused his original transgression comes...
Rav Yehudah in the Talmud seems to be setting an extremely high bar for teshuvah: you can only really have said to have done teshuvah after having been faced with the same situation twice and having resisted the temptation each time. Maimonides codifies this rule as well. This would suggest that Maimonides broadly agrees with this demanding approach.

However, Maimonides doesn’t say that this is the bar for normal teshuvah, but “complete teshuvah”—a higher level of teshuvah than, say, repenting on one’s deathbed. He offers lower versions of the ideal as well, suggesting that he also wants to follow a more pastoral, gentler approach, one that seems attainable.

1. What do you think of Maimonides’ juggling act? What do you think is he trying to gain that he felt was lacking in Rav Yehudah’s presentation, and what do you think he loses?

Note also that Rambam added an element that was absent from Rav Yehudah’s teaching: motivation. It can’t be, he says, that the person didn’t repeat their sin because of fear or a lack of strength; it must be solely due to the teshuvah they have done. In this way, he makes Rav Yehudah’s already very high standard even higher.

1. What do you think about the role of motivation in teshuvah?

2. Do you think avoiding sin because of fear or lack of strength is just as admirable? Less? More? Why?

WE ARE ALL IN THE MIDDLE

Inherited from classical Rabbinic literature are the categories tzadik (righteous), rasha (wicked), and beinoni (in the middle, neither righteous nor wicked). While you might assume that very few of us are tzadikim (a lot of good deeds) or resha’im (a lot of bad deeds), and therefore most of us are beinonim (a lot of each), in fact Maimonides suggests the opposite:

SOURCE #3

Maimonides Laws of Teshuvah 3:1
Each and every person has merits
By Maimonides’ logic, because your merits and your sins have to be **exactly equal** in order to be a **beinoni**, it is safe to assume that in fact **none** of us are **beinonim**. This in itself is a fascinating way to view the world, but it is even more interesting when compared to the way Maimonides suggests we see ourselves during the **teshuvah** process:

**Maimonides Laws of Teshuvah 3:4**

Throughout the entire year, a person should always look at himself as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If he performs one sin, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings destruction upon himself.

[On the other hand,] if he performs one mitzvah, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others...
Questions from Rabbi Shai Held

1. What do you think about Maimonides’ idea that we should all imagine that we and the world are on the precipice between salvation and destruction? What kind of ethic is he trying to instill in us? Is he successful? Why or why not?

2. In what ways does the image of merit and sin as a balancing scale resonate with you or not?

3. Given that Maimonides thinks that none of us are beinonim, how can this be reconciled with his instruction that we imagine that we are? How does the reader live in this counterfactual?

Take a Step Back

Take some time at the end of your session to discuss with your havruta Maimonides’ teachings on teshuvah here in a more general way. How do his ideas relate to how you have seen teshuvah in the past? How do they relate to your personal experience of teshuvah and the High Holiday period?