

The effectiveness of repentance (teshuvah) can be seen as unreasonable and even antinomian, a breach in the just natural order and the authority of law that G-d Himself authorizes over the objections of Torah, angels, prophets, and Wisdom. On the other hand, it resonates well with human experience – we forgive and forget ourselves, and find it virtuous but not generally astonishing when our friends do so.

The simplest explanation for this anomaly is that the effectiveness of teshuvah is a function of mercy, and in Jewish tradition mercy and justice are distinct and independent. G-d originally sought to create the world with His attribute of justice, but saw that it could survive only if His attribute of mercy was involved as well. Human beings, as creatures of this world, are capable of both justice and mercy – therefore we are capable both of accepting teshuvah and of recognizing how strange and problematic that acceptance is.

But there is an effect of one form of teshuvah that seems not only in tension with but rather a direct affront to justice, and which does not immediately resonate with our experience. The Talmud declares that teshuvah meiahavah (out of love) not only forestalls or mitigates punishment for past sins, but rather transmutes them into virtues. How can a sin retrospectively become a virtue?

I have read in the name of R. Tzadok of Lublin a fascinating solution to this question. Rav Tzadok has an absolutely literal understanding of the R. Chanina's statement "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven" (Berakhot 33b and others); he understands it to mean that all human actions are determined, and only our attitudes toward those actions are affected by free will. As all actions are in the hands of Heaven, it follows that all actions fulfill His will, even if they violate the Law; sin is the belief that one's actions contradicted His will. It follows that genuine teshuvah is the recognition that one's apparently actions were in fact fulfillments of His will, and there is no reason that they should not be counted as virtues.

R. Tzadok's brilliant solution does not satisfy me. First, I find the whole notion of reward and punishment for actions incomprehensible in his system (although I am tempted to suggest that he would read "sins become for him like virtues" as saying that neither of them generate either reward or punishment). Second, I see it as demeaning to human beings to say that their decisions have no impact on the world, and that they bear no responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

This last objection, of course, seems a general problem with teshuvah, which seems as a practical matter to be a means for human beings to avoid responsibility for their (mis)deeds.¹

The Rav zt"l tends to understand teshuvah's efficacy as stemming from its capacity to recreate the self, with the renewed self being sufficiently discontinuous with the old as not to bear responsibility for its predecessor's actions. On a technical level, this leaves each self responsible for its own choices, and thus seems preferable to Rav Tzadok's solution, and this solution is part and parcel of the Rav's overall powerful celebration of human freedom. But I think the costs of making our selves discontinuous are considerable, and the argument seems overstated - most simply, in Brisker terms, a

¹ I have noted elsewhere that it is actually a fundamental problem with mercy, but with regard to mercy there is at least the recognition that the lack of responsibility is undeserved.

baal teshuvah is not halakhically considered a newborn, nor must a baal teshuvah renounce credit for previous good deeds. Nor is it clear why those past misdeeds become virtues rather than merely disappearing.

I want to humbly suggest a different approach to teshuvah meiahavah, albeit one that owes much to both Rav Tzadok and the Rav.

A tenet of Jewish thought is that the world always contains within itself the seeds of redemption, but that there is no specific way in which redemption must occur. Every human choice forecloses some avenues of redemption, and makes others more accessible. This is true of both sinful and virtuous choices – one does not have to be a neocon to be aware of the law of unintended consequences.

Teshuvah meiahavah involves assuming responsibility for past misdeeds by finding the paths toward redemption inevitably, if accidentally, opened up by those choices. These include finding the ways in which you personally are capable of making better choices, of helping others, of having a deeper relationship with G-d – finding the place that you as a baal teshuvah can stand that goes beyond where you could have as an unblemished tzaddik.

Gemar chatimah tovah, and may we and all klal yisroel merit and achieve finding that place for ourselves.

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