***Confession: The Pyschological War Against Sin***

Rabbi Sammy Bergman- sbergman@torontotorah.com

**The Requirement of Confession**

1. **Rabbi Moses Maimonides (12th century Egypt), Laws of *Teshuvah* 1:1, 2:2 tr. by Simon Glazer**

כָּל מִצְוֹת שֶׁבַּתּוֹרָה בֵּין עֲשֵׂה בֵּין לֹא תַּעֲשֶׂה אִם עָבַר אָדָם עַל אַחַת מֵהֶן בֵּין בְּזָדוֹן בֵּין בִּשְׁגָגָה כְּשֶׁיַּעֲשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה וְיָשׁוּב מֵחֶטְאוֹ **חַיָּב לְהִתְוַדּוֹת לִפְנֵי הָקל בָּרוּךְ הוּא שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר** ([במדבר ה:ו)](/Numbers.5.6)  "אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה כִּי יַעֲשּׂו" וְגו' ([במדבר ה:ז)](/Numbers.5.7)  "וְהִתְוַדּוּ אֶת חַטָּאתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ" זֶה וִדּוּי דְּבָרִים. וִדּוּי זֶה מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה. כֵּיצַד מִתְוַדִּין. אוֹמֵר אָנָּא הַשֵּׁם חָטָאתִי עָוִיתִי פָּשַׁעְתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ וְעָשִׂיתִי כָּךְ וְכָךְ וַהֲרֵי נִחַמְתִּי וּבֹשְׁתִּי בְּמַעֲשַׂי וּלְעוֹלָם אֵינִי חוֹזֵר לְדָבָר זֶה. וְזֶהוּ עִקָּרוֹ שֶׁל וִדּוּי.

All commandments of the Torah, whether they be mandatory or prohibitive, if a man violates any one of them, either presumptuously or erroneously, when he will repent himself and turn away from his sinful way, he is obliged to confess before God, blessed is He! even as it is said: "When a man or woman shall commit any sin..… Then they shall confess their sin which they have done ([Num. 5.6–7](/Numbers.5.6-7)), which is a confession of words. Such confession is a mandatory commandment. How is the verbal confession made? The sinner says thus: "I beseech Thee, O Great Name! I have sinned; I have been obstinate; I have committed profanity against Thee, particularly in doing thus and such. Now, behold! I have repented and am ashamed of my actions; forever will I not relapse into this thing again." This is the elementary form of confession

וּמַה הִיא הַתְּשׁוּבָה. הוּא שֶׁיַּעֲזֹב הַחוֹטֵא חֶטְאוֹ וִיסִירוֹ מִמַּחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ וְיִגְמֹר בְּלִבּוֹ שֶׁלֹּא יַעֲשֵׂהוּ עוֹד שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר )[ישעיה נה ז](/Isaiah.55.7) "(יַעֲזֹב רָשָׁע דַּרְכּוֹ" וְגוֹ'. וְכֵן יִתְנַחֵם עַל שֶׁעָבַר שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר ([ירמיה לא יט)](/Jeremiah.31.19) "כִּי אַחֲרֵי שׁוּבִי נִחַמְתִּי". **וְיָעִיד עָלָיו יוֹדֵעַ תַּעֲלוּמוֹת שֶׁלֹּא יָשׁוּב לְזֶה הַחֵטְא לְעוֹלָם** שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר ([הושע יד ד)](/Hosea.14.4)  "וְלֹא נֹאמַר עוֹד אֱלֹקינוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ" וְגוֹ'. **וְצָרִיךְ לְהִתְוַדּוֹת בִּשְׂפָתָיו וְלוֹמַר עִנְיָנוֹת אֵלּוּ שֶׁגָּמַר בְּלִבּוֹ:**

What is repentance? The sinner shall cease sinning, and remove sin from his thoughts, and wholeheartedly conclude not to revert back to it, even as it is said: "Let the wicked forsake his way" ([Is. 55.7](/Isaiah.55.7)); so, too, shall he be remorseful on what was past, even as it is said: "Surely after that I was turned, I repented" ([Jer. 31. 19](/Jeremiah.31.19)). In addition thereto he should take to witness Him Who knoweth all secrets that forever he will not turn to repeat that sin again, according to what it is said: "Say unto Him.… neither will we call any more the work of our hands our gods" ([Hos. 14.3–4](/Hosea.14.3-4)). It is, moreover, essential that his confession shall be by spoken words of his lips, and all that which he concluded in his heart shall be formed in speech.

**A Cognitive Perspective: Facing the Reality**

1. **Christine Blint, Does Confessing Secrets Improve Our Mental Health? Scientific American Mind March 2016**

**https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/does-confessing-secrets-improve-our-mental-health/**

First, simply putting emotional turmoil into words changes how we think about it. Giving concrete form to secret experiences can help categorize them in new ways. For instance, when we translate emotional experiences into words and stories, we start to think about them in a simpler, less menacing context. There is no solid evidence to explain this phenomenon, but it most likely occurs because talking or writing about a disturbing event helps us understand it better. And things we do not understand cause greater anxiety.

Another possible explanation is that once we write about our upheavals, we tend to ruminate about them less, freeing us up to focus on other things. My colleagues and I have shown that people become more socially engaged in the weeks immediately following expressive writing exercises.

Dozens of studies have also shown that expressive writing is linked to less stress and improved sleep and cardiovascular function. We know that better sleep is associated with enhanced immune function and better general health—which correlate with better mental health, too.

1. **On Repentance in the Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *edited bPinhas Peli.***

[***https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-dimensions-of-repentance/***](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-dimensions-of-repentance/)

As we have already explained on several occasions, repentance is not a sudden occurrence. It does not begin at nightfall of the eve of the Day of Atonement, just moments before the recitation of confession. Repentance sprouts forth and grows in the course of a long and drawn‑out process typified by doubt and speculation, soul-searching and spiritual reckoning. First comes the inner stirring which generates actual repentance. A great gap often intercedes between the idea and the act, for crystallized thinking is the end product of intuitive, undefined thoughts. They take hold of one in the darkness of the night, they emerge from the innermost recesses of the secret self, and man tries to fend off some of them and hide them from himself, not to mention, from others. The road that leads from these first stirrings until the actual contemplation of repentance is long, indeed and even then, after the rational idea is clearly formed in thought, it must be reborn and translated into action.

To do this necessarily entails expressing the thought of repentance in words, and working it out in logical terms. Pure thought on its own, no matter how exact and penetrating, is simply not grasped until it is formed into words. We know many truths about ourselves that we do not dare to express in public, and even avoid saying them to ourselves. It is not easy to give expression to our thoughts–all the more so when these thoughts are unflattering–but without doing so no act of confession can take place. Indeed, confession is no simple matter. Were it an easy thing to confess, the Torah would not have demanded it of us, for what need is there for a commandment to do something that requires no effort? And if Maimonides made a point of stressing the requirement of doing confession, that alone is a sign that it is only achieved with difficulty.

Confession is not something that comes about suddenly, and it is certainly not the mechanical recitation of a set formula–it is, rather, part and parcel of repentance, the climactic finale of a drawn‑out, exhausting process. And just as repentance cannot be considered complete until it has brought man to confess, so too, confession is not valid unless it bursts forth from within the fiery depths of the furnace of repentance.

**Taking Back Power and Responsibility**

1. **Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (20th century Israel), Orot HaTeshuvah 16:1**

אחד מהיסודות של התשובה, במחשבתו של האדם, הוא הכרת האחריות של האדם על מעשיו, שבא מתוך אמונת הבחירה החפשית של האדם. וזהו גם כן תוכן הוידוי המחובר עם מצות התשובה שמודה האדם שאין שום ענין אחד, שיש להאשימו על החטא ותוצאותיו, כי-אם אותו בעצמו. ובזה הוא מברר לעצמו את חופש רצונו ועוצם יכלתו על סדרי חייו ומעשיו, ומתוך כך הוא מפנה לפניו את הדרך לשוב אל ד', לחדש את חייו בסדר הטוב.

One of the foundations of Teshuvah, in the thought of a person, is the recognition of a person’s responsibility for his deeds, which comes from the belief in free choice. And this is also the content of the confession connected with the commandment of the Teshuvah, that the person admits that there is no other matter, that should be blamed for the sin and its consequences, but themself. And in this he clarifies for himself the freedom of his will and the power of his control over the order of his life and deeds, and from this he clears before him the way to return to God, to renew his life in good order.

1. **Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (16th century Amsterdam), Mesilat Yesharim Chapter 4, tr. Rabbi Yosef Sebag)**

ושהתשובה תנתן לחוטאים בחסד גמור, שתחשב עקירת הרצון כעקירת המעשה. דהיינו, שבהיות השב מכיר את חטאו ומודה בו ומתבונן על רעתו ושב ומתחרט עליו חרטה גמורה דמעיקרא כחרטת הנדר ממש שהוא מתנחם לגמרי והיה חפץ ומשתוקק שמעולם לא היה נעשה הדבר ההוא ומצטער בלבו צער חזק על שכבר נעשה הדבר ועוזב אותו להבא ובורח ממנו, הנה עקירת הדבר מרצונו, יחשב לו כעקירת הנדר ומתכפר לו.

That the opportunity of repentance be granted to sinners as a complete kindness, so that the uprooting of the will be counted as the uprooting of the deed. Thus when the penitent man recognizes his sin and admits it, and reflects on his evil, repents of it and completely regrets ever having done it, as he would regret [in annulling] a certain vow, in which case there is complete regret, and he desires and longs that this deed had never been committed, and pains himself strongly that the matter was done, and renounces it for the future, and flees from it - then the uprooting of the deed from his will is counted to him as the annulment of a vow and he gains atonement for it.

1. **Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (20th century New York), Pachad Yitzchak on Yom Kippur 34**

ואם אנו אומרים שבעולם התשובה תופסים את עקירת הרצון כעקירת המעשה פירוש הדברים שבעולם התשובה אנו מרוממים את המעשים לשרשם. והסתכלות זו על האדם כאילו היו כל המעשים שלו כלולים ברצונו, ונגררים אחר רצונו בהחלט- היא היא הסתכלות השולטת בעולם התשובה. עולם התשובה הוא אותו עולם, אשר בו האדם נראה באספקלריא של השרשריות שבאדם. פרצוף אדם עומד שם בציור השרשים שלו. עולם התשובה הוא הוא עולם של השרשים. אותו השער, שעל ידו נכנסים לעולם השרשים, קרוי הוא בפי חז"ל: שערי תשובה. כל בעל תשובה המשתוקק לעקור את מעשיו על ידי חרטה וקבלה, שהם עוקרים את שורש מעשיו, בעל כרחו שהוא נזקק לאותו עולם שבו האדם נראה בסגולת השרשיות שבו. ובהיותי נזקק לשנות מקומו מעולם הענפים אל עולם השרשים, הרי הוא מוכרח לדפוק בשער העולם שהוא רוצה להכנס לתוכו וכשתשובתו מתקבלת אז מתגלית היא ההנהגה של הפותח שער לדופקי בתשובה.

And if we say that in the world of Teshuvah we perceive the uprooting of the will as the uprooting of the act, it means that in the world of Teshuvah we elevate the deeds to their root. And this perspective of man, as if all his deeds were encompassed by his will, and contingent contingent upon his will certainly this is the perspective that governs the world of Teshuvah. The world of Teshuvah is the same world in which man is seen in the lens of essence. The world of Teshuvah is the world of essence. The gate, by which one enters the world of essence, is called by the sages: gates of Teshuvah. Any person engaged in Teshuvah who yearns to uproot his actions through regret and commitment, which uproot the origin of his actions, is compelled to change his place from the world of branches to the world of roots, he must knock on the gate of the world he wants to enter and when his Teshuvah is received then the modality of “the one who opens a gate to those who knock in repentance” is revealed.

1. **Rabbi Yonah Gerondi (13th century Spain), Shaarei Teshuvah 1:19, tr. Rabbi Francis Nataf**

העיקר הי"ט עזיבת חטאו בהזדמן לו והוא בתוקף תאותו. ואמרו רבותינו זכרונם לברכה איזהו בע"ת אשר תשובתו מגעת עד כסא הכבוד. כאשר נבחן ויצא נקי באותו פרק ובאותו מקום ובאותה אשה. רצונו לומר - כי הזדמן החטא לידו והוא בתוקף יצרו ואונו בשרירי בטנו כעת הראשון אשר חטא. וכבש יצרו. ונמלט מעון מיראת השם וגאון פחדו. ומי שלא נזדמן לידו בענין הזה. יוסיף בנפשו יראת השם דבר יום ביומו. ככה כל הימים. וכאשר יחליף כח היראה די כבוש בכח הזה את יצרו ומסת משלו בעוצם התאוה. הלא בוחן לבות הוא יבין ונוצר נפשו הוא ידע. כי אם יבא לידי נסיון ויגע לידו כענין הראשון. יציל את נפשו מיד יצרו. והנה הוא לפני ה' במדרגה העליונה מן התשובה.

The nineteenth principle is leaving the sin when it chances upon him and he is still at the height of his desire. And our Rabbis, may their memory be blessed, said ([Yoma 86b](/Yoma.86b)), "Who is the penitent whose repentance reaches the Throne of Glory? When he is tested and comes out clean at the same time in the same place and with the same woman." [This is] meaning to say, when the sin avails itself to him, he is at the height of his impulse and his might is in the muscles of his belly like the first moment when he sinned; but he conquered his impulse and escaped from the iniquity due to his fear of God and the greatness of his fright. But for the one to whom it has not availed itself in this manner, he should augment his fear of God on a daily basis all of his days. And when he has reinvigorated the strength of his fear enough to conquer his impulse with this strength and his power over the power of the desire - does not the Examiner of hearts understand and the Fashioner of his soul know that if a test would come to him and it be like the first [situation], that he would save himself from his impulse? So behold that in front of God he is on the highest level of repentance.

1. **Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (20th Century New York), Pachad Yitzchak Yom Kippur 35**

מפני שעיקר פעולתו של הוידוי הוא הגלוי...כי בזמן שהחטא יוצא מן ההעלם שבלב על הגילוי שבפה, אז יוצא המאמר "סלחתי" מן הפה, לפיהם של תעלומות הלב.

For the main effect of confession is revelation…at the time in which the sin goes out from the concealment of the heart to the revelation of the mouth, then the statement of “I have forgiven”, leaves the mouth, based on the testimony of the depths of the heart.