

## When Can Repentance Be Considered Complete?

The Jewish month of Elul is a month of repentance in preparation for the High Holy Days. This is because, on the first of Elul, Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the second set of tablets and stayed until Yom Kippur (the tenth of Tishri). He also obtained God's forgiveness for the Israelites following the incident of the Golden Calf.

In Aramaic, "Elul" means "search". We must search our hearts in preparation for Rosh Hashanah (the Day of Judgment) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), by engaging in *tefillah*, *teshuva*, and *tzedakah*; that is: prayer, repentance and charity. Elul is the month when we grant forgiveness to individuals who have wronged us, on a one-on-one basis, and ask the forgiveness of those we have wronged.

Repentance is of paramount importance in Judaism. The one who repents is always forgiven.

The Talmud says:

- He who sins and regrets his act is at once forgiven. [Hag. 5a; Ber. 12b]
- God prays to Himself that His mercy should prevail over His anger and that He should forgive, even when strict justice demands punishment. [Ber. 7a]

The Midrash says:

The Holy One says: Even if [your sins] reach to Heaven, if you repent I will forgive. [Pesikta Rabbati 44:185a; see also Yalkut Shimoni 835]

The Tosafot say:

God's quality of forgiveness is 500-fold that of His wrath. [Tosafot on Sotah 4:1, based on Exodus 34:6–7]

The Rambam says:

Even if a man has sinned his whole life and repents on the day of his death, all his sins are forgiven him. [Yad, Teshuvah 2:1]

Rav Nahman of Breslov, the famous Hasidic leader, says:

There is no sin that will not be forgiven by sincere repentance. Every saying to the contrary in the Talmud and the Zohar is not to be understood literally. [Likkutei Ezot ha-Shalem 119 (1913)]

I would now like to ask the question: At what point can repentance be considered complete? There are four possible stages:

- 1-Realizing what you did was wrong, feeling bad about it, and resolving not to do it again.
- 2-The above, plus making restitution whenever possible.
- 3-All of the above, plus asking and receiving forgiveness.
- 4-All of the above, plus making the matter public.

Examples:

- 1-You steal, then feel bad and return the money anonymously. Must you also confess and ask the victim for forgiveness? Must you also make the matter public?
- 2-You cheat on your spouse, then feel bad and break off the extramarital affair. Must you also confess to your spouse and ask for forgiveness? Must you also make the matter public?

The Rambam writes from 12<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt that there are three stages to repentance: Confession to God, regret and restitution, and commitment not to repeat the sin when facing the same situation. [Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva (Repentance )] The confession need not be public, but making it public is “highly praiseworthy”. [Teshuva 2:5]

But the definitive treatise on repentance was written by Rabbeinu Yonah, from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Catalonia: שערי תשובה -- The Gates of Repentance. In it, he details the following 20 steps for a full repentance:

- 1-Acknowledge the sin and regret it.
- 2-Resolve never to repeat the sin; quoting Ezekiel and Isaiah:
  - As I live -- declares the Lord God -- it is not My desire that the wicked die, but that the wicked turn from their [evil] ways and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, that you may not die, O House of Israel! [Ezekiel 33:11]
  - Let the wicked give up his ways, the sinful man his plans. Let him turn back to the Lord, and He will pardon him. Our God freely forgives. [Isaiah 55:7]
- 3-Feel grief.
- 4-Feel pain; quoting Joel:

Yet even now - says the Lord - turn back to Me with all your hearts, and with fasting, weeping, and lamenting. [Joel 2:12]

5-Worry about the consequences of the sin; quoting Psalms:

I acknowledge my iniquity. I am fearful over my sin. [Psalms 38:19]

6-Feel shame; quoting Jeremiah:

Now that I have turned back, I am filled with remorse... I am ashamed and humiliated, for I bear the disgrace of my youth. [Jeremiah 31:19]

7-Speak humbly and feel low and submissive.

8-Act humbly; quoting Isaiah:

And you shall speak from lower than the ground. Your speech shall be humbler than the sod. Your speech shall sound like a ghost's from the ground. Your voice shall chirp from the sod. [Isaiah 29:4]

9-Stay away from the sources of sin.

10-Act in a manner contrary to the sin; quoting the Midrash:

If you have done piles of sins, do piles and piles of commandments that correspond to them. [Leviticus Rabbah 21:5]

11-Examine your ways; quoting Lamentations:

Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord. [Lamentations 3:40]

12-Recognize the punishments for the sin.

13-Consider the lighter sins as if they are severe.

14-Confess the sin; quoting the Torah:

And he shall confess that he has sinned. [Leviticus 5:5]

15-Pray for atonement; quoting Hosea:

Return to the Lord and say to Him: "Forgive all guilt and accept the good." [Hosea 14:3]

16-Correct the sin whenever possible.

If the sin is robbery and extortion, no atonement is possible until you return what was robbed. If the sin is causing pain to another, harassing him or embarrassing him; or speaking ill of him, no atonement is possible until forgiveness is requested. If the victim is

unwilling to forgive, the perpetrator has done all he could and the victim is deemed to have sinned. [Tanh. Hukkat 19]

17-Engage in acts of kindness and truth; quoting Proverbs:

Iniquity is atoned by kindness and truth. [Proverbs 16:6]

18-Remember the sin for the rest of your life; quoting Psalms:

For I recognize my transgressions, and am always conscious of my sin. [Psalms 51:5]

19-Refrain from sinning again if the opportunity presents itself; quoting the Talmud:

[If one has the opportunity to sin] with the same woman [he sinned with previously], at the same time and the same place, [but this time he overcomes his inclination, it proves his repentance is complete, and he is forgiven.] [Yoma 86b]

This is viewed as the ultimate test of true repentance.

20-Teach others to repent from their sins; quoting Ezekiel:

Repent and make repent. [Ezekiel 18:30]

These 20 steps can be essentially summed up in our first two steps: Feel contrite and resolve not to do it again, and make restitution. The third, informing the injured parties and seek their forgiveness, applies only if someone was actually hurt and knows it. In the examples shown, there is no need to inform the victim if the money was returned before the victim noticed it was gone, and no need to inform the spouse of the betrayal.

The fourth step, making the matter public, is also not required. An example is given in the Torah. When Joseph was about to reveal his identity to his brothers, the Torah says:

Now Joseph could not bear all those standing beside him, and he called out, "Take everyone away from me!" So no one stood with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. [Gen. 45:1]

This is interpreted as meaning that Joseph did not want his brothers' sins toward him to become public knowledge. It is not mandatory to let a sin go public, especially if it might embarrass others.

However, if one wishes to inform the unwitting victims and seek their forgiveness, or make the matter public with the consent of everyone involved, it is permitted.

*L'shana tova* and *Tizku leshanim rabbot* – Happy new year and may you merit many years.