

It's the Thought That Counts

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The will to goodness is everything; all of the skills in the universe are only the means of completing it.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook, Orot haTeshuvah 9:1

הרצון הטוב הוא הכל, וכל
הכשרונות שבעולם אינם אלא
מלוואי
אורות התשובה ט:א

Is Teshuvah in my Thoughts, or in my Speech?

Lulav. Matzah. Talmud Torah. Tzedakah. Teshuvah.

When the Rambam (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 1:1) adopted Rabbi Meir's phraseology (*Mishna, Yoma* 9:3) describing a process of "performing *teshuvah*," he framed our understanding of the mitzvah as action-based. This is cemented by his description of *viduy* as a verbal enumeration of our failings.¹⁶ Just as we wave a *lulav*, ingest matzah, study Torah and give *tzedakah*, so we perform *teshuvah* with our speech, listing our sins and articulating our regret.

Of course, speech is crucial: Speaking our sins aloud makes the admission concrete, and compels us to confront the reality of our criminal record. But is there no intrinsic value in the thoughts which lead to these words? Is my regret merely a *hechsher mitzvah*, preparation and catalyst for the declaration which is the mitzvah? Or are my thoughts also an "act" of *teshuvah*?

The Talmud itself indicates that thoughts can constitute *teshuvah*:

If a man proposes, "Marry me on condition that I am a tzaddik," then even if he is fully wicked, she is married; perhaps thought of teshuvah in his mind.

Kiddushin 49b

על מנת שאני צדיק אפילו רשע
גמור מקודשת שמא הרהר תשובה
בדעתו
קידושין מט:

They said regarding Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya that he omitted no zonah in the world... He then sat between two mountains and hills and asked, "Mountains and hills, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!" ... He then asked, "Heavens and earth, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!" ... He then asked, "Sun and Moon, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on

אמרו עליו על ר"א בן דורדיא שלא
הניח זונה אחת בעולם שלא בא עליה...
הלך וישב בין שני הרים וגבעות אמר
הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו
לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על
עצמנו... אמר שמים וארץ בקשו עלי
רחמים אמרו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך
נבקש על עצמנו... אמר חמה ולבנה
בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו

¹⁶ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2. Indeed, the Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuvah* never identifies regret as a stage in *teshuvah*; he only mentions that one's *viduy* declaration includes a statement that one regrets his past deeds.

your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!" ... He then asked, "Stars and constellations, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!" ... He then said: The matter depends only upon me. He placed his head between his knees and cried out in tears until his soul departed. A voice emerged and declared, "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is prepared for life in the next world!"

Avodah Zarah 17a

מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו... אמר כוכבים ומזלות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו... אמר אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו יצתה בת קול ואמרה ר"א בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם הבא **עבודה זרה יז.**

But these sources are puzzling: The transforming effect of verbal confession is clear, but why should the cycling of a synapse suffice to translate "fully wicked" into "tzaddik"? If a listing of sins is critical to *teshuvah*, how could Elazar ben Durdaya earn the next world, not to mention ordination, for repentance which amounted to internal thought and an animal wail?

Teshuvah: A Return to Greatness

Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook proposed a concept of internal *teshuvah*, repentance played out on a stage within the heart. While Rav Kook acknowledged our obligation to speak in confession and act in correction, he emphasized that our first step is to think in contrition.

As Rav Kook explained, we are created as pure souls, but entry into a material realm dulls our sensitivity to the sacred and so makes us vulnerable to sin. We are challenged to assert our spirit over our material trappings, strengthening our holiest aspect and committing ourselves to life on a higher plane. This is the process of repentance:

Entities come into existence as a descent from the Divine realm to worldly realms – a form of descent and of terrible "death" – to which no earthly descent... can compare. This is engineered on the higher calculation of justice, which gauged the justice of existence before anything was created... But this descent has the foundation for greater ascent stored within... as it is written, "Before mountains were birthed and earth and foundation were formed, You were G-d for all eternity. You laid man low, and declared, 'Return, sons of men!'"

Orot haTeshuvah 11:4

ההויות מתגלות בתור ירידה מאלקיות לעולמיות, שהיא כמו השפלה ו"מיתה" נוראה, אשר כל הירידות שבעולם... לא ישוו לה. וכל זה מעשה על פי המשקל העליון של שפיטת הצדק המשערת את משפט ההויות בטרם כל יציר נברא... אמנם ירידה זו הלא יסוד העליה העליונה גנוז בה... בטרם הרים ילדו ותחולל ארץ ותבל ומעולם עד עולם אתה קל תשב אנוש עד דכא ותאמר שובו בני אדם **אורות התשובה יא:7**

Our pure thoughts are our return to greatness

Within this philosophy, perfection is always present, albeit hidden, within the human being. As Rav Kook promised,¹⁷ "*Teshuvah* always resides in the heart; it is stored in the heart even during the sin itself." This pledge did not originate with Rav Kook; its roots are in the Talmudic¹⁸

¹⁷ *Orot haTeshuvah* 6:2

¹⁸ *Nedarim* 39a

statement that repentance was created before the universe itself. Embedded in the Divine schematic is our pristine core, and the route via which we restore it as our identity.

Certainly, the journey back to this truest nature of our soul involves actions, as described by the Rambam, but it is not defined by those actions. Rather, *teshuvah* – literally "return" – is a spiritual quest during which we retrieve the ethereal identity hidden beneath material layers. We seek the Divine message, and this search, taking place in our thoughts, is itself a revelation of our purity:

Via thoughts of teshuvah, one hears the voice of G-d calling to him from within the Torah, from within his heart's emotions, from within the world, its fullness and all therein... Thoughts of teshuvah reveal the depth of one's desire, and the strength of the soul is revealed in all of its glory through those thoughts. The greater the thought of teshuvah, the greater its liberation.

Orot haTeshuvah 7:3-4

The will to goodness is everything; all of the skills in the universe are only the means of completing it. The content of one's will [to goodness] is imprinted upon his soul by the light of return that is affixed within, and as a result, the great flow of Divine inspiration is manifested upon him continually, and a will which is great in its holiness, beyond the trait embedded in other human beings, grows powerful within him.

Orot haTeshuvah 9:1

This may explain how a man can declare himself righteous and be granted that status instantly, such that his proposal of "Marry me on condition that I am a *tzaddik*" is accepted on the basis of an intellectual decision – he has revealed his unsullied core, and therefore he is now a *tzaddik*.

This may also explain how Elazar ben Durdaya could, in the words of Rebbe, "acquire his world in a single moment," despite a career of immersion in immorality. The sinner had done nothing to correct his sin, but his immense regret displayed his native character.

To cite the words of Rav Kook:

One who feels within himself the depth of regret of teshuvah, and the exasperated desire in his thoughts to mend his flaws – those he is already capable of mending and those he is not yet capable of mending but for which he anticipates Divine mercy – can already count himself among the righteous.

Orot haTeshuvah 8:6

על ידי הרהורי תשובה שומע האדם קול ד' הקורא עליו מתוך התורה, ומתוך כל רגשי הלב, מתוך העולם ומלואו וכל אשר בו... הרהורי התשובה הם הם מגלים את עומק הרצון, והגבורה של הנשמה מתגלה על ידם בכל מילוי הודה, ולפי גדלה של התשובה כך היא מדת החירות שלה.

אורות התשובה ז:ג-ד

הרצון הטוב הוא הכל, וכל הכשרונות שבעולם אינם אלא מלואיו, נעשה תוכן מוטבע בנפשו על ידי אור התשובה הקבוע בו, וממילא חל עליו שפע גדול של רוח הקדש בתדירות, ורצון נשגב בקדושה, למעלה מהמדה הקבועה של בני אדם רגילים, הולך ומתגבר בו.

אורות התשובה ט:א

וכל המרגיש בעצמו עומק נחם התשובה והתמרמרות המחשבה לתקון פגמיו, בין אותן שתקונם כבר עולה בידו בין אותם שתקונם אינו עולה עדיין בידו והוא מצפה עליהם לרחמים, יכלול את עצמו בזה בכלל הצדיקים.

אורות התשובה ח:ו

Using our thoughts to create our tongues anew

This idea can help answer a challenge put forth by the Chida,¹⁹ regarding the acceptability of our verbal *viduy*.

We are taught "אין קטגור נעשה סניגור," that a prosecutor cannot switch sides to serve as a defense attorney. Based on this principle, gold may not be used for the garments worn by the Kohen Gadol when he enters the Holy of Holies to appeal for forgiveness; gold represents the sin of the Golden Calf.²⁰ How, then, can a mouth which has spoken *lashon hara* offer acceptable *viduy* before G-d – is this not a case of the agent of sin becoming a defense attorney? If gold represents ancient idolatry and is therefore ineligible before G-d, then a tongue which was used for evil should certainly be unacceptable for *viduy*!

The Chida sought to resolve the problem by explaining that once a person repents, he becomes a new creature. Therefore, the tongue in his mouth is no longer the same tongue that sinned, and it may be used for *viduy*. However, others objected to this answer: If *teshuvah* is effective only via the *viduy* declaration, then the conversion of sinner to *tzaddik* does not take place until the *viduy* is complete!

Rav Michael Yaakov Yisrael, a 19th century Turkish Rav and author of *ימין שנות*, answered the objection, explaining that once a person produces thoughts of *teshuvah*, he is already recreated as a new person. Therefore, the tongue is "new" before we ever arrive at the *viduy* declaration. This mirrors Rav Kook's conception of *teshuvah*: Our thoughts of repentance are our return to greatness, restoring us to our spiritual greatness.

First, then, we engage ourselves in thoughts of repentance, returning to the pristine spirit inside, removing obstructions and awakening our spiritual talents. Only afterward do we embark upon the process of actualizing those thoughts through the speech of *viduy* and through the actions of correction.

We are promised that when we commit ourselves mentally to a path of repentance, G-d will take this as a down payment, and ease the remainder of our journey:

When one's thoughts are bound to holiness and to the desire for teshuvah, one should not fear at all. Certainly, HaShem will prepare all of the paths via which complete teshuvah – illuminating all of the dark spaces with the light of its life – is acquired.

Orot haTeshuvah 7:5

כיון שהרעיון קשור לקדושה ולחפץ
התשובה, אין מה לפחד כלל, ודאי יזמין
השי"ת את כל הדרכים, שהתשובה
הגמורה, המאירה את כל המחשכים באור
חייה, היא נקנית על ידם.
אורות התשובה ז:ה

May we commit ourselves to return to internal purity, and follow up with practical steps, and so merit a *כתיבה וחתימה טובה*.

¹⁹ Cited in *Sdei Chemed Maarechet*, Klal י"ה

²⁰ Talmud, *Rosh haShanah* 26a