

Should one repent from, or rather toward?

One of my favorite halakhic questions of all time is one where someone begged to be allowed to sin once, so that they could obtain the incomparable merit of the mitzvah of repentance. The assumption of the question is that one can only repent from, that teshuvah is always about restoring a past better personality.

This seems to fit well with the literal definition of “teshuvah” – return. And while the classical formulation involves both “regret for the past, and commitment for the future” – in other words, repentance both from and toward - one can argue that even the commitment for the future is about going “forward to the past”, about returning to who one was before one sinned.

However, the Talmud famously distinguishes between “repentance out of fear” and “repentance out of love”. Repentance out of fear erases past sins; repentance out of love converts them into virtues. In other words, repentance out of fear is past-focused, and seeks only to correct what has happened, whereas repentance out of love seeks to use even past sins as a vehicle for a better future. Repentance out of fear is repentance from; repentance out of love is repentance toward.

In our day, the term “baal teshuvah” refers primarily to someone who has become halakhically observant for the first time. We use the term teshuvah to describe going ‘back to the future’, returning to an ideal state that one has never actually experienced. Thus our primary model is repentance out of love, and we are in an excellent position to deeply internalize the model of “repentance toward”. I think this gives us a window into several other aspects of repentance that are sometimes overlooked.

One example: Rambam teaches that repentance relates to character traits as well as actions. One can only repent *from* actions, but one can repent *toward* better character. Repenting from an action is the attempt to get back to where one was before one sinned, but repenting from a character trait is often an attempt to create a new self, better than any self one has previously inhabited.

Furthermore: Repenting of an evil deed is purely repentance from, but what is repentance from an imperfectly performed good deed? For example, how does one repent for having had incomplete kavvanah during davening, even if one nonetheless fulfilled one’s obligation? From having given tzedakah to a poor person without a smile and encouraging word? For not having called to say “Good Shabbes” to someone for whom it would have made a difference? When one is repenting for missed opportunities, it seems that the goal must rather be to repent toward, to become the kind of person who misses fewer such opportunities.

I suspect that this is also often true with regard to communal repentance, and specifically the aspect of individual repentance that relates to one’s responsibilities for creating a just, compassionate, and religiously vibrant community. It’s hard to measure what difference, if any, one’s failures in that regard made – perhaps somebody else stepped up to the plate when you stepped away, or perhaps the idea wouldn’t have worked anyway. The process of building community is rarely about actual restoration, as

people come and go and a community is always being reshaped and recreated. Communal teshuvah generally is, and should be, about being better than the community has ever been.

In truth, our use of the term teshuvah has deep roots in the Talmud. When Rav Yochanan meets Resh Lakish for the first time, Resh Lakish is an armed bandit, and Rav Yochanan commands him "Return"! While Tosafot suggest (for other reasons) that Resh Lakish may have been a yeshiva student gone wrong, the straightforward reading is that Resh Lakish first became involved with Torah at that moment.

And on another level, from Tanakh to our day Jews have described their vision of Geulah as a return, even though it is a return to something they have never experienced, and in many ways to something that never existed in the past.

May it be His Will that our generation's special capacity to understand teshuvah meiahavah, repentance out of love, enables us to repent toward ultimate Geulah.