

Teshuva

By Yamin Levy

In the spirit of the great Talmudic sages Maimonides understood Teshuva as significantly more than repentance. The Rabbis of the Talmud got this message across through powerful images that spark ones imagination. Teshuva in rabbinic literature was, for example, a basic condition for creation: “God marked out the whole world and it would not stand until He created Teshuva” (Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer 3). Rambam in his unique legal and philosophical style also endows Teshuva with significant meaning. A cursory look at the ten chapters of Hilkhos Teshuva and the various subjects subsumed under its heading immediately suggests this subject is unlike any other topic dealt with in his 14 volume 1000 chapter legal code. Included in these ten chapters titled Teshuva are laws and discussions on some of the most fundamental principles of faith such as, Divine providence, freedom of will, reward and punishment, resurrection, Messiah, the world-to-come, love of God, and cleaving to Godⁱ. It is evident for Maimonides Teshuva is basic to ones religious experience and quest for spiritual equanimityⁱⁱ.

The broad and comprehensive nature of this commandment is further amplified by the astonishing introductory caption which states that only a single mitzvah will be discussed in these chapters and that Mitzvah is Viduy and not Teshuva! One wonders whether or not the scope of Teshuva as presented by Rambam in Hilkhos Teshuva might warrant its inclusion among another list of religious mandates enumerated by Maimonides in his introduction to Sefer HaMitzvoth, Shores 4 where he writes:

[Heading to Principle 4] *We are not to include charges which cover the whole body of the commandments of the Torah.*

Examples of such biblical charges include “ye shall keep My statutes” or “ye shall keep My covenant.” These statements are so all-encompassing that they could not be limited to a positive or negative commandment. Could Teshuva in the Maimonidean sense be so inclusive as a religious mandate that it actually embodies the entire Torah imperative? Could it be that it is so fundamental a mitzvah that it would not be enumerated as a specific commandment?ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, Maimonides subscribes to the Rabbinic dictum “There is nothing greater than Teshuva; Teshuva is second to the Torah,”^{iv} that best captures the essence of the subject matter. A fuller appreciation of Rambam’s understanding of Teshuva emerges through a careful reading of *Hilkhot Teshuva*.

ⁱ See Guide 3:35 where Rambam writes: “The commandments that are fundamental opinions. They are those that we have enumerated in *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah*. Teshuva and Ta’aniot (Fast Days) also belong, as I shall explain, as I shall explain, to this class. With respect to inculcating opinions that are correct and that are useful for belief in the law, one should not say, what is their utility?”

ⁱⁱ When Rambam writes: “There is nothing but Teshuva...” he laments the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash and reiterates the all inclusive nature of Teshuva.

ⁱⁱⁱ See MT *Hilkhot Teshuva* 1:1; *Sefer Hamitzvot Positive Commandments* 73; This how Rabbi Shemuel Algazi, *Ahavath Olam*

^{iv} *Midrash Rabbah Dt. 2:24 & Midrash Rabbah Num. 2:10*