

Mi-Darkhei ha-Teshuvah: Authentic Repentance

Of the many novel insights presented in Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, Rambam's development of the "darkhei ha-teshuvah," "the ways of repentance," is at the forefront. Rambam states:

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני השם בבכי ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה כפי כחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותן המעשים ומשנה מעשיו כולן לטובה ולדרך ישרה וגולה ממקומו, שגלות מכפרת עון מפני שגורמת לו להכנע ולהיות עניו ושפל רוח. *It is of the ways of teshuvah for the repentant to shout continuously before God with cries and supplications, for him to give charity according to his ability, for him to distance himself significantly from the matter with which he sinned, for him to change his name, as if to say, "I am a different person and not the person who committed those transgressions," for him to transform all of his ways into the good and straight, and for him to exile himself from his place, for exile absolves sin, as it causes*

him to humble himself intensely.

Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:4

Rambam's formulation raises a variety of challenging questions.

First of all, what is the source for Rambam's description of "darkhei ha-teshuvah"? *Kesef Mishneh* assumes that Rambam's position is anchored in a comment of R. Yitzhak in *Rosh ha-Shanah*:

ואמר רבי יצחק: ארבעה דברים מקרעין גזר דינו של אדם, אלו הן: צדקה, צעקה, שינוי השם, ושינוי מעשה. צדקה - דכתיב (משלי י:ב) וצדקה תציל ממות, צעקה - דכתיב (תהלים קז:ו) ויצעקו אל ה' בצר להם וממצקותיהם יוציאם, שינוי השם - דכתיב (בראשית יז:טו) שרי אשתך לא תקרא את שמה שרי כי שרה שמה, וכתיב וברכתי אתה וגם נתתי ממנה לך בן, שינוי מעשה - דכתיב (יונה ג:י) וירא האלקים את מעשיהם, וכתיב וינחם האלקים על הרעה אשר דבר לעשות להם ולא עשה. ויש אומרים: אף שינוי מקום, דכתיב (בראשית יב:א) ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך מארצך, והדר ואעשך לגוי גדול.



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And R. Yitzhak said: Four things uproot a man's fate, and these are the four: charity, screaming [in prayer], changing one's name, and changing one's deeds. Charity, as the verse states, "And charity will save from death" (Mishlei 10:2); screaming,

as the verse states, “And they cried out to Hashem in distress, and He would deliver them from their distresses” (Tehillim 107:6); changing one’s name, as the verse states, “As for Sarai your wife – do not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name,” and it is written, “And I will bless her and also give you a son from her” (Bereishit 17:15); changing one’s deeds, as the verse states, “And God saw their deeds,” and it is written, “And God regretted the evil He said He would do to them and did not do it” (Yonah 3:10). And some say that even changing one’s place uproots his fate, as the verse states, “And Hashem said to Avram, ‘Go forth from your land,’” (Bereishit 12:1), and then He promised, “I will make you into a large nation” (ibid. 12:2).

Rosh ha-Shanah 16b

R. Yitzhak and the “*yesh omerim*” delineate all five of the various *darkhei ha-teshuvah* that Rambam records. Consequently, it is not surprising that *Kesef Mishneh* identifies R. Yitzhak’s statement as Rambam’s source. The context, however, is different in the two discussions. As Ritva notes, R. Yitzhak’s “four things” are methods that can uproot one’s fate. The act of changing one’s name, in particular, divorces one from the astrological harm to which he is subject:

שינוי השם שמשנה שמו שאינו האיש בעל העבירות כדי שלא יזכירוהו לרעה, ובר מהכי דבטיל ונפיק מאצטגנינות דיליה כדרך שאמר באברהם (שבת קנו).

The purpose of changing one’s name is to declare that he is not the same person who committed sins in the past, and thereby prevent others from speaking negatively about him. And aside from this, another benefit of changing one’s name is that his astrological fate is nullified and removed from him, as the gemara (Shabbat 156a) explains about Avraham.

Ritva, Rosh ha-Shanah 16b

Yet, while R. Yitzhak’s statement

concerns the changing of one’s *gezar din* (verdict), Rambam’s statement concerns the acts of a repentant! The act of uprooting one’s troubling destiny is certainly distinct in character from the act of repentance.

Kesef Mishneh himself accentuates Rambam’s deviation from R. Yitzhak when he states:

ואל ה’ דברים אלו רמז רבינו בדבריו אלה. And our rabbi [Rambam] hints to these five things with these words.

Clearly, *Kesef Mishneh* recognizes that Rambam does not quote R. Yitzhak’s instruction, but rather only hints to it. Rambam reinvents the application of R. Yitzhak’s words, and Rambam’s comments therefore cannot be construed as a verbatim quotation. The source for Rambam is the *gemara* in *Rosh ha-Shanah*, but Rambam alters its meaning.

On what basis does Rambam diverge from the simple interpretation of R. Yitzhak’s statement, broadening its scope to include not only *keri’at gezar din* but also *teshuvah*? What does Rambam’s interpretation of the passage in *Rosh ha-Shanah* reflect about his understanding of the concept of *teshuvah*?

Lehem Mishneh notes another critical discrepancy between Rambam’s comments and his apparent source:

וכל החמשה הזכרו בדברי רבינו...אף על פי דבגמרא אמרו דכל חד מנייהו סיג.

And all five ways are mentioned in our rabbi’s [Rambam’s] words, even though the gemara states that one of the five is sufficient [to uproot one’s fate].

If Rambam’s source is the *gemara* in *Rosh ha-Shanah*, why does Rambam argue that all five of the behaviors detailed in the *gemara* are indispensable to the accomplishment of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*? After all, according to R.

Yitzhak, only one of the five behaviors is necessary to uproot one’s fate!

Perhaps a more basic question should be confronted as well. What is the meaning of Rambam’s phrase, “*mi-darkhei ha-teshuvah*”? Rambam himself coins this terminology; it does not appear in the Mishnah or Gemara, and other *Rishonim* do not utilize it when discussing the same concept. Even Meiri, in *Hibbur ha-Teshuvah*, reformulates this idea. Lest we assume that Rambam’s phraseology is merely coincidental, we must note that the phrase appears not only in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, but also in *Hilkhot Ta’anit*:

ודבר זה מדרכי התשובה הוא, שבזמן שתבוא צרה ויזעקו עליה ויריעו ידעו הכל שבגלל מעשיהם הרעים הורע להן ככתוב (ירמיהו ה:כה) עונותיכם הטו וגו', וזה הוא שיגרום להם להסיר הצרה מעליהם.

And this is of the ways of teshuvah, that when suffering arises and they [Klal Yisrael] shout and blow trumpets, all will know that because of their bad deeds, they have been distressed, as the verse states, “Your sins have caused you to stray...” (Yirmiyahu 5:25), and this will cause them to remove the suffering from upon them.

Hilkhot Ta’anit 1:2

Rambam’s usage of the same phrase in both *Hilkhot Teshuvah* and *Hilkhot Ta’anit* suggests that the phrase carries significant meaning; it is not simply a convenient way of describing the proper way to react to sin and a methodology for attaining forgiveness.¹ Rather, it is indicative of some broader concept and ideal. What are the full implications of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*?

To unpack the meaning of Rambam’s *darkhei ha-teshuvah*, we begin by explaining Rambam’s veering from the simple understanding of R. Yitzhak’s comments. We can suggest two distinct, yet consistent, approaches.

First, in contradistinction to Ritva, Rambam may shy away from emphasizing astrological significance, especially in light of his broader rationalistic proclivities and specific rejection of this discipline. For Rambam, R. Yitzhak does focus on the uprooting of one's *gezar din*, but the method employed to uproot a *gezar din* demands the transformation of values, personality, and merit, rather than the alteration of one's astrological or mystical fate. It was natural for Rambam to apply R. Yitzhak's *keri'at gezar din* formula to a methodology of repentance, since repentance and *keri'at gezar din* share in common the need to transform one's personality and value system.²

Teshuvah, as the climax of Sefer ha-Madda, is not indispensable to man's life only because it facilitates his neutralizing of past sins; rather, teshuvah, at its finest, is an independently vital process, one that transforms a person into an oved Hashem and facilitates avodah mei-ahavah.

Second, Rambam's application of R. Yitzhak's statement to *Hilkhot Teshuvah* reflects Rambam's tendency to broaden and expand throughout *Hilkhot Teshuvah*.³ *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the final section of *Sefer ha-Madda*, constitutes a climactic transition, bridging the ideas of *Sefer ha-Madda* with the ideas of *Sefer Ahavah*. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* emphasizes the ideal service of Hashem, a service motivated by *ahavah* and rooted in the proper legal philosophy of *Sefer ha-Madda*. For this reason, chapter 10 of *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the section's final chapter, centers on the "*oved mei-ahavah*,"⁴ the one who serves Hashem due to his love for Him. As evinced

by Rambam's stance that the laws of *teshuvah* are the prerequisites for *avodah mei-ahavah*, Rambam defines and interprets the process of repentance in an all-encompassing fashion. *Teshuvah*, as the climax of *Sefer ha-Madda*, is not indispensable to man's life only because it facilitates his neutralizing of past sins; rather, *teshuvah*, at its finest, is an independently vital process, one that transforms a person into an *oved Hashem* and facilitates *avodah mei-ahavah*.⁵ Rambam's discussion of repentance for corrupt traits, values, and beliefs in the seventh chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuvah* further corroborates his broad understanding of repentance. Although Rambam records that true repentance includes the uprooting

of certain emotions and traits, such as anger, hatred, and jealousy, this assertion is unsourced.⁶ On what basis does Rambam justify his position? Additionally, we might question why Rambam waits until chapter 7 to discuss repentance focusing on character and personality; such discussion seems relevant to the core components of repentance, as outlined in chapters 1 and 2.

Perhaps Rambam's understanding of *teshuvah*, as captured by his thesis of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*, explains these apparent anomalies. If *teshuvah* is necessary not only to counteract sin

but also to propel man toward *avodah mei-ahavah*, then chapter 7 — which is dedicated to *ma'alat ha-teshuvah*, the greatness of repentance — is the most appropriate context in which to present repentance from traits. Rambam informs us that the greatness of repentance is precisely its transformative potential, but in order for *teshuvah* to achieve this ambition, it must be comprehensive; it must address both action and thought. Since *teshuvah*, in its most pristine form, is the laying of groundwork for service of Hashem *mei-ahavah*, no source is necessary to conclude that such *teshuvah* must encompass repentance that holistically addresses the entire personality.

Given Rambam's broad understanding of *teshuvah*, his reading of the passage in *Rosh ha-Shanah* emerges lucid and sensible. R. Yitzhak's statement advises one as to how to change his *gezar din*. Rambam intensifies and transforms R. Yitzhak's statement into "*darkhei ha-teshuvah*," expanding its relevance beyond the uprooting of decrees and applying it to the institution of repentance as a whole. Rambam adds that as part of "*darkhei ha-teshuvah*," one should not only shout, as R. Yitzhak advises for *keri'at gezar din*, but he should be "*tzo'ek tamid*," shouting constantly. Moreover, he should not only yell, but he should yell "*bi-vkhi u-vetahanunim*," with cries and pleas. One should not only give charity, as R. Yitzhak instructs, but he should do so "*ke-fi koho*," according to his ability. He must not only distance himself from evil, but he must distance himself greatly — "*u-mitraheik harbeh*." Finally, Rambam emphasizes that one must be "*meshaneh ma'asav kulan*"; he must change *all* of his ways. Rambam's intensification of R. Yitzhak's instructions reflects Rambam's attitude toward them. For Rambam, they are

part of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*. They are ways of motivating man toward and assisting him in self-evaluation and self-transformation. For *keri'at gezar din*, less intense shouting, charity, or changing of deeds may be sufficient, but for concrete repentance that leads to *avodah mei-ahavah*, intensification is necessary. Furthermore, not only must these acts be strengthened qualitatively, but they must be bolstered quantitatively as well. Rambam, as *Lehem Mishneh* notes, requires all five actions as part of *darkhei ha-teshuvah*. For *keri'at gezar din*, one action may be sufficient, but for *teshuvah* that leads to *avodah mei-ahavah*, all five are necessary.

The motif of “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*” as a window into *teshuvah* dominates much of Rambam’s *Hilkhot Teshuvah*. Interestingly, when Rambam articulates the well-known practice to increase giving of charity and multiply acts of kindness throughout the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance, he adds that the practice includes as well “*esek be-mitzvot*,” involvement in *mitzvot*.⁷ For Rambam, not only altruistic action should pervade the Ten Days; rather, the *ba'al teshuvah* must make extra effort to increase his punctiliousness regarding all commandments. Rambam’s expansion of the scope of proper activity during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* coheres precisely with his characterization of “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*.” If *teshuvah* is not simply an accumulation of merits but also a process of personal transformation, one that directs and

facilitates *avodah mei-ahavah*, then it must include intense involvement in all *mitzvot*.⁸ Thus, while they may seem innocuous on their surface, the “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*” are in fact the means, both quantitative and qualitative, that guide one on his path toward *avodah mei-ahavah*. This is not merely an itemized list of actions to take in order to achieve forgiveness. On the contrary, the phrase “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*,” in its intensified form, signifies Rambam’s all-encompassing understanding of *teshuvah*.⁹

Endnotes

1. See also *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 4:2, where Rambam again uses the term “*darkhei ha-teshuvah*” and mentions that which prevents one from accomplishing *darkhei ha-teshuvah*.
2. See *Shu"t ha-Rashba* 1:19. Rashba argues that exiling oneself from his locale, as R. Yitzhak advises, is beneficial not only for *shinuy mazal*, but also for attaining *kapparah* for one’s sins. As we have suggested for Rambam, Rashba similarly does not limit the application of R. Yitzhak’s advice to *shinuy mazal*, but rather includes attainment of *kapparah* as well.
3. See chapter 2 of מִיִּמִּינֵי מִיכָאֵל, “An Alternative and Complementary Perspective on *Teshuvah*: Rabbeinu Yonah’s *Sha’arei Teshuvah*,” which includes an analysis of the breadth and theme of Rambam’s *Hilkhot Teshuvah*.
4. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:2.
5. For a more extensive analysis of the tenth chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, see מִיִּמִּינֵי מִיכָאֵל chapter 8 “*Ahavat Hashem and Talmud Torah: The Telos of Teshuvah*.”
6. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 7:3. See Migdal Oz, ad

loc., who suggests that Rambam’s source is the concept of “*hirhurei aveirah kashu mei-aveirah*” (*Yoma* 29a). This suggestion, however, seems difficult, if not untenable; Rambam is explicit in his assertion that repentance must address not only thoughts of sin but also *middot ra’ot*.

7. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:4.

8. See מִיִּמִּינֵי מִיכָאֵל chapter 9, “Religious Stringency, Consistency, and the Implications of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*.”

9. See *Sefer Likkutim, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:3, who formulates the notion of repentance as “*takhlit bi-fnei atzmo*,” a purpose in and of itself. Such a characterization highlights the approach to repentance not as solely a reaction to sin, but as a proactive effort to achieve *avodah mei-ahavah*.



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