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Windows on *Teshuvah*

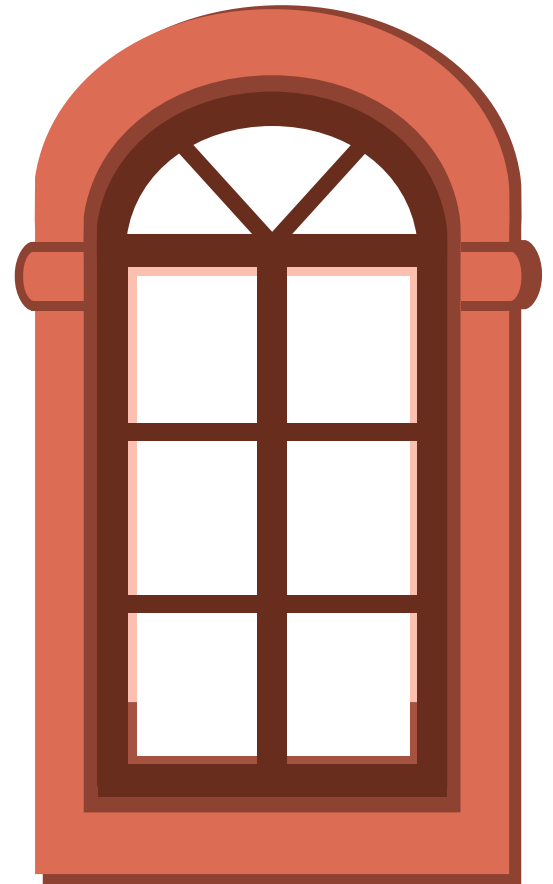
Rabbi Shai Held

◆ “repentance,”

Teshuvah is from the Hebrew root **שׁוּב**. = to return.

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?





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SESSION 1 The Beginning of *Teshuvah*

◆ Maimonides

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (1138–1204), also called the Rambam, remains today one of the most important Jewish thinkers of all time. Not only did he prepare his compendium of all rabbinic law (Mishneh Torah = “The Repetition of the Torah”)—the point of which was to summarise the rulings of the Talmud in such a way that you would never need another book in order to know the *halakhah*—he is also a giant in aligning philosophy with Jewish tradition (e.g. in his *Guide of the Perplexed*). A genius in Torah, he was also well-versed in the science of his day, and served as a doctor to the Muslim sultan Saladin in Egypt.

◆ A man

Maimonides (and his talmudic source below) assumes that the audience of his book are straight men and therefore, when coming up with an example of a sin, talks about illicit sex with a woman. But this is merely an example he thought would be easily understandable to his readers, not a limitation on his vision of *teshuvah*.

HOW HIGH IS THE BAR FOR *TESHUVAH*?

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

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ב:א
אי זו היא תשובה גמורה, זה
שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר
בידו לעשותו ופירש ולא עשה
מפני התשובה, לא מיראה
ולא מכשלוך כח, כיצד הרי
שבא על אשה בעבירה ולאחר
זמן נתייחד עמה והוא עומד
באהבתו בה ובכח גופו ובמדינה
שעבר בה ופירש ולא עבר זהו
בעל תשובה גמורה...

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.

◇ **ba'al teshuvah**

Literally “a master of *teshuvah*”—i.e. someone who has successfully completed the *teshuvah* process.

◇ **died in repentance**

There will be more discussion of this theme in session 4.

◇ **Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86b**

Yoma is the section of the Talmud about Yom Kippur, a natural place for discussing *teshuvah*.

◇ **Rav Yehudah**

A prominent late 3rd century Babylonian sage.

ואם לא שב אלא בימי זקנותו
ובעת שאי אפשר לו לעשות מה
שהיה עושה אף על פי שאינה
תשובה מעולה מועלת היא לו
ובעל תשובה הוא,

אפילו עבר כל ימיו ועשה
תשובה ביום מיתתו ומת
בתשובתו כל עונותיו נמחלין...
אם זכר בוראו ושב קודם שימות
נסלח לו.

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 □

תלמוד בבלי יומא דף פו עמוד ב
היכי דמי בעל תשובה? אמר רב
יהודה: כגון שבאת לידו דבר
עבירה פעם ראשונה ושניה וניצל


Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86b◇

What is a *ba'al teshuvah*? Rav Yehudah◇ said: If the object which caused his original transgression comes

◇ **as well**

Noting that Maimonides sets the bar at only one repeated situation, versus Rav Yehudah's two. It's also worth noting that, in a later section of his laws of *teshuvah* (2:4), Maimonides makes it clear that you should avoid as much as possible the object of your sin. Certainly no one here recommends actively putting yourself back in the same position in order to test whether you are a *ba'al teshuvah*!

◇ **classical Rabbinic literature**

See e.g. Mishnah Avot 5:10. 

הימנה, מחוי רב יהודה: באותה
אשה, באותו פרק, באותו מקום

before him on two occasions, and is saved from it. Rav Yehudah indicated: With the same woman, at the same time, in the same place.

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 

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ג:א
כל אחד ואחד מבני האדם יש לו

Maimonides Laws of Teshuvah 3:1
Each and every person has merits

זכיות ועונות, מי שזכיותיו יתירות על עונותיו
צדיק, ומי שעונותיו יתירות על זכיותיו רשע,
מחצה למחצה בינוני, וכן המדינה אם היו
זכיות כל יושביה מרובות על עונותיהן הרי
זו צדקת, ואם היו עונותיהם מרובין הרי זו
רשעה, וכן כל העולם כולו.

and sins. A person whose merits exceed his sins is [termed] a tzadik. A person whose sins exceed his merits is [termed] a rasha. If [his sins and merits] are equal, he is termed a beinoni.

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:

SOURCE #4

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ג:ד

לפיכך צריך כל אדם שיראה עצמו כל
השנה כולה כאילו חציו זכאי וחציו חייב,
וכן כל העולם חציו זכאי וחציו חייב, חטא
חטא אחד הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל
העולם כולו לכף חובה וגרם לו השחתה,

עשה מצוה אחת הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת
כל העולם כולו לכף זכות וגרם לו ולהם
תשועה והצלה...

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?