

Integrity and Complexity: Rav Aharon Lichtenstein on Teshuva

I. The Complexity of Religious Experience

1. Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting (1985)

[M]y personal experience over the last two decades has only reinforced an awareness of the spiritual significance of “the best that has been thought and said in the world.” For what is it that such culture offers us? In relation to art—profound expressions of the creative spirit, an awareness of structure and its interaction with substance and, consequently, the ability to organize and present ideas; in relation to life—the ability to understand, appreciate and confront our personal, communal and cosmic context, sensitivity to the human condition and some assistance in coping with it; in relation to both—a literary consciousness which enables us to transcend our own milieu and place it in a broader perspective. **Above all, culture instills in us a sense of the moral, psychological and metaphysical complexity of human life.**

A good friend of mine had a nephew who attended Harvard Business School. After he graduated, his uncle asked him: “Tell me, what did you learn?” He replied, “I learned that you can only make money with other people’s money.” The uncle’s response was, “If that’s the case, you got a good education.”

If I were pressed to encapsulate what I learned in graduate school, my answer would be: the complexity of experience. “The rest is commentary; go and study.” With respect to the whole range of points enumerated above, I say again that my life experience, in the States or in Eretz Yisrael, within the public or the private sphere, has only sharpened my awareness of the importance of these qualities.

II. The Context of Teshuva

2. The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering (1995)

Thus, **the Torah clearly places *teshuvah* in the context of crisis – not only in the intrinsic crisis of sin and consequent alienation from G-d but the external crisis that results therefrom.** In the wake of varied calamities – exile, dispersion, bondage – physical and spiritual repentance is anticipated and demanded: “And you shall seek from there the Lord your G-d, and you shall find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. When You in distress, and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, if you turn to the Lord your G-d, and are obedient to His voice” (Deuteronomy 4:29-30). **Yet obviously the obligation to repent is not conceived halakhically as a mode of responding to tribulation, and it is not confined to the disadvantaged.** Sin requires *teshuvah*, and affluence or poverty, robust or failing health, is irrelevant...

...From another perspective, however, *teshuvah*, as a phenomenon rather than qua *mitzvah*, has a wholly different effect. **It bears two primary aspects, recoil from and return to: “return from your evil ways” (Ezekiel 33:11), as opposed to “return, Israel, unto your G-d” (Hosea 14:2).** The first constitutes the “moral” element, broadly defined: the recognition of sin and its retrospective and prospective renunciation. The second is its “religious” component: the rehabilitation and restoration of one’s relation to G-d. The latter entails not only repentance but redemption. As a process that intensifies and deepens the individual’s link to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, it affects the whole of his being, having an impact, derivatively, upon his response to suffering as well.

2. Teshuva of Norm and of Crisis (2005)

[T]eshuva is normal, a routine part of our spiritual maintenance. Yet it is also normative, in both a timeless and a timely fashion. It is timeless in the sense that introspection is expected and demanded of a person simply as a function of his existence as a spiritual being, having been created in the image of G-d: “It would have been easier for man not to have been created, but now that he has been created, he should investigate his actions; some say he should examine his actions” (Eruvin 13b). It is also time-bound, varying with the temporal cycle; there is always a plateau of spiritual responsibility, and there are also peaks that require more than the normal fare...

If we ask ourselves about the character and range of *teshuva* as a norm, I think it would be fair to suggest that it bears a moral cast, rather than a religious one. **By this I mean that it focuses on the wrong that has been done, and not on the damage to one’s relationship with G-d...**Each sin requires its own *teshuva*, and each seems to be regarded in isolation, like an archipelago of islands, without looking at the totality...Normal or moral *teshuva*, while sincere, is often restrained, if not muted....

Crisis *teshuva* focuses less upon the sin that needs to be confronted and corrected, and more upon the ramifications of sin upon one’s relationship to G-d. In the terms I used earlier, it is more religious than moral. Consequently, it is described in teleological rather than corrective terms....In circumstances of genuine crisis, a person does not feel the need, or lacks the energy, to try to tinker with the details of corrective *teshuva*. He is desperately in need of an anchor. He feels himself catapulted into outer space, free floating, and in desperation and longing he looks to G-d and for G-d. Perhaps later there will be occasion to worry about the sins and the confession, but in the hour of crisis, at its most intense, he is less engaged by the moral, and more with the spiritual. When compared with normal *teshuva*, crisis *teshuva* is likely to be both more comprehensive and more intense...

We should not for a moment be drawn into deciding which form of *teshuva* is valid and which is not. With an eye towards the totality of our religious experience, delineating the contours of our service of G-d in its entirety, and with an eye to *Yom ha-kippurim* in particular, we shall categorically refuse to choose between them. On the contrary, we shall strive not only to maintain each of them independently, but **to attain integrated interaction...The power of *teshuva* is an integrated dual one: spiritual maintenance, focused upon correcting sin, and spiritual regeneration, stemming from spiritual crisis....***Yom ha-kippurim* is, in one respect, the day of forgiveness of sins...It is, at the same time, a day of regeneration, reconciliation and appeasement, even without reference to forgiveness of sins.

II. An Integrated Project of Teshuva

3. The Integrity of Teshuva (1997)

The term "integrity" has two possible meanings: the first denotes wholeness as opposed to fragmentation; the second has moral overtones, portraying a sense of honesty and total opposition to any form of falsehood. Our goal here will be to see if these two definitions can be interrelated in the context of *teshuva* (repentance). **Can *teshuva* be both true and limited, genuine yet partial? Can fragmented *teshuva* be subjectively sincere? In other words, can one repent for violating one commandment and not for another, yet still believe that both are the word of G-d? On an objective level, can we speak of G-d accepting such repentance?**

...This contrast is reflected in the Rambam's writings as well. He begins his *Hilkhot Teshuva* by saying that when a person transgresses "one" of the mitzvot in the Torah, he then has to recite viddui and thus fulfills a positive commandment. This *viddui* that is said over transgressing a particular commandment is described by Rambam as itself being specific; one must name the sin he committed. However, in chapter two of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, Rambam speaks of *teshuva* and Yom Kippur, and there the focus is once again on the general - "*Aval anachnu chatanu* - But we have sinned." There is no mention of particulars, but rather a simple seeking out of G-d when He is near...

The holistic or systemic *teshuva* of "*tit'haru*" makes sense because one cannot be "*tovel ve-sheretz beyado*," one cannot purify himself while still holding the very object that is the cause of his defilement. Rav Soloveitchik noted, in the name of the *Chavot Yair*, that the last line of Yoma, comparing G-d's purification of the sinner to that of a *mikveh* (ritual bath), is not as enthusiastic as it is usually made out to be. The Gemara first notes that Yom Kippur does not atone for sins committed between man and his fellow man. Then it concludes with Rabbi Akiva's statement of that the Jews are fortunate that they come to purify themselves before G-d Himself, and that He serves, as it were, as their *mikveh*. Why are these two lines juxtaposed? **The Rav answered that when G-d purifies the Jews, he does so acting as a *mikveh* - one cannot purify himself partially. If one has not yet cleansed himself of his sins against his fellow man, then not even G-d Himself can purify that individual. It is either all or nothing when it comes to one's relationship to G-d....**

If one aims for total *teshuva*, then, regardless of how slowly his *teshuva* progresses, he can feel confident that his *teshuva* will purify him of sin. However, if one repents in some respects, yet is unperturbed about his failure to do so in other areas, then his *teshuva* is sorely lacking. "*Ve-hitvadu*" without an eye towards "*tit'haru*" cannot work. Yet if the ultimate goal of total purification is kept in sight, then even a "partial" *teshuva* can be made to work, and can help an individual along the path to complete repentance.

4. *Love and Hate That are Not Baseless* (2008)

We see, then, that fast days were instituted for the purpose of introspection. What should we examine on a fast day? There are three layers to this examination. First and foremost, there should be an examination of deeds — “This will serve as a reminder of our wicked conduct and that of our ancestors.” There is a second layer, that of introspection and soul searching. On a certain level, introspection relates to a person’s conduct — what he should have done, and what not. But introspection involves not only an examination of the deed, but also of the doer, of his soul. The Rambam speaks of this layer in the passage in *Hilkhot Teshuva* cited above — those evil character traits that dull the soul and destroy every good part of it. There is, however, also a third layer. **In addition to the expression in deed of these negative inclinations, and the negative qualities in themselves, one should examine the roots of these traits and actions.** What made this possible? From where does the baseless hatred come? We are not dealing with an examination that contents itself with the surface levels, which are more comfortable to deal with. We are dealing with a fundamental examination of the deepest roots of one’s soul. Even the soul has a subterranean layer, from whence comes the drive to sin and perversity.

III. Teshuva and Religious Passion

5. Teshuva: Repentance and Return (1987)

As a result of sin, the personal relationship between man and G-d has been fractured, if not ruptured. It has been fractured because, in sinning, man himself is corrupted, spiritually corroded, and hence less worthy and less capable of having a relationship with G-d. It has been fractured because the sin itself, apart from the evil inherent within it, is an affront to G-d. Hence, whatever relationship a person had enjoyed with G-d is adversely affected by sin. Thus, **teshuva becomes not only a process whereby a person, recognizing sin and dissociating himself from it, goes on to purify and purge himself of the negative influence of sin, but, beyond that, also a process of reconciliation, of rebuilding bridges to G-d**, of removing barriers which sin has established between the sinner and G-d...

There is, however, an alternative form of teshuva, one which is not related directly to sin, not an outgrowth of evil, but rather one which takes place within a religious and spiritual vacuum. It occurs not in the context of one's relation to G-d, but rather within the context of a lack of relation to G-d. In fact, this type of teshuva grows out of one's perception of that lack.

Within this track, a person is neither separated from G-d by a barrier constructed of sins, nor does he cleave to G-d. He is simply dissociated. He is not engaged in agonized, interlocking combat with G-d, nor does he wrestle with his conscience; rather, he is oblivious and insensitive to the presence of G-d.

That being the case, his *teshuva* bears a very different character. It is not *teshuva* in relation to sin, but *teshuva* in response to a life which is insensitive to sin. G-d and one's relation to Him are not the focal point of one's life, at the epicenter of his being, but are at most a kind of peripheral presence, a set of parameters defining one's being...

The *viddui* contains two kinds of confessions. There are those which are themselves sins, and others which are not inherently sins, but are either areas of experience or activity within which the sin takes place, or a kind of quality or mind-set which attends upon the sin. **“Bi-veli da'at” can be understood in two ways. Some, perhaps most, would be inclined to understand it in the second sense: it is that which enables us to be sinners. We were not sufficiently heedful, and as a result a particular sin ensued. But some have understood “bi-veli da'at” as being itself a sin. A certain mindlessness is a failing inasmuch as we do not then fully realize the tzelem E-lokim (image of G-d) within us...**

6. Mediocre Teshuva and the Teshuva of the Mediocre (2003)

The third element of complete *teshuva*, in addition to initiative and attitude, is the element of aspiration. For what does one yearn? What is one's vision? What does one dream about in bed at night and in the course of his daily activity? **Teshuva can be truly mediocre if it is devoid of aspiration.** Such *teshuva* lacks vision: One might search and examine himself, perhaps with the proper motivation as well; but it is not part of any grand vision or continuous process. His acts of *teshuva* are a series of islands – a whole archipelago, perhaps – but there is no yearning, and that is what makes his *teshuva* mediocre. **So much of teshuva is about yearning. Yearning is both the terminus a quo and the terminus ad quem of teshuva, both its point of departure and its destination.**

Teshuva has two fundamental channels: the moral and the religious. These two channels can be seen in the linguistic presentation of *teshuva* in our traditional texts as being “*teshuva* from” or “*teshuva* to.” **The moral channel is the impetus to respond to sin and evil in their broadest sense and to rid oneself of them.** This is “*teshuva* from,” where one wants to get away from a negative place or situation, as in, “Turn back, turn back from your evil ways” (Yechezkel 33:11). Similarly, the

Rambam's introductory title for his *Hilkhot Teshuva* reads, "That a sinner should repent from his sin." There is a recoil, a revulsion from sin and from evil in all shapes and forms. However, this recoil has a positive side to it as well. It is a desire to get away from being soiled by sin and to achieve a life of purity and perfection, in which one has left behind his "evil ways" and has assumed a new lifestyle and possibly a new identity. **That is the *teshuva* of the first two chapters of *Hilkhot Teshuva* and of many verses in the Tanakh.** This moral *teshuva* is not satisfied with simply cleaning one's hands of sin and leaving it at that. It must also be conjoined by a desire and a vision to attain spiritual good, purity and integrity. **There is also the religious channel of *teshuva*, not to be pulled "from" something, to get away, but to be drawn "to" something or Someone – "el Hashem" or "ad Hashem,"** as in, "Come, let us turn back to the Lord" (Hosea 6:1).

Both channels, the moral and the religious, include the element of aspiration that is critical to complete *teshuva*, albeit perhaps in different proportions. If one wants to repair his relationship with G-d and, once more, enjoy His favor and His grace, have access to Him and feel close to Him, **his *teshuva* must contain the aspiration of purity, in both moral and religious terms.** This element of aspiration, like the elements of initiative and attitude, is wholly endemic to, wholly accessible to, and ultimately, it is hoped, thoroughly characteristic of the *teshuva* of the mediocre. **Even the most mediocre spiritual pilgrim can and must transcend the bounds of his mediocrity and attain previously unscaled heights, possibly allowing him to develop a fresh identity in the process.**

7. *Teshuva and Joy* (2007)

So we find happiness in the *teshuva*, irrespective of the benefits it confers as its result. There is no greater benefit than standing before Hashem. C. S. Lewis said that the message of the British Idealists (19th century Britain) is that it is more important that heaven exists than that we get there. **I will emend that slightly: it is more important that we have the experience of *teshuva* than it is to reap its benefits.** Obviously, we want the benefits, and we do our share and hope that *ke-vayachol* Hashem will do His. But the more important part is that we have the ability to stand before Hashem and ask for repentance.

8. *Changing Paths, not Just Deeds* (2000)

QUESTION:

From the beginning of Elul until Yom Kippur, when *teshuva* (repentance) "is most becoming and is accepted immediately" (Rambam, *Hilkhot teshuva* 2:6), every individual is required to examine his actions and to repent for any sins that he may have committed. In listing the laws of *teshuva*, the Rambam divides the *teshuva* process into four parts: abandonment of the sin, confession, regret, and a **resolution for the future** (2:2).

But as we examine our ways and seek to return to our Maker, doubt and despair start to overcome us: Was it not exactly a year ago, as we examined our deeds at the end of last year, that we confessed exactly the same sins, resolving not to repeat them? **And now only a year has passed, we discover that we have transgressed in the same areas,** and we have to accept upon ourselves not to transgress again in the future...

ANSWER:

In listing the stages of the process of *teshuva*, the Rambam describes the stage of resolution for the future as follows: "And He Who knows all secrets can testify concerning him that he will never again

repeat THIS SIN" (2:2). What is the meaning of the expression, "this sin"? Is the Rambam referring to the sin that the person committed – in which case the person will be considered as having performed *teshuva* even if he continues in all his evil ways, but abandons that one specific sin that he has confessed? I learned from Rav Soloveitchik zt"l that this is not the case. The key to understanding this is an understanding of the two aspects of the process of *teshuva*.

The Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuva* is divided into two parts: in chapters 1-6 he discusses a person who recognizes the sin that he has committed, and decides to perform *teshuva*. From chapter 7 onwards, the Rambam deals with a different type of *teshuva*: a person recognizes that his WAYS are evil, not just his deeds, and he seeks to change himself.

The first type of *teshuva* has a clear aim, and if a person does not transgress that sin again then he has attained his goal. By contrast, the second type of *teshuva* is a life-long mission. It has no endpoint; it guides a person's path throughout his life, "until he dies as a penitent and merits life in the World-to-Come" (7:1).

9. *The Principle of Choice and the Principle of Teshuva* (1992)

In *parashat Naso* we are told, "A man or woman who commits any mortal transgression to sin against G-d, such that that person will be guilty, then they must confess their sin which they did and make full restitution for their sin" (*Bamidbar* 5:5-7). Earlier in *Sefer Devarim*, too, in *parashat Va'etchanan*, we learn: "And you shall return unto the Lord your G-d, and you shall listen to His voice." (*Devarim* 4:30)...

...Since the background to *teshuva* is different in these cases, the process, too, is different. **For the person who sinned in one particular instance, it is sufficient to perform a "technical" *teshuva* consisting of *viddui* (confession) and a sin-offering, after which he is considered to have atoned for his sin. In *Sefer Devarim*, which deals with the person who is - as a general state of affairs - distanced and cut off from G-d, a complete change of personality is required, penetrating his heart and innermost character: "And you shall take it to heart..." (30:1).** Furthermore, because he is removed, he is obligated to return: "And you shall return to the Lord your G-d" (4:30). The effort required of him is also greater: "You shall find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (4:29), "and you shall return unto the Lord your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul" (30:2).

The ramifications and reaction on G-d's part are also different. A person who is so far removed from G-d needs assistance from Above: "From there the Lord your G-d will gather you up, and from there will He take you" (30:4); "and the Lord your G-d will circumcise your hearts..." (30:6). And finally, the happy tidings of *teshuva* and redemption together: "And the Lord your G-d will return your captivity and will have mercy on you, and He shall gather you up again from all the nations among which the Lord your G-d scattered you."

IV. *The Complexity of Teshuva and Maintaining Balance*

10. *A Pure Heart: Refining Character and Balancing Values* (2002)

A very focused procedure of *teshuva*, as in the first two chapters, needs to have an object to which it relates, and that object must be a particular sin. By contrast, in building a personality, we focus not only on one's literal obedience to the *Shulchan Arukh*, but, in the broader sense, on the extent to which he forms himself in line with what *tzelem Elokim* (the image of G-d) should be. That may entail many factors which are of great significance to the religious life, but not necessarily classified, narrowly

speaking, in particular halakhic categories.

The interplay between the earlier chapters and Chapter Seven highlights one aspect of the total religious balance we seek. One certainly must relate to every jot and tittle of formal Halakha, and beyond this, also to moral qualities. Today we speak of a person as being a *ba'al teshuva* (penitent) when he first led a life of sin and lacked commitment, and then decided to serve G-d. **In Chapter Seven, the Rambam speaks of people who already serve G-d, and says that each person must attempt to be a *ba'al teshuva*, in the sense that he endeavors to remove himself from sin and to maximize his potential.** This is a process, an effort, a direction: “he should try to perform *teshuva*” (7:1). *Teshuva* is not just a response to particular sins, but a lifelong enterprise of building oneself, and therefore everyone should think of himself as a *ba'al teshuva*...

...We are challenged, personally and communally, to strive for balance, to strive for comprehensiveness and particularly for the balance between the inner and the outer that is so critical to the character and content of Halakha. We are challenged to be honest with ourselves and to ask not only what particular sins we should repent, but also, looking at the broader picture which the Rambam paints, what is our particular area of need, what needs to be strengthened and emphasized.

A person's spiritual accounting should include a focus both on the overarching challenges of the first two chapters of *Hilkhot Teshuva* and on the more personalized challenge of Chapter Seven. To what extent are we tainted in one respect or another? What kind of balance do we need to strike between Chapter Seven and the first two chapters? This, too, differs from one person to another.

In one respect, *teshuva* is uniform, and in other respects, in terms of substantive content and emphasis, it is diverse. The challenge of *teshuva* is not only to be attentive and responsive to its demand, but also to be honest and sensitive in one's self-evaluation— to try to understand how the mitzvah of *teshuva* needs to be tailored for you personally within your particular context.

11. "Kalot and Chamurot": Gradation of Sin in Repentance (2001)

The Rambam's presentation here is comprehensive and undifferentiated. He makes a sweeping statement about "all the precepts in the Torah, positive commands or negative ones." There is no hint of weighing the significance or substance of a particular sin. **The process is more or less uniform, the formulation identical**, except for the fact that a person must mention exactly what he has done – slandered someone, shaved with a razor, lent with interest, etc...

...According to Rabbeinu Yona, it is important to distinguish between gradations of sin for a number of reasons. First, this is necessary in order that the requisite repentance be commensurate with the misdeed. Second, it is required so that the sense of guilt and shame - two different yet interactive responses - be of the proper dimensions.

Clearly, Rabbeinu Yona's presentation differs substantially from the Rambam's. Although in *Hilkhot Teshuva* 1:1, quoted above, the Rambam speaks not of the stages of *teshuva*, but rather of the viddui (confession) that comes at its end, his discussion of the stages of *teshuva* in chapter 2 does not highlight the need for inquiry into the different levels or grades of sin. Rabbeinu Yona, on the other hand, devotes the third section of his book to a very detailed catalogue of different levels of sin, listed in ascending order.

In terms of our own experience, goals and directions, we ought to assume, like the Rambam, that there is a uniform sense of *teshuva*, or, like Rabbeinu Yona, that differentiation is critical in order to undergo *teshuva* properly? If the latter, what kind of differentiation do we have in mind, and what kind

of categories can we think of?

... Coming back to our original question of Rambam's approach vs. R. Yona's, are we to think of sin as a uniform phenomenon, or are we to differentiate and classify both categories and circumstances of sin? This question applies to *avodat Hashem* generally and *teshuva* particularly. **I think the answer is clear: we need both Rambam's formulation and R. Yona's...**

...We reject totally the view that when one pursues the overarching relationship and the quest for intimacy and rehabilitation, all of the minutiae simply disappear into insignificance. On the other hand, we also reject the view that only the specific actions and details - weighted, graded, comprehended properly - will suffice. We do not - we dare not - focus exclusively on one of these two pillars. Our world is built in a multi-faceted and multi-planed way by relating to and integrating both aspects. The ability to relate to G-d is the most fundamental and basic aspect of human existence, and also its overarching, ultimate, beatific attainment. At the same time, the attention to detail, to every *se'if katan*, and the ability to integrate the poetry and the prose of *avodat Hashem*, is central to our conception and our experience.