

חובות הלבבות • שער התשובה • פרק שלישי

Sentence by Sentence • Punctuated Hebrew with Translation and Notes • Navy & Gold Edition

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In Shaar HaTeshuvah, Chapter Three, Rabbeinu Bachya lays out the essential foundations for genuine teshuvah. He explains that before one can truly repent, there are seven crucial understandings a person must internalize. These prerequisites ensure that the repentance is not superficial but stems from a deep awareness and sincere desire to return to Hashem.

This chapter guides us through these seven vital insights, from recognizing the disgracefulness of sin and its severe consequences, to understanding the efficacy of teshuvah itself. It emphasizes the importance of spiritual accounting and the firm resolve needed to abandon past transgressions, preparing the heart and mind for a complete return.

All introductions, summaries, and contextual notes are the editor's commentary and are not part of the original text.

אבל במה תהיה התשובה מהאדם? אימר בזה, כי תתכן לו אחר הקדמת ידיעתו בשבעה דברים.

But what does a person need to do to make his teshuvah effective? I will say on this, that it can be effective for him only after he first understands seven things.

הראשון: שידע גנות מעשהו ידיעה ברורה, כי אם לא יתברר לו זה, ויהיה מסתפק או שוגג בלתי מיד, לא תתכן החרטה ממנו עליו ובקשת המחילה בו, כמו שכתוב (תהלים נא): "כי פשעי אני אדע וחטאתי נגדי תמיד."

The first is that he must clearly understand the disgracefulness of his action, for if this is not clear to him, and he is in doubt or acts unintentionally rather than deliberately, it will not be possible for him to regret it and seek forgiveness for it, as it is written (Tehillim 51): "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me."

NOTE The Chovos HaLevavos distinguishes between a 'shogeg' (unintentional sin) and a 'meizid' (deliberate sin). True teshuvah requires recognizing the deliberate nature and disgrace of one's actions.

והשני: שידע בחיוב רע מעשהו וגנותו, כי אם לא יתברר אצלו כי מעשהו רע ומפעלו אינו טוב, לא יתחרט עליו ולא יקבל תנאי התשובה ממנו, ודינו בו כדין השוגג, ואמתלאתו רחבה, כמ"ש (שם יט): "שגיאות מי יבין וגו'."

The second is that he must understand the severity of his evil deed and its disgrace, for if it is not clear to him that his action is bad and his conduct is not good, he will not regret it and will not accept the conditions of teshuvah for it. His judgment regarding it will be like that of one who sinned unintentionally, and his excuse will be broad, as it is written (Tehillim 19): "Who can discern errors?"

והשלישי: שידע בחיוב הגמול על מעשהו, כי אם לא ידע זה, אין צורך מביאו אל החרטה עליו. וכשיתברר אצלו כי הוא ענוש עליו, יתחרט אחר כך ויבקש המחילה, כמו שכתוב (ירמיה לא): "כי אחרי שובי נחמתי וגו'", ואמר (תהלים קיט): "סמר מפחדך בשרי וגו'".

The third is that he must know the obligation of retribution for his action, for if he does not know this, no necessity will bring him to regret it. But when it becomes clear to him that he will be punished for it, he will then regret it and seek forgiveness, as it is written (Yirmiyahu 31): "For after my return I have completely changed my mind, etc.," and it says (Tehillim 119): "My flesh bristles from fright of You, etc."

והרביעי: שידע שהוא שמור עליו ונכתב בספר עונותיו, ולא יעבר עליו העלם ולא שכחה ולא הנחה, כמ"ש (דברים לב): "הלוא הוא כמס עמדי חתם באזרחתי", ואמר (איוב לו): "ביד כל אדם יחתום וגו'", כי אם יחשב כי הוא מפקר ואיננו שמור עליו, לא יתחרט ולא יבקש המחילה בו מפני אחר ענוש עליו, כמ"ש (קהלת ח): "אשר אין נעשה פתגם מעשה הרעה מהרה על כן מלא לב בני האדם בהם לעשות רע."

The fourth is that he must know that his sin is preserved and recorded in the book of his transgressions, and it will not be neglected, forgotten, or overlooked, as it is written (Devarim 32): "Is it not laid up in store with Me, sealed up among My treasures?" And it says (Iyov 37): "By the hand of every man He seals, etc." For if one thinks that it is abandoned and not preserved against him, he will not regret it and will not seek forgiveness for it, due to the delay in his punishment, as it is written (Koheles 8): "Because the sentence of an evil deed is not executed swiftly; therefore, the hearts of men are fully set in them to do evil."

והחמישי: שידע אמת כי התשובה אפן רפואת מדהו וחדרה אל הארוכה מרע מעשהו וגנות מפעלו, ושבה יתקן טעותו וישיב אבדתו, כי אם לא יתברר אצלו זה, יתיאש מכפרת הבורא יתברך ומרחמיו, ולא יבקש ממנו המחילה על מה שקדם לו מרע מפעלו, כמ"ש (יחזקאל לג): "אמרתם לאמר כי פשעינו וחסאתינו עלינו ובם אנחנו נמקים ואיה נחיה", והיתה התשובה על זה מהבורא על ידי גביאו: "חי אני נאם ה' אלהים אם אחפץ במות הרשע וגו'".

The fifth is that he must truly know that teshuvah is the remedy for his illness and the path to recovery from his evil deed and disgraceful conduct, and that through it he will correct his error and recover what he had lost. For if this is not clear to him, he will despair of receiving the Creator's atonement and mercies, and he will not seek forgiveness from Him for his past wicked actions, as it is written (Yechezkel 33): "So have you spoken, saying: 'For our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and because of them we are melting away, so how should we then live?'" And the Creator's response to this, through His prophet, was: "As I live, says Hashem Elokim, I do not wish for the death of the wicked, etc."

והששי: שיחשב עם נפשו כמה שקדם לבורא עליו מן הטובות, ומה שקדם לו מהמרות תמורת ההודאה עליהן, ושישקל ענשי העברה עם ערבותה, וערבות גמול הצדקה עם צערה בעוה"ז ובעוה"ב, כמו שאמרו רבותינו ז"ל: "הוי מחשב הפסד מצוה כנגד שכרה ושכר עברה כנגד הפסדה."

The sixth is that he must make a spiritual accounting with himself regarding the kindnesses the Creator has already bestowed upon him, and how he rebelled against Him instead of being grateful for them. He should weigh the punishment of the sin against its temporary pleasure, and the sweet reward of good deeds against the suffering involved in doing them, both in this world and the World to Come, as our Sages of blessed memory said: "Consider the loss incurred by a mitzvah against its reward, and the gain from a sin against the loss it entails."

וְהִשְׁבִּיעִי: חֵזֶק סָבְלוּ לְהִמָּנַע מִן הָרָע אֲשֶׁר הָרְגִיל בּוֹ, וְהִסְכֵּמְתוּ לְסוּר מִמֶּנּוּ בְּלִבּוֹ וּבִמְצַפּוֹנוֹ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב (יואל ב'): "וְקָרְעוּ לְבָבְכֶם וְאֵל בְּגָדֵיכֶם."

The seventh is the strength of his endurance to refrain from the evil he had become accustomed to, and his firm resolve to turn away from it, both in his heart and in his conscience, as it is written (Yael 2): "And tear your hearts, and not your garments."

וּבְהִתְקַדֵּם בְּרוּר אֵלּוּ הַשְׁבָּעָה דְּבָרִים בְּדַעַת הַחוּטָא, תִּתְּכֵן מִמֶּנּוּ הַתְּשׁוּבָה מְעֻנְתִּיו.

And when these seven things are clearly established in the mind of the sinner, then teshuvah for his transgressions can be effective for him.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM IT

Rabbeinu Bachya teaches that effective teshuvah requires seven preliminary understandings. First, one must clearly recognize the disgraceful nature of their sin. Second, they must grasp its gravity and evil. Third, they need to realize the punishment the sin incurs. Fourth, it is crucial to understand that the sin is recorded and pending retribution, not forgotten. Fifth, one must be convinced that teshuvah is the true remedy and path to atonement. Sixth, a person should perform a spiritual accounting of Hashem's kindness versus their rebellion, weighing the consequences of sin against the rewards of mitzvos. Finally, one must strengthen themselves to endure the difficulty of abandoning habitual sins and firmly resolve to renounce them. Only with these seven insights can a sinner's repentance be truly effective.

לְמַעֲשֶׂה WHAT TO TAKE HOME

My dear friend, the Chovos HaLevavos here gives us a profound roadmap for teshuvah, not just as a concept, but as a lived reality. He lays out seven crucial understandings that must precede true repentance. It's not enough to just say "I'm sorry." We need to truly internalize what we've done, its gravity, and its consequences. This isn't to scare us, but to awaken our hearts to the truth of our actions before Hashem.

Think about the first four points: knowing the act is disgraceful, understanding its evil, realizing the punishment, and knowing it's all recorded. This is about clarity, about stripping away our excuses and self-deception. We often minimize our missteps, or push them out of our minds. But the Chovos HaLevavos teaches us that real teshuvah begins with an honest, unflinching look at ourselves, seeing our actions through Hashem's eyes, not our own.

Then come the next three: knowing teshuvah is the remedy, reflecting on Hashem's kindness versus our rebellion, and resolving to change. This is where hope and action enter. Once we've faced the truth, we can embrace the incredible gift of teshuvah, knowing Hashem wants us to return. We remember His endless chesed, which makes our rebellion even more painful, and fuels our desire to break free from old habits. It's a journey from self-deception to clarity, from despair to hope, and from regret to resolute change.

So, for today, pick one area where you know you need to improve. Before you even try to change, spend a few minutes truly internalizing the first point: clearly acknowledge to yourself, and to Hashem, that this specific action or habit is indeed disgraceful and not what a Yid should be doing. Don't minimize it; just see it for what it is.

