

# A History of Teshuva

The Winding Path of Penitence and Where it Leads



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The Jewish Center

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לזכר נשמת הרב שמואל צבי בן יוסף הלוי

The following is excerpted and adapted from a story that appeared in Tablet Magazine in 2018 by Pini Dunner:

Yechezkel Taub was born on October 7, 1895, in a small town in Poland. His father, Rabbi Yaakov Taub, was the “Rebbe” of Yabłona, a small town near Warsaw that was home to a vibrant Orthodox Jewish community. When R. Yaakov died in 1920, Yechezkel, 24 years old, suddenly found himself at the head of a prestigious and wealthy Hasidic sect.

He took his position seriously and inspired his followers. In 1924, he was persuaded by a cousin, who was passionate about the land of Israel, that the future for Jews lay there rather than in Eastern Europe. With the support of his wealthier Hasidim, he and a few hundred of his followers moved to Palestine. They and another group of Hasidim were welcomed by Jewish officials and ended up buying land in the hills in the north of the country, close to Haifa. Their settlement became known as Kfar Hasidim.

The new arrivals were welcomed with open arms. Notables came to see the remarkable phenomenon of Hasidic farmers for themselves. But very soon, things began to badly. There were disputes with the local Arab population. The Kishon River overflowed, flooding the valley and turning it into a swamp. There was an outbreak of malaria and a number of the settlers died. Bedouins caused further trouble. The farm failed. Despite the initial enthusiastic financial support from Yablener Hasidim in Poland, funding slowly dwindled and then dried up completely.

In 1928, the rebbe went to the United States to drum up support, but to no avail. In desperation, he turned to the Zionist organizations for help. Finally, he made a deal to transfer the land to the Jewish Agency. They would provide the settlers with a stipend, while the JNF would absorb the accumulated debts. The settlement was restructured, and religious Zionists from Germany and Holland, who had appropriate agricultural training in Europe, eventually helped improve its fortunes.

With the situation in Poland rapidly deteriorating, Hasidim from Yabłona began turning up in Palestine, expecting to take possession of the plots of land they had paid for over a decade earlier. But the Yablener Rebbe was able to give them neither their land nor their money back. They leveled all kinds of accusations against him and he again travelled to the United States in 1938 to see if he could raise funds to help support his community.

His efforts started to bear fruit, but the time to help had passed. War broke out. The German army marched into Poland, and the rebbe now found himself trapped in America. With no hope of getting back to Palestine or of supporting himself, he moved out west, where he found work in the California shipyards.

And then news reached him that the Nazis had murdered the entire Yabłona community, along with most of Polish Jewry. He had a crisis of faith. In 1944, the Yablener Rebbe removed his Hasidic dress, shaved off his beard and payos, changed his name, and filed immigration papers to become a naturalized citizen of the United States. He stopped keeping kosher; he stopped

observing Shabbat; and abandoned the Torah. The Yabloner Rebbe had remade himself into an assimilated American immigrant called George Nagel.

There are plenty of books about repentance. And there are plenty of books about penitents. But I've yet to discover a book that tells the history of the project that occupies virtually all of our religious energy for the better part of a month. Mysteriously, the history of teshuvah has never been written.

My goal this morning is almost wrecklessly ambitious. I want to attempt to produce for you an outline of what it is that teshuvah has meant to Jews over the course of the past 3,000 years.

A man was praying to God. He said, "God – can I ask you a question?" "Go right ahead," God said. "God, what is a million years to you?" God said, "To me, a million years is like a second." Then he asked, "God, what is a million dollars worth to you?" God said, "To me, a million dollars like a penny." So the man said, "God, can I have a penny?" And God said, "Sure! In a second."

This morning I want to condense three thousand years of Jewish history into 55 minutes.

Time is in the eye of the beholder. We'll see if we can make the most of ours this morning: not only to study the history of teshuva, but to think about why that history matters so much for each of us in 2019.

So let me say two words of introduction and then we can jump right in.

First, while I think there's a lot to recommend the approach I'm about to share, I want to be clear that this is not intended in any way to be definitive or decisive. Like any history, there are a lot of ways it can be approached. I'm offering one way to conceptualize this topic. You should feel free to think of others.

Second: I've identified five תקופות, five epochs in the history of Teshuva. Like any attempt at periodization, the lines are never going to be perfectly clear. Of course there's blurriness and of course there's overlap. When one epoch ends and another begins, it's not as if everything that teshuva had meant up until that point suddenly evaporates. My argument is about emphasis.

If we were learning about the history of books, we would say that with the invention of print a new period began. But it wasn't as if Gutenberg came along and suddenly there were no more manuscripts. Manuscripts continued to circulate for hundreds of years after the printing press.

And so it is with the history of teshuva. A new epoch didn't mean the end of a period. It just meant that in a given time or place, the emphasis changed – and sometimes it changed so much that it relegated previous ideas to the distant background.

So let's take it from the top.

The Midrash actually writes that Teshuvah predates the creation of the world. I'm not equipped to go back quite that far, but I do want to start from the beginning. The first epoch I want to identify is the period of the Bible. What does it mean to do teshuva in the Torah?

Our first baal teshuvah in the Torah is the character of Yehudah. Remember the story? Yehudah had made a commitment to his daughter in law, Tamar. After her first two husbands died, Yehudah promised that he would allow his youngest son, Shelah, to marry Tamar – to perform the mitzvah of yibbum – levirate marriage. But when that son came of age, Yehudah failed to honor his commitment. So Tamar took matters into her own hands and became pregnant by Yehudah himself. Thinking she had played the harlot, Yehudah condemned her to death. At the very last moment, Tamar gives Yehudah the opportunity to take responsibility for his own actions. And that's exactly what he does.

Judah recognized them [the wrap, the staff and the signet] and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again.

**1 בראשית לח**  
וַיִּכַּר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צִדְקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי עַל כֵּן  
לֹא נָתַתִּיהָ לְשִׁלָּה בְּנִי וְלֹא יָסַף עוֹד  
לְדַעְתָּהּ.

The narrative is very sparse. But the one thing we have on record from Yehudah is his confession. The first penitent in the Bible does teshuvah by confessing. "She's right," he says "and I'm wrong." And it's no accident that his name is Yehudah – from the word להודות – which means to admit or confess.

Now let's move to a larger scale. The greatest sin our national history is the sin of the golden calf. And we know that Moshe prays on our behalf and the story is able to continue. He manages to win atonement for the Jewish people. How?

30 The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." 31 So **Moses went back** to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold.

**2 שמות לב**  
ל וַיְהִי, מִמָּחֳרָת, וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם, אַתֶּם  
חָטַאתֶם חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה; וַעֲתָה אֲעֹלָה אֶל-ה', אוֹלִי  
אֲכַפְּרָה בְּעַד חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם. לֹא וַיָּשָׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל-ה',  
וַיֹּאמֶר: אָנָּה, חָטָא הָעָם הַזֶּה חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה, וַיַּעֲשׂוּ  
לָהֶם, אֱלֹהִי זָהָב.

Notice the Torah goes out of its way to say Moshe *returns* to Hashem. And what's his winning argument? A confession. A simple statement of the facts: The people sinned.

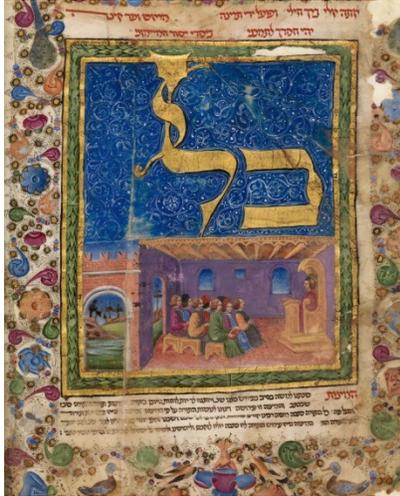
And then this is actually what gets enshrined as law:

6 "Say to the Israelites: When any man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, 7 he must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for the he has done, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the person he has wronged.

**3 במדבר פרק ה**  
ו דָּבָר, אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אִישׁ אוֹ-אִשָּׁה כִּי יַעֲשׂוּ  
מִכָּל-חַטֹּאת הָאֵדָם, לְמַעַל מֵעַל בֵּה'; וְאִשְׁמָה,  
הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא. ז וְהִתְוַדָּו, אֶת-חַטֹּאתֵם אֲשֶׁר  
עָשׂוּ, וְהָשִׁיב אֶת-אֲשָׁמוֹ בְּרֹאשׁוֹ, וְחִמִּישְׁתּוּ יָסַף  
עָלָיו; וְנָתַן, לְאִשְׁרֵי אֲשֶׁם לוֹ.

There it is – black on white. The sinner is obligated to confess.

So when the Rambam tells us what Teshuvah means according to the Torah, it should come as no surprise that this is exactly what we find:



All *mitzvot* of the Torah, whether mandatory or prohibitive: if a person violates any one of them, either intentionally or erroneously, when he repents and turns away from his sinful way, he must confess before God. For it is written, “When a man or woman shall commit any sin..... Then they shall confess their sin which they have done.” This means verbal confession. This confession is a positive *mitzvah*. How does one confess? The sinner says, “I beseech you, Hashem. I have sinned; I have been obstinate; I have committed profanity against you,

particularly in doing this and that. Now, behold! I have repented and am ashamed of my actions; forever will I not relapse into this thing again.” This is the basic form of confession; but whosoever elaborates upon his confession is indeed, praiseworthy. Likewise all those who bring sin-offerings or trespass-offerings, when they offer their sacrifices, whether for their errors or for their spitefulness, find no atonement in their sacrifices, unless they repent, and deliver a verbal confession, even as it is written, “He shall confess that he has sinned in that thing.”

**4 רמב"ם תשובה א:**  
כל מצות שבתורה, בין עשה בין לא תעשה, אם עבר אדם על אחת מהן, בין בדון בין בשגגה, כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו חייב להתודות לפני האל ברוך הוא, שנאמר: "איש או אשה כי יעשו וגו' והתודו את חטאתם אשר עשו זה וידוי דברים. וידוי זה מצות עשה. כיצד מתודין? אומר: 'אנא השם, חטאתי, עויתי, פשעתי לפניך ועשיתי כך וכך, והרי נחמתי ובושתי במעשי, ולעולם איני חוזר לדבר זה'. וזהו עיקרו של וידוי. וכל המרבה להתודות ומאריך בענין זה, הרי זה משובח. וכן בעלי חטאות ואשמות, בעת שמביאין קרבנותיהן על שגתן או על זדונן, אין מתכפר להן בקרבנם עד שיעשו תשובה ויתודו וידוי דברים, שנאמר: "והתודה אשר חטא עליה."

And to the extent there's a Temple, this is what attaches to the korban. When someone has sinned and wants to do Teshuvah, they bring a korban to the Beit Hamikdash and they confess.

When anyone becomes aware that they are guilty in any of these matters, they must confess in what way they have sinned.

**5 ויקרא פרק ה**  
ה וְהָיָה כִּי-יֵאָשֵׁם, לְאַחַת מֵאֵלֶּה: וְהִתְוֹדָה--אֲשֶׁר חָטָא, עָלֶיהָ.

And this will become clearer as we move on, but I just want to call to your attention to all the components of the Teshuva process that are not here: Regret, remorse, reconciliation, commitment for the future, etc. Occasionally, we may get a hint about one of these elements. But for all intents and purposes, these are absent in Biblical Teshuvah. Confession is the be all and end all of the process.

A priest was being honored at his retirement dinner after 25 years in the parish. A leading local politician and member of the congregation was chosen to make the presentation and give a little speech at the dinner.

When he was delayed, the priest decided to say his own few words while they waited. “I got my first impression of the parish from the first confession I heard here. I thought I had been assigned to a terrible place.

“The very first person who entered my confessional told me he had stolen a stereo and, when questioned by the police, was able to lie his way out of it. He had stolen money from his parents, embezzled from his employer, was engaged in all kinds of inappropriate dalliances. I was appalled. But as the days went on I learned that my parishoners were not all like that and I had, indeed, come to a fine parish full of good and decent people.”

Just as the priest finished his talk, the politician arrived full of apologies at being late. He immediately began to make his presentation. 'I'll never forget the first day our parish priest arrived,' he said. 'In fact, I had the honor of being the first person to go to him for confession.'

In the Torah, confession is between man and God. And it forms the essence of Biblical repentance. The penitent brings his offering to the Temple and confesses his sin. Achieving atonement in this world is not always possible. But when it is, it always involves vidui. Confession is the key to Teshuvah.

And so we have our first epoch.

## The Prophets

Now let's move to the second תקופה – the period of the Prophets. And again, keep in mind – for the overwhelming majority of the time in which prophets function – the temple was standing. So it was of course still possible – and entirely expected – that a penitent would bring a korban to the Temple. And people continue to confess in the Prophets. Just think of King David.

But we start to see an important shift in emphasis.

And this is best captured in the statement of the prophet, Hoshea.

Come, let us return to the LORD....

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice; knowledge of  
God; not burnt offerings.

6 הושע פרק ו

לכו ונשובה אל ה'... כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח ודעת אלהים מעלות.

Jeremiah doesn't stand on a mountaintop and say, “Ye unrepentant Israelites: Confess your sins as of old and bring hither your sacrifices to the Temple!”

A korban and a confession are insufficient.

For the prophet, the main thing is not a return to the Temple, but a return to the right way.

יֵעֶזֶב רִשְׁע דְרָכוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶן מְחֻשְׁבֹתָיו וְיָשֵׁב אֶל יְהוָה וִירְחַמֵּהוּ וְאֶל אֱלֹהֵינוּ כִּי יִרְכָּה לְסִלּוֹחַ.

Let the sinner leave his sinful ways!

The prophets constantly inveigh against bad behavior and call – very simply – for better behavior. And that behavior, they say, will lead to healing, forgiveness and redemption. More than anything else, Teshuvah is about returning to obedience to the law. Just think of the Teshuvah story we'll read on Yom Kippur afternoon. Yonah tells the people of Ninveh to repent. So what do they do?

- They fast;
- And they put on sackcloth;
- And they sit in the dust;
- And they pray;

And what saves them?

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

**7 יונה פרק ג**  
וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם, כִּי-שָׁבוּ מִדְרָכָם הָרָעָה; וַיִּנָּקֶם הָאֱלֹהִים, עַל-הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת-לָהֶם--וְלֹא עָשָׂה.

The Prophet doesn't care about any of the externals. The only thing that matters is that they mended their ways and started acting better!

God doesn't want a show of self-deprivation. He wants a movement toward charity, justice and compassion.

For the prophets, the metaphor is always one of betrayal or adultery.

על אשר עזבו אבותיכם אותי  
“They abandoned Me!” God says.

To return means to leave behind sin, idolatry and false gods and go back to the path of Torah and Mitzvot.

Again: Notice what's demanded of the sinner. It's not about confession or reconciliation. It's about starting to do better today.

And this point wasn't lost on the author of the following Midrash. (This text that also appears in the Talmud Yerushalmi.) Let's learn it together.

They asked wisdom: What is the sinner's penalty? She said to them, *Trouble pursues the sinner*. They asked prophecy: What is the sinner's penalty? She said to them, *The one who sins is the one who will die*. They asked the Torah, What is the sinner's penalty? She said to them, *Let him bring a guilt offering and atone for his sin*. They asked the Almighty: What is the sinner's penalty? He said to them, *Let him repent and atone for his sin*.

**8 פסקיתא דרב כהנא כה:ז**  
שאלו לחכמה החוטא מהו עונשו, אמרה להם וחטאים תרדף רעה (משלי יג: כא). שאלו לנבואה החוטא מהו עונשו, אמרה להם הנפש החוטאת היא תמות (יחזקאל יח: ד). שאלו לתורה: חוטא מה עונשו? אמרה להם: יביא אשם ויתכפר לו. שאלו להקב"ה החוטא מהו עונשו, א' להם יעשה תשובה ויתכפר לו.

There are a number of voices here and we could spend a lot more time just explicating this single source. But notice the difference between the answer of the Torah and the answer of the Prophets. In the Torah, you bring a korban – which of course is always accompanied by vidui – and you can achieve atonement.

What does Prophecy answer? The sinner sinned! Let him submit to his punishment! If Teshuva means atoning for your sin, the prophets aren't really interested. If you sin, you get punished. If you want to repent, the best you could do is try to succeed the next time around. Prophets don't really believe in a teshuvah that says you can go back and put things right. What's done is done. You sin – you bear the burden of that sin.

When it comes to Teshuvah, the prophets were entirely forward looking. For the Prophet, Teshuvah isn't about repairing the past; it's about repairing the future.

## **Talmud: A victim-centric approach**

So this brings us to the third epoch, the period of the Talmud, beginning in the first centuries of the Common Era. And here, Teshuvah undergoes a tectonic shift. The world has been turned on its head. The Temple is in ruins and the balance of power starts to tilt away from Israel and toward the diaspora.

Consider, for example, the following midrashic text which is contemporaneous with the Talmudic era:

One who does *teshuvah* is considered as if he went to Jerusalem, rebuilt the Temple, erected the altar, and offered all the sacrifices ordained by the Torah. [For the Psalm says], *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart...* [Psalms 51:19]

**9 ויקרא רבה ז:ב**  
מנין למי שהוא עושה תשובה שמעלין עליו כאלו  
עלה לירושלים ובנה את בהמ"ק ובנה את המזבח  
ומקריב עליו כל הקרבנות שבתורה מן הדין קריא  
זבחי אלהים רוח נשברה.

Notice there's a certain self-consciousness that Teshuvah is a kind of replacement for the sacrifices that used to be brought in the Temple. There's a recognition that the absence of the Temple created a void. Sinners used to have a remedy – a prescription for what to do in the aftermath of sin. And that remedy is no longer possible.

This is a new era. Teshuva means something else. So what does it mean?

And as we'll see in a moment, the rabbis of the Talmud don't simply embrace the prophetic model that says behave better next time.

They begin to construct a new paradigm. Let's look at one of the key texts together:

**Rabbi Yitzhak said: One who angers his friend, even only verbally, must placate him, as it is stated: "My son, if you have become a guarantor for your neighbor, if you have struck your hands for a stranger, you are snared by the words of your mouth...Do this now,**

**10 יומא פז.**  
אמר ר' יצחק כל המקניט את  
חבירו אפילו בדברים צריך  
לפייסו שנאמר (משלי ו, א) בני

my son, and deliver yourself, seeing you have come into the hand of your neighbor. Go, humble yourself [*hitrapes*] and urge [*rehav*] your neighbor” (Proverbs 6:1–3). This should be understood as follows: If you have money that you owe him, open the palm of [*hater pisat*] your hand to your neighbor and pay the money that you owe; and if not, if you have sinned against him verbally, increase [*harbe*] friends for him, i.e., send many people as your messengers to ask him for forgiveness.

אם ערבת לרעך תקעת לזר  
כפיך נוקשת באמרי פיך עשה  
זאת אפוא בני והנצל כי באת  
בכף רעך לך התרפס ורהב  
רעך. אם ממון יש בידך התר לו  
פסת יד ואם לאו הרבה עליו  
רעים

In the Talmud, Teshuvah is about going back and mending what’s been broken. If the sin involved money, go back and make victim whole again. If the issue is a broken relationship, go back and fix it. Ask for forgiveness.

**Rav H̄isda said: And one must placate the one he has insulted with three rows of three people, as it is stated: “He comes [*yashor*] before men, and says: I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not” (Job 33:27).** Rav H̄isda interprets the word *yashor* as related to the word *shura*, row. The verse mentions sin three times: I have sinned, and perverted, and it profited me not. This implies that one should make three rows before the person from whom he is asking forgiveness.

**11 יומא פז.**  
(ואמר) רב חסדא וצריך  
לפייסו בשלש שורות של  
שלשה בני אדם שנאמר  
(איוב לג, כז) ישור על  
אנשים ויאמר חטאתי וישר  
העויתי ולא שוה לי

And if that doesn’t work, keep trying.

Why: Because in the Talmud, the goal is restoration and repair. The objective of Teshuvah is to go back and make things right again. For those of us who think about Maimonides when we think about Teshuvah, it was this Talmudic model that formed the backbone of his entire model.

In the first epoch of teshuva, all that’s demanded of the sinner is confession.  
In the second, the Prophets insist the sinner do better next time.

In the Talmud, there’s a new theme. Yes, we’ll worry about the future. But first, let’s go back and see if we can repair the damage that’s been done. It’s an entirely different kind of approach. And even Yom Kippur isn’t sufficient to affect atonement on its own.

Yom Kippur does not atone for one’s  
[interpersonal sins] until one placates his friend.  
In the eyes of the Talmud, Teshuvah means reconciliation.

**12 משנה יומא ח:ט**  
אין יום הכפורים מכפר עד שירצה חברו.

R. Zera, the gemara says, would walk pace back and forth before a colleague who had insulted him in the hopes that doing so would encourage the wrongdoer to reconcile.

יומא פז.  
רבי זירא, כי הוה ליה מילתא בהדי איניש הוה חליף ותני לקמיה ומצויא ליה, כי היכי דניתי וניפוק ליה מדעתיה.

The common denominator in all these sources is the notion that the penitent is trying to fix what’s broken. Go back to the victim – to the person who’s been wronged – and try to make things better. If you’ve taken something, give it back; if you’ve upset them, put them at ease; if you’ve insulted them, ask for forgiveness.

To go back means to go back to the victim and try to set things right.

So Teshuva takes on an almost magical quality. You can really go back and alter the past.

**Reish Lakish said: Great is repentance, as the penitent's intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions, as it is stated: "Return, Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity"** (Hosea 14:2). The Gemara analyzes this: **Doesn't "iniquity" mean an intentional sin? Yet the prophet calls it stumbling**, implying that one who repents is considered as though he only stumbled accidentally in his transgression. The Gemara asks: **Is that so? Didn't Reish Lakish himself say: Great is repentance, as one's intentional sins are counted for him as merits, as it is stated: "And when the wicked turns from his wickedness, and does that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby"** (Ezekiel 33:19), and all his deeds, even his transgressions, will become praiseworthy? The Gemara reconciles: This is **not difficult: Here**, when one repents **out of love**, his sins become like merits; **there**, when one repents **out of fear**, his sins are counted as unwitting transgressions.

**13 יומא פו:**  
**אמר ריש לקיש גדולה**  
**תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו**  
**כשגגות שנאמר (הושע יד, ב)**  
**שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך כי**  
**כשלת בעונך הא עון מזיד הוא**  
**וקא קרי ליה מכשול איני**  
**והאמר ריש לקיש גדולה**  
**תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו**  
**כזכיות שנאמר (יחזקאל לג,**  
**יט) ובשוב רשע מרשעתו**  
**ועשה משפט וצדקה עליהם**  
**(חיה) יחיה לא קשיא כאן**  
**מאהבה כאן מיראה**

You can see the gemara yourself for how to reconcile the tension between these two statements. But one is more extraordinary than the next. Either your intentional sins can be transformed into unintentional ones, or can they actually become merits!

We never could have imagined something like this in Biblical Teshuvah or Prophetic Teshuvah because the penitent never really looked back. It's only here in the Talmudic period where we're introduced to the notion that one who's returning to the past, could really change the past.

## Medieval

This takes us to the fourth epoch in the history of the Teshuvah – and surely the most unsettling to our 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities.

It's a form of repentance known as Teshuvat ha-Mishkal or in English, compensatory teshuvah. And this is a model that began to find expression in 12<sup>th</sup> century Ashkenaz and continued in some form or fashion for the better part of the next 500 years. Here the idea is not return to the temple with a korban and confess. It's not about adjusting your behavior.

And it's not about returning to the past to set aright what's been made wrong. Here we have a fundamentally new strategy. And it's best portrayed in the following example set forth by R. Elazar of Mainz (1176-1238). Here's his prescription for someone who's committed adultery.

## Rokeach

A penitent who wishes to perform compensatory repentance should measure the pain [he will endure] against the pleasure [of his sin]. For a full year he may not eat meat or drink wine – except for Shabbatot and holidays and Purim. Nor may he eat warm bread, nor may he bathe except a little [before] holidays.

**14 ספר הרוקה הלכות תשובה סימן י**  
**תשובת המשקל יש לו לשקול צערו כנגד הנאתו שנהנה**  
**בה ושנה שלימה אסור לאכול בשר ולשתות יין לבד**  
**משבתות וימים טובים ופורים ולא יאכל לחם חם ולא**  
**ירחץ כי אם בימים טובים מעט ולא ילך לראות בשום**  
**שחוק כי אם ילך לנשואין בשעת הברכה ולא יעדן עצמו**  
**בשום דבר וילקה בכל יום וישכב על דף אחד בלא כר כי**

Nor may he attend any joyous affair except for a wedding at the time of the ceremony. He may not enjoy any pleasure. He should receive lashes daily and sleep on a single board with no pillow....

אם בשבת וביום טוב על תבן או על קש וכר בראשו ויסיר רוח הבהמיו' שבו חומר התאוה וחיי צער יהיה ושק על בשרו ולא ידבר מעניין התאוה חשקים ונשוקים ומשמושים ומיני אהבות וחשק או חמודים :

The goal here can be reduced to a single word: Penance.

You've done something wrong; now you have to pay the price.

It actually accepts the premise of the prophetic approach – and then brings it to fruition. Remember we made this kind of bold statement about the prophets. They don't really believe in Teshuvah. You can't go back into the past and change it. So the prophets say let the sinner be punished and let him improve his behavior the next time around. We sort of glossed over the first part because in the world of the prophets, we usually think about punishment as the province of the divine.

But the medieval pietists decided to take matters into their own hands. In this lifetime, we can't put our finger on the pulse of divine justice. It seems like a lot of sinful people lead pretty happy lives. The philosophers call it theodicy. צדיק ורע לו. When it comes to divine reward and punishment, we have to accept that the ways of Hashem are inscrutable.

So I sinned and Hashem is not punishing me. And the court's not punishing me either. I live in France or Germany. Maybe the Jewish community has a little autonomy to collect taxes or settle petty financial disputes. But there's no *beit din* that's going to punish me for cooking on Shabbat or saying *lashon hara* about by neighbor.

So the sinner in medieval Ashkenaz said, "I'm going to punish myself."  
And my self-inflicted punishment will correspond directly to the severity of my transgression.

Little *aveirot* call for little penances. Big *aveirot* call for bigger ones.

### Sefer Hasidim 167

For sins of sexual impropriety, he must perform penance commensurate with the lashes or *karet* [he would have received were there a *beit din* to mete out his punishment]. If [the sin took place] in the winter, when the local river freezes, let him break the ice and sit in the water for the length of time it took to commit his sin....  
In the summer, let him sit in the dust with ants....

### 15 ספר חסידים ס' קס"ז

מי שבא על אשת איש אם בא לשאול האיך יעשה תשובה או אם בא על אותם שחייב כרת במס' חגיגה משים חילוק מתי מעוות לא יוכל לתקן מתי יועיל תשובה ומאותן שמועיל להם תשובה ואמרו חייבי כריתות שלקו נפטרו מידי כריתתן הרי יש לו לעשות תשובה דבר השקול למלקות או לכרת. וכך היתה התשובה אם בימות החורף הוא כשבא הקרח בנהר אם רצה ישבר הקרח וישב במים עד פיו או עד חוטמו כפי שעה שדבר עמה על העבירה עד שעת גמר העבירה וכן יעשה תדיר כל זמן שיש קרח ובימות החמה ישב בחפירה שנמלים שם ויסתום פיו או בכלי ששם הנמלים ויהא לו אח"כ כלי מים שירחוץ בו.

It's difficult even to read this or to conjure up the image of what's being described.

Rest assured, as a matter of practice, there was a recognition on the part of the poskim that one can't be too draconian.

With the passage of time, the poskim accepted that we might need to rein it a little and be a little less demanding....

**R. Mordekhai Jaffe**

Nevertheless, if he [the apostate] wishes to repent, we cannot be stringent with him; for it is difficult for him to abandon the gentiles and we need to be careful that he does not return [to them].

**Prague, 1609**

ומ"מ אם בא לשוב אין מחמירין עליו שקשה לו לפרוש מן הגוים וחיישינן שלא יחזור לסורו...

**16 לבוש עטרת זהב ס' קנח:ב**

וט"ס אמר בא לשבאין מהפירין עליו שקשה לו לפירוש סג' רגליים וחיישינן שלא יחזור לסורו על כלבויש עיר שושן פיסת תפוח :

And you can see another example of this in the following source with regard to an entire community that had violated Shabbat (c. 1450)

Those who [violated Shabbat] must fast for 40 days within a given period of time.... Nor may they eat meat or drink wine.... And every person should contribute to charity 18 *peshitin*. But if a person wishes to fast a little less [often], he may contribute to charity... There are those who are more stringent, but these days when the strength of the generations has waned, one may be lenient.... And even though I questioned whether one may postpone the fasts until the winter [when the days are shorter], my father allowed it.

**17 פתחיה איסרליין, תרומת הדשן פסקים וכתבים סימן ס**  
אבל חפירה ובנין דהו מלאכה דאורייתא, איכא למימר דלא הותרה בשביל חשש סכנה כזה. ע"כ נראה לא"א יצ"ו אותם בני עונשין אשר חללו שבת בחפירה ובשווי גומות ובהטחה שהוא כמו בנין, יצטרכו להתענות ארבעים יום תוך זמן כמו מ' מאייר עד ר"ה. ושלא לאכול בשר ולשתות יין כמו שכתוב בתשובת מהר"ם ז"ל, גבי בא על גדה בשוגג. וגם לתת צדקה כל איש אשר חלל שיעור חטאת בדנקא, ושיערו מור"ם ז"ל שהוא י"ח פשיטין. ואם ירצה אדם לפחות מקצת התעניות יתן עבור כל יום י"ב פשיטין, כאשר כתב מור"ם ג"כ בתשובה דלעיל. ואע"ג דאיכא דיעות הם דמחמירי טובא, עכשיו דהדורות תש כח יש להקל כדברי המיקל, גם כתב רא"ם ז"ל: ואף איסור הבערה דאיסור דאורייתא די בארבעים יום שלא רצופין דבנרדף הקילן. ואשר נסתפקת אם יש לדחות התעניות עד לימי החורף, נראה לאדוני אבי פשיטא דהיתר הוא לדחות, דאפ"א אם היה נדור ובא להתענות היה יכול לדחות. ואשר כתבת מחמת הרכיבה חוץ לתחום, נראה לאדוני אבי אם היה סכ"נ בדבר אינם צריכין שום כפרה.

So we've scaled it back a little – but only a little. The operative principle was still the notion that the sinner should suffer in a manner commensurate with his sin.

I don't want to get too far afield, but it certainly sounds like some of this may have been picked up from penances that were a commonplace in medieval Christian Europe.

Which of course reminds me of a story:

Avram went into a church, took out his tallis and his siddure and proceeded to start davening. Before the priest began the service, he got up and announced: "Will all non-Christians please leave." Avram continued davening.

Again the clergyman said, "Will all non-Christians please leave."

And again, Avram went right on davening.

Finally, the priest decided he needed to be even more explicit. He got up and said, "Will ALL JEWS please leave."

At this, Avram took off put down his siddure and packed up his tallis, then went to the altar, picked up a statue of Jesus and said, "Come on bubbela. It's clear they don't want us here anymore."

It's hard to know who got what from whom, but we're now in a position to move on to the fifth and final epoch in the history of Teshuvah.

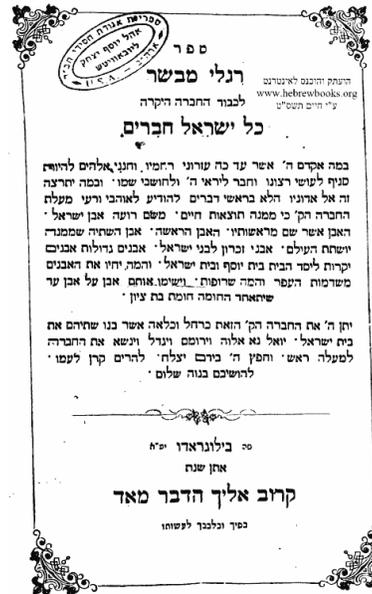
**Modern: General Teshuva and a Return to the land**

This brings us into the modern period, the final period we'll look at this morning.

And the most important exponent of this modern conception of Teshuvah was a man by the name of R. Yehudah Alkalai. He was born in Sarajevo in 1798.



Rabbi Yehudah and Esther Alkalai before their immigration to Palestine in 1874.



He studied in Jerusalem and went on to become an important rabbi in the Serbian capital of Belgrade.

Nationalism was in the air and Alkalai was introduced to the concept of Jewish nationalism by R. Yehuda Bibas, the rabbi of Corfu.

He taught Hebrew to the young men of the congregation, whose mother tongue was Ladino. And the blood libel known as Damascus Affair in 1840 led him to write his first Hebrew book *Minhat Yehudah*.

It was his firm belief that redemption was in the hands of man himself. Complacent dwellers in foreign lands, he wrote, should read the writing on the wall and come to grips with the looming threat of anti-Semitism. He called for nothing less than a return to Israel.

Over time, he developed an elaborate plan that called for

- the introduction of a tithe to finance settlement,
- the restoration of a Sanhedrin
- the revival of Hebrew
- investment in Jewish agriculture,
- and the creation of a Jewish army.

Needless to say, his own efforts bore few tangible results. He himself made Aliyah with his wife at the end of his life and died in Israel in the 1870s. But it wouldn't be long before his wild ideas began to form the conceptual basis for a modern Jewish state.

But what does any of this have to do with the history of Teshuva?  
Let's learn a couple excerpts from his writings together.

Individual *teshuva* means a sinner turns from his sin, in accordance with the definition of *teshuva* as set down by the *Rishonim*... We call this individual *teshuva* because it pertains to the individual: each person engages in *teshuva* in accordance with his sin. The more grave his transgression, the weightier his *teshuva*.

General *teshuva*, on the other hand, means that the entire Jewish People returns to the Lord our God, to the land of our forefathers' inheritance. For "one who lives outside of the Land is considered as someone who has no God," and Jews [while living] outside of the Land, are unwitting idolaters, as it is written, "And there you shall serve man-made gods, wood and stone," concerning which Rashi comments, "Since you are in servitude to those who serve [idols], it is as though you serve [idols] yourselves."

All the prophets commanded [that the nation engage in] this general *teshuva*, as our teacher [Rambam] writes: "All the prophets demand *teshuva*, and the Jewish People is redeemed only through *teshuva*. The Torah promises that the Jews are destined to do *teshuva* at the end of their exile, and immediately they will be redeemed." This refers to general *teshuva* – the idea that the Jewish People will return to the Holy Land."

Know that the primary meaning of *teshuva* is that a person returns to the place from whence he came, as in, "And his return (*teshuvato*) was to Rama, for there his home was" (I Samuel 7:17). *Chazal* then borrowed the term to refer to repentance for one's sin... And once the term was given this meaning, it was applied extensively, and all the *Mussar* teachers used it, such that out of habit it became natural, as though the word *teshuva* never had any other meaning, and its original meaning was forgotten. But general *teshuva*, according to the original meaning of the word, means that we return to the land that we left, for it is our eternal home.

And it's even possible to detect the words of R. Alkalai in the words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook:

When there is true desire to return, even though obstructed by many hindrances, as for example, confused thought or physical debility, or inability to rectify matters that concern man's relationship with his fellow man, although the hindrance is very

### 18 ר' יהודה אלקלעי, פתח כחודה של מחט, 324

תשובה פרטית ר"ל שישוב החוטא מחטאו עפ"י גדרי התשובה אשר גבלו לאשונים<sup>22</sup>, הלא הם כתובים בס' הרוקח ובס' ראשית חכמה ובס' חובת הלבבות ודומיהן. והתשובה הזאת קדמה לעולם, כדאיתא בנדרים דל"ט ע"ב: תניא, שבעה דברים נבראו קודם שנברא העולם אלו הן: התורה והתשובה וכן ערך וגהינם וכסא הכבוד בהמ"ק ושמו של משיח. ועוד כמה וכמה מאמרי תשובה לרז"ל הלא בספרתם. ולזאת תקרא תשובה פרטית מפני שנצרכת בפרטות לכל איש ואיש התשובה כפי חטאו, לפי כובד עונו כך משקל תשובתו. ולא כל האצבעות שוות<sup>23</sup>. אבל התשובה הכללית ר"ל שישובו כל ישראל אל ה' אלהינו לארץ נחלת אבותינו. כי הדר בחוצה לארץ דומה כמי שאין לו אלוה<sup>24</sup>. וישראל בחוצה לארץ עובדי ע"ז בטורה הם<sup>25</sup>, שגא' <sup>26</sup>: ועבדתם שם אלהים מעשה ידי אדם עץ ואבן, כמ"ש רש"י: משאתם עובדים לעובדיהם כאלו אתם עובדים להם. ג. והתשובה הכללית הזאת צוה עליה כל הנביאים כמ"ש רבינו הלכות תשובה פ' ז' <sup>27</sup>: כל הנביאים צוה על התשובה ואין ישראל נגאלין אלא בתשובה. ר"ל תשובה כללית שישובו ישראל לארץ הקדושה<sup>28</sup>. כתיב <sup>29</sup>: שמעו זאת בית יעקב וגו'. פי' החכם בנימין זאב <sup>30</sup> בביאורו לספר ישעיה, וז"ל: הנבואה הזאת נאמרה לדעתי על כל שארית הגולה הן בבבל הן בשאר ארצות אשר נפוצו שם. ותכליתה להעיר רוח הנדהים לשוב אל ה'. בכל לבם ולעלות עם אחיהם לארץ נחלתם וכו'. וכן למה תשקלו כסף בלא לחם<sup>31</sup>. הערה אל גולי בבל ושאר ארצות כי יניחו את מקומם ויעלו אל ארצם כי בארצות הגוים אך לריק יתם כחם ולהבל יגעו<sup>32</sup>. וכבר אמרנו כמה פעמים שזו היתה מגמת הנביא שכל ישראל ישובו ונחלת אבותיהם. שמעו שמוע אלי<sup>33</sup>. לעלות עם אחיכם. הטו אזניכם ולכו אלי<sup>34</sup>. כפי דרכי הוא כמשמעו לכו אלי אל ה' קדשי ושם אכרות לכם ברית עולם לקיים חסדי דוד<sup>35</sup>, כמ"ש: לעולם אשמור לו חסדי<sup>36</sup>. דרשו ה' בהמצאו<sup>37</sup>. גם הפרשה הזאת דבוקה למה שלפניה וענינה כמו שאמרתי. שגם בימי עזרא כבר הגיעה עת דודים<sup>38</sup> לכנס גדתי ישראל מארבע כנפות הארץ. ואין הדבר תלוי אלא בתשובה<sup>39</sup>. בהמצאו לעת כזאת<sup>40</sup> כי הגיעה עת הגאולה והישועה. כי לא מחשבותי מחשבותיכם<sup>41</sup>. לפי דרכי הענין כי אין שהבטחתי ע"י עבדי הנביאים לגאול אתכם ואתם חשבו שזאת הבטחה מוהלת בא תבא על כל

### 19 ר' יהודה אלקלעי, פתח כחודה של מחט, 326

תדע לך שהיה תיבת תשובה הוראתו הראשונה היא שישוב האדם אל המקום אשר יצא משם, כמו: ותשובתו הרמתה כי שם ביתו<sup>42</sup>. ורז"ל ע"ד השאלה הניחו את השם הזה לשב מחטאו. שהיה נראה ונדרתה וחזרו ונראה<sup>43</sup>. והוראתו זאת לא נמצאת כי אם בדברי רז"ל וכיון שהוראתו זאת היא נצרכת למאד ונהגת בכל מקום ובכל זמן. ודבר זה כל חכמי המוסר והרגל נעשה טבע<sup>44</sup> כאלו לא היתה הוראה אחרת בתיבת תשובה, והוראתו הראשונה נשכחת כמת מלב<sup>45</sup>. והתשובה הכללית היא לפי הוראתו הראשונה שנשוב אל הארץ אשר יצאנו משם, כי היא בית חיינו.

### 20 ר' אברהם יצחק הכהן קוק, אורות התשובה פרק יז

כשרוצים באמת לשוב, אע"פ שמעוכבים בשביל כמה מניעות, כמו מחמת בלבול דעת או מחמת

great and the heart will surely be broken because of the knowledge of the great obligation imposed upon him to correct his defects in the best and most complete manner – nevertheless, since the will to return in repentance is firm, even though he does not possess enough strength to overcome all obstacles, one should accept the enlightenment of repentance as a purifying and sanctifying element, so that he will not waver because of the restraints due to his not having achieved complete repentance; from striving toward every form of exaltation and every degree of spiritual elevations, appropriate to him in accordance with the sanctity of the soul its sacred character. **And just as this is a fundamental principle insofar as the individual is concerned, so is it in regard to the community in its totality; the illumining of repentance is within Israel. The awakening of the desire of the nation, in general, to return to its land, to its nature, to its spirit, to its character – truly, this striving contains within itself the light of repentance.** Actually, the truth is expressed with absolute clarity in the expression of the Torah: “You will return to the Lord, your God” (Deuteronomy 30:2), “When you will return to the Lord, your God” (Ibid verse 10). This repentance is an inner repentance, but it is concealed with many obstructing veils, and no form of obstacle or hindrance to perfection possesses the power to hinder the Supreme light from shedding its splendor upon us.

חלישות כח או מחמת אי-יכולת לתקן דברים שהם נוגעים בין אדם לחברו, אע"פ שהעכוב הוא גדול מאד והלב מוכרח להיות נשבר מפני ידיעת גדל החובה המוטלת על האדם לתקן את כל פגמיו, באופן היותר טוב והיותר שלם, מ"מ כיון שהרצון לשוב בתשובה הוא אמיץ, אע"פ שאין בכחו עדיין לסלק את כל המניעות צריכים לקבל את ההארה הזאת של התשובה בתור תוכן המטהר והמקדש עד שלא יזוז, מפני העכובים של אי השלמת התשובה, מכל רוממות ומכל עליה רוחנית שהיא ראויה לו, ע"פ קדושת הנשמה וצביונה הקדוש. **וכשם שזוה הוא כלל גדול אצל היחיד, ככה הוא אצל הצבור בכללותו.** הארת התשובה ישנה בישראל. התעוררות הפצה של האומה בכללה לשוב אל ארצה, אל מהותה, אל רוחה ואל תכונתה, באמת אור של תשובה יש בה. באמת הדבר מתבטא בכרור גמור בבטויה של תורה: "ושבת עד ד' אלהיך" "כי תשוב אל ה' אלהיך". התשובה היא תשובה פנימית, אלא שהיא מכוסה בהרבה מסכים חוצצים – ואין כח בשום עכוב ומניעת השלמה לעכב את האור העליון מהופיע עלינו.

Of course there was an important conceptual split between the Religious Zionists on the one hand and the non-Zionists on the other. In our camp, this ideology coalesced into the movement that saw the ingathering of exiles and return to Zion as the movement that predates the messianic era. The non-Zionists believed – and continue to believe – that the return to Zion will only happen after the advent of the messianic era.

But certainly for our purposes, here we have what I would consider the final stage. And in a sense, we've come full circle – except now the circle in much wider.

In the Torah, teshuvah had a more literal meaning. It meant the return of the sinner who had been alienated from God and His Temple. So he brought a *korban* – to come close again.

R. Alkalai argued that there is no more essential definition. Teshuvah means a return to the place from which we've come. In addition to personal teshuvah, he gives us a concept of national teshuvah – national return to the Promised Land.

## Part II: The Machzor on Yom Kippur

So these are the five epochs in the history of Teshuvah. Of course history is full of blurred lines. And it's not to say there wasn't overlap or that these are the only categories.

But I think there's certainly enough evidence to support the notion that we have distinct and discrete stages in the history of Teshuvah in which priority was given to different aspects of repentance.

The question now is: What do we have to show for it? Here we are in the middle of the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah. Yom Kippur is right around the corner. What does the history of Teshuvah have to do with the people sitting in this room in 2019? Why a history lesson on Shabbat Shuvah?

So let me ask you a different question: Did you ever notice what a mess the Machzor is? For purposes of contrast, think of the Haggadah on Pesach. Everything follows a neatly structured seder. One stage follows the next: We progress from Kadesh through Hallel and Nirtzah.

On Yom Kippur we have a machzor that follows no seder at all. Just think about what goes on in our machzor:

- We start with kapparot on erev Yom Kippur
- We say vidui and confess our sins
- We chant piyuttim and selichot
- We spend hours rehashing the avodah in the temple
- We read about the scapegoat going over the cliff
- We have the book of Jonah
- We've got books of life and death and remembrances of things past

We're all over the place!

If I haven't telegraphed it for you already, what I'd like to suggest is that our machzor is an anthology. Collected and curated in this extraordinary book are all the elements that we've discussed today. It's not a history book, so they don't follow a strict chronology. But woven throughout the day – and even starting before Yom Kippur – are all the elements from our five epochs of Teshuva.

1. Think of Biblical repentance. It's all about confession; and in the time of the Temple, confession in the context of a *korban*. Now think of Mussaf on Yom Kippur. The shul stands in for the temple. It's a mikdash me'at. The chazzan is the stand-in for the Kohen gadol. There's no other time of the year that we re-enact the Temple service: The counting and the bowing – the whole liturgy takes us right back to the precincts of the Beit ha-Mikdash. Starting at Minchah on Erev Yom Kippur, we say vidui and confess no fewer than ten times! אשמנו בגדנו גזלנו. Vidui is the mantra of the day.

And there's something else. Actually right at the beginning of the book: Kapparot. We've talked about it in the past. It seems so archaic. Sephardim wanted to abolish it altogether.

What's it about?

And while performing *kapparot* let him imagine in his heart that he is guilty of a capital offense [who ought to suffer the same fate] as this bird. And this is the

**21 תשובת מהר"י וייל ס' קצא**  
הג"ה במיימוני בעי"כ = בערב יום כפורים = יעשה  
כפרות ויאמר ... חליפתי תמורת כפרתי זהו שם  
החותך חיים לכל חי. ויחשוב בלבו שהוא חייב מיתה

rationale behind all *korbanot*.

כמו זה. והיינו טעם הקרבנות.

We're not allowed to bring *korbanot* in the absence of the *beit hamikdash*. And we're not allowed to do anything that even resembles a *korban* – which is why we use a bird that would never come into the Temple. But the sentiment is right there! It's our symbolic *korban* right before Yom Kippur.

2. Now think of the call of the prophets.

The idea of *teshuva* is not about sacrifices; it's about behaving better. Remember the Haftarah we read on Yom Kippur?

5 Is such the fast I desire? A day for men to starve their bodies? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day of favor for God? 6 No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness and untie the yoke of lawlessness; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. 7 It is to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own flesh and blood.

## 22 ישעיהו נח

ה הַכֹּזֵה, יִהְיֶה צוֹם אֲבֹתֶרְהוּ--יּוֹם עֲנוּת אָדָם, נִפְשׁוֹ; הִלְכֶף כְּאֶגְמוֹן רֹאשׁוֹ, וְשָׁק וְאָפֵר יִצִיעַ--הִלְזָה תִקְרָא-צוֹם, וַיּוֹם רְצוֹן לֵה!. וְהִלּוֹא זֶה, צוֹם אֲבֹתֶרְהוּ--פִתְחַת חֲרָצְבוֹת רִשְׁעִי, הִתֵּר אֲגָדוֹת מוֹטָה; וְשִׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חֲפְזִים, וְכָל-מוֹטָה תִנְתְּקוּ. ז הִלּוֹא פָרַס לְרַעֲב לֶחֶמֶד, וְעֲנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תִּבְיֵא בַּיִת: כִּי-תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסְיָתוֹ, וּמִבְשָׂרָךְ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם.

What a crazy thing to say. Here we are on Yom Kippur afflicting ourselves and fasting – and we say – that's actually not what Hashem wants. So why are we saying it! Because the *machzor* preserves the prophetic conception of *Teshuvah* as well. We embrace the notion that today is the day we commit to improving our behavior.

Or think of וּנְתַנֶּה תוֹקֶף and our proclamation: *Teshuva*, *Tefillah*, *Tzeddakah*. It's our pronouncement that we're turning a new leaf – to think about the coming year and all the ways we can improve.

Hashem: I'm not stuck in the past! I'm thinking about the present and the future and I'm committing to doing better.

3. What about Talmudic *teshuva*? Where's *ritzui* and reconciliation in the *machzor*? סלח לנו מחל לנו כפר לנו. Every time we ask Hashem for forgiveness, we remind ourselves that *teshuva* is about repairing our broken relationships. Which is why every *machzor* says – go ask for forgiveness on *erev yom kippur*.

4. Which brings us to the medieval period and *teshuvat ha-mishkal* – surely the most jarring part of the conversation today. It seems so utterly foreign to us to think of sitting in snow or becoming ascetics to do *teshuva*. But maybe it's not quite as foreign as you think!.

There was a very common medieval practice – which you won't find anywhere in the Talmudic tradition – for people to give one another symbolic lashes on Erev Yom Kippur. And it's not so obscure. It's right here in the Shulhan Arukh.

**דיני ערב יום כפור**

142

ענין וכסאזא אשילא סתק השכה און לכך עליו וחס אשכ עד הלילה מ"ג יכד • מסגים • וחס  
 היה מתעסק בעניות שאינו שלו כשעמד בלילה • והיה כי תבוא לנכבד יתקב ויזיך תחוד כנראה  
 אשמנו כנדנו היינו התודות ככל אות ואות אל איב כנראה אשמנו חס ואות חס כל עניי לכבו  
 אשכ ידע בעלמנו שלא היה מוסר נסה עד הסה ויזכר מאוד בידיו • זה קודם כל הדרי כי הוא דיבא  
 דגמלא (ע"ש כרמב"ן הוא ערב יום כפור עם השכה) ועיון ביו"ט שהיה בני' ע"ש כרמב"ן ע"ש  
 אך דמו לא שטיק הודווי הוא החאבוס שעתה כתיב הכתובים חזל וישיב עליו וידע תשלומות  
 שלא ישוב לום התקף עוד לעולם ר"ל שהגורל ית"ש שיועד מתכונת אדם כוחו לא האדם בעת  
 ערב יום"כ מקדימין להתפלל מנהה כדי שיהיה לו שעות אח"כ לאכול סעודה המספקת •  
 כתב ביו"ט"ה שבהפלת ענתה וכן ככל הפלת יום"כ ויאמר פסוק יהיו לרצון קודם הידווי ויתר  
 סודווי אלהי גור לשונו (מזלתי) : ואחר יסיו לרצון אלהים ואלהי אבותיו • אשמנו חס  
 וידע עד ששעית • ע"ש עד ותלם רעים • כ"ז תמאל בתפלת יום"כ • ויאמר אלהי כבוד • וס'ן  
 חזר התפלה עד עושה השלוש ואלא וידווי : ק"ש • עלינו • ק"י : ואח"כ מלקין ברצועה של  
 עגל • הנהג מוטה פניו לרצון ואחריו לדרום • ואומר אשמנו כו' ג"ס • והמלקה אומר ג"ס וסוף  
 המוש ג"ס מיכות כנגד ג"ס מלקות :



24 נוסח מחזור ווילנא (1876)

ואח"כ מלקין ברצועה של עגל. הנלקה מוטה פניו לצפון ואחריו לדרום. ואומר אשמנו וכו' ג' פעמים. ומלקה אומר ג"פ והוא רחום. ל"ט תיבות כנגד ל"ט מלקות.

After [Mincha] one [gives/receives] lashes with a leather strap. The lashee faces north and says, *Ashamnu*, etc. three times. Meanwhile the one dispensing the lashes says *ve-hu rachum...* [which contains] 39 letters corresponding to the 39 lashes.

23 שלחן ערוך ס' תרזו: כל הקהל לוקים מלקות ארבעים אחר תפלת המנחה, שמתוך כך יתן אל לבו לשוב מעבירות שבידו.

Following Mincha, each member of the congregation receives 40 (39) lashes. This will impel him to concentrate on repenting for the sins that he has committed.

And it's attested to in lots of Machzorim. I have just a couple examples for you. This is the relic of Teshuvat ha-Mishkal. At least symbolically, let's punish ourselves a little before Yom Kippur.

**מחזור**  
**של יום הכפורים**  
 במסגרת קהיל קדוש  
 ספרדים •  
**חלק רביעי**  
 וכל בו תפלות של יום הכפורים • רבל  
 בסדר יפה דברי דבור של אבנו כתיב  
 עלא ודתי שורה על המהפלה  
 לכבוד רחמינו ושובל  
 למוזיקה של שופ בלובל  
 דעת כללי •

---

**בויניציאה**  
 Nella Stampar. Bragadina  
 Con Licen. de  
 Superiori,

**ואחר**  
 תפלת המנחה כל הקהל לוקין מלקות מ  
 שמתוך כך יתנו לשם לשוב מעבירות  
 שבידם • וזה לך עדר המלקות כתבתי וקניי שמערכ  
 נחמידי ארץ ישראל תנ"כ • הקו' הכופה את הלוקש  
 כפתו על העמוד ונותר לו מנהר ה' בני א תמאס  
 נא תקוין כתיבתו כי את אשר יאשכ ה' ינוס וכלב  
 את כז ירכי וודעת גם לכה • וידע • איש  
 את בני ה' אלהיך מיסרך ושכפות אומר תרני •  
 אך כמעט אל בארך אן מעשני • וכשואל עלקש  
 אותו

ואחר תפלת מנחה כל הקהל לוקין מלקות מ' שמתוך כך יתנו לשם לשוב מעבירות שבידם.

25 מחזור של יום הכיפורים  
 מנהג ק"ק ספרדים  
 (Venice, 1792)

Following Minchah, every member of the congregation dispenses 40 lashes. For doing so will inspire the populace to repent of the sins in their hands.

And you can actually see this in the following book published in Leipzig in 1705. Friedrich Albrecht Christiani was a 17<sup>th</sup> century apostate. And it was common practice for Jewish converts to Christianity to teach about and write about Jewish practice – always disparagingly – since they had an inside view. So you have to appreciate their books in that context, but they weren't

making things up out of whole cloth. They were usually a faithful – albeit mocking – representation of contemporary Jewish life. So what do you see? It's the Erev Yom Kippur scene. *Kapparot* at the top of the page. And *malkut* at the bottom of the page.

26 Friedrich Albrecht Christiani, *Der Juden Glaube und Aberglaube*, Leipzig, 1705.



But there's something else, too. Compensatory teshuvah is attested to all over the Yom Kippur Machzor. You know what I have in mind? Klopping al chet.

We're pounding our chests? What is that about? We don't do that. We don't afflict ourselves. How is that even allowed?

I can't prove it, but I suspect that klopping al chet is in fact the last remnant of the medieval model of teshuva we learned about earlier. At least on a symbolic level, we punish ourselves – we beat ourselves up.

5. Which bring us to the final chapter. Teshuvah Klalit. The return to Zion. Which is probably – as we say – the most literal meaning of Teshuvah. But where is it in the machzor?

It's everywhere. Just think of some of the lines from our davening that we say over and over again:

- נוסח התפילה של יום הכיפורים**
- שְׁמַחָה לְאַרְצָךָ. שִׁשּׁוֹן לְעִירָךָ. וְצַמִּיחַת קָרוֹן לְדוֹד עֲבֹדָךָ. וְעָרִיכַת גֵּר לְבֵן יִשְׂרָאֵל מְשִׁיחָה, בְּמִהְרָה בְּיָמֵינוּ:
  - וְתַמְלֵךְ אֲמָה הוּא ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִהְרָה עַל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ. בְּהַר צִיּוֹן מִשְׁכַּן כְּבוֹדָךָ. וּבִירוּשָׁלַיִם עִיר מְקֻדָּשְׁךָ. כְּפָתוּב בְּדַבְרֵי קְדוֹשְׁךָ:

- זכור ה' חַבַּת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם אֶהְבֵּת צִיּוֹן אַל תִּשְׁכַּח לְנֶצְחָה:
- אַמָּה תִקּוּם תִּרְחַם צִיּוֹן כִּי עַתָּה לְחַנּוּנָהּ כִּי בָּא מוֹעֵד:

What does any of this have to do with Yom Kippur?

This is both the original and ultimate Teshuvah! The return to the land of Israel.

And what's the conclusion of Yom Kippur?

After the last kaddish.

After the tekiah gedolah.

We start singing: L'shana Habah.

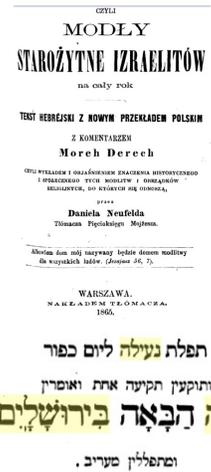
It's not the seder! What are we talking about? Where did this come from?

I started doing a little research. And I found it attested in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and I found it as far back as the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But before that, I couldn't find a trace.



1912 r.

יְרוּשָׁלַיִם עֲנִינוּ. דַּעֲנֵי לְצִדִּיקֵי וְחַסִּדֵי וְחַסִּדֵי  
 (ויִשְׁבְּרֵי רֵי בְּקֵל דָּוִד נְדוּר עֲנִינוּ :  
 ומוקע תקופס א' לכה • חסי' ככסת  
 ונומרים לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם :  
 ומתפללין תפלת ערבים של תולדאומר אהם חונקתו • ק"ע  
 (וכמו"ש ויתן לך ואל"א ויסי נוס"ס • ואתם קדוים) עליו ק"י :  
 וסגו לקדש סגנוס מוד כשיו"אין מניסכ"י מעוטס"ס כקלים  
 וקיעינ' כלל כסת :  
 קדוש לבנה



פג

I checked dozens of machzorim from the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. No hint of **לשנה הבאה**. And even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it's only in Eastern Europe. Not in Italy; not in Amsterdam; not among the Sephardim...

Not finding a historical source doesn't mean there isn't one.

But maybe l'shana ha-ba only crept into the machzor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and actually correlates to the timing of Jewish nationalism...

The whole goal is to return to Zion. And if we're not there now, we at least have to express the desire and the hope that we'll be there next year. לשנה הבאה בירושלים.

**Concluding thoughts**

It's all here because all of Jewish history is all here. What the Mishna says about Torah is equally true about Teshuvah. We all know that the Mishna teaches us: הפך בה והפך בה. If you dig deep enough, you'll find everything in the Torah. But we forget the context. Notice the previous Mishnah.

He used to say: At five years of age the study of Scripture; At ten the study of Mishnah; At thirteen subject to the commandments; At fifteen the study of Talmud; At eighteen the bridal canopy; At twenty for pursuit [of livelihood]; At thirty the peak of strength; At forty wisdom;

**27 אבות פרק ה**  
 הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, בֶּן חֲמִשׁ שָׁנַיִם לְמִקְרָא, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִי לְמִשְׁנָה, בֶּן שְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה לְמִצְוֹת, בֶּן חֲמִשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה לְתַלְמוּד, בֶּן שְׁמוֹנֶה עֶשְׂרֵה לְחֻפָּה, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִים לְדוּף, בֶּן שְׁלֹשִׁים לְכַתֵּב.

At fifty able to give counsel; At sixty old age; At seventy fullness of years; At eighty the age of “strength”; At ninety a bent body; At one hundred, as good as dead and gone completely out of the world.

בן ארבעים לבִּינָה, בן חמשים לעצה, בן  
לשים לזקנה, בן שבעים לשׂיבָה, בן  
שמונים לגבורה, בן תשעים לשׂוּחַ, בן מאה  
בָּאֵלוֹ מֵת וְעֵבֶר וּבָטֵל מִן הָעוֹלָם:

Ben Bag Bag said: Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein. And look into it; And become gray and old therein; And do not move away from it, for you have no better portion than it.

בן בג בג אומר, הִפֵּךְ בָּהּ וְהִפֵּךְ בָּהּ, דְּכֻלָּא  
בָּהּ. וְבָהּ תִּתְחַזֵּק, וְסִיב וּבָלָה בָּהּ, וּמִנְהָ לֹא  
תִּזְוַע, אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִדָּה טוֹבָה הִיא מִנְהָ.

Ben Bag Bag is telling us that we should always be returning to the Torah – irrespective of what stage of life we find ourselves.

As human beings, we’re ever in flux. Our identities – and our Jewish identities – are dynamic. We’re not the same people we were yesterday let alone last year or last decade. So the Mishna tells us: You have to go back to the well. It doesn’t matter if you’ve learned it before. On its face, the material might look the same, but *you’re* not the same! So your relationship with it is entirely different.

Forget the fact that half of Tanakh is rated PG-13 so we never learned it in the first place. That I learned something once or even many times says nothing about what I may gain from studying the same text anew now that I’m a little older.

For years I’ve been grappling with the halacha of going to the grave to ask for forgiveness. I could never make sense of it! Remember the gemara:

And if [the injured person] has died, [the injurer] brings ten people, and has them stand next to his grave; he then says, “I have sinned against the Lord, God of Israel, and against so-and-so, whom I injured.”

**28 יומא פז.**  
ואם מת מביא עשרה בני אדם ומעמידן  
על קברו ואומר חטאתי לה' אלהי  
ישראל ולפלוגי שחבלתי בו

It almost borders on something cultic. We tell the person to go the cemetery! It’s wild! I didn’t have enough guts to reconcile while he was alive. I’m going get forgiveness from him now that he’s dead?

But seen through the historical lens of Talmudic Teshuvah, I have an entirely different appreciation for what it’s about. It’s so obvious. It’s just the furthest extreme of the Talmud’s conception of Teshuva. You have to do everything humanly possible to repair what’s been broken. If that means reaching back into a past and having a conversation with someone who’s no longer in this world, so be it.

And what’s true for Torah, is true for Teshuvah. But the message is even more pressing.

When it comes to Torah, we can all appreciate that as we age we become a little wiser and old stories or texts might mean something different to us.

When it comes to Teshuvah, the stakes are so much higher. Because when I was younger, I may have tried and failed. And so we become skeptical about the very efficacy of Teshuvah! Maybe, we think to ourselves, I'm not cut out for this whole teshuvah thing. Or maybe it doesn't really work.

An older member, who's since passed on, once told me how she had tried to reconcile with her daughter. The two weren't on speaking terms. Each year she would call her before Rosh Hashana and try to open up a conversation. And each year her daughter declined. And then one year, something changed. She couldn't tell me what it was, but her daughter agreed to meet for coffee. And for the last two years of her life, she had a relationship with her daughter once again.

What I'm arguing is that the definition of Teshuvah itself and our relationship to it change over the course of our lifetime.

הפך בה והפך בה

It's our duty to keep coming back to it.

All the paths are open.

The best model in one stage of our life may be entirely unsuited to another. Or what failed so miserably last year might in fact be the perfect remedy this year. In the great drama of repentance, the only constant is Hashem. Teshuvah may have changed. The people in our lives may have changed. And surely: we have changed.

George Nickel avoided contact with the Jewish community of Los Angeles and then San Diego, where he moved. The only link to the past was a niece in Kfar Hasidim, with whom he corresponded. Years later, her son, Ehud moved to California after his army service to become a journalist. He made contact with George and they established a close relationship. After the War, George went into real estate. He had ups and downs. In his 70s, he lost everything. He collapsed, and ended up in the hospital.

There, Ehud visited him and suggested he move back to Israel. But after decades of self-imposed exile, George just could not see himself returning to Kfar Hasidim, the source of so much painful anguish and trauma. When he was released, he decided to go back to school and earned a degree in psychology.

In 1978, having started down the path of reinventing himself, he finally felt confident enough to pay a visit to Kfar Hasidim. He was met by Ehud at the airport and driven to a hall packed with people who had gathered to meet the man who had put Kfar Hasidim on the map. Old and young, religious and secular—everyone connected to the village was there. A seat at the front was left empty for George, and as a hush descended he slowly made his way toward his seat and sat down under the large welcome sign that adorned the front wall. An elderly man stood up and turned to speak.

“Rebbe, do you remember me?” he asked.

George looked at him, trying to figure out who he was.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Are you Chaimke? Chaimke Geldfarb?”

Chaimke smiled. “Yes, Rebbe, it’s me.” His voice was hoarse with emotion. “On behalf of all the residents of our community, I want to welcome you back home. You were probably nervous to come here. You probably think we are angry with you.... you think we are angry that it all went wrong. But Rebbe, if that’s what you think, you’re mistaken. Because Rebbe—you saved our lives—if it were not for you, we would all have been killed by the Nazis.”

“Look over there ...” Chaimke pointed toward a group of people in the middle of the hall. “That’s my son with his wife and children, and next to him my two daughters with their husbands and children.”

“My parents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, and their children—all murdered by the Nazis. But we came with you, Rebbe. We built this place. We founded this village. We survived. And you were the one who saved our lives. And for that we thank you. Thank you for our lives, and for the lives of our children and grandchildren.”

George was stunned. When he recovered his composure, he said that he realized that it might be time for the Yabloner Rebbe to come home to Kfar Hasidim. It didn’t happen right away. He had to go back to Los Angeles to wrap up his affairs. In 1981, he settled in Kfar Hasidim for good. At the age of 86, he returned to religious observance and George Nagel became the Yabloner Rebbe once again.

Whether he intended it or not, George hit on virtually all the paths of Teshuvah that we talked about today. Whether he said vidui isn’t known to me... But everything else is here:

- Like the prophets remonstrated: He returned to a life piety;
- Like the Talmud insisted: He reconciled with those he had wronged;
- Like the pietists of Ashkenaz, he punished himself by going into exile;
- And like R. Alkalai, he ultimately returned to the Land of Israel.

Wherever we find ourselves in life – at age 26 or 96 – Teshuvah is possible.

The Machzor is our portal. It can transport us through time and space: Into either the past or the future; toward a promised land that may be figurative or literal.

1. Maybe I need to come clean and confess in words what it is that I’ve done wrong
2. Maybe I can’t go back into the past and just need to move forward
3. Maybe I need to do the hard work of repair and reconciliation
4. Or maybe I’m really feeling awful and need to beat myself up or go on hiatus for a while
5. Or maybe I need to think about a larger mission – national teshuvah and a return of God’s people to God’s Promised Land

Whatever models fits us best, let’s not let this Teshuvah season pass us by without choosing.

In the end, the History of Teshuvah is not at all about what repentance looked like yesterday. It's about what it looks like today. כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד.

The only thing between us and the path of penitence is the willingness to take the first step.

I wish each and every one of you a shana tova u-metukah.