

# Strategies for Transformative Teshuva

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One of the most frustrating Elul experiences is reflecting back on the past year and seeing that many goals for change that had been laid out last year on Rosh Hashana did not go as planned and are still in need of *teshuvah*. After a year, it's a very depressing thought to think "I'm right where I was last year."

It may lead one to wonder, as much as I am anticipating the impending *yemei hadin*, what's the point? What am I doing wrong? Why can't I make the changes last?

Two insightful comments from *gedolim* of the past generations are in fact strategies that can help the teshuvah of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur be more than sudden inspiration, rather substantial transformation.

## Rav Yisrael Salanter

*Hashem says, my children, create for me a small opening of Teshuvah, as tiny as the head of a pin, and I will open for you openings that even wagons and chariots can pass through.*

**Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:2**

בני פתחו לי פתח אחד של תשובה כחודה  
של מחט, ואני אפתח לכם פתחים שאפי'  
עגלות וקרונות נכנסים בו  
שיר השירים רבה ה:ב

Apparently it is not necessary and perhaps we are not even expected to do a full *teshuvah gemura* all by ourselves, rather, our task is to do a little bit and Hashem guarantees us that he will respond in kind and make our *teshuvah* even more expansive.

As beautiful as the words of this Midrash are, they are very perplexing. What does it mean to do just a little bit of *teshuvah*? The Rambam tells us in *Mishnah Torah (Hilchos Teshuvah 2:2-3)* that there are three central components to *teshuvah*: regret, *viduy* and leaving the sin permanently. The Rambam writes that we must do all three parts to reach the point of removing ourselves from a sin to the extent that Hashem Himself can testify about us that we will never

return to such a sin! How do we do just a little bit, part of the whole, that's not enough? If I have to pick one of the three which should I pick? Is the Midrash teaching that if we regret our sins Hashem will take care of the rest? That's certainly not the impression the Rambam gives, rather it's all or nothing. What then is the Midrash relating when it says that a small hole of *teshuvah* is sufficient?

Rav Yisrael Salanter, father of the mussar movement, explains in *Ohr Yisrael* (letter 6), a collection of letters written to his students, a fundamental principle that in turn sheds light on the words of the Midrash in Shir hashirim. He says that different people can do the exact same mitzvah or the exact same *aveirah* and receive different rewards or punishment. The same person can even do the exact same thing at two different times and be rewarded (or punished) differently. How is that possible? The Mishna says in *Pirkei Avos* (5:19) לפיכך צערה אגרה, the reward is set according to the pain and effort involved in a mitzvah pursuit. Not every action is viewed the same, there is a context to the action that affects the exertion involved. He therefore suggests that every mitzvah or *aveirah* can be divided into two categories those that are קל, easy, and those that are כבד, difficult. Whether something is easy or difficult is determined based on the overall picture, a person's natural tendencies, the pressure of the particular situation and any other pertinent factor. Based on the principle of the Mishna in *Avos*, the reward for an easy mitzvah is less than that of a difficult one, but the flipside is true as well, the punishment for violating an *aveirah* that was easy to circumvent is greater.

For example, if one attends minyan daily it is an easy mitzvah, while for that very same person the mitzvah of *Talmud Torah*, finding time to engage in Torah study may be very difficult. *Davening* with a minyan is an "easy" mitzvah while learning Torah is a "difficult" mitzvah, thus the reward for the performance of the mitzvah will take into account how difficult the mitzvah is for this person at this time.

Rav Yisrael Salanter then takes this idea one step further. The difference between the easy and the difficult within the same mitzvah is as stark as the difference between two different *mitzvos* or *aveiros*.

For example, regarding *lashon hara*, there is a difference between speaking *lashon hara* about a random acquaintance versus a spouse or very close friend. It's much easier not to say *lashon hara* about someone close to us who we care dearly about such as a spouse or good friend than an acquaintance with whom we don't have a very personal relationship. Therefore, the reward for overcoming the desire to speak *lashon hara* about a random acquaintance is much greater than avoiding *lashon hara* about a spouse. [Certainly, though, the reverse is also true; the punishment if we do speak about someone close to us, when it is easily avoidable, is much more severe.]

With this idea we now can understand the Midrash in Shir haShirim. Opening up a small amount of *teshuvah* does not mean to do a partial *teshuvah* on everything (one of the three components) that in fact is a deficient *teshuvah*, rather Rav Yisrael teaches an astounding *chidush*, the same way one who was steeped in a particular *aveirah* and leaves all aspects of it completely is considered a *ba'al teshuvah* for that specific *aveirah*, so too a person who has a real *kabala* (plus the other aspects of *teshuvah*) to never go back to even just the easy aspects of a

particular *aveirah*, is considered a בעל תשובה גמור, a complete *ba'al teshuvah* on that matter. It's not enough to do part of a whole, but a whole of part is enough!

That's the strategy we learn from Rav Yisrael Salanter, if we want change that will last, start with correcting those items that are easier to fix, with a full *teshuvah*, and Hashem will help making the *teshuvah* even broader to reach those areas that are more difficult and ultimately ensure that the *teshuvah* will be transformative.

## Chafetz Chaim

"And now", the word "now" refers to *teshuva*, as it is written "and now, Israel, what does Hashem [ask of you]..."

**Midrash Rabbah 21:6**

ועתה, אין ועתה אלא תשובה, שנאמר  
(דברים י) ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך  
בראשית רבה כא:ו

The words of this Midrash are difficult to understand, how does the word ועתה imply *teshuvah*, if anything it's the continuation of the *passuk*, the part that is not even cited by the Midrash that implies something similar to *teshuvah* as the *passuk* continues that G-d asks of us to fear him and follow in His paths?

The Chafetz Chaim (*Ahavas Chesed Perek 11*) explains that the lesson of this Midrash is that one needs to realize that the most potent weapon that the *Satan* uses against Bnai Yisrael is procrastination. One will plan on beginning to learn or fulfill a mitzvah properly and the *Yetzer Hara* will tell the person, "sure, no problem, fulfill this mitzvah, but do it tomorrow". Each and every day the *Yetzer Hara* tries the same thing and in the end the inspiration dies and no change has been made.

The Chafetz Chaim writes about procrastination in very powerful language:

*If one contemplates this he'll realize that this [procrastination] is the greatest factor of all factors that prevent one from serving Hashem, and because of it a person remains naked of Torah and mitzvos and repentance, because the person who is lazy will always push off everything until tomorrow or to another future date.*

ובאמת כשנתבונן בזה, היא הסבה  
הגדולה שבכל הסבות המונע את האדם  
מעבודת השם יתברך, ועל ידה נשאר  
האדם ערום מתורה ומצוות ומתשובה  
כי מטבע העצל לדחות כל דבר ודבר  
למחר וליומא אחרא

This, the Chafetz Chaim suggests, is the explanation of the Midrash. The word ועתה, and now, means *teshuvah*, not because of the continuation of the *passuk*, rather because it, the word ועתה, contains a fundamental principle for effective *teshuvah*; *teshuvah* has to be done now, if a person procrastinates and waits until tomorrow then the chances of the change he is hoping to implement succeeding decreases.

When you're ready to improve in any way, learning, *davening*, being a better friend, whatever it may be, if you try and implement the change immediately instead of waiting for what you may think is the opportune moment you'll be more likely to succeed.

The *Chafetz Chaim* adds an *eitzah*, advice, that he says he heard from a *gaon echad*, a certain great *talmid chacham*, on how to defeat the *Yetzer Hara* that tries to push off realizing our spiritual gains until tomorrow.

He says a person needs to contemplate two points. The first is that he only has a single day to live, there is no tomorrow – I need to do what needs to be done today. The second point is that he only has one page of Gemara to learn, I only have the task in front of me- as overwhelming as a task may be don't push it off, my responsibility is only to the task at hand.

This, says the *Chafetz Chaim*, is essential for a *teshuvah* that is going to be transformative. When the inspiration comes and you're ready to make changes, ויעתה, it needs to be done now, worry about later at another time, for now focus on the task at hand and you'll have a better chance to succeed.

If we combine these two strategies, Rav Yisrael Salanter's lesson that it's more critical to do a full *teshuvah* on part of a mitzvah (even the easier part), than a partial *teshuvah* on a whole mitzvah, and the *Chofetz Chaim's* lesson of acting with immediacy without procrastination, then hopefully we'll succeed in doing our partial *teshuvah* without procrastinating and, as the Midrash says, Hashem will see that small opening of *teshuvah* and widen it and our *teshuvah* will transform us for the coming year and we'll all be written in the book of life, health and happiness.