

חובות הלבבות • שער התשובה • פרק שמיני

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

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This chapter of Chovos HaLevavos delves into a profound question: how does a baal teshuvah, one who has repented, compare to a tzadik, a righteous person who has never sinned? We will explore three distinct scenarios, each offering a unique perspective on the spiritual standing of the penitent.

We will learn that sometimes the baal teshuvah can reach the same level as the tzadik, sometimes even surpassing him, and sometimes the tzadik remains on a higher plane. The determining factors lie in the nature of the sin committed and the depth and sincerity of the repentance, particularly how it shapes the individual's ongoing avodah and yiras Shanayim.

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

אבל אם ישתנה השב עם הצדיק, אומר כי יש מן השבים שישתנה אחר התשובה עם הצדיק אשר לא חטא; ומהם מי שיש לו יתרון על הצדיק; ומהם מי שיש לצדיק יתרון עליו, אע"פ ששב.

Regarding whether a baal teshuvah can be equal to a tzaddik, I will say that there are some baalei teshuvah who, after repenting, become equal to a tzaddik who never sinned; some who even have an advantage over the tzaddik; and some over whom the tzaddik has an advantage, even though they repented.

ובאור החלק הראשון הוא שיהיה החוטא בקצורו במצות עשה שאין בה כרת, כציצית וכלולב וכסכה והדומה לזה.

The explanation for the first case is when the person's failing was in a positive mitzvah that does not carry the punishment of Kares, such as tzitzis, lulav, succah, or similar mitzvos.

NOTE Kares is a severe spiritual excision, a punishment from Heaven for certain grave sins, where the soul is cut off from its source.

וכאשר ישוב המקצר בהם בלבם ובגלשונו, וישתדל לעשות אותם, ולא ישנה קצורו בהם, ימחל לו הבורא וישתנה עם הצדיק אשר לא קצר בהם.

When such a person who was deficient in these mitzvos repents in his heart and with his speech, and strives to fulfill them, and does not repeat his neglect, the Creator will forgive him, and he will become equal to the tzaddik who never fell short in these mitzvos.

ובכמו זה נאמר: "השב מן החטא כמי שלא חטא", ואמרו רז"ל: "עבר על מצות עשה שאין בה כרת ועשה תשובה, אינו זז ממקומו עד שמוחלין לו, שנאמר (מלאכי ג): 'שובו אלי ואשובה אליכם'."

Regarding such a penitent, it is said, "One who repents from a sin is as if he never sinned," and our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "If one transgressed a positive mitzvah that does not incur Kares and repented, he does not move from his place until he is forgiven, as it is stated (Malachi 3), 'Return to Me, and I will return to you.'"

והחלק השני, והוא שיש לו בו יתרון השב על הצדיק, באור זה שיהיה השב חטא חטא קטן במצות לא תעשה שאין בה כרת, ואח"כ שב ממנה תשובה שלמה בכל תנאיה.

The second case, where the baal teshuvah has an advantage over the tzaddik, is explained as follows: when the baal teshuvah committed a minor sin, a negative mitzvah that does not carry Kares, and afterwards repented from it with a complete teshuvah, fulfilling all its conditions.

ושם עונו לעצמו ונכח פניו, ומבקש תמיד המחילה עליו, ונכלם מבשתו מהבורא, ונכנס בלבו המורא מענשו, ונשברה נפשו.

He places his sin before him and opposite his face, constantly seeking forgiveness for it, feeling ashamed before the Creator, with the fear of punishment entering his heart, and his spirit broken.

והוא נכנע ושלל לפני האלהים תמיד, והיה חטאו סבה לכניעתו והשתדלותו לפלע חובות הבורא.

He is always submissive and humble before Hashem, and his sin becomes a cause for his humility and his diligent effort to fulfill his obligations to the Creator.

לא יתגאה במאומה ממעשהו הטוב, ולא ירבה בעיניו, ולא יתפאר בו, וישמר בשארית ימיו מן המכשול.

He does not become proud in the least over his good deeds, nor do they seem great in his eyes, nor does he boast about them, and he guards himself from stumbling for the rest of his days.

חוטא זה הוא שיש לו יתרון על הצדיק שלא חטא החטא ההוא והדומה לו, כי הצדיק אין בטוחים בו שלא יתגאה ויגבה לבו וירום במעשהו.

Such a sinner is the one who has an advantage over the tzaddik who never committed that sin or similar ones, because the tzaddik is not guaranteed that his heart will not become proud, haughty, and elevated due to his deeds.

וכבר נאמר כי יש חטא שמועיל לשב יותר מכל צדקות הצדיק, ויש צדקה שמזיקת לצדיק יותר מכל חטאות השב, כשיפנה לבו מן הכניעה ודבק בגאות ובחנף ואהבת השבח.

It has already been said that there is a sin that benefits the baal teshuvah more than all the righteous deeds of the tzaddik, and there is a good deed that harms the tzaddik more than all the sins of the baal teshuvah, when the tzaddik turns his heart away from humility and clings to pride, flattery, and love of praise.

כמ"ש אחד מן הצדיקים לתלמידיו: "אלו לא היה לכם עון, הייתי מפחד עליכם ממה שהוא גדול מן העון".

As one of the tzaddikim said to his students, "If you were completely without any sins, I would be afraid for you of something worse than sin."

אמרו לו: "ומה גדול מן העון?" אמר להם: "הגאות והחנף".

They asked him, "What is worse than sin?" He answered them, "Pride and flattery."

ובשב כזה ארז"ל: "במקום שבעלי תשובה עומדים, אין צדיקים גמורים יכולים לעמד."

And regarding such a baal teshuvah, our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "In the place where baalei teshuvah stand, even perfectly righteous tzaddikim cannot stand."

וְהַחֲלָק הַשְּׁלִישִׁי שֶׁיְהִיָּה הַשֵּׁב עוֹבֵר עֲבֻרוֹת גְּדוּלוֹת מִמִּצְוֹת לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה שֵׁשׁ בָּהֶם מִיתָה בְּיַד אָדָם וְכָרַת בְּיַד שָׁמַיִם, כְּחִלּוֹל הַשֵּׁם וְשִׁבּוּעֵת שֶׁקָּר וְהִדּוּמָה לָהֶם מִן הַגְּדוּלוֹת.

The third case is when the baal teshuvah transgressed major sins from the negative mitzvos that carry the punishment of death by Beis Din or Kares from the Heavenly court, such as Chillul Hashem, a false oath, and similar grave sins.

NOTE Chillul Hashem means desecrating Hashem's Name, which is a very severe sin.

וְאַחֵר כֶּה שֶׁב מִטְעוּתוֹ בָּהֶם וְהַשְּׁלִים תְּנָאֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה וּגְדָרֶיהָ, כִּי הַמְּחִילָה לֹא תִתְּכֵן לוֹ עַד שֶׁיִּנָּסֶה בַּעוֹה"ו מִמָּה שִׁיּוּכָל לְסַבֵּלוֹ וְיִנָּקֶה מֵעוֹנָתוֹ.

And afterwards, he repented from his error in these matters and fulfilled the conditions and boundaries of teshuvah; however, forgiveness will not be complete for him until he is tested in this world with suffering that he can bear, and thereby be cleansed of his sins.

וְבוֹ אָמְרוּ רַז"ל: "עֹבֵר עַל מִצְוֹת לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה שֵׁשׁ בָּהֶם כָּרַת וּמִיתָת ב"ד וְעֲשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה, יְסוּרִין מִמֶּרְקִין וּמִיתָה מִכְּפָרָת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תהלים פט): 'וּפָקַדְתִּי בְשֶׁבֶט פִּשְׁעָם וּבִנְגָעִים עֲוֹנָם', וְכָתִיב (ישעיהו כ"ב:י"ד): 'אִם יִכְפֹּר הָעוֹן הַזֶּה לָכֶם עַד תָּמֹתוּ'."

Regarding such a person, our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "If one transgressed a negative mitzvah that carries Kares or death by Beis Din and repented, sufferings cleanse him, and death completes the atonement, as it is stated (Tehillim 89), 'Then I will punish their transgression with a rod, and their iniquity with afflictions,' and it is written (Yeshayahu 22:14), 'Surely this iniquity shall not be atoned for you until you die.'"

וְהַצַּדִּיק שֶׁלֹּא עָבַר אֵלּוֹ הָעֲבֻרוֹת יֵשׁ לוֹ יִתְרוֹן עַל הַשֵּׁב מֵהֶם בְּלִי סֶפֶק.

And without a doubt, the tzaddik who never transgressed these types of sins has an advantage over the baal teshuvah who repented from them.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM IT

Shaar HaTeshuvah, Chapter Eight, meticulously outlines three categories regarding the comparison between a baal teshuvah and a tzadik. The first case describes a penitent who transgressed a positive mitzvah without Kares; through sincere repentance, he immediately achieves the same standing as a tzadik who never sinned. The second case presents a baal teshuvah who committed a minor negative transgression (without Kares) but whose repentance is so profound, marked by constant shame, brokenness, and humility, that his sin becomes a catalyst for greater submission and avodah, ultimately elevating him above a tzadik who might become complacent or proud. The third case addresses a penitent who committed severe sins punishable by Kares or death; while his repentance is accepted, full atonement requires suffering in this world, thus placing the tzadik who never committed such sins on a higher level.

My dear friends, the Chovos HaLevavos today gives us such a powerful chiddush about teshuvah. We often think of teshuvah as simply wiping the slate clean, returning to where we were before. But the Baalei Teshuvah, those who truly return to Hashem, can reach even higher levels than a tzadik who never sinned! How can this be? Because the sin itself, when truly repented for, can become a catalyst for a profound transformation.

When a person stumbles, and then truly takes that fall to heart, it can break their spirit in a holy way. They become humble, constantly aware of their dependence on Hashem, and filled with a deep fear of sinning again. This brokenness, this constant striving to repay their debt to the Creator, can lead to a level of submission and humility that even a tzadik who never fell might not achieve. The tzadik, while pure, might be more susceptible to a subtle pride in their good deeds. But the baal teshuvah, having experienced their own weakness, is inoculated against this.

This is why our Sages teach us, "In the place where baalei teshuvah stand, even perfectly righteous tzaddikim cannot stand." It's not about the sin itself, but what the sin, through the process of teshuvah, *does* to the person's heart. It can forge a deeper connection, a more profound humility, and a more intense yearning for Hashem's closeness.

So, what's our takeaway for today? Let's internalize this truth: if we have stumbled, Hashem is not just waiting to forgive us and bring us back to square one. He is waiting for us to use that experience to grow, to become even more humble, more broken-hearted, and more devoted to Him. Don't let past mistakes define you negatively; let them be the springboard for a deeper, more authentic avodah. Today, let's take one small step to turn a past stumble into a source of greater humility and closeness to Hashem.