

Erev RH

I always like to begin the High Holiday season by reviewing what Teshuvah is all about.

First, let's clear away some misconceptions. Teshuvah is not repentance. Repentance is sometimes the beginning of Teshuvah. Repentance involves feeling bad about something you have done, so you wish you had not done it. As I see it, expecting that repentance is meaningful on its own is very selfish – and doesn't do much to improve the world. As a relevant joke has it - "Have you felt bad about the murders you have committed?" "Certainly – I feel bad each time I get caught and wonder what to do so I don't."

Teshuvah is also not an all or nothing kind of thing. There is a complete "I have checked off all the boxes" Teshuvah, which applies to almost everything a person might do which gets us further away from God. There is also a Teshuvah which is necessarily incomplete in terms of checking off all the boxes, but it is complete in terms of interactions between people.

The complete, checking off all the boxes process which works for most actions is: 1) Realize that there is something nagging at you, and if it happens to be because you remember you did something wrong, admit your wrongdoing to yourself. 2) State the wrongdoing to the person who

was wronged. Asking for forgiveness at that time is possible, but not a requirement. 3) Fix what was broken whenever possible. Please note that punishment is not fixing what was broken, even if it is often a consequence of doing something wrong and admitting it. 4) Do not repeat that particular mistake ever again.

At a minimum, teshuvah involves the first and fourth steps. It is really hard to imagine that the process can even begin unless you realize that you did something wrong. Now, there are times when the way you find out something you did was not taken the way you meant it is when a friend of yours becomes less friendly. Those peccadillos can become the impetus for a relationship based Teshuvah – as in teshuvah for the relationship, where neither party will punish the other party for a similar offense without letting them know what is triggering it, but they are not really the basis for a personal Teshuvah (I can fulfill the promise not to throw the ball in my parent's home, but I cannot fulfill a promise to never disappoint them.) There is also no teshuvah at all if my future actions are not changed.

It is the second and third stages which cannot always be accomplished. There are times when the person whom we have wronged is no longer available. While many psychological techniques involve writing letters to people with whom you can no longer speak, and it is often helpful

for the person who is doing the writing, it is not actually, technically, letting the person know. Then there are the two prime examples of actions that are not amenable to being fixed – gossip and murder. I used to think that meant that those people who were engaged in activities that were not amenable to the third step could never do teshuvah while alive. I now think that this is being too easy on them by removing their responsibility to work on the fourth step. It is very important that murderers and gossips stop what they do. Under these two main categories fall the concepts of causing embarrassment and shaming, which are also things which should be stopped, or not even started. I understand that shaming is being used more and more these days – the internet seems to be wonderful about never letting a person forget that they acted stupidly once.

I would sincerely like it if in every aspect of my life, when I messed up, I could do Teshuvah. Teshuvah gives you a life-long opportunity for a second chance. Unfortunately, not all bureaucracies believe in second chances.

I originally thought that there would be some instances when I would want the all or nothing approach to be applied. As I began listing those things like plague carriers or places where people got food poisoning, I realized that if their situation changed, then indeed allowing a second

chance was appropriate. When the plague carrier is beyond the contagious stage, or the restaurant has fixed the cleanliness problems, the incident which caused the problem is not an adjective that permanently describes them.

The world of no second chances is a bleak one. What you have done defines who you are, and what you will always do. It is the world of Les Miserables, as interpreted by Javert. As a brief overview, Valjean stole a loaf of bread to feed his starving nephew when he was 19, and forever after he is an unemployable thief in Javert's eyes. If you don't know the story, I suggest you either read it or watch the musical.

A problem I have with the world of no second chances is that it makes it far more difficult to rebuild one's life after a mistake has been made.

I know there are certain classes of misdeeds that actually are indicative of a life-long problem. A person who acts like a predator because they consider themselves to be one is probably only going to pay lip service to the concept of Teshuvah at best. The miscreant who does one of the many other kinds of misdeeds may indeed be susceptible to Teshuvah, the second step of which is admitting that you did something wrong.

I think one of the problems with some of the agencies which do not agree with Teshuvah on principle, is that they feel that enabling Teshuvah would be the equivalent of saying that nothing wrong had been done. It is not, of course. You can accept somebody's statement of what they did, and even listen to their appeal for forgiveness, and then afterwards you can help them figure out how to do the third step – and none of that requires that you forgive the person. Over time, not forgiving somebody does you more harm than them, but you can help somebody do Teshuvah without being ready to move on yourself. After all, if they are serious about their Teshuvah, you will never have to worry about them repeating the same thing.

May each of us be enabled to perform Teshuvah regularly, so that each year we are focusing more deeply on perfecting ourselves.