

In the Rambam's laws of Teshuva, in the very first chapter, in the very first section, the Rambam tells us what is necessary in order to do Teshuva. He says that we must confess our sins. He says, "And they must confess their sins which they have done with the confession of words." This confession is a positive commandment. We know that we are all composed of many different thoughts and attitudes, and until we crystalize our attitudes and thoughts and can actually express them in words, then we have not really done anything. We have not really grabbed a hold of these feelings and initiated a process of change. The process of change may take an awful long time, and we may feel uneasy when we have different thoughts, but until we actually get down and express in concrete terms what we mean we really have not come to that stage of Teshuva which is necessary for us in order to be granted forgiveness. Therefore, we have to make a confession. We make this confession before G-d. The Rambam continues and says, "How do we confess? We say, 'Please, G-d, I have sinned. I have acted willfully. I have acted rebelliously before You. I have done so and so and, behold, I am ashamed and I regret my deeds, and from now on I will not return to do this anymore'."

This, of course, is the basis of all confession. In Jewish confession you have to admit that you did something wrong, and then you have to say you are sorry for what you did and agree never to do it again. You cannot do, as some people do, and say, "Yes, I did it, but that so and so deserves it and I would do it again to him." That is not a confession which will gain you repentance. You have to agree that what you did was wrong, and you have to say that you are sorry for what you did, and you have to agree not to do it again. I once heard a Mafioso type of television who said that he did wrong and he was sorry for what he did wrong, but if he would ever lose his money he would do it over again.

He said it was worse to be without money than what he did before. This, of course, would not be a good confession either. In order for us to gain forgiveness for our sins we must, first of all, recognize that we have sinned, then we must be sorry for what we did, and then agree not to do it again. Notice that we say, "We have sinned before You", that we have sinned before G-d. It is not just that we have harmed another person, but that we have estranged ourselves from G-d. We have made ourselves disgusting in our own eyes, that we do not feel pure, that we crave to be forgiven. We have been assured that as long as we have done with a pure heart and sincerely we will be forgiven.

This, of course, is basic Jewish doctrine. However, it is hard to understand what the Rambam says later on. In the second chapter of the Laws of Teshuva, in the 8th paragraph, it says that it is customary that the confession of sins that all Israel says we should say that we have sinned and we also include our forefathers in our sins, and we also say that we should confess every Yom Kippur the sins that we have committed in a previous Yom Kippur. Even though we have already been forgiven for these sins we should still confess them over again. It says here, "The sins that they confessed upon them on this Yom Kippur, we should return and confess upon them on the sins that we made from a previous Yom Kippur." Even though we have still stayed righteous and repentant, we should not withhold ourselves from confessing those sins over again. It says, "Because my sin I make known and my offense is placed before me." In other words, even those sins that we have already been forgiven for in previous years, not in this year, we should confess over again. Even though we still maintain our penitance state. We have not done those sins over again. Why should this be? Why do you confess sins that you have already gained

forgiveness for? It does not seem to make sense. Also, too, when in the Rambam's book on the Laws of Massa HaKorbonas, we learn how when a person brought a sacrifice he also was commanded to make a confession.

There the confession is different. There the confession is, "I sinned and I did this and this, and I am now bringing my Teshuva before You, and this is my Kapora, my restitution." What kind of confession is this, and why did we have to make this type of confession? It, too, does not seem to make sense because before you could bring the sacrifice yourself you had to make the first confession that the Rambam talked about. You had to admit your sin, say you were sorry for you sin, and agree never to go back to it again. Why did you require another confession when you brought the animal? Before you were even eligible to bring the animal you had to make the first confession so, therefore, your sins should have been forgiven.

We also have another problem. The other problem we find in the Gemora Sanhedrin where we learn how the Slokesh says there that if a person does Teshuva his intentional sins will be made unintentional sins. Then a few lines later he says that if you do Teshuva your intentional sins will be made merits. What is going on here?

Perhaps we can understand these questions if we go back to what we learned before when we said that when we admit our sins we are saying that, "We have sinned before You, G-d." People think that they have done such evil things that they can never get back in G-d's graces. They think that they have sinned so much that they are completely lost, that they can no longer find G-d. This, of course, is not true according to the Jewish religion. Although there is a special Medrash that said, "What is asked wisdom? What is the punishment of a sinner? And wisdom tells

them, 'Sinners, let them be pursued by their evil'. And then they ask prophecy, 'What is a sinner's punishment?' He tells them, 'The soul that sins it shall die'. And they ask the Torah, 'What is a sinner's punishment?' And the Torah tells them, 'Let them bring a guilt offering and gain atonement.' And then they ask the Holy One, Blessed be He, 'What is a sinner's punishment?' And He told them, 'Let them do Teshuva and then they will gain forgiveness'."

They tell the story of Acher, who was one of the greatest rabbis who lived behind Rabbi Akiva. His name was Elisha ben Avuha. Elisha ben Avuha, Rabbi Akiva, and two other rabbis entered into mystical studies. Only Rabbi Akiva came out whole. Elisha ben Avuha became a heretic, and another rabbi went crazy and another rabbi died. Elisa ben Avuha, they say, became a heretic because he once saw a father tell a son to climb a tree and to take the eggs but to remember to shoo the mother bird away. The boy shooed the mother bird away, took the eggs, and then fell off the tree and died. Elisha ben Avuha knew that in the Torah we are promised twice to be given long life: once when we honor our parents and once when we shoo away the mother bird, and here the boy had done both and had died so Elisha ben Avuha said, "There is no judge and there is no law," and, therefore, became a heretic. Probably this was an excuse because he probably was depressed by Roman life and thought the Jewish people had no chance, so he decided if you cannot lick them, join them. He was such a great rabbi that Rav Meir used to follow along and learn Torah from him while he was riding a donkey on Shabbos. The other rabbis used to ask Rabbi Meir how he could do that, and he said "Well, I take the seed and throw away the rind." Rabbi Meir was always trying to get Elisha ben Avuha to repent. Elisa ben Avuha said he could

not because he was too far gone. At the end of his life he entered out a cry which Rabbi Meir interpreted to be a sign of Teshuva and that he, too, would be forgiven by G-d.

Therefore, it is not just the foregoing of punishment that we are asking for on Yom Kippur. What we are asking for is actually to be made pure.

That's why you use the word Slach, not just Mechal. Mechal means to foregoing punishment. We want to stand pure before G-d. We want to be accepted before G-d. We want to come before G-d whole and complete.

The rabbis tell us that there are two types of Teshuva: a Teshuva Meava, a Teshuva from love, and there is also Teshuva Meira, a Teshuva from fear. They are both efficacious, as Roshlokesh told us. In one case they changed the sins we do on purpose. They change them to accidental sins. You know in Jewish life you could not bring a sacrifice, in most instances, for things you did on purpose. You could only bring a sacrifice for things you did by accident. Things you did on purpose, it did not do any good to bring sacrifices. First you had to make up with the person against whom you sinned. You also sinned against G-d, but bringing sacrifice was too easy a way to get out of your sin, but your intentional sins, G-d would say, "I will consider them like accidental sins especially if you have made up with them," but only, of course, if you had made up with the person against whom you sinned. This, the rabbis tell us, comes when we repent out of fear, when we repent because we know that we have done the wrong thing, but we are still not sure of ourselves. We are still afraid that we may repeat the same sin. Therefore, we break with our past completely. That is the repentance which comes from fear. Roshlokesh says there is a higher form of repentance. That is the repentance that comes from love where we do not break from our past but use the

energy and strength of our past in order to even do better in the future.

We can understand a little bit about this concept if we understand a little bit about Roshlokesh. Roshlokesh, according to the Talmud, started out as a Talmud Chochum, as a scholar, but for some reasons or another, he became a gladiator and after a gladiator he became an armed robber. There is a story told that once Rav Yochum was bathing in the Jordan and Roshlokesh came and stole his clothes. Rav Yochum recognized Roshlokesh from his student days, and he called him back and said, "How could you do this? You have sunk to such a low point. Why don't you come back to the yeshiva with me?" Roshlokesh, at first, did not want to, but Rav Yochum convinced him and told him, "Remember my beautiful sister. If you are successful, who knows, maybe you could marry her," etc. Roshlokesh came back to the study hall. There is a story that says he left, too, after a few weeks, but then he decided that Torah was the best thing and came back. He became a great scholar. He became the study mate of Rav Yochum. The Talmud is filled with pages of how Rav Yochum and Roshlokesh argue and discuss different problems. Roshlokesh knew the power of Teshuva. He knew what it was to come back to Torah after being away from Torah. He knew that the highest form of Teshuva was when you took the energy that you would normally use to do evil and instead to do good with it. You know, it is a strange phenomena that negative emotions are usually a lot stronger than the positive emotions. When you hate somebody you usually hate them with greater energy than when you love somebody. A friend you will do a favor to once in a while when you see him, but an enemy you will do evil and harm to any way you can. This is an unfortunate aspect of human nature that the destructive forces seem to be more filled with energy than the constructive forces. Roshlokesh was telling us here that if you could only take this energy that you use for destructive

forces and use them for positive forces you can overcome all sorts of barriers and reach even a higher place than if you had never done anything ill, because now you know the power and energy you can put into positive acts because you used to put them into negative acts. This is what he meant by saying that you can even make the acts you did on purpose into merits. If you take the energy, if you learn from the acts you did in the past they can become merits.

We see that many times among people who, in order to do Teshuva, and, of course, it is still valid Teshuva, must break completely with their past. This, of course, is a must for alcoholics and drug addicts. They cannot get involved with their old crowd unless, of course, their friends have also gone on the wagon or foresworn drugs. It is very important that they get together self-help groups and help each other. If you go back to the old crowd, to the old people it is suicide. You will just end up going back to the old habits. We know that this is a valid form of Teshuva. After all, Abraham was told to Lech Lecha, to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's home to go to the land of _____ when he was 43 years old. He had to break completely with his past. It was essential at that time. But that is not the highest form of Teshuva. The highest form of Teshuva is when we can take our past and use it for good. Therefore, that is why we read in our prayers that we are supposed to lift up our sin, and if we cannot lift up our sin, then at least, G-d, You should pass over our rebellion, our sin. That is why we say, too, when we say over and over again the Lord is a merciful and gracious G-d. We use the expression there, too, "Nosayah Von LoVesha". In English it just says forgiving the sin and the rebellion, but Nosayah in Hebrew has the connotation of lifting up. It means to "lift up", "to marry", "to carry". You see what you have to

do in marriage. You have to forgive. You have to lift. You have to carry. You have to lift each other's spirits, etc.

Of course, we mention to blot out the sins that we have. Sometimes we have no choice. We have to blot out the sins that we have done, to rid ourselves of the past, but that is not the highest form of Teshuva. That, of course, is what many people are confronted with today, that they do not realize that the highest form of Teshuva is not to break with your family and friends and from the skills and talents you had before but to elevate them and use them in the purpose of Hashem. Rock singers and so forth who were involved with so forth and so on and drugs but who became Baal Teshuvos. They can form their own bands free of drugs. We have the Diaspora Yeshiva Band composed of some of the greatest rock musicians in America who later found Judaism and could still use their skills and energy for the pursuit of Judaism and not to its detriment. We have found people who when they re-establish their relationship with their family have a deeper relationship now because they understand the important of family. They understand the importance of children, and they can take their rebellion that they had before and use that same energy only use it in a positive force.

That, of course, is what we mean here, too, when we say that a person who brought a KOrban has to make a confession. Confession is different here. He says, "Yes, I sinned and I did this and this," but here it does not say, "I am ashamed and I am not going to do it over again," because that is already understood. He says, "I am returning with my Teshuva before You. I am giving my Teshuva to You, G-d, and this should be my restitution. What I am doing now is taking all that energy that I used to use for evil things and using it now for positive things." That is the highest form of Teshuva. I am using all those talents and skills that I used to squander in the pursuit

of evil I now use it for the pursuit of good, that I am now taking all of those things that in the past I used in order to further bad goals I am now using them to further good goals. This is what it means, too, when the Rambam says in the second chapter when he says that we confess over again the sins that we have already been forgiven for because we remember how the energy and the skill and the emotion that we used to do the sins and now we use that same energy and emotion to do good with. That is my restitution now. That is how I am making good for what I did before.

That is also, too, why the rabbis say that a Baal Teshuva stands in a higher place than a Tzadek, than one who never sins because a Baal Teshuva understand the powerful forces within a human being that can lead him to do evil things, but he now takes the energy of those negative forces and applies them in a positive way. He understands better what people are going through, too, because he has gone through it and he knows better how to appreciate others and their struggles and how to sympathize and be more tolerant to them, but, at the same time, he can serve as an example to them how to overcome these terrible types of problems. So on this day, Shabbos Shuva, let us all remember that we need to stand in front of G-d, and we need to stand in front of G-d pure. We can come before G-d with a precious gift even if we have sinned and done wrong things. That precious gift is the knowledge of the energy and the problems that beset people when they are confronted by an evil path, but we can take the same energy and the same drives and use them now for positive goals. Let us all hope that all of us will do this so we will truly be worthy of a good year, that we will be like Roshlokesh, who took all of the energy that he used in the past in physical, carnal things, even in criminal things, and he used them for Torah. He enhanced Torah and the Jewish community. His past experiences had turned from willful sins to merits. Let us all hope that we can change around all our faults

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and make them merits, too, in the coming year so we will be truly worthy
of a Happy, Healthy, and Prosperous New Year. Amen.