



Beyond the Point of No Return: On Teshuvah and Finding a Way Out Myriam Ackermann-Sommer

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The Yamim Noraim certainly are an appropriate time to wonder about the profound meaning of Teshuvah and its concrete significance in our lives, as we are reminded in Rambam's Hilchot Teshuvah (*Mishneh Torah* 2:7) - even though it is quite clear that the pivotal experience of "returning" (or "repenting") is a pillar of our daily experiences as post-Temple Jews, a fact that Rambam also forcefully stressed.

בְּזִמְנֵי הַיָּמִים הַזֵּה שֶׁאֵין בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קַיָּים וְאֵין לָנוּ מִזְבֵּחַ כְּפָרֶה אֵין שָׁם אֶלָּא תְּשׁוּבָה.

At present, when the Temple does not exist and there is no altar of atonement, there remains nothing else aside from Teshuvah (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:7).

In keeping with Rambam's assertion, it seems obvious to us that we should constantly be striving for higher spheres of spiritual realisation, for greater submission to God's will and openness to others. Thus, we are constantly on our way to an ethical self-realisation that should be described as an ongoing process rather than as a state that one can definitely achieve. We are very much aware that the Yamim Noraim are part and parcel of this experience, spurring us on to become our better selves through introspection.

However, it is not always clear where we are headed as we tentatively walk the path towards Teshuvah. To do Teshuvah, etymologically, should simply be to "return", in other words, to "go home", to walk all the way back to the place whence we came. Yet as a *baalat Teshuvah*, it seems to me that "returning" paradoxically leads us to tread untrodden, sometimes risky tracks. In other words, this process and life-changing experience does not escort us back to where (and who) we used to be, which is precisely what we are trying to avoid. We are trying to avoid repeating our past deeds, which we can look back on with intense repulsion. Indeed, were we to repeat, or return to, our former ways, we would miss the whole point of Teshuvah altogether.

אֵי זוּ הִיא תְּשׁוּבָה גְּמוּרָה. זֶה שְׁבָא לִידוֹ דְּבָר שְׁעֵבַר בּוֹ וְאֶפְשָׁר בִּידוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ וּפְרָשׁ
וְלֹא עָשָׂה מִפְּנֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה

What constitutes complete Teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he or she sinned when he or she has the potential to do it again, and yet abstains and does not commit it because of Teshuvah. (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1)

It ensues that Teshuvah, even though it may, in time, result in a feeling of inner peace and realisation, is no bed of roses. It is not half as safe as its name would seem to suggest - quite the opposite. Indeed, it can go hand in hand with an uncomfortable sense of clash between past and present, a jarring representation of one's self as irretrievably flawed, a nagging feeling of remorse and shame at remembering our past mistakes and shortcomings. All of these may in fact be signs that the process of Teshuvah is, as it were, *working*. They all seem to confirm that Teshuvah has nothing to do with going back or retracing one's steps, and, that, despite the fact that it can be translated as "an answer, a reply", it seems to raise more questions than it provides answers.

So, where is it that we “return” when we go through this experience? An obvious answer might be: to Hashem. Through Teshuvah, we are indeed “going home” in a theologically meaningful sense: we are returning to a state of moral cleanliness, preceding the stain of transgression. Hence the necessity of *Viduy*, or oral confession of one’s misdeeds, as one goes through Teshuvah. This somewhat puzzling mitzvah is at the heart of Rambam’s *Hilchot Teshuvah* -- it actually provides his opening comment in the very first chapter of his treatise.

כָּל מִצְוֹת שְׁבִיתוֹרָה בֵּין עֵשֶׂה בֵּין לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה אִם עָבַר אָדָם עַל אַחַת מֵהֶן בֵּין בְּזָדוֹן בֵּין בְּשִׁגְגָה כְּשִׁיעֲשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה וַיָּשׁוּב מִחֻטְאוֹ חֵיב לְהִתְוֹדוֹת לְפָנָי הָאֵל בְּרוּךְ הוּא שְׁנֹאמֵר (במדבר ה ו) "אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה כִּי יַעֲשׂוּ" וְגו' (במדבר ה ז) וְהִתְוֹדוּ אֶת חַטֹּאתֵם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ" זֶה וְדַי דְּבָרִים. וְדַי זֶה מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה. כִּיצַד מִתְוֹדִין. אוֹמֵר אֲנִי הַשֵּׁם חַטֹּאתַי עֵוִיתַי פְּשַׁעְתַי לְפָנֶיךָ וְעֲשִׂיתִי כְךָ וְכךָ וְהִרִי נַחֲמֵתִי וּבִשְׁתִּי בְּמַעֲשֵׂי וּלְעוֹלָם אִינִי חוֹזֵר לְדַבֵּר זֶה. וְזֶהוּ עֵקֶר שֶׁל וְדַי

All the commandments of the Torah, whether positive (mandatory) or negative (prohibitive), if someone violates any one of them, either willingly or inadvertently, when he or she repents and turns away from his or her sinful way, he is obliged to confess before God, blessed is (S)he! even as it is said: "When a man or woman shall commit any sin..... Then they shall confess their sin which they have done" (Bamidbar 5:6–7). This refers to a verbal confession. Such confession is a positive command. How is the verbal confession made? The sinner says thus: "I implore you, Hashem! I have sinned; I have been obstinate; I have committed profanity against You, particularly in doing thus and such. Now, behold! I have repented and am ashamed of my actions; forever will I not relapse into this thing again. This is the elementary form of confession.

At first, I found this insistence on confession surprising - all the more so as both the *Sefer haMitzvot* and the *Minchat Chinuch* (mitzvah 364) understood this passage as an indication that only *viduy* could fulfill the mitzvah of Teshuvah, rather than the inner feeling of Teshuvah itself, or the decision of atoning for one’s transgressions that stems from this feeling. Speech has the strength of a deed in many a context (see Bava Metziah 90b), as is the case here. Thus, it is the utterance of atonement that seals the mitzvah of Teshuvah. It is quite conspicuous during the Yamim Noraim, times of collective repentance that unite *Am Israel* in a heartfelt plea to Hashem - the confession of an entire people.

Nevertheless, it remains unclear why a God who can “probe the heart and search the mind” (Jeremiah 17:10) might need such oral confession. Why does it really have to be voiced? Why a “*viduy devarim*”, a confession of words? Will our pangs of guilt not suffice to show Hashem how remorseful we are? Is the decision to refrain from committing the same mistakes simply not good enough? These questions highlight the fact that Teshuvah may not be so much a matter of return to one’s (former, untainted or purified) self as a way out of the self that opens onto the dimension of otherness - a way *out* of one’s former dispositions and misdeeds, and *into* more meaningful relationships with both Hashem and the people who surround us.

This idea seems supported by textual evidence from *Hilchot Teshuvah*. Another perhaps even more unsettling passage of Rambam’s treatise mentions (and praises!) public confession, a practice that may sound quite outlandish to us (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:7). Actually, it is likely that imagining myself undergoing the confession that follows in front of my family and friends would bring me out in a cold sweat!

וְשָׁבַח גְּדוֹל לְשֵׁב שִׁיתְוֹדָה בְּרַבִּים וַיִּזְדַּע פְּשָׁעָיו לְהֵם וּמִגְלָה עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבִּינוּ לְבֵין חֲבֵרוֹ לְאַחֵרִים וְאוֹמֵר לְהֵם אֲמַנֵּם חַטֹּאתַי לְפָלוֹנִי וְעֲשִׂיתִי לוֹ כְךָ וְכךָ וְהִרִינִי הַיּוֹם שֶׁב וּמִתְנַחֵם. וְכָל הַמִּתְגַּאֵה וְאִינוֹ מוֹדִיעַ אֶלָּא מְכַסֶּה פְּשָׁעָיו אֵין תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ גְּמוּרָה שְׁנֹאמֵר
(משלי כח יג) "מְכַסֶּה פְּשָׁעָיו לֹא יִצְלִיחַ".



It is very praiseworthy for a person who repents to confess in public and to make one's sins known to others, revealing his interpersonal transgressions to others, saying to them: "Even though I have sinned against that person, whom I have wronged thus and such, behold me this day, I repent and am remorseful". But someone who conceals out of pride but covers up his or her sins, is not a wholehearted penitent, of whom it is said: "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper" (Proverbs 28:13).

Rambam goes on to specify that this confession should only be undertaken for one's interpersonal transgressions, namely, the transgressions we have committed against other people. However, both transgressions (against God and people) make the ritual of confession necessary, or, in the latter case, extremely commendable (in the form of public expiation).

The aforementioned inquiry resurfaces here: why confess *publicly* and perhaps humiliate oneself when one can merely acknowledge one's transgressions (be they in the realm of interpersonal relationships, i.e. *bein adam la-chavero*, or in the realm of the human being's relationship with Hashem, *bein adam la-makom*) and move on without repeating the same mistakes? Is the oral confession simply meant to enforce one's goodly disposition?

I do not think so. It seems to me that *viduy* has something more to teach us - what I called a way out of the self and its inner limitations. *Teshuvah* requires two participants: the one who atones for his or her transgressions, and the recipient of such repentance. One simply cannot forgive oneself in matters that have to do with ethical breaches in our relationships to Hashem and to our fellow human beings.

Similarly, Rambam explicitly states that "Yom Kippur can only atone for transgressions between man and God" (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:9), while transgressions that involve other people who were sinned against require something more than inner Teshuvah. Indeed, only when the transgressor "gives his (or her) colleague what s-he owes him (or her) and appeases him (or her)" can s-he be forgiven. Teshuvah, in that case, merely prods us into mending damaged relationships and recreating meaningful connections between us and those who share our lives.

The same process applies when one asks forgiveness from Hashem through the mitzvah of *viduy*. Through this experience, one acknowledges one's failings and one's vulnerability to sin. Hence Rabbi Abahu's suggestion that people who undertake the challenging work of Teshuvah stand higher than those who never did (Brachot 34) -- only through the recognition of one's own limits and shortcomings can we soar above the trammels of our inevitably limited and fragile selves and acknowledge how dependent we are upon one another for forgiveness and fulfillment. Thus, Teshuvah is not our own reassuring or condemning response to our own failings and mistakes, but rather the process through which we open ourselves to otherness and await an answer. Our confession, be it public or private, merely voices a plea that we hope will be answered favourably by God as well as by our brothers and sisters. Teshuvah ("the answer") begins inside, as a realisation of one's vulnerability, but it essentially comes from the outside. It is the "I forgive you" that we anxiously pray for throughout the Yamim Noraim and that will hopefully come both from others and from the Great Other - Hashem, who teaches us how to open ourselves to otherness as S-he mercifully opens the heavenly gates to listen to our cries throughout Yom Kippur.

Myriam Ackermann-Sommer was born and raised in France. She holds an M.A. in English, with a minor in Hebrew from the Sorbonne at the École Normale Supérieure. Her master's degree in English literature focused on Jewish American authors and Jewish philosophy and she is currently writing a Ph.D. on Jewish American short stories. In 2017 Myriam and her husband co-founded Ayeka, a co-ed study group for Parisian students and young professionals. A dedicated musician, Myriam has also earned a diploma in transverse flute and loves to enhance the spiritual dimension of Judaism by singing her heart out in prayer groups.

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