

A SURVIVAL GUIDE TO THE NEW YEAR

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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

Each year, we enter the High Holiday season with high hopes for תשובה (*teshuvah*, literally "returning" = Repentance). We hope that we will mend our ways and do things a little better next year. But how much time do we spend thinking about how we will accomplish this *teshuvah*? Probably not much. Do we expect repentance to work by osmosis? I hope not. This document is designed to spark some thinking about the mechanics of repentance. It is based on a work called חובות הלבבות (*Chovot Ha-levavot* = obligations of the heart). As such, the opinions expressed herein are not necessarily my opinions. I encourage people to read this document as a primer for thought and discussion.

ABOUT CHOVOT HA-LEVAVOT

Chovot Ha-Levavot is a classic of Jewish moral philosophy and ethics composed by Rabbi Bachya ben Rabbi Joseph ibn Paquda in Saragossa (Muslim Spain) during the second half of the eleventh century. He wrote this work feeling that other Jewish literature concentrated too much, if not exclusively on those commandments that involve particular actions.

In this work, ibn Paquda discusses the workings of those Jewish laws that do not require particular overt action (hence, "Obligations of the Heart"). Ibn Paquda draws from biblical and rabbinic sources as well as from a number of non-Jewish sources, including Muslim mysticism and Arabic Neoplatonism. "In accordance with Platonic teachings . . . he maintains that man's soul, which is celestial in origin, is placed, by divine decree, within the body, where it runs the risk of forgetting its nature and mission. The human soul receives aid from the intellect and the revealed law in achieving its goal. . . . With the aid of reason and the revealed Law the soul can triumph over its enemy, the evil inclination (*yetser*), which attacks it incessantly in an effort to beguile it into erroneous beliefs and to enslave it to bodily appetite." (EJ)

Chovot Ha-levavot is broken down into ten chapters which cover (1) Affirming the unity of God; (2) the nature of the world disclosing the workings of God; (3) divine worship; (4) trust in God; (5) sincerity of purpose; (6) humility; (7) repentance; (8) self-examination; (9) asceticism; and (10) love of God. The seventh chapter, upon which this document is based, discusses how a person can go about successful repentance, and what some of the barriers to repentance might be. The author gives countless situations to scripture, and many situations to rabbinic literature to demonstrate each point he makes.

Chovot Ha-levavot is written in Judaeo-Arabic and was translated into Hebrew by R. Judah ibn Tibbon in 1161 (first published in Naples, 1490).

Sources: Bar Ilan Judaic Library CD-Rom and Encyclopedia Judaica "Bahya Ben Joseph ibn Paquda"

PREFACE

- Realization that a person will fall short of doing what s/he is obligated to do based on the person's obligations to the Creator.
- Through God's mercy, God has provided the individual with the opportunity to fix those error and to return to God and God's path.

CHAPTER 1 - WHAT IS *TESHUVAH*?

- Repentance is a person's preparation to serve the Creator after the person has gone astray from the service of God.
 - There are two ways one strays from God's path:
 - Ignoring that which God has commanded to do.
 - Doing something that God told him the person to do and thus attempting to rebel from the Creator.

CHAPTER 2 - THREE TYPES OF *TESHUVAH*

1. One who has returned because the person has not been presented with the opportunity to sin, but if s/he found the opportunity, his/her evil inclination (יְצִרָה) would defeat his/her intellect (שְׂכָל) and s/he would not avoid the sin. Once this person does the act and realizes the gravity of the act, the person will regret having done so.
 - 1.1. - This person has only returned in word, but not at heart. This person is liable for God's punishment (חַיֵּב בְּעֵנֶשׂ הַבּוֹרָא יִתְבַּרְךָ). (NOTE: ibn Paquda does put this as a category of *teshuvah*).
2. One who returned both in mind and body (בְּלֵב וּבַגְּבוּרָה) and who pits his mind against his inclination and attempts to influence his body (נַפְשׁ) and battle its (his body's) desires (תַּאֲוָה וְתִיקָה) until he prevails and it holds it (his body) back from from what the Creator loathes, except that his body constantly tries to lead him astray, and sometimes he defeats it, and sometimes [his body] wins out.
 - 2.1. This is not complete repentance which is necessary for atonement (פְּצִיחָה). For that one must completely remove oneself from sin. (NOTE: Compare: In the first type of *Teshuvah*, one is liable for punishment. Here, the repentance "doesn't bring atonement." Seems like a suspended sentence).
3. One who has followed all the conditions of repentance and his intellect has defeated his desires.
 - 3.1. This person is worthy to be saved [from punishment] by God.

CHAPTER THREE - WHAT ARE THE NECESSARY ELEMENTS OF *TESHUVAH*?

1. Understanding completely the disgrace (גְּבוּרָה) of his/her actions (otherwise s/he will not completely regret them).
2. Understanding the nature of the negativeness of his/her actions (otherwise s/he might think that the action was excusable as simple error).
3. Knowing that s/he is liable for punishment (otherwise s/he will not feel the necessity to regret his/her actions).
4. Knowing that his/her actions are recorded (by God) and will not freely be forgotten.
5. Knowing that *teshuvah* is the medicine that will "cure the illness" (other wise he will give up (יִתְיַאֵשׁ) on receiving atonement).

6. Considering how many good things God had done for him/her and how much s/he has rebelled from God rather than thanking God for that goodness. Further, to weigh the punishment related to his sins against the (transient) benefit from them, and the reward for doing good (צְדָקָה) against the trouble in this world considering both this world and the world to come, as the Rabbis taught: וְהוּי מַחֲ שֵׁב הַפְסֵד מִצְוָה כְּנֶגֶד שְׂכָרָהּ וְשִׂכְרָהּ עֲבִירָה כְּנֶגֶד הַפְסֵדָה *consider the cost [from performing] a mitzvah against its reward, and the reward [from] sin against its cost.* (Avot 2:1)

CHAPTER 4 - THE STEPS TO *TESHUVAH*

1. Regretting sin.
 - 1.1. This reflects that s/he considers his/her actions disgraceful (see ch. 3 #1).
 - 1.2. We see how this works with people forgiving each other. When a person displays regret for something the person did to another, the other is more likely to forgive him/her.
2. Abandoning and removing oneself from sin.
 - 2.1. This reflects the person's clear belief in reward and punishment (see ch. 3 #3).
 - 2.2. We see that between people, when a person abandons doing that which wronged the other, then the person is worthy of forgiveness.
3. Confessing sins and seeking forgiveness for them.
 - 3.1. This is a reflection of his/her humility (וְשִׁפְלוּת) before God.
 - 3.2. We see that between people, when one displays humility before his/her friend and admits that s/he wronged the other and asks for forgiveness, and his/her fellow sees that s/he regrets what the person did in the past, the fellow will not be held back from forgiving.
4. Accepting on him/herself not to go back and do them.
 - 4.1. This is a reflection of the person's understanding how negative the person's actions were (see ch. 3 #2).

CHAPTER 5 - DETAILS OF THE STEPS TO *TESHUVAH*

In this chapter, ibn Paquda spells out some items that will help facilitate the four steps listed in Chapter 5.

1. Regret of sin:
 - 1.1. Fear of imminent punishment for sin.
 - 1.2. Having a broken heart and humility towards God because of the sin.
 - 1.3. Change of clothing, speech, food and other behavior to manifest the regret.
 - 1.4. Crying/yelling/mourning over what one has done.
 - 1.5. Chastising him/herself (וְשִׁי וְכִיחַ נִפְשׁוּ) and feeling shame (וְרִכְכְּלִימָנָה בְּמִצְוֹת) regarding how s/he has fallen short of his/her responsibilities to God.
2. Abandoning sin:
 - 2.1. Avoiding anything that was forbidden by God.
 - 2.2. Avoiding anything that, though permissible, might bring one to sin, e.g. something that one is not sure if it is permitted or forbidden.
 - 2.3. Avoiding doing the same transgression even when the opportunity presents itself, and, avoiding the transgression simply out of awe of God.
 - 2.4. Avoiding sin because of shame before God, and not fear of humanity.
 - 2.5. Abandoning even the thought of performing the sin (see ch. 2 #3).

3. Asking for forgiveness:
 - 3.1. Seeing one's sins as great.
 - 3.2. Constantly remembering one's sins.
 - 3.3. Fasting during the day and prayer at night, when one is free of the bothers of the world (טַרְדָּה עֲסָקֵי הָעוֹלָם).
 - 3.4. Constant supplication to God to atone sins, to forgive, and to accept the repentance.
 - 3.5. Making an effort to warn others from similar sins, and to cause them to fear its punishment.
4. Accepting on him/herself not to go back and sin:
 - 4.1. Weighing the temporary benefits that are mixed in with the troubles caused from sinning against the unadulterated reward in the world to come for doing good.
 - 4.2. Considering the possibility that death could be imminent.
 - 4.3. Considering the benefits one received from God even during the period that one was straying from God's path.
 - 4.4. Paying back/returning any damage one caused by sinning.
 - 4.5. Impressing on oneself the greatness of the exalted Creator against whom's word he rebelled.

CHAPTER 6 - SOURCES OF INSPIRATION TO *TESHUVAH*

1. Recognizing the greatness of God and the goodness bestowed by God and how this obligates one to serve God.
2. One being furnished with rebuke by God's messenger, be it a prophet, the Torah, or a teacher.
3. Seeing the suffering of another person who similarly strayed from God's service.
4. Personally experiencing God's punishment. Regarding this person it is said אַז יִקְרְאוּנִי וְלֹא אֶעֱנֶה *then they will call me and I will not answer.*

Note: Chovot Ha-Levavot states that this list is in order of worthiness.

CHAPTER 7 - IMPEDIMENTS TO *TESHUVAH*

1. A lack of anything listed in Chapter 3.
2. Constantly performing the sin and delays in leaving the sin aside. For this there will be no repentance. There is no small sin when it is done constantly, nor a great sin when there is a request for forgiveness. This is because constantly sinning displays a devaluation of God's commandments. When one does something constantly, the sin gets continuously worse.
3. Returning to the sin after having completed the course of repentance for it. (Rabbi Gradofsky notes: This sounds like the person who has quit smoking and starts up again).
4. Planning to repent in the future. This person thinks that s/he'll avoid the sin after s/he no longer has the appetite for it. This is rebellion against God. Thus, the Rabbis said אֲחַטָּה וְאָשׁוּב, אֲחַטָּה וְאָשׁוּב, אֲחַטָּה וְאָשׁוּב *those who say 'I will sin, and I will repent; I will sin, and I will repent,' never get around to repenting* (Babylonian Talmud Yoma 85b).
5. Repenting from some sins while becoming more regular at others. This is like one who immerses in a ritual bath while holding on to an unclean reptile (see Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 16a).

CHAPTER 8 - IS THE ONE WHO DOES *TESHUVAH* ON EQUAL FOOTING WITH A BORN *TSADIK* (RIGHTEOUS PERSON)?

Some are greater, some are worse.

- If the transgression was minor, involving the failure to follow a positive commandment (i.e. "thou shalt . . . ") of the Bible, for which punishment under Jewish law is minor or non-existent, the person who repented is on equal footing with a *tsadik*.
- If the transgression was minor, involving violation of a negative commandment (i.e. "thou shalt not . . . "), for which judicial punishment is minor, and the person followed all the requirements of *teshuvha*, the person has better standing than the *tsadik*, because the *tsadik* cannot be confident that his heart will not become stronger and lead him astray. As one *tsadik* said to his students, "Were it that you did not have sins, I would be concerned about that which is greater than sin." And they said to him: "What is greater than sin?" To which he responded, "haughtiness and hypocrisy." It is regarding such a penitent that the Rabbis of blessed memory said וְזוֹ שְׂבַעֲלֵי תְשׁוּבָה עַ וּמְדִים אֵין צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִים יֵכ וְלִים לְעַמּוּד *where penitents stand, the completely righteous cannot stand.*
- If the transgressions were of a major negative commandments (note that for the other two in the list the word "transgression" was singular, here it is plural) for which one would be liable death or divine excommunication (פְּרַת בְּיַדִּי שְׁמַיִם), one cannot get forgiveness from repentance alone, until one suffers in this world. The righteous one who has known no such sin is without a doubt greater than this one.

CHAPTER 9 - ARE SOME SINS EASIER THAN OTHERS TO REPENT FROM?

There are two types of sins:

1. Sins that are exclusively between the person and God. With these sins, a person only damages (יִחַמֵּס) themselves.
 - 1.1. In this case, a person can achieve *teshuvah* in his/her lifetime when the person is awakened to eliminate the sin and attempts to repent from his sin towards God. And it is sensible that the repentance for this is in line with the sin (e.g. if s/he ate forbidden food, s/he should stop doing so).
2. Sins between a person and their fellow. In this case, another person is damaged either physically, financially, or in reputation.
 - 2.1. Teshuvah is more difficult in this case.
 - 2.1.1. Sometimes it is difficult or impossible to find the person s/he has wronged in order to undo the damage (see Ch. 5 #4.4).
 - 2.1.2. The person may not have the financial ability to repay the damage.
 - 2.1.3. The person if found may not forgive the transgressor.
 - 2.1.4. S/he might not know how great the financial damage was.
3. Some other impediments to *teshuvah*:
 - 3.1. Sometimes one gets used to sinning and it is hard to reverse (see also Ch. 7 #2). E.g. gossiping
 - 3.2. Not knowing to whom one said things that damaged someone else's reputation.

CHAPTER 10 - WHAT DO YOU DO IF REPENTENCE IS DIFFICULT?

- If one really accepts the steps to repentence with all their details, and with all one's strength, God will assist the person to get the rest of the way. E.g:
 - God will give the person financial wherewithal to pay back from whom s/he stole.
 - God will help him/her find an heir to the deceased person from whom s/he stole.
 - If someone has refused to forgive the person, God will soften that person up.

Chovot Ha-Levavot closes with a sermon encouraging repentence. The following is one piece I found particularly poignant:

ואלו היה אדם מזהיר אנשי קריה או אנשי מדינה. ויאמר: בני אדם היו נכונים לנסע לעזה"ב, כי איש אחד יפקד מכם בחדש הזה, ואינני יודע אותו. האין מן הדין על כל אחד מהם שיהיה נכון למות, מיראה, שמא יהיה הוא האיש ההוא. ואיך לא נהיה כולנו נכונים לו, ואנחנו רואים, כי המות בכל חדש ובכל מקום מכלה מספר רב מן החיים. הלא מן הדין עלינו שנירא על נפשותינו בכל חדש ונחשב על עניינינו וצידתנו ובית מועדנו, קודם עת הצורך אליהם אפילו יום אחד, כמו שאמרו ז"ל: שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך . . .

If a person would warn the people of a city or of a state and say "People: be prepared to go to the world to come, for one of you will be chosen this month, but I do not know who. Would it not be logical for every one of them to be prepared to die, out of fear lest s/he is that person. How can we all not be prepared, because we see that every month and every place death gathers many of us from life. Is it not logical for us to fear for our souls every month and consider our deeds and our goals and our appointed time at least one day before the necessary time? As the (the Rabbis) of blessed memory said: "Repent one day before your death." . . . (Avot 2:10)