



A Summary of the Laws of T'shuva (Repentance) of Maimonides

— RABBI YOSEF BLAU

Rabbi Yosef Blau is the Senior Mashgiach Ruchani (spiritual advisor) at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University since 1977. He also serves as spiritual guidance counselor for students at Yeshiva College. He is also the honorary president of the Religious Zionists of America after being president for twelve years.

This essay offers a summary of Maimonides' teachings on repentance, presenting t'shuva (repentance) as foundational to Judaism and as a function of the human capacity for transformation and improvement. Discussion questions are provided to invite reflection on how this core teaching relates to the issue of abuses of power.

In his code of Jewish Law, the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides begins the section on The Laws of Repentance by focusing on the obligation to recite a confession (*vidui*) when repenting for a sin, describing the recital as a mitzvah. This has led many commentators to conclude erroneously that repentance per se is not a mitzvah (a commandment unto itself). But Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik points to the introduction of the Mishneh Torah, where Maimonides writes that the mitzvah is that one should repent for his sins before G-d and recite a confession. He explains that the inner nature of the mitzvah is to repent, but the repentance has to be concretized through outer verbalization. This duality is critical to understanding the process of t'shuvas; the formal recital has to reflect an inner change.

The recital of *vidui* has three components: 1) acknowledging and enumerating one's sins, 2) expressing embarrassment and regret, 3) making a commitment to change one's behavior and not to repeat these sins. All three elements are necessary. It is insufficient to promise to change without admitting and regretting wrongdoing in the past.

Maimonides outlines an example of ideal demonstration of t'shuva: An individual guilty of a sexual impropriety finds themselves in the identical situation as when they sinned, with the same desires, and this time controls his impulses and refrains from acting. While this description seems to imply that t'shuva can be accomplished through a one-time difference in behavior, Maimonides is acutely aware of the possibility of returning to old patterns of behavior, and elsewhere he describes many possible points on the path of t'shuva, including tearful prayer, giving charity, avoiding the environment that led to one's sinning, making symbolic changes such as changing one's name, and even going into exile.

The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) is set aside for t'shuva. On this day, individuals join together in communal t'shuva, and an extended *vidui* is recited ten times. The strength of the community enhances the t'shuva of each individual, motivating each person to examine their actions.

The t'shuva process before G-d famously only suffices for sins between human beings and G-d, but not when an individual hurts another person. In the case of a sin between human beings, the sinner must genuinely apologize to the person they have sinned against and ask for forgiveness. When there has been monetary loss, compensation has to be made. But financial restitution is not fully possible when the damage is internal and not quantifiable.

A major question about the Jewish concept of t'shuva is to what extent it either stems from G-d's grace or reflects the human capacity to grow and change. Maimonides analyzes the critical role that belief in free will plays in Jewish conceptions of t'shuva. By focusing on free will in the context of the laws of t'shuva, Maimonides suggests that the possibility of true repentance emphasizes humans' ability to change.

Maimonides expands the scope of t'shuva and its ability to transform the sinner, analyzing the ability of t'shuva to change not only behavior but character traits. A person can have a negative character trait without doing an actual sin. A baal t'shuva (a person who fully repents) becomes a different person—according to some sources, on a higher spiritual level from the person who was righteous the entire time.

Maimonides has a multidimensional conception of t'shuva that he views as foundational to Judaism. He begins by discussing the role of t'shuva in mitigating and, in some cases, even eliminating divine punishment for sins. Only later does he focus on how t'shuva can actually bring someone to a higher level of existence. For Maimonides, while t'shuva takes place in an initial moment, maintaining the change is an ongoing struggle. When it is successful, true transformation can occur.

T'shuva is the responsibility of the individual and is enhanced by being part of a community. While it is fundamental to the Jewish conception of the relationship between humans and the Creator, when we regard transgressions between people, all the regrets and commitments to G-d in the world are not adequate without repairing the human relationships. Thus, human community can both support t'shuva and provide the ground on which it must take place.

Discussion Questions

Maimonides focuses on t'shuva as a process for individuals. The questions below expand our field of vision for this guide to talk about how organizations and communities might (1) support the t'shuva of individual perpetrators of abuse and (2) engage in their own collective process of t'shuva.

1. Rabbi Blau describes *t'shuva* as an individual process that can be supported by the community. What is the appropriate role of a Jewish community in supporting and encouraging the *t'shuva* of a member who is guilty of abuse? Is it possible for a community or organization to meet its core obligations to support victims and protect safety yet also support the *t'shuva* of perpetrators?
2. Rabbi Blau describes *t'shuva* as a double-faceted process, joining outer actions with fundamental inner change. What kind of public, external actions can communal leaders make when incidents of abuse come to light? If—G-d forbid—abuse of any kind has already happened within your community, how can your community make a *vidui*? How can it demonstrate regret? What communal changes would you urge it to make to ensure that this abuse does not happen again? Can any of those changes be made right now, to prevent wrongdoing before it happens?

This piece is part of the Respect & Responsibility: A Jewish Ethics Study Guide that is a joint project of Sacred Spaces and the Center for Jewish Ethics. Learn more at www.jewishsacredspaces.org.

