

Parshas Nasso

The Roots of Repentance

This week’s Torah portion speaks of the commandment to confess one’s wrong-doings before G-d as a part of repentance. This Sicha analyzes the essence of repentance according to both the exoteric and the esoteric parts of Torah.

In this week’s *parsha* is expressed the commandment to confess one’s sin at the time of repentance. The Torah states,

Text 1

The Lord then spoke to Moshe saying: “Tell the children of Israel: When a man or woman commits any of the sins against man to act treacherously against G-d, and that person is [found] guilty, they shall confess the sin they committed, and make restitution for the principal amount of his guilt, add its fifth to it, and give it to the one against whom he was guilty.”

Bamidbar 5:5-7

In his *Sefer HaMitzvos*, Rambam relates that this verse is the source of the positive commandment of confessing one’s sin at the time of repentance.

Text 2

We are commanded to verbally acknowledge the sins we have committed before G-d (exalted be He), when we come to do *teshuvah* (to repent). This is “*vidui*” (verbal confession), the idea of which is to say, “O G-d, I have sinned, I have committed iniquity, I have transgressed and done ...”... The source of this commandment

is G-d’s statement (exalted be He), “Tell the children of Israel: When a man or woman commits any of the sins against man...”

Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvos, Asei 73

While Rambam enumerates the *mitzvah* to confess for one’s sins—in his listing of the commandments—he seems to omit that there is any commandment of repentance in its own right.

The commentators are therefore split as to whether or not (according to Rambam) there is an actual commandment to repent one has sinned or that although it is definitely something that one should do, there is no actual commandment.

Three opinions

There are generally three attitudes expressed in the commentators concerning how to classify the idea of repentance and confession:

- 1) There is no commandment to repent, but when one chooses to repent there is a specific formula of how to do so.

This view is explained by the following statement of *Minchas Chinuch*:

Text 3

Repentance is not a commandment... (Rather) this positive commandment of confession is like many of the 613 mitzvos... that are not an (active) commandment to do, rather when one does an action during a certain scenario it is considered a *mitzvah*, such as divorce (where is no *mitzvah* to divorce one's wife but if one chooses to, he must do so in a certain way which is a *mitzvah*)...So too, the Torah stated, if a person repents in such a scenario one must confess, but one does not disregard a *mitzvah* if one does not repent.

Minchas Chinuch, 364

This opinion can as well be supported through Rambam's wording in the beginning of his Laws of *Teshuvah* (repentance): "*When one will repent and return from his sin, he is obligated to confess...*" Instead of Rambam saying that there is a *commandment* to repent, he instead says that *when* one repents they are instructed to confess.

- 2) There is indeed a commandment to repent for one's sin, but it is not included in the *reckoning* of the 613 *mitzvos* because it is a general commandment, as opposed to a specific one.

The explanation for this approach can be understood through the following that elucidates that general commandments are not included amongst the 613 commandments:

Text 4

In the Torah there are commandments and injunctions that are not specific but rather

incorporate all of the *mitzvos*. It is as if it said, "Do all that I commanded and do not do all that I forbid you to do..." There is no rationale to count such a commandment as a separate *mitzvah*, for He is not commanding to do a specific action to the point where it would be classified as a positive commandment; he is also not forbidding a specific action to the point where it would be classified as a negative commandment.

Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvos, Shoresh 4

It is because the commandment of repentance is a general one, which tells the person to keep all of G-d's commandments, instead of telling the person to do any specific action, that it is not included in the 613 *mitzvos*.

As R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the Alter Rebbe) explains, repentance merely entails the individual's resolves never to rebel against G-d's will and not any specific action.

Text 5

The commandment of repentance as required by the Torah is simply the abandonment of sin... He must resolve in perfect sincerity never again to revert to folly to rebel against His rule, may He be blessed; he will never again violate the King's command, G-d forbid, neither a positive command nor a prohibition.

Tanya, Igeres HaTeshuvah, Ch. 1

It is because the commandment of repentance is merely an expression of re-accepting the yoke of Heaven, that the commandment is considered a general commandment which is not considered one of the 613 commandments.

Therefore, when discussing the *mitzvah* of repentance, Rambam only mentioned the commandment of confession, which is a specific command.

- 3) Repentance and confession are both details of the same commandment.

This reasoning can be seen in Rambam's header to the Laws of Repentance, which encapsulates the laws of repentance "that a sinner should repent from his sin before G-d and confess." Rambam not only says that there is a commandment to confess but expresses that there is a commandment to repent as well.

This last approach is clarified as follows:

Text 6

Repentance and confession are one commandment. For, there is no confession absent of repentance, since one who confesses but does not resolve in his heart to revert from sin is as if one immerses (in the *mikvah* [ritual bath] for the sake up purity) but has an (impure) rodent in his hand.

Kiryas Sefer, Laws of Teshuvah 1:1

The third way

To explain the third view regarding the *mitzvah* of repentance in more detail:

Repentance and confession are both two aspects of one commandment. Repentance incorporates the aspect of thought of the commandment—the resolve not to sin—while confession is the aspect of verbal expression.

This is articulated in the words of Rambam:

Text 7

He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart.

Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 2:2

It is understood therefore, that the *mitzvah* of confession incorporates the act of repentance, as, if a person has no inner resolve, their words are meaningless. This is similar to the meaningless act of dunking in a *mikvah* while one retains the impure object in their hand. Just as one cannot become pure until one relinquishes the impure object, so too, one cannot repent and confess until they have relinquished sin.

While Rambam in his Sefer HaMitzvos only mentions the commandment of confession and not that of repentance—although it would seem that repentance is the *primary* commandment and the confession is merely an *extension* thereof—this is because once he is classifying a commandment, Rambam chooses to mention the part of the *mitzvah* that is an *action* rather than that which is merely fulfilled through thought (as with the resolve of the repentance).

An example of the above rule can be seen through prayer:

Prayer is a composite of two parts—the expression of the heart and its articulation through speech. The idea of the heart's expression being a component of prayer is stated in the Talmud:

Text 8

It has been taught: “To love the Lord your G-d and to serve Him with all your heart¹.” What is Service of Heart? You must say, prayer.

Talmud, Taanis 2a

The main idea of prayer is the expression of the heart, not the words that one says. This is to the extent that when a person does not recognize that they are standing before G-d during their prayers, it is not considered that they had prayed².

While this is true, when Rambam describes prayer he focuses on the aspect of the *speech*. He expresses this as follows:

Text 9

A person should not raise his voice during his *Amidah*, nor should he pray silently. Rather, he should pronounce the words with his lips, whispering in a tone that he can hear.

Rambam, Laws of Tefilah 5:9

This is the basic meaning of “prayer”: an act of supplication to G-d through speech. The reason for this is because when *mitzvos* are classified, they are generally categorized by their physical act and not their emotional intent. So too, concerning repentance Rambam enumerates the physical act of repentance and does not mention the part that takes place in the heart.

¹ Devarim, 11:13.

² See Chidushei HaGrach, Rambam, Laws of Prayer, 4:15.

Exoteric explanation

Of the three above explanations as to how to define repentance, the third explanation—that repentance and confession are both part of the same commandment—seem most plausible according to the exoteric understanding of the Torah. This is for the following reason:

- 1) The first explanation, which suggests that according to Rambam there is no commandment to repent, is implausible, as Rambam himself writes in the header to the Laws of *Teshuvah* that the positive commandment of repentance dictates “that a sinner should *repent* from his sin before G-d and confess.” Rambam clearly says that there is a commandment to repent. It therefore seems unambiguous that according to the Rambam, there is indeed a commandment to repent.
- 2) The second explanation, stating that while one is indeed commanded to repent, repentance is not enumerated amongst the other 613 *mitzvos* because it does not entail any specific action not already included in other commandments, is questionable as well. For repentance *does* include the act of regretting one’s sin, which is *not* included in other commandments. As Rambam himself states,

Text 10

What constitutes repentance? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again as it states³, “May the wicked

³³ Yeshaya 55:7.

abandon his ways..." Similarly, he must *regret the past*, as it states⁴: "After I returned, I regretted."

Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 2:2

Being that the aspect of regret is an integral part of repentance, and is not included in other *mitzvos*, it is understood that repentance is not merely accepting the yoke of Heaven and should therefore as well be enumerated amongst the 613 commandments.

One can possibly explain, though implausible, that regret is not a separate act within repentance but only a detail of accepting to fulfill G-d's will in the future. For, if an individual does not regret his actions, this itself is a proof that his resolve for the future is lacking as well. According to this reasoning, regret would not be considered a separate aspect of repentance in order to classify repentance as its own, unique *mitzvah*.

However, this is an extremely improbable explanation, as when the Shulchan Aruch⁵ (Code of Jewish Law) discusses the laws of repentance through which a person who has been previously disqualified from testifying can become a proper witness, only the resolve for the future is mentioned, and not the regret that one has for their past sins. From this it is understood that it is possible to have proper resolve for the future *without* regret for the past, and they are thus independent components.

Accordingly, the regret that one is to have when one does *teshuvah* is not an *aspect* of his commitment for the future but a *separate* part of the commandment of repentance.

⁴ Yirmiyahu 31:18.

If so, it is unlikely to explain that the reason that commandment of repentance is not mentioned is that it does not have its own distinct action, as the act of regret is a distinct action which separates it from other commandments.

It is therefore understood that the most plausible explanation is the *third* explanation— i.e., that indeed there is a *mitzvah* to repent, which is part and parcel of the command to confess. The aspect of repentance though, is not clearly expressed, as Rambam only mentions the *act* of the *mitzvah* and omits the intention of the heart.

All are true

All three explanations mentioned are posed by accepted Torah commentators. Concerning the differing opinions that the Rabbis offer, the Talmud says the following:

Text 11

R. Abba stated in the name of Shmuel: "For three years there was a dispute between *Beis Shammai* and *Beis Hillel*; the former asserting, 'the *halachah* is in agreement with our views,' and the latter contending, 'the *halachah* is in agreement with our views.' Then a *bas kol* issued, announcing, '[The utterances of] both are the words of the living G-d, but the *halachah* is in agreement with the rulings of *Beis Hillel*'.

Talmud, Eiruvim 13b

Though there is only one ruling, all valid opinions in the Torah are "words of the living G-d" and contain an important lesson in one's service of G-d.

⁵ Choshen Mishpat, Section 34.

For, the reason why the *halacha* was only decided according to one opinion is because in action, one can only act in one manner, but concerning the spiritual intent of the *mitzvah*, there is room for all opinions.

So too, concerning the three opinions regarding repentance, that a) it is not a commandment, B) it is considered a *general* command, and C) it is a specific commandment like any other, all three views hold significance concerning the spiritual idea behind the commandment to repent.

A G-dly body

The spiritual significance to the discussion of repentance can be understood through prefacing that the 248 positive commandments and the 365 negative commandment correlate to the specific number of limbs and sinews in the body.

Concerning the 248 positive commandments the Talmud says,

Text 12

... And 248 positive precepts, corresponding to the number of the members of man's body.

Talmud, Makos 23b

Concerning the negative commandments the Zohar states,

Text 13

Man has 365 sinews that correspond to the 365 commandments that he may not do.

Zohar 1,170b

When an individual is complete in all his 613 commandments then correspondingly, he is complete in the spiritual elements of his soul. But, when he is lacking in his *mitzvos*, then he is as well lacking a limb of his soul.

This is the spiritual significance of repentance; that the power of repentance is able to repair the limbs of the soul.

Text 14

Repentance is on a higher level than all of the commandments...to fill up the blemish and what is lacking.

Likutei Torah, Nitzavim 45c-d

When one repents from the depth of their heart and soul they are able to tap into a level of their soul where there is no blemish to begin with. This in turn draws down a new life force, which repairs the soul.

A general command

Accordingly, the significance of the second view, which holds that the commandment of repentance is a general *mitzvah* and thus not included amongst the 613 commandments, can be appreciated.

The reason why general commandments are not enumerated in the 613 commandments is because only the *specific* limbs of the soul are enumerated as commandments, and not those that incorporate the entirety of the soul.

It is because repentance is “on a higher level than all of the commandments” that it is not included amongst the 613 commandments.

This opinion believes however, that although the commandment of repentance itself is not considered a *mitzvah*—as it is an expression of

the essence of one soul—the *confession* aspect of repentance, which is not expressive of the soul's essence, is indeed enumerated as one of the 613 commandments.

Not a commandment

From the above explanation one can understand as well Opinion 1, which held that there is no commandment to repent *at all*.

As explained above, repentance has the ability to mend the limbs of the soul, as it is expressive of the soul's essence, which is not blemished through sin.

That being said, in order for the essence of the soul to truly express itself, it needs to do so without any coercion. As when a person does something because he is obligated and coerced to do so, it is not an expression of the person himself, and is only an external expression of the individual.

The more the coercion is mitigated, the more the person himself is expressed. Something that is truly an expression of the soul's essence is done with no outside motivation whatsoever⁶.

It is because repentance is an expression of the essence of the soul that there is no command regarding it. For, only when a person repents purely on their own volition do they reveal the essence of their soul.

Free choice

According to the above, a curious point in Rambam's Laws of *Teshuvah* can be explained as well. Within the presentation of these laws, he explains at great length the principle of free choice:

⁶ This is similar to the reason that the joy of the dancing during Simchas Torah, which is only a custom, is more intense than the joy during the rest of the holiday of Sukkos, which is based on a biblical

Text 15

Free will is granted to all men. 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 be wicked, the choice is his...A person should not entertain the thesis held by the fools...that, at the time of a man's creation, The Holy One, blessed be He, decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked... This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and *mitzvos* as it states⁷: "Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil]." Similarly, it states⁸, "Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse]," implying that the choice is in your hands.

Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 5:1-3

Seemingly, the principle of free will, which "is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and *mitzvos*," should have been explained when Rambam presents the principles of the Torah. Why does he not clarify the concept of free choice there, and instead explain it in the laws of repentance?

Based on the above though, this can be explained:

The litmus test to know if one's repentance is authentic is if comes from the essence of the soul, with no coercion. It is therefore of utmost importance to explain the concept of free choice in the laws of repentance. Concerning other commandments, the concept of free choice is primarily concerning their reward and punishment and not the *actual completion* of the

verse. The more that the joy is intense the less that it is mandated.

⁷ Devarim 30:15.

⁸ Devarim 11:26.

commandment; not so with repentance, where without free choice, there is no repentance at all.

A specific command

Yet, as explained above, Rambam's halachik opinion is like Opinion 3—that repentance is indeed a commandment which is enumerated in the 613 commandments.

The explanation of this in spiritual terms can be appreciated by the following thought in Pirkei Avos, brought in the name of R. Yaakov:

Text 16

He would also say: A single moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is greater than all of the World to Come.

Pirkei Avos 4:17

The connection between repentance and good deeds (as R. Yaakov joined together) is that through repentance a person illuminates the good deeds that they do—being that repentance breathes a new life into an individual's Torah and *mitzvos*.

This is in truth the entire point of repentance; that it should transform the manner in which an individual fulfills the *mitzvos*.

Often times when a person repents for their sins, they have a tendency to escape this world that caused them to falter and to cling to G-d by letting go of the world.

The Talmud brings the following dramatic story, which illustrates this example:

Text 17

It was said of R. Elazar b. Dordia that he did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming

to her. Once, upon hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she blew forth breath and said: "As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Elazar b. Dordia never be received in repentance." He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed..."The matter then depends upon me alone!" Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed. Then a *bas kol* was heard proclaiming: "Rabbi Elazar b. Dordai is destined for the life of the world to come!"

Talmud, Avoda Zara 17a

While R. Elazar ben Dordai's repentance was indeed accepted, it is not the manner of repentance that is desired.

It is for this reason that the Rabbis stressed that there needs to be "repentance and good deeds." Rather than one's repentance causing one to escape the world, it should rather breathe a new vitality into his service on Earth, in the manner that his *mitzvos* are fulfilled.

This is the reason that repentance, which is fulfilled with the heart, is considered a specific *mitzvah* according to the conclusive opinion of Rambam. This expresses that although repentance is indeed an expression of the depth of one's soul, which is beyond this world, nevertheless, it cannot remain above the human experience and must instead cause a newfound passion in one's fulfillment of the *mitzvos*.

(Based on Likutei Sichos 38, Nasso 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)

