

TESHUVAH

By: Earl Walters

Teshuvah is a Hebrew word which means "returning." In the spiritual sense, *teshuvah* means returning to the Creator of the universe, who we call Yahweh. It means turning away from the secular, from the worldly way of life and turning back to His way of life. Since He has given us a standard for our lives, returning to Him means returning to obedience to His standard, His teachings, His commands, His *Torah*.

Taking the journey of a *baal teshuvah* ("master of return") isn't simple, but it's also not too difficult. It may take a while, depending on how much you have turned away and need to turn back. Some of the return can be accomplished by attending a Messianic synagogue and by reading Jewish/Hebrew Roots books. But for many people who have allowed themselves to be assimilated into the non-culture of the world, finding a local Messianic Rabbi and Congregation to help may be the solution.

What are Sin and Repentance?

"Sin" or "*Chet*" in Hebrew, means "failure in our relationship with Yahweh." In other words, being disobedient to His commands and instructions.

Our goal should be to continually move closer to Yahshua/Yahweh, But "*chet*" is behavior which causes us to move away from Yahweh, to "miss the mark".

While we deeply regret our movement away from Yahweh, we should not despair. Rather, we should bear in mind the verse written by King Solomon, the "wisest of men," in the Book of Kohelet 7:20 {Ecclesiastes},

"There is no one
So righteous in the world,
Who does only good,
And does not sin."

The Four Steps of Repentance

Teshuvah (Return, or Repentance) is a generous gift from Yahweh, which allows us to erase our improper actions through a four-step process (see below).

The Torah tells us that no matter how far we stray or how many times we sin, Yahweh will wait for us to return to him through Teshuvah.

There are four basic parts to Teshuvah:

- 1. Leaving the Sin**
- 2. Regret**
- 3. Confession Before Yahweh**
- 4. Acceptance for the Future**

1. Leaving the Sin

Leaving the sin consists of stopping the commission of the sinful act. One cannot do Teshuvah if one continues to do the sin, even if he or she were to perform the next three steps perfectly.

2. Regret

Regret consists in sincerely regretting one's wrong action. One must be genuinely ashamed and embarrassed over one's sins. Knowing something is wrong and rationalizing continuing to sin is not regret.

3. Confession Before Yahweh

Confession before Yahweh consists of an oral confession spoken out loud, in which one formulates in words the commitments and attitudes one has reached in his or her heart. One should say, "I have sinned, I have done such and such; I deeply regret my actions, and I declare before Yahweh, Who knows my innermost thoughts, that I will never do this sin again."

4. Acceptance for the Future

Acceptance for the future consists of resolving in one's heart never to commit the sin ever again.

But...

1. The above steps only work for sins committed against Yahweh; for sins committed against other people, one must first ask forgiveness from that person before Yahweh will accept the Teshuvah. Remember, Yahshua said go and reconcile with your brother before even trying to bring your sacrifice to the altar.

This is the source of the practice by many Hebrews to contact all of their family, friends and co-workers during this period to ask for forgiveness for anything we may have done to upset them during the past year(s).

2. These four steps are of course only valid if we do Teshuvah AFTER THE FACT. One cannot say in advance - "I can do this sin, then do Teshuvah and He will forgive me..." It simply doesn't work that way as it may in other belief systems. Even the Blood of Yahshua does not cover "intentional and un-repentant sin".

On the other hand...

One should keep in mind that Teshuvah is an ongoing process that cannot be accomplished overnight. No matter how many times a person may stumble in the Teshuvah process, that person has to simply pick him or herself up and keep trying to stay on the right path. This is the strength and wisdom we receive from the Ruach HaKodesh.

What Yahweh is really looking for is the sincerity of the effort that a person puts into their Teshuvah!

"Midrashim" about "Teshuvah," Repentance

"Midrashim" are stories and ideas from sections of the Talmud not dealing directly with aspects of Jewish Law.

The stories are either true stories about famous or not-so-famous individuals, which illustrate a moral point, obvious fables, again illustrating moral points, or philosophical ideas, derived from verses in the Bible. Some of the "Midrashim" found in the Talmud about "Teshuvah," Repentance, are as follows:

1. "Rabbi Abahu bar Zeira said, 'Great is Teshuvah, for it preceded the Creation of the World, as it says, 'Before the mountains were born,... You reduced Man to nothingness, and said 'Repent ...' (Tehilim/Psalms 90:2-3)" (Bereshit Rabbah, 1)

Comment: A necessary psychological component which is, indeed, built into the human personality is that he or she is powerless in comparison to Yahweh, Whose definition of Good and Evil he or she must obey.

2. "Thus do You teach the sinner the way to go" (Tehilim 25:8) - that Yahweh shows the way to Repentance.

Wisdom was asked 'What should be the punishment for the sinner?' She answered, 'Let evil pursue the sinner.' (Mishlei/Proverbs: 13:21)

Prophecy was asked, 'What should be the punishment for the sinner?' She answered, 'The soul that sins shall perish.' (Yechezkel/Ezekiel 18:4)

The Torah was asked, 'What should be the punishment for the sinner?' She answered, 'Let him bring a sacrifice, and be atoned for.'

The Holy One, Blessed be He, was asked, 'What should be the punishment for the sinner?' He answered, '**Let the sinner repent and he will find atonement.**' This is the meaning of the verse 'Thus You show the sinner the way' - 'You show the sinner how to repent' (Yalkut Shimoni, Tehilim/Psalms 25)

Comment: The source of the effectiveness of Teshuvah is the Holy One Himself. More-or-less the same idea as "The Quality of Mercy is not strained; it drops as the gentle rain from Heaven upon the place beneath." (Shakespeare)

3. "Rabbi Yaakov says, 'This World is like an anteroom (of a Palace) with respect to the World-to-Come. Prepare yourself in the anteroom so that you will gain entry to the Palace.' (Pirkei Avot, 4:21)

He used to say, 'One moment of repentance and good deeds in This World is better than all of Life in the World-to-Come. But (by contrast), one moment of spiritual delight in the World-to-Come is better than all of Life in This World.' " (Pirkei Avot, 4:22)

Comment: These Mishnayot in Pirkei Avot compare "This World" to the "World-to-Come" in two respects. The first is that "This World" is the place for growth, for self-improvement, for making changes in one's behavior. The "World-to-Come" is the place of "Reward;" the nature and quality of the "Reward" are dependent on what one has accomplished in "This World." Change and continued growth are no longer possible in the "World-to-Come."

But in terms of "Quality of Life," the "World-to-Come" is immeasurably superior to This World.

The following Midrash stresses the same point as the previous one did.

4. "If it is bent, it **cannot** be made straight, and if something is missing, it **cannot** be replaced." ("Kohelet"/Ecclesiastes 1:15)

"In 'This World,' what is crooked **can** be made straight, and if something is missing, it **can** be replaced; however, in the 'World-to-Come,' the opportunity to straighten out the crooked or to replace something that is missing has passed." (Kohelet Rabbati 1)

Comment: If one's behavior is "crooked" in some way, it has to be straightened out in 'This World;'; similarly, if one's behavior is lacking an important characteristic, perhaps to develop and exercise greater generosity, the time to work on acquiring and exercising that characteristic is in 'This World;'; afterwards, it will be too late.

5. "Open the door for me, my beloved sister..." ("Shir HaShirim"/Song of Songs 5:2) Rabbi Yesa said, 'The Holy One, Blessed be He said to Israel, "My sons, Open the door of Repentance as the 'eye of a needle,' and I will open it for you so that wagons and carriages can pass through." (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 24)

Comment: "Doing Teshuvah" is not easy. But, like many other worthwhile processes, a person need only start the job. Once that is done, "somehow" Yahweh gets involved and helps the person, so that the person is able to surmount the difficulty.

6. "Rabbi Pinchas the Priest, the son of Chama, said, 'The Holy One, Blessed be He, does not desire the punishment of his creatures, as it says, 'For I do not want people to die, says Yahweh, but rather 'Return' and 'Live' (Yechezkel 18:32)' And it further says, 'As I Live, says Yahweh, I do not want the wicked to die! And what does He want? To find His creatures innocent! As it says, 'Yahweh wants to find him innocent...' " (Yeshayahu 42:21) (Midrash Tanchuma; VaYera)

Comment: The Elohim of Israel is on the opposite extreme from the picture of the vengeful, wrathful "Elohim of the Old Testament" painted by Anti-Semites. Rather, He loves His creatures and He desires that they live a moral life, in accordance with the Torah and the example of Messiah Yahshua, and thus merit the World-to-Come.

7. "Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said, 'What does the verse mean that says, 'With respect to fools, He will mock; but to the humble, He will show graciousness?' ("Mishlei"/Proverbs 3:24)

"If a person wants to make himself unclean, he is permitted to do so; if a person wants to make himself clean, he is helped..." (Masechet Yoma: 38b)

Comment: This Midrash emphasizes the principle of "Bechirah Chofshit," "freedom of choice." A person is given the opportunity to choose between Good and Evil; he or she is with respect to this matter entirely free to choose; there is no coercion. If a person chooses "Good" and "Life," he or she is assisted. An individual is free, however, to choose "Evil" and "Death."

This does not mean that life is free of consequences or that choices are not significant. Earlier choices may limit future options, and it may be more difficult, or impossible, to return to a previous state, without tremendous effort. But then again, "If a person wants to make himself clean, he is helped."

8. "The stranger is not forced to pass the night outside." ("Eyov"/Job 31:32) This teaches that Yahweh does not disqualify His creatures permanently; rather, He accepts all. The gates are open at all times; anyone who wishes to enter may do so." (Shemot Rabbah: 19) The redeeming blood of Yahshua is instantly available to anyone who turns from his sin in true repentance.

Comment: This Midrash complements the previous one and the following one, in illustrating that "No one is permanently pushed away!"

9. "Rabbi Levi said, 'Great is Teshuvah, for it enables a person to reach the throne of Yahweh,' as it says 'Return, O Israel, **to Yahweh** your Elohim.' (Hoshea 14:2)" (Masechet Yoma: 86a)

Comment: In general, no matter how far an individual has distanced himself from Yahweh by his previous behavior, it is possible for him to return, depending on his effort, all the way to great closeness to his Creator.

- | |
|--|
| 10. "Rabbi Yochanan said, 'Great is Teshuvah, for it causes a person's verdict to be torn up.' " (Rosh HaShanah 17b) |
|--|

Comment: Until a person's death, there is no such thing as an irrevocable verdict; no matter how bad a person's behavior was, it is possible for him to have his Heavenly Verdict revoked.
--

11. "Resh Lakish said, 'Great is Teshuvah, for sins done on purpose are converted to accidental sins.'

But didn't Resh Lakish say, 'Great is Teshuvah, for sins done on purpose are converted to good deeds!?'

The resolution is that the first statement is true when the Teshuvah is done out of fear of Heavenly punishment; the second is true when the Teshuvah is done for the love of Yahweh." (Masechet Yoma 86b)

Comment: It is possible to do Teshuvah out of two motivations: fear of punishment by the "Heavenly Court" in the "World-to-Come," or out of love of Yahweh. The Repentance of the second type is so powerful that it can change "sinful acts" done in the past to "good deeds" on a person's Heavenly Record.

"Midrashim" about "Baalei Teshuvah," People who Repented

Some of the "Midrashim" found in the Talmud about "Baalei Teshuvah," People who Repented, are as follows:

1. "One who says, 'I will sin, then repent; I will sin, then repent' is not permitted to repent." (Masechet Yoma 85b)

Comment: The generosity of Yahweh is infinite, but a person cannot play games with Him. If a person continues to sin, while intending at the end to

erase all his sins through "Teshuvah," Yahweh withholds from such a person the possibility of Repenting.

2. "What is the definition of a 'Baal Teshuvah?'" - Rabbi Yehudah said, 'One who has the opportunity to do the same sin (implying that circumstances are such that his desire to do the sin is the same) and, **this time, does not do it!** He is a Baal Teshuvah!' (Masechet Yoma 86b)

Comment: But, this is certainly not to imply that if such circumstances cannot be duplicated exactly, a person should not "do Teshuvah!" 99% of a "Baal Teshuvah" is **infinitely better** than a sinner!

3. "Rabbi Bar-Chanina Sava said in the name of Rav, 'Anyone who does a sin, **and is ashamed of it**, all his sins are forgiven!' (Masechet Berachot 12b)

Comment: Of course, the degree of shame must be true and deep and, naturally, the only One Who is able to evaluate this is the Judge of all the World, Who sees the innermost recesses of every living person.

4. "Rabbi Abahu said, 'Where Baalei Teshuvah stand, People who have never sinned cannot stand!' (Masechet Berachot 34b)

Comment: Rabbi Abahu's understanding of the Psychology of Repentance is such that the true Baal Teshuvah reaches a level of righteousness not matched by someone who has never "sinned."

Of course, there is no one who has, literally, "never sinned," as Kohelet says "There is no one so righteous in the world who does only good, but has never sinned." (Kohelet 7:20) Nobody is perfect. But the statement remains in force. According to Rabbi Abahu, those "sinners" who are able to muster up their spiritual resources to overcome their sins and return to Yahweh have accomplished more than those who have rarely sinned.

5. The following is a very free translation of the following Midrash, but I believe it captures the basic idea:

"It was said concerning 'Rabbi' (the title of 'Rabbi' to be explained below) Eliezer ben Duradia that he had a great appetite for sin, and there was almost no sin in the world that he had not done. One day he heard of a sin that he had never done. It was located far away and was very expensive. He decided to do it with a friend, who would help with the expenses and be pleasant company on the way.

When they arrived at the location, they immediately made arrangements to do the sin. While they were doing it, his friend said that he thought that

Eliezer, because of all the sins that he had done, would never be admitted into the "World-to-Come."

Since he had never thought so far into the future, hearing this forecast of his fate was very shocking. He went to the mountains and asked them to intercede for him. They said that they had to be concerned about their own future, as it says 'For the mountains and the hills will be moved.'
(Yeshayahu, 54:10)

He then went to the heavens and the earth and asked them to intercede for him. They responded that they also had to be concerned for their own future, as it says, 'The heavens will disappear like smoke, and the earth will unravel like a garment.'

Until he realized that he was the only one responsible for his fate. He put his head between his knees and wept with such force that his soul left him.

A Heavenly Voice was heard, saying, 'Rabbi Eliezer ben Duradia is prepared for entry into the World-to-Come.'

Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, the great Torah Sage who compiled the Mishnah, upon hearing of the above, cried and said, 'Some acquire their share in the World-to-Come by many years of toil. Others acquire their share in **one moment.**' And Rabbi Judah the Prince said, 'Not only are they accepted, but they are given the title of 'Rabbi.' '(Masechet Avodah Zarah 17a)

6. "Our Rabbis taught, 'A person should always push away the sinner with the left (generally, the weaker) hand, but hold him close with the right (generally, the stronger) hand.'

Comment: It is necessary to push away the "sinner," to some extent; that is, to let him know that he has gone off the path, but never to reject him entirely, as that would violate the entire spirit of the Torah's approach to Sin and the Acceptance of Repentance.

7. "Anyone who leads the People towards righteousness, will not sin; and someone who leads the People towards sin will not be allowed to do Teshuvah.

What is the justice of this?

The one who led the People towards righteousness will not sin because **how would it look if the teacher was in Gehinnom** (the Jewish expression for **the "place of punishment" reserved for the wicked,**

after death - not very pleasant, but probably no "pitchforks." Also, the name of a valley outside of Jerusalem; actually, the valley is Gei-ben-Hinnom, undoubtedly related; perhaps the site of an ancient idol-worshipping cult), **and the students in "Gan Eden"** (the "Garden of Eden," the Hebrew expression for "Paradise," **the "place of reward" for the righteous)?!** "

(Actually, with regard to these matters, the Jewish position is 100% Belief in "Reward and Punishment," but, as to the specifics, we say, with King David, "no eye has seen it, O Yahweh, but Yours.")

Conversely, the one who led the People towards sin will not be permitted to repent because **how would it look if the teacher was in "Gan Eden" and the students in Gehinnom?!**" (Masechet Yoma 87a) This is the idea Yahshua was talking about when He stated that anyone teaching another to disregard Torah would be least in the Kingdom.

Comment: A leader of the Hebrew People is held to a very high standard of responsibility. Not only must he be concerned about his own actions; he must lead his people in the right direction, as well, because his ultimate destiny becomes intertwined with theirs.

8. "Our Rabbis taught: 'If someone stole a beam, built it into his house, and then decided to do 'Teshuvah,' and return the 'beam' in accordance with the verse obligating reformed bandits to return the stolen goods, as it says, 'And he shall return the stolen object which he stole,' **how should he make the return?**

Beit Shammai requires the thief to dismantle his house, retrieve the **actual stolen beam**, and return it.

Beit Hillel requires the thief only to return the **value of the beam**, in order to make it easier for the thief to do 'Teshuvah.' " (Masechet Gittin: 58a)

Comment: The "P'sak Din," the decision of Jewish Law, and the actual practice, is in favor of Beit Hillel. Society plays a major role in helping the "sinner" return. In this case, the requirement of a thief to "Return the Stolen Item" is **defined as requiring only the value, and not the item itself. Yahshua supported this interpretation in His teachings.**

9. "Once a certain man wanted to 'do Teshuvah.' His wife said to him, 'Fool! If you 'do Teshuvah,' even the belt which you are wearing will have to be returned.'

So the man changed his mind and **did not 'do Teshuvah!'** " (Masechet "Bava Kama," "The First Gate:" 94b)

Comment: The Oral Torah describes a man's wife as a "helper-against him." This expression, which seems to contain an internal contradiction (is she a helper or is she against him?) is interpreted by the Talmud as referring to two different husbands; that is, if he is deserving, she is a "helper;" otherwise, she is a negative influence.

In the selection above, the **wife was clearly a negative influence**, in that as a result of what she said, **her husband was discouraged and decided not to "do Teshuvah."**

But the next Section deals with the story of **Rabbi Akiva**, one of the great heroes of Jewish History, **whose wife played a major, if not an indispensable role, in the development of his greatness.**

Rabbi Akiva, Master of Teshuvah

Rabbi Akiva, as a young man, did not know a word of Torah. He worked as a shepherd for "Ben Kalba Savua," one of the richest men in Yerushalayim. One day, Rachel, the daughter of Ben Kalba Savua, looked at Akiva and was extremely impressed by his modesty and his gentleness with her father's flocks. She also noticed in him a tremendous potential for accomplishment in Torah, although his potential was at this point totally unrealized.

Rachel approached the Shepherd Akiva and suggested that they get married. When her father found out about this, he was very upset, because he had envisioned a Torah scholar as a husband for his daughter, rather than an ignorant shepherd. In his anger, he vowed to cut the young couple off financially, leaving them penniless.

One of Rachel's conditions for marrying Akiva was that he go to a Yeshiva to learn Torah. Even though he sincerely accepted the condition and married Rachel, he initially found it extremely difficult to fulfill it. In fact, while an ignorant shepherd, he had harbored a secret hatred towards Torah scholars

Once, while shepherding his flocks, he gazed into a pool, where he saw a hollowed-out rock resting under a waterfall. He wondered how the rock, one of Nature's hardest substances, had been hollowed out. When he was told that the water had, over a long period of time, made the drastic change in the rock, he reasoned as follows:

"If a rock, though extremely hard, can be hollowed out by water, how much more so should it be possible for Torah, which is compared to water, to change my heart, which is soft. I will begin to study it, and try to become a Torah scholar."

Akiva and his son, Yehoshua, went to the same teacher at first. Together they studied the Aleph-Bet, the Hebrew Alphabet. They went on at their own pace,

Yehoshua at the pace of a bright child, Akiva analyzing the meaning of each new fact and idea that he learned, deeply and thoroughly. Rachel suggested that Akiva go to a Yeshiva and devote himself full-time, for twelve years, to the study of Torah. Having the permission and encouragement of his wife, Akiva went to study in the Yeshiva of the great Rabbi Eliezer ben Hirkonus.

Years passed. Akiva studied more and more material, in greater and greater depth, but remained silent in the class. When he proposed his first explanation of a difficult point at the Yeshiva, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, a colleague of Rabbi Eliezer, immediately recognized the depth and profundity of Akiva's analysis.

As more years passed, Akiva received Semichah, Rabbinic Ordination, and became known as Rabbi Akiva. He opened his own Yeshiva, which began to attract many students. At the end of a dozen years, he returned to Jerusalem, to greet his wife, accompanied by twelve thousand students. As she heard their approach, Rachel came out and, out of great love for Rabbi Akiva, and honor for the Torah, she prostrated herself at his feet. When his students moved to push her away, he restrained them, saying, "All the Torah knowledge that I have, and all the Torah knowledge that you have, are the direct results of this woman's love of the Torah!"

Ben Kalba Savua, remorseful over how he had mistreated his daughter, went to Rabbi Akiva, whom he did not yet recognize, but of whom he knew only that he was a great Torah scholar, seeking an "opening" for his vow. (Briefly, an "opening" of a vow means that if the circumstances of the vow were such that if the maker of the vow had known about some fact, he would not have made the vow, that is its "opening.")

When his father-in-law came before him, Rabbi Akiva asked him whether he would have cut off his daughter if he had known that her husband would become a Torah scholar, Ben Kalba Savua answered, "Even for one chapter, one Mishnah, one verse, I would not have done it." Then Rabbi Akiva revealed his identity.

In his joy, Ben Kalba Savua turned over half of his fortune to his daughter and son-in-law. Rabbi Akiva was now able to fulfill a promise he had made to his wife, to give her a model of Jerusalem made of gold to wear in her hair.

Later, Rabbi Akiva heard Rachel say to her neighbors that she was so happy and proud of her husband's accomplishments that she would be happy to let him go away for another dozen years, to completely realize his potential. She discussed the matter with Rabbi Akiva, he determined that she would be happy with the arrangement, and he agreed to do as his wife wished. He did that, reached his full measure of greatness, went on to become one of the eternal heroes of the Jewish People, great in Torah, great in love of Yahweh, great in "Emunah,"

"Belief," in the Almighty, and great in appreciation of and devotion to his wife.
(Masechet K'tuvot: 62b-63a)

Sometimes, a person may do Teshuvah for the "wrong" reasons. But there is a principle in the Jewish Tradition, that if a person does a good deed, such as learning Torah, even for the "wrong" reason, he or she will eventually come to do it for the right reason.

"Resh-Lakish," the Reformed Bandit

Shimon, the son of Lakish, was the leader of a group of bandits, during the rule of the Romans, after the [Destruction of the Second Temple](#). He had a reputation for great strength, with a wild, even violent streak. He was also supposed to have great leadership ability, with very high, if somewhat misdirected, intelligence.

One time, Rabbi Yochanan, a great Torah scholar, was bathing in the Jordan River. All of a sudden, another figure plunged into the water and swam to him. Rabbi Yochanan said, **"Your strength should be devoted to the Torah!"**

Rabbi Yochanan was known as one of the most handsome men of his time. Shimon, quickly noticing this, responded, "Your beauty should be devoted to women!"

Rabbi Yochanan searched for a way to persuade the leader of the bandits to abandon his present lifestyle and come into the Bet Midrash (a room or building dedicated to the study of Torah), and to adopt the lifestyle of the Torah. Nothing he could think of was likely to work, except for one.

Rabbi Yochanan had a younger sister, whose beauty even surpassed his, translated, of course, to the feminine side. Certain that his sister would see the same great qualities in Shimon as he did, Rabbi Yochanan said, **"Ben Lakish, Repent!** If you begin to study Torah, you can have my sister, whose beauty is even greater than mine (with her permission, of course), as a wife!"

This was more than enough to draw the interest and attention of Shimon. He accepted the offer, began to study Torah, married Rabbi Yochanan's sister, and eventually became the student-colleague of his brother-in-law. Known in the Talmud as "Resh Lakish," he entered history as one of the immortal Torah giants, in scholarship and character, of the Jewish People. (Masechet "Bava Metzia," "The Middle Gate," 84a)

Adapted From Orthodox Union articles