**Is *Teshuva* Easy or Hard?**

**By Rav Elyakim Krumbein**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Pay attention to the following statement, as well as to your instinctive inner reaction to it: “*Teshuva* is really easy!”

If, like most people, you have any sort of experience in the realm of *teshuva*, your reaction is probably one of disbelief (“Nonsense!”) or perhaps a cynical brush-off (“Anything else I should know?”)

But how are we to react to a verse from the Torah itself – a verse familiar to us – expressing exactly the same idea, only in fancier “biblical” language:

For this commandment which I command you today – it is not hidden from you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you might say, “Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?” Nor is it over the sea… For the word is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. (*Devarim* 30:11-14)

According to Ramban, the words “this commandment” refer to the commandment of *teshuva*.

The Rambam, in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, makes a similar claim regarding Divine service in general: it is not so difficult! According to the Rambam, this is precisely the message of Torah, distinguishing it from other religious approaches: “For this Divine Torah, which was commanded to Moshe… comes to *ease* the service of ritual and the tasks” (III:47). The verse cited above supports the Rambam’s view.

If the Torah says that it is not difficult, how is it that we mess up? The answer to this question is hinted at in the very same verse: “It is not in heaven, *that you might say*….” The whole point is what one “says” to oneself. If one’s perception is that something is difficult, then one will indeed find it to be so. There are some kinds of errors that become fixed in our thinking and which then become so difficult for us to let go of, that we are easily led to start finding ways to prove them. And once we have “proved” any aspect or element, we feel justified in asserting that we *know*, from experience, that the process of *teshuva* is exceedingly difficult.

However, more than the difficulty proves the perception of it, it turns out that the perception creates the difficulty. Because it is “supposed” to be difficult, we start off going about it in such a way that there is little chance of success: we try to force ourselves to undergo great or dramatic changes within a short time. Obviously, our measly measure of success then serves as further “proof” of how difficult *teshuva* is.

The truth is that trying to force something upon ourselves like this is an unripe form of *teshuva* that goes against human nature – it is “*teshuva* undertaken out of fear.” Real *teshuva*, the Torah tells us here, is “near to you:” it proceeds in harmony with a person’s nature; it is “*teshuva* undertaken out of love.” *Teshuva* is a gradual, orderly, organic process, like the growth of a tree.

***Teshuva* “in the heaven” and “over the sea”**

The Torah then goes into greater detail. Where does our mistake occur? One possibility is that we think that Divine service is “in the heaven,” something transcendental and lofty that lies beyond the capability of flesh and blood mortals. Only angels are perfect, we tell ourselves, and if our Divine service or our *teshuva* is not perfect, it is not worth anything. Alternatively, we might imagine that the Torah is “over the sea” – in other words, a distant reality that cannot be realized in this world. Our world is a roiling sea, full of disorder, and the idea of truly serving God in the midst of this chaos is simply absurd. Society around us is a maelstrom of materialism and false values, doubts, cynicism, and the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. Any pretense that man can serve God in such a place can only lead to despair; it would require swimming against an unstoppable tide of apathy. All of this creates a mixture of imagined humility and self-pity: we are far from *teshuva*, both in terms of our very nature as human beings, and in terms of our utter helplessness in view of the influences around us.

The message that Moshe conveys in the above verses is that such thinking is wrong: “You have adopted a picture of reality that is not relevant; it will not lead anywhere useful. The truth is that *teshuva* is here on earth, on this side of the ocean, very close by!”

This is the message that the Maggid of Dubnow conveys in one of his well-known parables, based on Yishayahu’s rebuke: “But you have not called upon Me, O Yaakov, for have you wearied yourself about Me, O Israel” (43:22). The situation may be compared to that of a postman who trudges along, carrying a very heavy parcel. He finally arrives at the address and knocks on the door. The homeowner opens, takes one look at the postman puffing and panting on his doorstep, and immediately realizes that there has been some mistake – the postman has apparently mixed things up and delivered the wrong package. He tells him, “This delivery is meant for someone else; the package I’m expecting is a small, lightweight item.” Similarly, the prophet declares in God’s Name: If you have “wearied yourself about Me,” then “you have not called upon Me.” You have heaped all these difficulties upon yourself; I never asked that of you.

**Easy *teshuva* in practice**

What is meant by the words “near to you”? It means that the Torah does not go against human nature; rather, it accords with it. When this principle is implemented, *teshuva* becomes “easy.” What does this mean in practice? An example might help illustrate.

What is achieved through difficult or intensive action, and what results from an easy action? We know that acting out of habit is easy, while breaking a habit is difficult. Instead of trying to break a bad habit, let us rather pay closer attention to our good habits. Our daily routine is full of them! Some of our automatic actions are in fact important *mitzvot*, from saying “*Modeh Ani*” upon awakening, to our daily prayers, our social interactions and relationships with family and friends, and so on. These are things that we do anyway, so they require no special effort on our part; the issue is just that we do them without thinking, and this is what our *teshuva* needs to address. Habit breeds uncalled-for disparagement and underestimation, and it is this attitude that must be corrected before anything else. That is the gateway to *teshuva*. Rav Charlap *z”l* explains (*Ori ve-Yishi* 1) that the first and most critical step in *teshuva* is entering this gateway.

The idea that “a sin drags another sin in its wake” means, according to Rav Charlap, that a person is fundamentally good and holy, and it is in fact unthinkable that he could sin – were he not drawn in that direction by the influence of a previous sin. But then we must ask, where did the first sin come from? How could sin ever appear on the horizon of a person’s life as a real option? Rav Charlap’s answer to this is that the first sin is not a real sin; it is not even failure to perform a mitzva. It is merely a degree of negligence in performing a mitzva. In other words, the mitzva is done, but without the proper attention and enthusiasm, such that its practical execution is “sloppy.”

Correcting this deficiency is the key, and it is precisely this that is “near to us.” We are speaking here of *mitzvot* that are already ingrained in us; the problem is just that we give them no thought. All we need is a very simple thought: If I’m already doing this mitzva, then why not really invest myself and do a more complete job of it? That’s easy! And thus one small step is followed by another. The actions that are already deeply rooted in my life are harnessed as an engine for growth and progress.

**Two sides to “*teshuva* out of love”**

This is precisely the place of “*teshuva* that proceeds from love,” which includes two stages. First is our attention to the fact that this action that we repeat every day is actually a “mitzva”: a spiritual act expressing great value, which is part of our self-identity. This thought, if we place it “upon our heart,” arouses a feeling of identification and even spiritual elevation, and quite naturally we find ourselves performing the very same action with a more profound awareness. Then, once we appreciate the greatness of these seemingly routine actions, we are ready for the next stage. Now we must ask what we are able to do right now in a better way, easily, and without “going crazy.” For example, maintaining good spirits and acting with alacrity and vigor will lead to an improvement that will be readily apparent. The main thing is to be headed in the direction of repair. One small step is enough to count as part of our “*teshuva*.”

The *mitzvot* that come easily to us are those that are natural to us. They are already part of our routine, and they do not require any great change within us; all we need is to express that which already exists inside us. I certainly believe in the blessings that I recite all the time, so if I am already reciting them – why not try to enter the “soul” of the blessing, to concentrate on it and to experience it? When I am engaged in my job, too, I give expression to my world of values: I am making a contribution to society (“The world is built on kindness”); I am striving for excellence (“Great is he who enjoys the labor of his hands”), etc. Thinking about this arouses inner will and thankfulness, and encourages me to take care to perform each task in a more complete way.

As a different example, let us consider walking to the synagogue. What is there to see in this simple action? There are many possibilities, depending on a person’s orientation and way of thinking. One might view it as walking towards a connection with God, joining the congregation, or connecting to the core of life. When one thinks about this, one’s enthusiasm is aroused and this in turn will elevate and enhance one’s prayer. The same approach and technique can be used to view chance personal encounters or other seemingly mundane situations in a new light.

**Coping with “lows”**

The nature of life is such that if a person enjoys a positive period of growth and fulfillment, a period of lethargy and heaviness is likely to follow. What is the purpose of these “low” times, when it sometimes appears to us that we are unable to uplift ourselves? During this time, a person remains just as he is, doing only what comes naturally to him – even in his spiritual efforts. Surprisingly enough, he discovers that his basic, “default” spiritual situation does not require maximal spiritual tension. He discovers that he is good even when he is not pushing himself to the limits. His regular, everyday lifestyle is already “as full of *mitzvot* and good deeds as a pomegranate,” and he is within the category of “*teshuva*” even in this state. This thought gives him joy and depth of meaning.

In order to be a “*ba’al teshuva*” – someone who “engages in *teshuva*” on a constant basis, one has to love it. And this becomes possible when we focus on the good within us, in order to extract the maximum from it.

May the Holy One, blessed be He, restore us to Him with a whole heart and a willing soul.