



Yom Kippur 2008
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In the fifth and sixth chapters of his *Hilkhot Teshuva*, Maimonides elaborates on the fundamental Jewish tenet of *bechira chofshit*, free will, the fact that the Almighty grants each individual the capacity to choose between good and evil. Maimonides rejects outright and unequivocally the notion of predestined virtue or sinfulness; he asserts that “it is possible for all people to be righteous like our teacher Moshe, or wicked like Yerovam son of Nevat” (5:2).

In Maimonides’ opening remarks to the seventh chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, he explains the relevance of this precept to the topic under discussion in this treatise, repentance: “Since each person has the ability [to choose between good and evil], as we explained, a person should endeavor to perform *teshuva* and verbally confess his sins and shake his hands of his sins, in order that he die as a penitent, and earn life in the next world.” The concept of free will directly results in the need to repent. A person can never attribute his wrongdoing to fate and forces beyond his control; a sinner must accept responsibility for his wrongdoing and make an effort to improve.

A number of scholars noted the peculiar wording that Maimonides chooses in formulating this passage: “...a person *should endeavor* [*yishtadel*] to perform *teshuva*.” Why does he present repentance as an advisable option, as something that one should “try” to do? Maimonides prefacing *Hilkhot Teshuva* by establishing that there is a Biblical command “that a sinner shall repent from his sin before God and confess.” What, then, does he have in mind when he speaks of an obligation to “endeavor” to repent?

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein (www.etzion.org.il/dk/1to899/777mesiv.htm) answered by distinguishing between two different categories of *teshuva*: repentance for a specific wrong that one committed, and improving one’s overall religious standard. In the case of a specific transgression, one indeed bears an obligation to undergo the process of *teshuva* which Maimonides outlines towards the beginning of *Hilkhot Teshuva*. Here, the obligation is not to “attempt” repentance, but to repent, to confess and resolve never to repeat the sinful act. In the seventh chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, however, Maimonides speaks of the second category of *teshuva*, namely, the obligation to constantly strive to raise one’s current standard, and reach for greater levels of achievement in *avodat Hashem*. This *halakha* is indeed defined as a requirement to “endeavor,” to make the effort, to invest time and thought into becoming a better servant of God.

A number of passages in this chapter support this contention, that Maimonides refers here to general growth and progress, as opposed to repentance for specific misdeeds. In *halakha 2*, for example, he writes, “A person should always see himself as though he will soon die, and that he may die at that instant and will thus have died with his sin; he should therefore repent from his sin immediately.” Maimonides describes here the importance of repenting “always,” at all times, as opposed to performing *teshuva* in

response to particular mishaps. Perhaps even more importantly, in *halakha* 3, Maimonides emphasizes that repentance is necessary not only for specific misdeeds, but also for character flaws such as jealousy, enmity, gluttony and the like. As he speaks in this context of the lifelong process of *teshuva*, he clarifies for us the kinds of “sins” for which we must constantly repent. Even when a person cannot identify particular misdeeds that he has committed, he can certainly find areas in his character which can be refined.

Rav Lichtenstein added that a number of prophets spoke of correcting one’s *derakhim* (“ways”), as opposed to repenting from sins. Yeshayahu (55:7), for example, cries, “Let the wicked man abandon his way...” (“*Ya’azov rasha darko...*”). *Teshuva* demands not only resolving not to repeat wrongful acts, but also changing paths, making changes in habits and lifestyles. In many ways, this is the far more challenging and daunting of the two kinds of repentance. It demands the courage and humility to change directions, to move off one road and step onto another. This is the lifelong process of repentance, which requires that we constantly strive to grow and improve, and never feel complacent and satisfied with our current level of achievement.