

# The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn



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## THE PARADOX OF TESHUVAH

In the first chapter of Igeres Hateshuvah, the Alter Rebbe tells us the exact definition of what it means to do *teshuvah*:

"*Min hatorah*, the mitzvah of *teshuvah* entails abandoning the sin, and nothing more (*azivas hachet bilvad*). In other words, the sinner must sincerely resolve not to return to foolishness by rebelling against Hashem's authority, and not to transgress the King's command, both *mitzvos aseh* and *mitzvos lo saaseh*."

Analyzing this short paragraph can provide us with much insight into what *teshuvah* is all about.

### THE ONLY FACTOR

First of all, with these words the Alter Rebbe is highlighting a tremendous leniency in the mitzvah of *teshuvah*.

The mitzvah of *teshuvah*, says the Alter Rebbe, entails one thing and one thing only—to resolve not to sin again. With the word *bilvad* ("and nothing more"), the Alter Rebbe is teaching us that fasting and other methods of penance typically associated with *teshuvah* are not part of the *mitzvah*.

What's more, the word *bilvad* excludes even those elements that do affect one's atonement, such as the obligation to feel remorse for his misdeeds (*charatah*) and to verbally express his regret and resolve (*viduy*). Although these are integral parts of the *teshuvah* process, without which the sinner will not achieve atonement, they are not what the essence of *teshuvah* is about.

The essence of *teshuvah*, says the Alter Rebbe, is limited to a single point: the resolve to mend one's ways from now on.

### A BROAD RESOLVE

This idea is also expressed in the well-known *halachah* of a *rasha* who betrothed a woman on condition that he is a *tzaddik*. The *din* is that she is betrothed out of doubt, as he may have resolved at that moment to turn over a new leaf.

Surprisingly, this *din* applies even if the person in question is a

thief, and the stolen items are still in his possession. Atonement cannot be achieved until he returns what he has stolen, yet he has done *teshuvah* and is considered a *tzaddik* just because he resolved to change!

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Together with this great leniency, the Alter Rebbe also emphasizes a tremendous stringency. Although *teshuvah* only entails resolving not to sin, the resolve that must exist is a broad one. It is not, as one would assume, merely a resolve to refrain from committing *this particular sin* again, rather it is a commitment to accept Hashem's authority and refrain from transgressing *any sin* ("not to

transgress the King's command, both *mitzvos aseh* and *mitzvos lo saaseh*").

What is the logic behind this? Why does *teshuvah* consist of specifically such a framework?

### TWO ELEMENTS OF SIN

When a person transgresses, *chas veshalom*, two things occur. First of all, he is displaying his lack of subservience to Hashem. By nature, a Jew is Hashem's servant and fulfills what He commands; disobeying His Will demonstrates he does not reckon with Hashem's authority. Secondly, he creates a blemish in his *neshamah*. In practical terms, this means that every sin a person commits introduces a negative characteristic into his persona.

Since a sin brings about these two results, two things are necessary to rectify it. First of all, the sinner must accept Hashem's authority upon himself once again. He must recognize that it is Hashem, not he, who is in charge of his conduct, and he must commit to acting as a servant of Hashem instead of following his heart's desires. This transforms him from a *porek ol* (one who casts off the yoke of Hashem) to an *eved Hashem* (servant of Hashem), which is the essence of *teshuvah*.

Then there is achieving atonement—*kapparah*, which translates

as “cleansing.” In order to cleanse the spiritual damage incurred by the sin, further actions are necessary. With mitzvos between man and Hashem, *charatah* and *viduy* must be done, while mitzvos between man and his follow require additional corrections, such as returning the stolen object or requesting forgiveness.

[The reason *charatah* and *viduy* are what erase the defect is as follows: Every sin creates a *kelipah*. The act of the sin creates the *kelipah*'s “body,” while the enjoyment the sinner experienced instills its “soul.” By regretting his misconduct one removes the soul of the *kelipah*, while verbally expressing his regret erases the body.]

## THE RIGHTEOUS THIEF

We can now understand why the essence of *teshuvah* consists of resolving to fulfill Torah and mitzvos, and nothing more. True, if he has not yet regretted his past or said *viduy*, the defect remains in place. Yes, if he has not yet returned the stolen object, the added defect this causes is still there. But since he has committed to return to Hashem and fulfill His Will, he has done *teshuvah*.

This is also why a *rasha* who betrothed a woman is considered a *tzaddik*, just by virtue of his thoughts of repentance. In its basic meaning (not the definition given in Tanya), a *tzaddik* is a person who accepts Hashem's authority and adheres to His Will as dictated in Shulchan Aruch, while a *rasha* is one who rejects the Heavenly yoke and does as he wishes. In this context, as soon as he resolves to live as a servant of Hashem, he is a *tzaddik*, regardless of any blemish (or unreturned stolen objects) that may still remain.

This also explains the above-mentioned stringency in *teshuvah*. Although a resolve alone is sufficient, the resolve must be that he is accepting Hashem's authority in every area. If he only

resolves to cease committing this particular sin but still plans on doing others, he is not yet a true servant of Hashem, and his *teshuvah* is lacking.

(This does not mean that to do proper *teshuvah*, one must resolve to become a *beinoni* of Tanya. Although a true *eved Hashem* serves Hashem properly in every aspect, the fact is that with certain misdeeds, a person may not feel he is disregarding Hashem's authority by doing them. Such transgressions will not render him a *porek ol*, one who casts off the yoke of Hashem. *Teshuvah* means a person must resolve to accept Hashem's authority in all those areas *he feels* constitute defying Hashem's command.)

## THE DEPTH OF “BILVAD”

By using the word *bilvad*, the Alter Rebbe is hinting to something yet deeper.

However important it is to cleanse the blemish and initiate atonement, it does not affect the essential connection of a Jew and Hashem. But accepting Hashem's sovereignty, on the other hand, is something that is important (so to speak) for Hashem Himself. It is significant in the highest levels Above that we are and act as *avadim* of Hashem.

This idea is hinted to in the word *bilvad*. Through *azivas hachet bilvad*, abandoning the sin and nothing more, we reach *hu ushmo bilvad*, the level

where Hashem and His name are one.

For further study, see לקוטי שיחות חלק לט ע' 123. שיעורים בספר התניא (אידיש) אגה"ת ע' 1069, 1065-1064.

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