

חובות הלבבות • שער התשובה • פרק ששי

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

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This chapter of Chovos HaLevavos, Shaar HaTeshuvah, delves into the various catalysts that inspire a person to return to Hashem through teshuvah. We will explore four distinct ways in which an individual is stirred to repent, ranging from an internal awakening based on recognizing Hashem's goodness to external prompts like rebuke or suffering.

Each path to teshuvah is illustrated with a powerful mashal (parable) of a slave returning to his master, highlighting the different motivations and levels of acceptance for each type of repentance. The chapter also draws upon pesukim from Tanach to underscore the importance and efficacy of teshuvah, regardless of the initial impetus.

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

אבל אפן ההערה יהיה לאחד מארבעה דברים.

However, the manner of arousing oneself to teshuvah will be through one of four ways.

האחד מחזק הכרת האדם את אלהיו, ובחינתו בהתמדת טובתו עליו, ומה שהוא חייב עליה מעבודתו, ושומר מצותיו, והזהר ממה שהזהיר.

The first way is from a person's strengthening his recognition of Hashem, reflecting on the continuous goodness Hashem bestows upon him, and realizing what he owes in return: his avodah, observing His mitzvos, and being careful to avoid what He has forbidden.

והוא כעבד הבורח מאדניו, כשהוא חושב בטוב אשר גמלו, ישוב אליו לרצונו לבקש ממנו מחילה על מה שקדם לו מהירותו וברחו מעבודתו, והוא העבד המפיק דרך הטובה ומבין נתיב ההצלה.

This is like a slave who ran away from his master; when he considers the good his master bestowed upon him, he will willingly return to him to ask for forgiveness for his past rebellion and for fleeing his service. This is the slave who finds the good path and understands the way to salvation.

ובכמוהו נאמר (שם ד) אם תשוב ישראל נאם ה' אלי תשוב, ר"ל אם תשוב לרצונה קדם בוא הענש עליה אקבל תשובתה ואבחר בה לעבודתי, ואם תסיר שקוציה מפני ולא תנווד ולא תברח מעבודתי ונשבעת בשמי באמת ולבה לשוב אלי באמונה ותברכו בה גוים ובה יתהללו.

Regarding such a person, it is said (Yirmiyahu 4:1), "If you return, O Yisrael, says Hashem, to Me you shall return." This means: if you return willingly before punishment comes upon you, I will accept your teshuvah and choose you for My service. And if you remove your abominations from My presence, and you do not waver or flee from My service, and you swear by My Name in truth, and your heart faithfully returns to Me, then nations will bless themselves through you and praise themselves through you.

והתשובה על כל התנאים הוא מה שאמר והתברכו בו גוים ובו יתהללו.

The teshuvah that fulfills all these conditions is what is meant by the verse, "nations will bless themselves through you and praise themselves through you."

ואמר (מלאכי ג) שובו אלי ואשובה אליכם.

And it is also said (Malachi 3:7), "Return to Me, and I will return to you."

והשני בַּעַת שֶׁתְּבוֹאָהּ תּוֹכַחַת הַבּוֹרָא יִתְבָּרַךְ וְהַכְלָמָתוֹ עַל רֵעַ מַעֲשָׂיו וּמַפְעָלָיו, בֵּין עִ"י נְבִיא דִּוְרוֹ אִם יִהְיֶה בְּזִמָּן הַנְּבוּאָה, אוֹ מִתּוֹרַת ה' הַנֶּאֱמָנָה, אוֹ מִפִּי מוֹרֶה לַעֲבוֹדַת הָאֱלֹהִים, אֲשֶׁר הוּא טַעֲנַת הַבּוֹרָא בְּאָרֶץ עַל בְּרוּאָיו, וְאִין דּוֹר מִן הַדּוֹרוֹת רִיק מִמֶּנּוּ.

The second way is when the Creator, blessed be He, brings rebuke and shame upon a person for his evil deeds and actions, whether through the prophet of his generation (if he lives in a time of prophecy), or from the faithful Torah of Hashem, or from a teacher of the avodah of Hashem. This is the Creator's claim upon His creations on earth, and no generation is ever empty of such a guide.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ ז"ל: עַד שֶׁלֹּא כָּבְתָה שְׁמִשּׁוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, וְזָרְחָה שְׁמִשּׁוֹ שֶׁל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ תִּלְמִידוֹ; עַד שֶׁלֹּא כָּבְתָה שְׁמִשּׁוֹ שֶׁל עֲלִי, וְזָרְחָה שְׁמִשּׁוֹ שֶׁל שְׁמוּאֵל הַרַמְתִּי; עַד שֶׁלֹּא כָּבְתָה שְׁמִשּׁוֹ שֶׁל אֱלִיהוּ, וְזָרְחָה שְׁמִשּׁוֹ שֶׁל אֵילִישָׁע; יוֹם שִׁמַּת רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא, נוֹלַד רַבֵּינוּ הַקְּדוֹשׁ.

As our Sages, of blessed memory, said: "Before the sun of Moshe set, the sun of Yehoshua his disciple rose; before the sun of Eli set, the sun of Shmuel HaRamati rose; before the sun of Eliyahu set, the sun of Elisha rose; on the day Rabbi Akiva died, Rabbeinu HaKadosh was born."

NOTE This teaching from the Gemara (Kiddushin 72b) illustrates the principle that Hashem always provides spiritual leadership for every generation, ensuring that there is always someone to guide people in His service.

וְעַל הַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה יִמָּצֵא בְּכָל הַדּוֹרוֹת וּבְכָל הָאָרְצוֹת, לֹא יִחְסַר קוֹרֵא אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֶל עֲבוֹדָתוֹ וּמוֹרֶה אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ.

And in this manner, it will be found in all generations and in all lands: there will never be a lack of one who calls to Hashem and to His service, and teaches His Torah.

וְהַשֵּׁב הַזֶּה כְּעֶבֶד שֶׁבָּרַח מֵעֲבוֹדַת אֲדוֹנָיו, וּפָגַע עֶבֶד נֶאֱמָן לְאֲדוֹנָיו, וְהוֹכִיחוֹ עַל בְּרָחוֹ מֵאֲדוֹנָיו, וַיַּעַץ אוֹתוֹ לָשׁוּב אֵלָיו, וְהִבְטִיחוֹ שִׁימְחֵל לוֹ, וְהַזְכִּירוֹ רַב טוֹבוֹתָיו וְחַפְצָיו עָלָיו, וְשָׁב אֵלָיו וְנִכְנַע אֵלָיו.

This penitent is like a slave who ran away from his master's service, and then met another slave who was faithful to his master. This faithful slave rebuked him for fleeing his master, advised him to return, assured him that the master would forgive him, and reminded him of the master's abundant goodness and desires for him. So, the slave returned and humbled himself before his master.

וְהַשְׁלִישִׁי כְּשֶׁהוּא רוֹאֶה נִסִּיּוֹן הַבּוֹרָא וְחֶזֶק עֲנָשׁוֹ לְמִי שֶׁהֵלֵךְ בְּדַרְכוֹ לְצֵאת מֵעֲבוֹדָתוֹ, יוֹסֵר בּוֹ וַיָּשׁוּב אֶל ה' מִיִּרְאָתוֹ עֲנָשׁוֹ וְנִקְמָתוֹ הַחֲזָקָה.

The third way is when a person observes the Creator's trials and the severity of His punishment for someone who followed his own path of abandoning His service; he will be chastened by this and return to Hashem out of fear of His strong punishment and retribution.

וְהוּא כְּעֶבֶד הַבּוֹרֵחַ מֵאֲדוֹנָיו, כְּשִׁישְׁמַע מֶה שֶׁהָיָה מַעֲוִנָּשׁוֹ לְמִי שֶׁבָּרַח מִמֶּנּוּ כְּמוֹהוּ, וַיּוֹסֵר בּוֹ וַיָּשׁוּב מִתְחַנֵּן אֶל אֲדוֹנָיו לְמַחֵל לוֹ וּלְסַלֵּחַ עוֹנֵוֹ קֹדֶם שִׁיבְאָנוּ הָעֲנָשׁ.

This is like a slave who ran away from his master; when he hears about the punishment another slave like him received for running away, he is chastened by it and returns, pleading with his master to forgive him and pardon his sin before punishment comes upon him.

וע"כ אמר הכתוב (ויקרא יח) ולא תקיא הארץ אתכם וגו' כַּאֲשֶׁר קִאָּה וגו'.

And concerning this, the verse states (Vayikra 18:28), "And let the land not vomit you out for having defiled it, as it vomited out the nations that preceded you."

והרביעי בבוא ענש הבורא עליו במין ממיני הצרות, וכיון שהרגיש בו געור והקיץ משנתו ושב אל האלהים מחטאו.

The fourth way is when the Creator's punishment comes upon him in some form of tribulation; once he feels it, he awakens and arises from his slumber, and returns to Hashem from his sin.

והוא כעבד הבורח מרבו אשר שלח אליו מי שייסרנו ויעננו על ברחו מעבודתו, וכאשר הגיע אליו ברח אל אדוניו מתודה מחטאיו ומבקש מחילתו וסליחתו.

This is like a slave who ran away from his master, and the master sent someone to chastise and punish him for fleeing his service. When the emissary reached him, he ran back to his master, confessing his sins and seeking his forgiveness and pardon.

ובכמוהו נאמר (משלי א) בבוא כשואה פחדכם וגו' אז יקראנני ולא אענה.

Regarding such a person, it is said (Mishlei 1:27), "When your fear comes like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind... then they will call Me, but I will not answer."

ואמר (ד"ה ב לג) וכהצר לו חלה את פני ה'. ויכנע מאד.

And it is also said (Divrei HaYamim II 33:12), "And when he was distressed, he entreated the L-rd his G-d, and he humbled himself greatly."

והמצליח השב אל האלהים בפנים הראשונים, ותחתיו בהצלחה ובקבול מי שלא שב עד שפאתהו תוכחת הבורא והם הפנים השניים.

The most successful and accepted is the one who returns to Hashem through the first way. Below him in success and acceptance is one who did not return until the Creator's rebuke came upon him, which is the second way.

ותחתיהם בהצלחה ובקבול מי שלא שב עד שחלה הרעה על סביביו.

Below them in success and acceptance is one who did not return until misfortune befell those around him.

ותחתיו בקבול והחזרה מי שלא שב עד שחל עליו הענש ונתיסר בו.

And below him in acceptance and return is one who did not return until punishment befell him personally and he was chastised by it.

והוא הרחוק שבשבים לקבל האלהים תשובתו ולמחל חטאו, עד שישב אל ה' ויראה מן החרטה והעזיבה ובקשת המחילה בלבם ובלשונם ובתנועותיו מה שיחייב למחל לו ולקבל תשובתו ולעבר על פשעיו:

This last one is the furthest among the penitents from having Hashem accept his teshuvah and pardon his sin, unless he returns to Hashem and demonstrates such regret, abandonment of sin, and seeking of forgiveness—in his heart, speech, and actions—that it warrants his being forgiven, his teshuvah being accepted, and his transgressions being overlooked.

Shaar HaTeshuvah, Chapter Six, outlines four ways a person is stirred to repent. The highest level is when one repents willingly, out of a deep recognition of Hashem's constant goodness and one's duty to Him, likened to a slave returning to his master out of free will. The second way is through rebuke from a prophet, Torah, or a Rav, which serves as a constant guide in every generation. The third is by observing the punishments meted out to others who followed a similar sinful path, leading to fear of Hashem's retribution. The fourth, and least desirable, is when one repents only after experiencing personal tribulation and suffering. The chapter concludes by ranking these four types of penitents, with the first being the most successful and accepted, and the last requiring the most profound and comprehensive teshuvah to be pardoned.

למעשה WHAT TO TAKE HOME

The Chovos HaLevavos teaches us today about the four ways a person can be stirred to do teshuvah. The first, and highest, is when we simply reflect on Hashem's constant goodness to us, His endless chesed, and we realize our obligation to Him. We don't need a push, a rebuke, or a punishment. We just look at the world, at our lives, and we see His hand, His love, and we are moved to draw closer, to serve Him with joy and gratitude.

This is the ideal, to return to Hashem out of pure love and recognition, like a child who runs back to a loving parent, not because they were called or disciplined, but because they simply miss being close. It's an avodah of the heart, to cultivate that awareness of Hashem's constant presence and kindness in our lives. When we truly internalize that, our desire to fulfill His mitzvos and avoid what displeases Him flows naturally from a place of deep appreciation.

Even if we're not on that highest level, Hashem in His infinite mercy gives us other opportunities: through the words of a Rav, by seeing what happens to others, or even, chalilah, through personal challenges. But the Chovos HaLevavos emphasizes that the earlier we respond, the more beloved and accepted our teshuvah is. Why wait for a wake-up call when we can choose to awaken ourselves?

So, for today, let's try to take a moment, perhaps before davening or before bed, to simply reflect on one specific act of Hashem's goodness in our lives. Let that feeling of gratitude be the spark that draws us closer to Him, not out of fear, but out of love.