

# TESHUVA: SELF-REFLECTION AS RESTORATION

*Rabbi Aaron Portman*

The concept of teshuva plays a central role in Jewish consciousness. Teshuva can mean “repentance,” or the turning away from past sins and asking for forgiveness. Teshuva can also mean “return,” perhaps the return to one’s true self, or a return to goodness and justice. Teshuva and forgiveness come hand-in-hand, the process of teshuva ideally culminating in forgiveness of the self and forgiveness of others.

During the season leading up to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and concluding on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, teshuva serves as the vehicle through which radical self-reflection and transformation can occur. Individuals are tasked with taking a hard look at themselves and asking “what have I done, and what can I do better.” Communities might reflect on where they succeeded and where they failed. The process of self-evaluation can be challenging, but it is an important step in developing intentional selves and societies.

Unfortunately, we live in a society where the notion of restorative and regenerative self-reflection is devalued. The carceral system, specifically, ignores the value of teshuva and replaces it with a dehumanizing, punitive system of mass incarceration, where many are unjustly imprisoned and none are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful acts of teshuva.

In this study session, we will investigate the ways Jewish texts--specifically the writings of Maimonides, a 12th c. Spanish rabbi and philosopher--have defined and categorized teshuva, and what it might mean in our own practices of reflection and returning. Is there a way to return from bad behavior? What if we hurt someone else? How should we treat those who have done wrong? How might we build a community that places value on teshuva? Does the carceral system help facilitate teshuva, and what might an alternative look like?

## TESHUVA AND INCARCERATION

### I. What is Teshuva? How does it work?

Mishneh Torah, Maimonides

Laws of Repentance Chapter 1

(1) ... Those obligated to be executed or lashed by the court do not attain atonement through their death or lashing unless they repent and confess.

(4) ... There are certain sins that can be atoned for immediately, and other sins that can only be atoned for over the course of time.

Chapter 2

(1) ... Even if one sinned every day and repented on the day of death, and died in repentance, all of the sins are forgiven.

**משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה א'**

(א) ... וְכֵן כָּל מַחֲיָבֵי מִיתוֹת בֵּית דִּין  
וּמַחֲיָבֵי מַלְקוֹת אֵין מִתְכַּפֵּר לָהֶן בְּמִיתָתָן אוּ  
בְלִקְיָתָן עַד שֶׁיַּעֲשׂוּ תְשׁוּבָה וְיִתְוַדּוּ:

(ד) ... יֵשׁ עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁהֵן מִתְכַּפְּרִים לְשַׁעֲתָן  
וְיֵשׁ עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁאֵין מִתְכַּפְּרִים אֶלָּא לְאַחַר זְמַן.

**הלכות תשובה ב'**

(א) ... אֶפְלוּ עֵבֵר כָּל יְמָיו וְעָשָׂה תְשׁוּבָה בְּיוֹם  
מִיתָתוֹ וּמַת בְּתְשׁוּבָתוֹ כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָיו נִמְחָלִין:

1) Does [Rambam's](#) definition of Teshuva resonate with you? Are there things here that trouble you?

2) Does applying the above laws to the idea of prisoners--some of whom may have committed real and violent crimes--change your ability to believe in this kind of Teshuva?

## II. Punishment v. Repentance

Mishneh Torah, Maimonides

### Laws of Repentance Chapter 7

(3) ... One should also turn away from bad tendencies, from anger, hatred, jealousy, deceit, the pursuit of wealth, honor, feasting and the like; from all of these it is necessary to turn in repentance. Indeed these iniquities are more grievous and more difficult for one to be separated from than those which require action.

(4) Let not a ba'al teshuva (one who returns in repentance) imagine that they are far from the degree of the righteous on account of the iniquities and sins which they have committed. It is not so, in fact the Creator considers the ba'al teshuva beloved and desirable, as if they had never sinned ...The sages said: "The place whereon the ba'al teshuva stands the wholly righteous could not stand."

(8) ... It is a grievous sin to say to a ba'al teshuva: "Remember your previous deeds", or to recall the sins in their presence so as to put them to shame, or to mention things and subjects similar to the sins so as to bring up what had been done. This is all forbidden.

### הלכות תשובה ז'

(ג) ... כִּי הוּא צָרִיךְ לְחַפֵּשׂ בְּדַעוֹת רָעוֹת שֵׁשׁ לוֹ וְלָשׁוּב מִן הַכַּעַס וּמִן הָאִיבָה וּמִן הַקְּנָאָה וּמִן הַהִתּוֹל וּמִרְדִּיפַת הַמָּמוֹן וְהַקְּבוֹד וּמִרְדִּיפַת הַמַּאֲכָלוֹת וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן מִן הַכֹּל צָרִיךְ לְחַזֵּר בְּתִשׁוּבָה. וְאֵלּוּ הָעוֹנוֹת קָשִׁים מְאוֹתָן שֵׁשׁ בָּהֶן מַעֲשֵׂה שְׂבִיזָמָן שְׂאֵדָם נִשְׁקַע בְּאֵלּוּ קָשָׁה הוּא לְפָרֵשׁ מֵהֶם:

(ד) וְאֵל יְדִמָּה אָדָם בְּעַל תִּשְׁוּבָה שֶׁהוּא מְרַחֵק מִמַּעֲלַת הַצְּדִיקִים מִפְּנֵי הָעוֹנוֹת וְהַחֲטָאוֹת שֶׁעָשָׂה. אֵין הַדָּבָר כֵּן אֲלֵא אֶהוּב וְנִחְמָד הוּא לְפָנֵי הַבּוֹרָא כְּאֵלּוּ לֹא חָטָא מֵעוֹלָם... אָמְרוּ חַכְמֵי מְקוֹם שְׂבִיבְעֵלִי תִשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין אֵין צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִין יְכוּלִין לַעֲמֹד בּוּ.

(ח) ... וְחָטָא גְמוּר הוּא לֹא לְבַעַל תִּשְׁוּבָה זְכוֹר מַעֲשֵׂיךְ הָרָאשׁוֹנִים אוֹ לְהַזְכִּירָן לְפָנֶיךָ כְּדִי לְבִישׁוֹ. אוֹ לְהַזְכִּיר דְּבָרִים וְעֲנִינִים הַדּוֹמִין לָהֶם כְּדִי לְהַזְכִּירוֹ מֶה עָשָׂה. הַכֹּל אָסוּר:

“One day at a time.”

*Common Alcoholics Anonymous Slogan*

**Questions to consider:** Why might “bad tendencies” be more difficult to repent from than bad actions? Why do you think a ba'al teshuva is considered greater than a tzadik (wholly righteous person)? Why are we forbidden from reminding a ba'al teshuva of their past?

## III. Forgiveness

Isaiah 43:25

(25) It is I, I, who—for My own sake— Wipe your transgressions away and remember your sins no more.

Mishneh Torah, Maimonides

### Laws of Repentance Chapter 2

(10) It is forbidden for a person to be ill-natured and unforgiving, for they must be easily appeased and hard to anger; and when a sinner asks for forgiveness, they should be granted forgiveness wholeheartedly and

### ישעיהו מ"ג:כ"ה

(כה) אָנֹכִי אָנֹכִי הוּא מַחֵה מִחָה פְּשָׁעֶיךָ לְמַעַנִּי וְחַטָּאתֶיךָ לֹא אֶזְכֹּר:

### הלכות תשובה ב'

(י) אָסוּר לְאָדָם לְהִיּוֹת אַכְזָרִי וְלֹא יִתְפַּיֵס אֲלֵא יְהֵא נוֹחַ לְרַצּוֹת וְקָשָׁה לְכַעַס וּבִשְׂעָה שֶׁמִּבְקָשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ הַחוּטָא לְמַחֵל מוֹחֵל בְּלֵב שְׁלֵם וּבִנְפֶשׁ חִפְצָה. וְאִפְלוּ

soulfully. Even if one is persecuted and sinned against exceedingly, one should not be vengeful and grudge-bearing, for such is the path of the Children of Israel and their correct hearts.

#### Leviticus 19:18

(18) You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD.

הַצַּר לּוֹ וְחָטָא לּוֹ הַרְבֵּה לֹא יִקָּם וְלֹא יִטָּר. וְזֶהוּ דִרְכָם שֶׁל זֵרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבָּם הַנְּכוּן:

#### וּיקרא יט:יח

(יח) לֹא־תִקָּם וְלֹא־תִטָּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאַהֲבֵת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

- 1) Why does God wipe away sins? Are we expected to do the same?
- 2) How might we relate to our own actions, and the actions of others, through the lens of teshuva and forgiveness?
- 3) Does the carceral system, as it functions in America, accomplish true teshuva? What might be a more effective process of teshuva?
- 4) In what ways does our society need to engage in a process of teshuva?

[RETURN TO MENU](#)

