BS”D

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Two Types of Teshuva

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

There is an argument in the Gemora (Yoma 86a) about performing the *vidui*, the confession, which is an intrinsic part of *teshuva* (repenting).

Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba says you should specify your sin as Moshe Rabeinu did when he said before G-d, “This people have done a great sin, they have made a god of gold,” referring to the golden calf.

Rabbi Akiva says that it is not necessary to specify the sin (that is, one can simply confess and say, “I have sinned,”) as the passage in Tehillim reads, “Happy is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered over.”

The Halachic ruling in this matter is not black and white. There are various other Talmudic passages which have to be taken into consideration in determining the Halacha. There is also discussion on whether Rabbi Akiva means you *need* not confess your sins in detail or you *should* not. There is also the issue of determining if the sages are arguing about private confession or public confession.

I am not going to go into these issues here. I’ll simply cite what the Shulchan Aruch and Rama say: (For a fuller understanding of the issues, see Tur, Beis Yosef, Beis Chadash, chapters 607.) “You don’t have to specify the sin; if you want to specify, you may do so; if you are confessing silently, it is proper to specify the sin.” The Rama adds, “If you are praying out loud, you should not specify the sin. (607:2)

I would like to discuss the spiritual issues behind specifying or not specifying one’s sin. First, however, I would like to cite another argument in the Gemora in Yoma (ibid).

The Beraita declares that if you confessed and repented for a sin on a previous Yom Kippur, you should not confess for the same sin (when you have not again committed it) on a later Yom Kippur. In fact, if you do, it’s compared to a dog eating its own vomit. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov says it *is* praiseworthy to confess again as it is written, “My sins are always before me.”

The Shulchan Aruch writes (607:4) that one may confess sins of previous years. (It’s interesting that although the Talmud says that it is praiseworthy, the Shulchan Aruch merely says that you may.)

There are two forms of teshuva mentioned in the Talmud: teshuva out of love and teshuva out of fear. When your repentance is out of love, your sins are transformed to Mitzvos. When it is out of fear, your sins of intent are considered unintentional. In Chassidus, the two forms of teshuva are referred to as the higher teshuva and the lower teshuva.

The lower teshuva means you regret your past actions, and you commit yourself to never repeating them. The higher teshuva means you totally realign your relationship with G-d. You feel distanced from Him by your act of disobedience. You seek to come closer to G-d, to cleave to Him, to be in a state of connectedness with Him. This type of teshuva is transformative. Your whole being is centered on your connection with G-d.

I suggest that the opinion that one need not confess each individual sin is talking about the higher teshuva experience. If teshuva is merely regret for past deeds, it is not a change in the person, just in his actions. Each action has to be considered separately. Each action has to be regretted and fixed. Thus, each sin must be included specifically in the vidui.

But if teshuva is being connected with G-d, then the details of the sins are not important. It is enough to acknowledge that you have sinned. You were far from G-d, you felt the anguish of that estrangement, and now you embrace G-d with your whole being. You don’t have to focus on this particular sin or that particular one. You are no longer distant from G-d. You, all of you, is cleaving to Him.

If your teshuva is not a total change, but rather a piece-by-piece fixing of your mistakes, you should repent for sins even of years past. Even if the year or many years have gone by and you have not repented, that sin is still something you may be tempted to do. So each Yom Kippur, you should catalog all your past failures and recommit yourself to avoiding them in the future.

But if your relationship to G-d has been transformed, your past sins don’t exist, so to speak. You are living a G-d-inspired life. Past sins are unthinkable to you. They’re no longer part of who you are. So you should not dredge them up from the past. They are gone, totally gone.

If we look at the two forms of teshuva and their Halachic ramifications as far as the nature of the vidui we say, we’ll probably find, at least for most of us, that we have not been totally transformed. So it is important for us to look at the details of our lives from the immediate past and from the more distant past and recommit ourselves to necessary improvement of our actions. We do specify each sin, think about it, and work on it.

Nevertheless, the higher ideal of teshuva is not totally beyond our grasp. We should seek moments of exhilaration and joy in G-d’s presence. We should pray in an inspired way. We should think, not only about deeds, but about G-d Himself and about what it means to be close to Him.

The more we do that, the more we see the big picture of teshuva and not only the details, the closer we come to a true transformation, to a teshuva out of love.