

Taking Responsibility For Our Own Growth (Edited Transcript)

[Listen to audio](#)

We are in the midst of the very special days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, known as the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance. The Aseret Yemei Teshuvah are the most intense days of the year. The Shabbos that falls out during this time is called Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbos of Repentance, which takes its name from the first word of this week's Haftorah, which begins, Shuvah Yisrael, Return, Israel!; it is a time for reflection and for repentance.

There are two aspects of the Ten Days of Repentance which the Rambam mentions in his Laws of Repentance. In chapter two, law six, he says that even though repentance and prayer are good throughout the year, the Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur are especially potent for repentance and prayer. We say about this time (Yeshaya 55: 6), Dirshu Hashem b'hitavto, Seek out Hashem when He is close by. During this time Hashem is particularly close to us, and our repentance and our prayers are more easily accepted.

It is also a time when the stakes are much higher. This is conveyed by the Rambam in chapter three of the Laws of Repentance. The whole theme of this chapter, specifically law four, is that we have to view the world as though it is suspended, hanging in the balance between fifty percent merit and fifty percent sin, and that the next thing we do will tip the scales for ourselves, for our community and for the world at large. This is especially important to have in mind between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, with our judgment to be sealed on Yom Kippur. Therefore, says the Rambam, it is customary for the entire House of Israel to increase their acts of charity and good deeds and to be involved in mitzvot from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, more so than during the rest of the year. This is also a time for extra davening because we are trying to add as much merit so as to tip the scale in our favour as we approach Yom Kippur.

Taking Responsibility for Our Own Growth

The Mishnah in Piskei Avot (1:14) says, Hu [Hillel] hayah omer: im ein ani li, mi li? Uche'ani l'atzmi, mah ani? V'im lo achshav, eimatai? He [Hillel] used to say: if I am not for myself who will be for me? And when I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? The Noda B'Yehudah, one of the great sages in recent generations, says that this Mishnah is particularly important when approaching the Ten Days of Repentance.

According to some commentaries this Mishnah is talking about a person's performance of mitzvot. Rashi says that "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" means that if I do not do my mitzvot, no one can do them for me. The Maharal explains that one can transfer most material things on to other people, but a mitzvah cannot be transferred - one has to do it himself. Parents can leave a great monetary inheritance to their children, but they can't leave an inheritance of mitzvot. Their children have to do mitzvot on their own. Ultimately, we have to take responsibility for our own lives. We are judged by Hashem and have to give an account for our own mitzvot. Each one of us has to do our own mitzvot: no one else can do it for us.

Rabbeinu Yonah and the Rambam explain the above Mishnah as referring to attaining inspiration, namely, if I don't rebuke, encourage and inspire myself, who will do it for me? Although it is true that we get inspiration from the outside through the encouragement and prodding of our rabbis and teachers, Rabbeinu Yonah teaches us that this kind of external inspiration will only last a short while. We each have to be self-motivated, take responsibility for our own growth and be proactive, for example, finding more opportunities to learn, buying new Torah books or putting more effort into davening, whatever it may be. These Ten Days of Repentance are about taking responsibility for ourselves.

Rav Yisrael Salanter shares an interesting, practical piece of advice in one of his letters. He suggests making resolutions for the New Year in the areas which are easiest for us. This seems to go against conventional wisdom, which maintains that we should work on

those things with which we struggle with the most, not the 'easy' areas. But Rav Salanter suggests we work on the easier areas, saying that one is more likely to succeed when making a resolution about a relatively easy, practical step in mitzvah observance. Success will generate momentum, and will push us further. Furthermore, we are held more accountable for the easy changes we could have and should have made, because they were easy to do.

Following Rav Salanter's advice, let us start with the easy things. Let us think of practical, easy, changes we can adopt.

We are not alone

Although we are responsible for our own actions, we must realise that there is a balance between taking responsibility for our own growth and needing Divine assistance. This is expressed in the second statement of Hillel, *u'che'she'ani l'atzmi, mah ani, 'if I am only for myself, what am I?'* Although we have to take the initial steps towards self-improvement, we can't do the job on our own. One of the students of the Shla, known as the Lechem Mishna, quotes a Midrash (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:3) where G-d says to us, *pitchu li petach echad shel teshuvah k'chuda shel machat, v'ani poteiach lachem petachim she'yihyu agalot u'kraniyot nichnasot bo, 'open for Me one opening of repentance like the point of a needle and I will open up for you gateways [so huge] that carriages will be able to pass through.'*

G-d is saying that once we take the first steps He will help us. Sometimes this journey to becoming a better Jew feels so daunting 'there is so much to do. However, if we start with the first few steps we don't have to worry about how we will scale the mountain since G-d will help us the rest of the way. We don't have to do it on our own, we just have to **start** on our own and then Hashem will help us.

In this vein, there is another encouraging statement from the Gemara (Yoma 38b), *ba litaher mesayin oto, 'a person who comes to purify himself, G-d helps him.'* And not only G-d, but His messengers in the form of the community, rabbis, teachers. All of the support that's out there is to help us on our journey but we still have to take the initiative. We must own the process and take those first steps, even if they are small steps, and then we will receive the great support from Hashem and from our rabbis and teachers and community, which is built into the process because if I am on my own what can I possibly achieve?

Making Every Minute Count

The third and final statement of Hillel in the Mishnah is, *v'im lo achshav, eimatai, 'and if not now, when?'* The best way to understand this statement is based on a halachah in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 23:1), the Code of Jewish Law, which says that if you are in a cemetery and you normally wear your tzitzit out, you have to tuck them in. Although a funeral is a religious service, unlike at a bris, no tallaysim are worn by any participants. Even when the dead body is wrapped in a tallis, the tzitzit are cut off the tallis. Why? The Gemara (Brachot 18a, Menachot 41a) explains that this is called *loeg la'rash, 'mocking the poor.'* Only when you are alive can you do mitzvot. When you flaunt your tzitzit in a cemetery, you are effectively saying to the dead: I can do mitzvot and you can't, and that's painful. It's like a rich man taking a wad of money and waving it in the face of a poor man who wants it but can't get it.

But why would a reminder of the inability to do mitzvot pain those who have passed on? After all, the next world is Gan Eden. It's a world of spirituality, a world of perfection, a world of complete justice and accountability. We see from this is the value of every mitzvah and the preciousness of life on this earth. For every mitzvah that we do, we have an opportunity to accumulate merit for all of eternity. Once we leave this world we can't do it anymore and therefore there is an element of sensitivity to the dead even though they are in a higher world.

A story is told about how the great Torah Sage, the Vilna Gaon was crying on his death bed. His students said, why are you crying? Can you imagine the Gan Eden, the tremendous reward that is waiting in the World to Come, for a person of the spiritual stature of the Vilna Gaon? In answer, the Vilna Gaon picked up his tzitzit and said, *'in this world, for a few coins I can fulfill a mitzvah; when I go to the next world I won't be able to do mitzvot any more and that is why I am crying.'*

It is so important to have a sense of the preciousness of every minute of life because whatever we do in this world lasts for eternity. It is the merit of the mitzvot that we do in this world that is going to sustain us in the next. Rashi on these last words of the Mishnah compares it to Shabbos. If you don't prepare and cook on Friday, you are not going to have anything to eat on Shabbos. The next world is like Shabbos, Rashi says. You can't cook, you can't work. Whatever you do on 'erev Shabbos? ? which is this world ? is what will sustain you in the next world. So our time here is a time of potential to build what we will live on for eternity in the next world. When Shabbos comes in, when we leave this world, the account is frozen. We leave with whatever mitzvot we did when we were alive ? and that's it. In some circumstances, children can do mitzvot on behalf of parents and continue the merit, but in general there is nothing else one can do to increase one's merit in the next world.

Therefore, every minute of life is precious. Im lo achshav, eimatai? if not now, when? Because now is the time. Rabbeinu Yonah points out that we can't get back a day that passes. So even if tomorrow we're still in this world and can still do more mitzvot, if we missed the mitzvah potential of today, it is lost. When they told the Chofetz Chaim the saying, 'time is money,' he corrected them. No, he said, time is life. The minutes and the hours can slip through our fingers if we don't pay attention and take advantage.

We Want Life

At this incredibly powerful time of the year, we feel the urgency of the moment. During these ten days more than anything else, we are begging Hashem for life. We say Zachreinu l'chaim melech chafetz ba'chaim v'chatveinu b'sefer hachaim, 'remember us for life [the] King who desires life and write us in the Book of Life.' Life is so precious because if we get another year of life from Hashem we can do so many mitzvot with that.

In its three statements, this mishnah gives us the direction for the Ten Days of Repentance and for the whole year. If I don't take responsibility and do my mitzvot, nobody else can do them for me. I don't have to worry about being alone; if I start the process G-d will help and my rabbis and teachers and community will help. But I have to start the process. And finally, if not now, when? I have to take advantage of the opportunities presented to me today.

As we look towards the New Year, we need to take on practical resolutions to improve the different areas of our lives. We need to do this with a sense of urgency, with the awareness of how precious life is, and if we take this step, G-d will help us scale great heights.