YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**ROSH HASHANA 5781**

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In memory of Batya Furst z"l  
Niftera 28 Elul 5765.   
Dedicated by her family.

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These Rosh Hashanah Shiurim are written in memory of Zina Gontownik, on the occasion of her 14th Yahrzeit, occurring on the 28th of Elul.

Dedicated by her children, Anne and Jerry, and her grandchildren, Shira and Ari, Daniela and Zev, Bellene and Yoni, Jordana and Ranan, Hillel, and Lilly and Ezra.

May Bubby’s soul be bound up in the bond of Eternal Life.

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In commemoration of the yahrzeit of Elke bat Binyamin Tzvi z"l

whose yahrzeit falls on 28 Elul, 16/17 September.

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**Teshuva: Obligation and Opportunity**

Based on a sicha by

**Harav Aharon Lichtenstein** *zt”l*[[1]](#footnote-1)

How do we categorize and describe teshuva: as an opportunity or as an obligation? The two terms are, of course, quite different. When we speak of opportunity, we generally have in mind some fortunate, perhaps undeserved, option to which we are glad to have access, whereas obligation conjures up a sense of pressing demand, a categorical imperative grounded in an existential situation or mandated by an authoritative commander. One doesn’t need to think hard to realize that the answer is that teshuva is both. I would like to examine in what sense it is both and how these two aspects of teshuva are related.

*Teshuva* **as Opportunity: Free Will**

We can bring to bear two distinct elements upon the concept of opportunity, one general and one specific. Broadly speaking, teshuva is grounded in our faith in and experience of free will. It certainly is no accident that the Rambam, probably the greatest champion of free will among the Rishonim, placed the concept of free will at the very heart of Hilkhot Teshuva. In the three central chapters (chaps. 5–7), the Rambam presents what is probably his fullest exposition of the concept and its significance.

Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and the wicked, the choice is his. (Hilkhot Teshuva 5:1)

In halakha 2, he presents and rejects the opposing view, a theological, astrological determinism, insisting instead that “each person is fit to be righteous like Moshe Rabbeinu or wicked like Yorovam.” After expounding upon the theme of free will over the course of two chapters, he draws his conclusion at the beginning of chapter seven:

Since free choice is granted to all people, as explained, a person should always strive to do teshuva and to confess verbally for his sins, striving to cleanse his hands from his sins in order that he may die as one who has performed teshuva and [thereby] merit the life of the World-to-Come. (7:1)

Thus, the prelude to discussing the need for teshuva is the concept of free will generally, the confident faith – so deeply rooted in the world of Halakha – that we have the capacity to manage our lives in accordance with our moral and religious will. This is the first aspect of the opportunity implicit in teshuva.

*Teshuva* **as Opportunity: The Gift of** *Teshuva*

But there is an additional aspect: the gift of teshuva, which is, itself, multiple. At one plane, it is free will writ large. One might have assumed that while freedom is a gift with which we are initially graced, this gift is given to us when we are a kind of tabula rasa, a blank slate unencumbered by sin and degradation; but once the albatross of sinful and immoral behavior has been cast around our necks, we no longer are able to move freely, and no longer possess that capacity for free choice. Indeed, the Rambam states that in extreme cases, such as with Pharaoh, that is exactly what occurs (Hilkhot Teshuva 6:3). Fortunately, this is not the norm. The freedom that characterizes our lives generally continues to be in force and allows us to move freely even after sin, even after we have distanced ourselves from God and from our true selves.

Apart from that, there are other elements of opportunity within teshuva that have nothing to do with our ability to repent, but rather with the results of teshuva, and the readiness of God to accept teshuva. We are granted the opportunity of remission of sin; God is willing to waive whatever punishments we had justly deserved. And at the relational level, quite apart from canceling our terrible debts, God is willing to receive us again into His presence and reopen channels of communication. The Rambam, in the continuation of the seventh chapter, stresses this element particularly:

How exalted is the level of teshuva! Only yesterday this sinner was divided from God, the Lord of Israel…. He would call out [to God] without being answered…. He would perform mitzvot, only to have them thrown back in his face…. Today, [after having repented,] he clings to the Divine Presence…. He calls out [to God] and is answered immediately…. He performs mitzvot, and these are accepted with grace and joy…and, furthermore, God longs for our mitzvot and good deeds. (7:7)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus, the opportunity afforded by teshuva, the gift which, by divine grace, we have received, entails three components: (1) the element of free will, which remains operative, notwithstanding the fact that we have defiled ourselves; (2) the readiness on God’s part to forgive our sins; (3) His willingness to forget about the past, and to enable us to come unto Him once again.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Teshuva* **as Obligation**

But, of course, teshuva, for us, is not simply an opportunity, an option of which we can avail ourselves to the extent that we wish. It is – wondrously – that, but not only that. Teshuva is also an obligation.

Now, it is well known that the Minchat Chinnukh questions the imperative nature of teshuva. The Rambam, both in the heading before Hilkhot Teshuva and in the halakhot themselves, speaks of teshuva, but when prescribing actions he seems to focus upon viddui, verbal confession.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Minchat Chinnukh (364:2) asserts that according to the Rambam teshuva is not counted as a mitzva; rather, it is viddui that is a mitzva. If a person wants to do teshuva, then the Rambam prescribes how it is to be done, just as if one chooses to wear a four-cornered garment, one must affix tzitzit according to certain specifications. There is no verse mandating, at least at the halakhic plane, that a person perform teshuva.

This is, however, an exceedingly strange position to assume. It is absolutely chilling to think that teshuva, the key to our present spiritual state and to our ultimate metaphysical destiny, should be merely a matter of preference and predilection. Is it conceivable that a particular action, viddui, is thoroughly legislated by the Torah, yet that which concerns the totality of our being, teshuva, is a matter of choice? Both the Torah and the prophets constantly hammer away at the theme, “Shuvu, shuvu, shuvu, Return, return, return,” speaking in the name of God to the individual, the Jewish people, and even the other nations! These convey a strong sense that one who is sensitive to his relationship to God, one who is concerned about spiritual values and his own spiritual existence, certainly will want to do teshuva, and surely must do teshuva. Indeed, other Rishonim counted teshuva as a mitzva, and, to some extent, the Rambam himself can be construed as believing this.[[5]](#footnote-5) In any event, regardless of whether we accept the position of the Minchat Chinnukh or we accept that teshuva is an independent obligation, the place of teshuva as a central value, as a lynchpin within religious life, is certainly secure.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This obligation is, of course, multiple. Inasmuch as sin itself entails various components, likewise, teshuva, which is the corrective of sin, has various components. First, there is the evil in the sin itself that needs to be corrected, be the sin bein adam la-Makom, in the man-God realm, or bein adam le-chavero, interpersonal. Second, at the level of bein adam la-Makom, there is obviously the affront to God in every violation of His will. Furthermore, sin defiles spiritually and religiously, and that requires a corrective. Likewise, at the level of bein adam le-chavero, sin defiles a society, a community, and one needs to perform teshuva for that defilement, too.

Finally, a sinner must repent for the offense to himself, bein adam le-atzmo. To sin, and to remain mired in sin is, first and foremost, to endanger ourselves, as sin is damaging to one’s personality, regardless of religious or spiritual consequences. A central aspect of our worldview is that one has responsibility not only to others, but also to oneself. The liberal notion that a person is master of himself and therefore can arrange his life and activities as he wishes, so long as he is ready to bear the consequences, stands totally in opposition to the worldview of Judaism, and indeed to any religious perception. A religious perspective views human life and the human self as a gift or a charge given by God. Hence, we have a responsibility not only to the divine image in others, but to the divine image in ourselves. A person who curses himself or maims himself violates the same prohibition as one who curses or maims others. And, surely, just as we are enjoined to save others from impending disaster, so we are enjoined to save ourselves, and this relates not only to our physical lives, but a fortiori to our spiritual lives as well. Teshuva, therefore, is demanded of us, quite apart from what we need to do for God, or need to do for our surroundings. We need to do it for ourselves, as part of our responsibility to our Creator who has entrusted us with a nitzotz Eloka mi-ma’al, a divine spark embedded within us.

These elements of teshuva are clearly obligatory, whether teshuva is an independent mitzva or, even failing that, is a religious and moral imperative growing out of our sensibility regarding spiritual matters.

**Linking Opportunity and Obligation**

When speaking of teshuva as an obligation, there is an additional element to be borne in mind. The Rambam states:

Yom Kippur is a time of teshuva for all, individuals and community, and it is the occasion of forgiveness and remission for Israel. Accordingly, everyone is obligated to repent and confess on Yom Kippur. (Hilkhot Teshuva 2:7)

The Rambam presents a fact and then draws an inference from it. The fact is that Yom Kippur is a day which is favorable for teshuva. That being the case, says the Rambam – and there is a causal nexus here – all are obligated to do teshuva and recite the viddui. In effect, the Rambam has linked the two elements we are addressing: if you have the opportunity, you must avail yourself of it. So, apart from the fact that there might be a mitzva of teshuva, just as there is a mitzva of lulav, sukka, or shofar, there is an additional ground for teshuva being obligatory: the fact that it is possible renders it mandatory. The opportunity produces an obligation.

The same thought is presented by Rabbeinu Yona in Sha’arei Teshuva:

Realize that the penalty of the sinner who defers teshuva greatly intensifies itself each day. [Why?] For he knows that anger has gone forth upon him and that there is a sanctuary to which he can flee, the sanctuary of teshuva, and still he persists in his rebellion and continues in his evil. Though it is within his power to emerge from the turmoil, still he does not fear the scorn and the wrath. His evil, therefore, is great. (1:2)

The reason the punishment increases daily is that person knows he has offended God and is justly liable for punishment, and, additionally, knows that there is an escape hatch, and yet he doesn’t avail himself of that opportunity. As an example, Rabbeinu Yona cites a famous midrash (Kohelet Rabba 7:32) about a group of imprisoned criminals who show some initiative and dig a tunnel underneath the jail. One by one, naturally, they leave, yet one of them remains behind. The jailer comes along, sees the tunnel open, and strikes the remaining criminal with his staff, saying, “Fool! The tunnel is open before you; how did you not avail yourself of it and rush to freedom?” The jailer, who, after all, should be reacting against this escape hatch, regards the remaining criminal as a person to whom freedom – which should be a central value – is of little moment. In effect, Rabbeinu Yona and the midrash are saying that the moment the opportunity is there, it engenders obligation, at least to a person who is morally and religiously sensitive; failure to avail ourselves of the opportunity becomes a sin all over again.

So, if we ask ourselves whether teshuva is an opportunity, a chesed granted by God, or an obligation, a demand imposed upon us, the answer is not only that it is both, independently; it is both, intertwined. The very existence of the opportunity imposes a fresh obligation. This is the meaning of the Rambam’s expression, “Accordingly.” It is inconceivable that a person who attaches significance to his own spiritual state should be totally impervious and insensitive to the ability to restore his relationship to God and to cleanse himself. If, indeed, he does not seize the opportunity, this is both a symptom and a cause of spiritual weakness.

**Opportunity and Obligation within a General Religious Worldview**

Within the worldview of Chazal and of gedolei Yisrael, this sense of both the centrality of opportunity and obligation and their interaction can be viewed as a manifestation of a much broader concept. It can be placed within the more general context of our conception of divine service in particular and of human existence in general. Both opportunity and obligation are central concepts within our view of human life as it is and as it ought to be. At one plane, the sense of obligation, of duty, is both critical and central, whether at the moral plane – we think of humans as by definition committed, willy-nilly, to a moral and ethical life as part of having been created in the image of God[[7]](#footnote-7) – or at the religious plane. If we were to take a single term that, more than anything else, we could regard as defining human existence and what frames our lives, it would certainly be the concept of mitzva. A Jew lives, first and foremost, as a called being, as a commanded being.

The very first Rashi in *Chumash* presents this idea not only surprisingly, but I would say audaciously. Rashi quotes the celebrated midrash in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak that the Torah ought to have started not with Bereishit but with the first mitzva – the implication being that what is important in Torah is the mitzvot. This perspective holds that Torah is, essentially, a legislative document that speaks to us in normative terms. The sense of being commanded is central to Jewish existence.

Although the Jew is commanded more thoroughly and extensively than others, divine command is also a universal category. The sense of human life as being guided, informed, and saturated by the sense of command is part of our conception of universal existence. In this context, let us examine two very striking verses in Bereishit, chapter 2. The first verse says, “The Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may eat’” (2:16). Then the Torah continues, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it, for on the day that you eat of it, you shall be worthy of death.” The question arises: Whereas the first verse says that God commanded Adam, the actual command, not to eat from the tree of knowledge, is only in the second verse. Why, then, is initial reference made to “Of every tree of the garden you may eat,” which is not part of the commandment?

The question, as I have formulated it, is grounded in the essentially secular conception that God has commanded us only with regard to certain areas of life, and that He has left a large neutral area where our own will and preferences find expression; there we act as we want. He has “His four cubits” (Berakhot 8a), but the rest of the ballpark is ours. However, a religious conception does not view any aspect of human reality as devoid of God and His commanding presence. While the Halakha does, at times, distinguish between a devar mitzva (obligatory matter) and a devar reshut (optional matter),[[8]](#footnote-8) fundamentally, the message is that the realm of devar reshut is not outside the ambience of God, but under His tutelage. Thus, not only is abstaining from the tree of knowledge a realization of the divine command, but eating every other fruit in the Garden of Eden – and anywhere else – is likewise part of serving God, part of the realization of “the Lord God commanded.” As a verse stated to Adam, it is of universal import.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Seizing Opportunity in the Spiritual Realm**

The sense that opportunity engenders obligation in the spiritual realm is not just a universal religious conception but also a central category of a Torah-based worldview. The failure to exploit spiritual potential, the failure to drink spiritual life to the lees, is not just some kind of pallid passivity, but, in the perception of Chazal, it is spiritual rot, described as such and condemned as such.

Let me cite several examples drawn from various areas of human life. The Gemara in Yevamot speaks of the mitzva of procreation. One would think that if a person is enjoined to procreate and he does not do it, his failure is only that he has not fulfilled a positive mitzva. While it is not ideal to miss a mitzva, he hasn’t taken an evil action; he simply has not done something good. But this is not how Chazal speak of him:

It was taught: Rabbi Eliezer states, He who does not engage in procreation is as though he [is one who] sheds blood…. Rabbi Ya’akov said, It is as if, so to speak, a person has diminished the stature of God…. Ben Azzai says, It is as though he sheds blood and diminishes the divine image. (Yevamot 63b)

All this where one has simply not availed himself of the opportunity to fulfill a certain mitzva, that of procreating and building a family.

Let us now take something more directly interpersonal. The Gemara in Berakhot (12b) states: “Rabba bar Chinnana Sava said in the name of Rav: Anyone who is able to beg for mercy for his friend and does not do so is called a sinner.” For example, if a friend of his is ill, he could have said Tehillim or he could have implored God on his behalf; yet he didn’t do it, either because he didn’t think of it, or he was busy with other activities. Again, we would say he hasn’t done the mitzva, but we might not have said he sinned. After all, it is not an absolute mitzva like procreation, but rather gemilut chesed, an act of kindness. Nevertheless, Chazal say, “He is called a sinner.”

Or, to take another area: regarding Torah study, the Gemara in Sanhedrin (99a) is literally frightening. The verse at the end of Shelach (Bemidbar 15:31) refers to a person very severely: “A person has defamed the word of God and has countermanded His command.” Who is considered to have “defamed the word of God”? “Rabbi Nehorai says, He who can engage in the study of the Torah but fails to do so.” If one wants to understand how seriously Chazal regarded this, you need only to look at the other things listed there: one who maintains that the Torah is not from Heaven, or a heretic, etc. And who joins this list? One who has an opportunity for Torah study and didn’t avail himself of it! Then there is the Gemara in Chagiga (5b) that lists three classes of people over whom God, so to speak, weeps daily. Who is the first on the list? “He who can engage in the study of Torah but fails to do so.” God, so to speak, weeps over the failure to translate opportunity into obligation, to avail oneself spiritually of that which was within reach.

Chazal saw the significance of opportunity and the need to translate it into obligation not only in abstract terms; they read Tanakh and saw central figures in the Bible in its light. For example, Chazal say (Berakhot 7a) that when Moshe Rabbeinu asked God, “I pray, please show me Your glory” (Shemot 33:18), God said to him, “When I wanted to reveal Myself [at the time of the burning bush], you ran away. Now that you want, I don’t want.” Apparently, this gemara regards Moshe critically in the same vein we have been developing: he had an opportunity to see the revelation of the Divine Presence, but he didn’t have the spiritual resources or inner strength for that encounter. This was a failing, and that opportunity, having been missed, was not to be restored.

Even more strikingly, the Gemara in Chullin (91b), cited by Rashi,[[10]](#footnote-10) discusses Ya’akov Avinu as he was leaving his father’s house. Based on an inconsistency in Ya’akov’s itinerary – he seems to have arrived in Charan and then gone back to Beit-El – Rabbi Yitzchak says that Ya’akov reached Charan and then realized what he had passed. “Is it conceivable that I passed by a place where my forefathers had prayed and I did not pray there?” I suppose most of us could do that quite readily and quite frequently. What Chazal are stating here is that Ya’akov, in what was a critical juncture in his life, suddenly realized, retrospectively, that he had had an opportunity and passed it up. It wasn’t a mitzva – there is no mitzva to pray specifically where one’s ancestors did – but it was an opportunity: to find inspiration, to define his mission and his future, and to derive strength from a return to his roots. He could have done all that, but he did not. He passed by the place at which his ancestors prayed as if it were a subway station. The moment that Ya’akov realized that, he was struck with regret and guilt over having neglected a wonderful opportunity. But being Ya’akov Avinu, he didn’t just let himself be eaten away by remorse; he turned around.

A remarkable passage in the Yerushalmi extends this concept far beyond the spiritual area with which we are dealing.

Rabbi Chizkiya, Rabbi Kohen in the name of Rav stated: A person will stand in judgment [before the Almighty] for every [fruit] that he saw and of which he did not partake. Rabbi Lazar took this to heart and planted a little garden [with many types of fruit]. At least once a year he took pains to partake of each fruit. (Kiddushin 4:12)

A person has the opportunity to partake of God’s world, to come in live contact, even as a consumer, with that which the Almighty has created, and that, too, is a form of contact with God. Now, why must a person eat all types of fruit? He has his staple fruits that he enjoys, which he eats from year to year. Even if that means having a more circumscribed experience of God’s world, so be it. Yet for that one is going to stand in judgment! If the opportunity to eat a guava engenders an obligation to eat it, what are we to say of the opportunity to pray properly, to learn Torah properly, to engage in chesed properly, to be suffused with a sense of God’s presence, to perform teshuva properly? We are expected to lead a life charged with a sense of obligation, on the one hand, and with a sense of the awareness of opportunity, on the other. We need to keep our eyes and ears open to know where opportunity is present, and to live a life suffused with the interaction of the two.

**Bringing Opportunity and Obligation Back to** *Teshuva*

These two concepts and their interaction have special relevance to teshuva. Life is, to a great extent, a field of opportunity; but at the same time, it is also a field of missed opportunities. When an infant is born, the whole world is potential. Gradually, by the exigencies of life and the need for self-definition, the field of one’s activity narrows, and all kinds of opportunities that had, in theory, existed at birth dwindle and eventually disappear from sight. Beyond this natural constriction, there is our failure to seize opportunities that were within grasp. We were not sufficiently sensitive and aware; either we did not realize the importance of the value, or did not sufficiently take heed to look around us and see where the opportunity existed. As a result, we missed so much valuable, significant spiritual potential. Retrospectively, we realize we could have structured our lives so much better, suffused it with greater value, organized it more efficiently, utilized time and effort more wisely. We could have set our priorities more correctly. We look back upon life, and, even when we don’t see active evil, we see so much waste. And waste is itself evil.

With regard to the prohibition of bal tashchit, of wasting property, the Gemara in Shabbat (129a, 140b) teaches: “Bal tashchit as applied to one’s own person stands higher”; waste of human resources is more critical than waste of property. How much worse is the waste of spiritual potential, that gap between what we could have been, what we should have been, and what we are. Everyone has this gap; for some it is enormous, and for others it seems smaller, but there is always the gap. That gap is the waste of human potential that was inherent within us, of the divine image God gave us. We, somehow, “diminished the stature of God” within ourselves. We could have procreated spiritually, but we did not do it. Maybe it sounds too severe to translate this into a kind of bloodshed, choking off incipient life, but we can certainly speak of “diminishing the stature of God.” To the extent that we are spiritually sensitive, this is both pitiful and tormenting.

Along comes the opportunity of teshuva. Teshuva is not just an opportunity *per se*; it is the opportunity to amend for all the missed opportunities. Teshuva is the chance to redress the balance, to take all of that waste and not only neutralize it but energize it, even transforming it into a positive force. Chazal teach:

Reish Lakish said: Great is teshuva, for one’s intentional sins are counted as unwitting transgressions…. Is that so? Did not Reish Lakish say: Great is teshuva, for one’s intentional sins are counted as merits?… This is not difficult; one is out of love, the other out of fear. (Yoma 86b)

Where teshuva is properly experienced, even “intentional sins are counted as merits.” So if one can speak of life, generally, as opportunity translated into obligation, teshuva is the opportunity to bring back all that we missed, to confront the torment and amend the failure. Ultimately, it allows us to restructure and rebuild our lives, and perhaps even more, when teshuva is performed out of love, to build upon our failure, our waste, and our diminishing of the divine stature.

*Teshuva***: A Gate and a Window of Opportunity**

When we speak of opportunity, we can refer to two separate concepts. There is, first, a kind of constant opportunity. One has the ability to involve oneself in Torah every day, every hour, within the limits of other obligations and commitments. Second, there are opportunities that are more specific, that arise at a particular time due to a confluence of circumstances, as when opportunity “knocks.” We might speak, then, of a “gate” of opportunity, and a “window” of opportunity. A gate is always open, so that you can walk through it whenever you want. In contrast, a window normally is shut, and during the fleeting moment when it is opened one can hope to extend his hand through it.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Teshuva, as the opportunity to amend for the failure to exploit opportunity, can be viewed in both perspectives. In a certain sense, teshuva is always possible. Every moment, every day, a person can perform teshuva. “The gates of teshuva are eternally open” (Devarim Rabba 2:12), and the outstretched hand, as it were, of the Almighty is always there. But there are also moments when He knocks on our window, when we experience “Kol, Dodi dofek, A sound, my Beloved is knocking” (Shir Ha-shirim 5:2). And then the obligation, grounded in opportunity, becomes that much greater. The constant opportunity is certainly challenging and imperative, but if, beyond that, God does not simply remain majestically ready to receive you, but reaches out to you and descends to you, woe to one who misses that, who relives the verse, “Dodi chamak avar, My Beloved has slipped away” (Shir Ha-shirim 5:6). When the opportunity is sharper and more immediate, the obligation is much greater as well.

It is in this vein that we are to understand the Rambam and Rabbeinu Yona. Yom Kippur is “the occasion of forgiveness and remission for Israel.” This is a time when God is not simply present in the recesses of His infinite being, but has descended to us. The verse commands us to “Seek out the Lord when He may be found, call upon Him when He is near” (Yeshayahu 55:6), and Chazal say, “These are the ten days from Rosh Ha-shana to Yom Kippur” (Rosh Ha-shana 18a; Yevamot 49b). This is “when He is near”; this is the opportunity that beckons particularly. And if it beckons it obligates! “Accordingly, everyone is obligated to repent.”

**Self-examination** **during the Ten Days of Repentance**

What does this teshuva demand of us? Of course, we must view our lives honestly and in detail to see where and whom we have wronged. But that kind of introspection is not sufficient, for if teshuva is indeed the opportunity to amend for lost opportunity, we need to address ourselves to that loss, to that waste. We need to confront not simply the active sinner in us, but the indolent in us.

The Gemara in Berakhot (5a) states:

Rava, and some say Rav Chisda, said: If a person sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct, as the verse states, “Let us search and examine our ways and return to the Lord” (Eikha 3:40). If he checked and did not find [sinful behavior], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of Torah.

The question arises: when he examined his conduct, did he not look into neglect of Torah study? I think the answer is clear. Of course, when a person examines his conduct, among the various areas he investigates is whether he is learning Torah: “The study of Torah is equal to all the others” (Pe’a 1:1). But he conducts his self-examination only at the level of whether he sinned by neglecting the mitzva of Torah study. Yet neglect of Torah is not just a question of a sin. While the Gemara in Sanhedrin castigated one who had the opportunity to study but did not, the Gemara in Chagiga discussed another dimension of neglect of Torah – one that caused the Almighty, so to speak, to weep! Why is He described as weeping only over neglect of Torah study, but not over desecration of Shabbat or eating non-kosher food? It is because the weeping is not over sins as such; it is over the waste of this wonderful resource of human life that could have been developed and was instead left to rot. When Chazal speak of attributing suffering that has no discernible cause to “neglect of Torah study,” they refer to the waste, the failure to energize spiritual potential.

That examination of deeds of which Rava speaks has various components. Broadly speaking, we certainly subscribe to the Socratic axiom that the unexamined life is not worth living – but we need to bear in mind what it is that we examine. We need to undergo self-examination at three different levels. There is the examination of which the Rambam speaks at the beginning of Hilkhot Teshuva, where a person examines his actions: I did this, or I didn’t do that. There is, at the other extreme, the examination of one’s self: who am I, and where do I stand in relation to who I could be? Between these extremes, the Gemara quotes the verse in Eikha, “Let us search and examine our ways” (3:40), referring to the totality of our behavior. The Rav z”l used to speak frequently of “sin,” meaning specific actions, and “the ways of sin,” the whole context of lifestyle and personality out of which sin develops and by which it is sustained. This direction that life takes, this modality of activity, stands somewhere between the definition of self and the analysis of particular actions.

With regard to the concept of the waste of spiritual resources, of the failure to implement a kind of spiritual carpe diem, we need to examine ourselves at all three levels: we check our actions, we examine our ways, and, perhaps most profoundly and painfully, we investigate our very being, our inner self.

All of this is extraordinarily demanding and difficult. It is hard enough to do what we are supposed to do and abstain from that which we are proscribed from doing, clearly and narrowly defined. But, when we not only hold ourselves to a standard of what we do, but gauge ourselves by optimum, by potential, and therefore hold ourselves accountable for every opportunity we could have seized and did not – this is, as I said, painful, even tormenting. Yet here we encounter not only the obligation of teshuva, but the chesed of teshuva.

*Teshuva* **as** *Tashlumin*

I spoke earlier of a kind of opportunity to make amends for missed opportunity. In the world of Halakha, this is known as tashlumin. We have two models for this, and there is a clear difference between them.

First, there is a type of tashlumin where, if you missed the first opportunity, you have a second chance. The paradigm is Pesach sheni (Bemidbar 9:9–14).[[12]](#footnote-12) If you didn’t bring the Pesach offering on the fourteenth of Nisan – not only, as in the passage in the Torah, where a person was at a distance or impure (Bemidbar 9:10), but even if you violated intentionally – you bring Pesach sheni, the compensatory Pesach offering on the fourteenth of Iyar. Similarly, if you didn’t bring the mandatory festive offerings, the korbenot ha-regel, on the first day of a Festival, you can bring them during the entire holiday.[[13]](#footnote-13) Or, if you didn’t make havdala on Saturday night, according to many Rishonim[[14]](#footnote-14) you can make havdala until Tuesday, be-torat tashlumin, as a compensation. We don’t know why the Torah gave tashlumin for korban Pesach and didn’t give tashlumin for hearing the shofar or sitting in the sukka. Whatever the reason, with regard to certain mitzvot, there is a second chance.

The second type of tashlumin is applicable to prayer. The Gemara says that since prayer contains an aspect of rachamei, supplication for mercy, the halakha of tashlumin applies to it. Unlike the earlier cases, here the Gemara explains why there is a second opportunity for prayer. The reason is that prayer is an expression of our quest, our pleading, and a plea can never be shut off. Therefore, there is a halakhic difference between the tashlumin of korban Pesach and korbenot ha-regel, and the tashlumin of prayer. Regarding Pesach and regel, even if a person violated the mitzva intentionally the first time around, he still has tashlumin. It’s a gezerat ha-katuv, a Torah edict. With regard to prayer, however, there is tashlumin only for unintentional neglect of the mitzva, such as if he accidentally forgot, or if circumstances did not enable him to pray, but not if he omitted prayer intentionally. The Gemara implies that, fundamentally, prayer should not have tashlumin – it should be like most other mitzvot. But at the level of rachamei, mercy, prayer is essentially a plea, a turning to the Almighty, and those gates can never be closed. That being the case, if one wantonly missed the prayer, if one knew it was taking place but did not want to stop what he was doing and pray – such a person is denied the opportunity to make it up later.

Teshuva is a kind of tashlumin, an opportunity to amend that which one did not avail himself of initially, and it is an opportunity grounded in rachamei. Rachamei here has a dual sense. On God’s part, it is an expression of compassion and kindness. It defies all logic to turn back the clock, to restructure the past; this is divine chesed. On our part, it means a plea, turning to God out of the depths of our remorse and our desire, not only to amend but to build. And where there is rachamei on our part and on His, then, indeed, the great burden of trying to review one’s life, with all the concern and all the anxiety accompanying that review, is then channeled into teshuva. This introspection into one’s actions and into the path of one’s life, which in one respect is so difficult and perhaps tormenting, becomes – to the extent that it is our rachamei and His rachamei – so uplifting, so ennobling. It becomes, indeed, a manifestation and a realization of the opportunity to restore everything we had missed and which now, in the infinite kindness of the Almighty, we are able to sustain and to develop.

We do not want to be like the prisoner in Rabbeinu Yona’s midrash: not to be prisoners of ourselves, of our past, or of our failure. If we have within us the spiritual resources, the desire to move, to build, and to avail ourselves of that remarkable chesed of the Almighty – the chesed of teshuva, of forgiveness and atonement, of the remission of sin and of punishment, and, above all, the chesed of the restoration of our relation to Him – then what might seem almost an unbearably difficult task becomes a source of joy. Then we encounter the Almighty receiving us, opening the gates, “Petach lanu sha’ar…ki fana yom, Open the gate for us…for day is nearly past” (Ne’ila prayer).

1. . Excerpted with permission from Rav Lichtenstein’s book, [*Return and Renewal: Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth*](https://korenpub.com/products/return-and-renewalhardcover), eds. Michael S. Berger and Reuven Ziegler (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2018). This *sicha* was delivered at the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem in Tishrei 5759 (1998), and was adapted by the editors from a transcript prepared by Michael and Rena Siev. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . The concept of teshuva as a gift God has given us can also be found in the way Rabbeinu Yona opens his Sha’arei Teshuva:

   Concerning the principles of teshuva: among the Blessed One’s kindnesses to His creations is having prepared for them the way to rise from the pit of their deeds and to escape the trap of their offenses…. In His great goodness and uprightness, He has taught and exhorted them to turn to Him upon having sinned against Him…. Even if they have offended and rebelled exceedingly and been utterly faithless, He has not closed the doors of repentance to them.

   This chesed is a gift, an opportunity conferred upon us by God. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . These different aspects of free will can also be detected in the language of the prophets. They speak not only of teshuva “from,” turning away from sin, as in the verse: “Turn, turn from your evil ways” (Yechezkel 33:11), but also teshuva “to,” exemplified by: “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God” (Hoshea 14:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . Hilkhot Teshuva 1:1 states:

   If a person transgresses any of the mitzvot of the Torah, whether a positive commandment or a prohibition, whether willingly or inadvertently, when he repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess before God, blessed be He, as the verse states (Bemidbar 5:6–7), “Any man or woman who commits any wrong toward a fellow man…. They shall confess their wrongdoing.” This refers to verbal confession (viddui), and this confession is a positive commandment. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . In the heading to Hilkhot Teshuva, the Rambam writes, “There is one positive commandment herein, namely, that a sinner should repent from his sin before God and confess.” The emphasis does seem to be more on the act of teshuva itself than on the detail of confession. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. . No less an authority than the Vilna Gaon insisted that there are values that may be of the highest order, even though they are not counted among the mitzvot. See his commentary on Megillat Esther, 10:3, s.v. doresh tov:

   This refers to good deeds and proper middot, for proper middot are more crucial than all the [actions], as I have written that the proper middot are not written explicitly in the Torah, for they underlie the entire Torah. As the Gemara states, one should regard one who gets angry as an idolater (Shabbat 105b), and one who gossips is considered like a heretic (Arakhin 15b); and the same goes for all the middot. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . Like Kant’s famous sense of wonder – inspired, as he said, by the starry heavens above him and the moral law within him (Critique of Practical Reason 5:161) – the force of moral law is certainly part of our tradition and part of our sensibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. . For example, a person can make an oath with regard to a devar reshut, but not with regard to a devar mitzva. See Rambam, Hilkhot Nedarim 3:7–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. . The Gemara (Sanhedrin 56b) uses this verse as a point of departure for the seven Noachide laws incumbent on all humanity. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. . Bereishit 28:10, s.v. ki va. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. . These relate to two terms in Modern Hebrew: hizdamnut, which by definition is of a particular time and occasion, and efsharut, which connotes the possible, something that is always there. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. . There is a dispute in the Gemara regarding exactly how to define Pesach sheni (Pesachim 93a–b), but, for our purposes, I will regard it as a tashlumin, compensation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. . Here, again, there are two views in the Gemara (Chagiga 9a) whether this is regarded as tashlumin, compensatory, or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. . *Tosafot,* Pesachim 107a, s.v. Ameimar; Rosh, Pesachim 10:13; Rambam, *Hilkhot* Shabbat 29:4; see Tur and Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 299:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)