

The individual and the community in *teshuvah*

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I Selections from the Rambam (Moses Maimonides), *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva*

1) 3:1

כל אחד ואחד מבני האדם יש לו זכויות ועונות, מי שזכויותיו יתירות על עונותיו צדיק, ומי שעונותיו יתירות על זכויותיו רשע, מחצה למחצה בינוני, וכן המדינה אם היו זכויות כל יושביה מרובות על עונותיהן הרי זו צדקת, ואם היו עונותיהם מרובין הרי זו רשעה, וכן כל העולם כולו.

Every single person has both merits and sins. One whose merits are greater than one's sins is a righteous person, and one whose sins are greater than one's merits is a wicked person. One who has an equal number of merits and sins is a regular person. Similarly with a state—if the merits of its inhabitants are greater than their sins, it is righteous; if their sins are greater, it is wicked. Similarly, for the whole world.

2) 2:1

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה, זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופירש ולא עשה מפני התשובה, לא מיראה ולא מכשלון כח

What is complete *teshuvah*? A case in which the opportunity arises to commit the same sin again, and in which a person is able to do it, and separates him/herself and does not commit the sin [and acts in this way] because of having done *teshuvah* and not out of fear and not out of a lack of capacity.

3) 2:7

יום הכפורים הוא זמן תשובה לכל ליחיד ולרבים והוא קץ מחילה וסליחה לישראל, לפיכך חייבים הכל לעשות תשובה ולהתודות ביום הכפורים. . . .

Yom Kippur is the time of *teshuvah* for each individual and for the whole community, and it is the conclusion of the period of forgiveness and repentance for the Jewish people. For this reason, everyone is obligated to do *teshuvah* and to confess sin on Yom Kippur.

4) 2:8

היודי שנהגו בו כל ישראל אבל אנחנו חטאנו (כולנו) והוא עיקר היודוי

The confession that is customary for the Jewish people to make on Yom Kippur is “but we (all of us) have sinned” and this is the essence of the confession.

Moses Maimonides (aka “The Rambam”—an acronym for **Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon**) lived in Spain and northern Africa from 1135 to 1204. Two of his major works were the *Mishneh Torah* (from which these laws of *teshuva* are taken), one of the first compilations of Jewish law and *Moreh Nevuchim—A Guide for the Perplexed*, an important book of Jewish philosophy.

5) 3:4

אע"פ שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזירת הכתוב רמז יש בו כלומר עורר ישינים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם, אלו השוכחים את האמת בהבלי הזמן ושוגים כל שנתם בהבל וריק אשר לא יועיל ולא יציל הביטו לנפשותיכם והטיבו דרכיכם ומעלליכם ויעזוב כל אחד מכם דרכו הרעה ומחשבתו אשר לא טובה, לפיכך צריך כל אדם שיראה עצמו כל השנה כולה כאילו חציו זכאי וחציו חייב, וכן כל העולם חציו זכאי וחציו חייב, חטא חטא אחד הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לכף חובה וגרם לו השחתה, עשה מצוה אחת הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לכף זכות וגרם לו ולהם תשועה והצלה שנאמר וצדיק יסוד עולם זה שצדק הכריע את כל העולם לזכות והצילו. . .

Even though sounding the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a decree of the Torah, nevertheless there is a message in this action, as if to say: "Arouse sleepy ones from your everyday habits, awaken from your slumber, repent from your actions and remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year, devote their energies to vanity and emptiness which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon your evil path and thoughts.

Accordingly, through the entire year, a person should always look at oneself as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. A person who performs one sin tips one's balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings about destruction. A person who performs one mitzvah tips one's own balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to oneself and others. This is implied by [Proverbs 10:25] "A righteous man is the foundation of the world,"—meaning, one who acted righteously tipped the balance of the entire world to merit and saved it. . .

6) 4:1

ארבעה ועשרים דברים מעכבין את התשובה, ארבעה מהן עון גדול והעושה אחד מהן אין הקב"ה מספיק בידו לעשות תשובה לפי גודל חטאו. ואלו הן: (א) המחטיא את הרבים ובכלל עון זה המעכב את הרבים מלעשות מצוה, (ב) והמטה את חבירו מדרך טובה לרעה כגון מסית ומדיח, (ג) הרואה בנו יוצא לתרבות רעה ואינו ממחה בידו, הואיל ובנו ברשותו אילו מיחה בו היה פורש ונמצא כמחטיאו, ובכלל עון זה כל שאפשר בידו למחות באחרים בין יחיד בין רבים ולא מיחה אלא יניחם בכשלונם, (ד) והאומר אחטא ואשוב ובכלל זה האומר אחטא ויום הכפורים מכפר.

There are twenty-four deeds which hold back *teshuvah*. Four are the commission of severe sins. God will not grant the person who commits such deeds to repent because of the gravity of these transgressions. These are:

- a) One who causes the masses to sin, included in this category is one who holds back the many from performing a positive commandment.
- b) One who leads one's colleague astray from the path of good to that of bad; for example, one who proselytizes or serves as a missionary [for idol worship]
- c) One who sees one's child becoming associated with evil influences and refrains from rebuking him/her. Since a child is under the parent's authority, if the parent were to rebuke the child, the child would have separated from these influences. Hence, the parent [is considered] as causing the child to sin.
Included in this sin are also all those who have the potential to rebuke others, whether an individual or a group, and refrain from doing so, leaving them their shortcomings.
- d) One who says "I will sin and then repent." Included in this category is one who says "I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone for me."

II **Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, “The Individual in the Community” in *On Repentance*** Trans. Pinchas Peli (Jerusalem: Orot, 1980) 125-126

The distinction between the individual and the community is inherent in all that pertains to the Days of Awe. This emerges very clearly from the phraseology of the *Zichronot* (verses having to do with memory) section of the prayers: “You recall *the whole universe*, neither is all of creation concealed from You, all is revealed and known to You our Lord, our God, Who watches and sees to the end of time”—here, then, is a reference to the whole community. And immediately afterwards: “For you invoke the law of remembrance *to count each soul and being.*”

Such too is the acquittal offered by the Day of Atonement—both individual and communal. Judaism has always viewed man from this dual perspective. It sees each person as an independent individual and also as a part of a community, a limb of the body of Israel. Jewish thinkers have conducted an ongoing dialectic on this subject through the ages. The pivotal question is: Does the individual stand above the community which should serve his needs, or should the individual subordinate himself to the community’s needs? In Judaism this question has been asked in relation to the individual who serves as a community leader. Who, in our history, was a greater leader than Moses, redeemer of Israel, the great rabbi and teacher, about whom our Sages wrote that his worth was equivalent to that of 600,000 men, meaning the total number of the male community of the time? Nonetheless, when the Children of Israel fashioned the Golden Calf, “God said to Moses, ‘Go down’—lower yourself down; for did I not grant you greatness only to benefit Israel? And now that Israel has sinned what need have I of you?” (Talmud, Berakhot 32b) Even the greatness of an individual like Moses is dependent on the community. It would seem that the community and the individual are placed in balance with each other and are interdependent. At times we find that the community must sacrifice itself on behalf of the individual; for example, when enemies surround a town and say: “give us one man (as a hostage),” the community must refuse and rather let all be killed than hand over one single Jew to them. And at times the individual must sacrifice himself for the good of the community.

Never is the individual’s worth belittled when measured against the whole community; and never is the community undermined because of any individual or individuals. Each has its own position of strength.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993)—known as the Rav—was one of the most important Jewish scholars of the twentieth century. As an Orthodox rabbi who held a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin, Soloveitchik committed himself both to traditional Jewish practice and to intellectual and practical engagement with the world.

Soloveitchik served as Chief Rabbi of Boston in the 1930s and as *Rosh Yeshiva* (one of the intellectual leaders & teachers of the school) of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, the rabbinical school of Yeshiva University, from the early 1940s through 1985.

How do these authors define “righteousness” and “wickedness”? Do you agree with these definitions?

Maimonides identifies a number of sins as ones for which God does not grant forgiveness. Why do you think that he chooses these particular sins? Do you agree with his list? Why or why not?

What is the relationship between the teshuvah of the individual and that of the community? When, in your own life, have you seen a relationship between the sins and/or teshuvah of the individual and of the community?