

**ROSH HASHANA EVE
THE PROCESS OF TESHUVA
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RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

A Hasidic Rebbe once asked his students the following question: “How far do you have to travel to be on the other side of the world?” His students sat down and analyzed mathematical equations to find a possible answer. After a period of time they returned to the Rebbe and came up with possible solutions. He looked at all of them and said: “You are all incorrect. The answer is: Just one step. Turn around, and you’ll face the opposite direction.”

That’s what this period of time in the Jewish year is all about. Turning around, going the opposite direction, doing what we call in the terminology of the period of the High Holy Days, Teshuva, commonly interpreted as repentance.

This is a difficult concept for us to get our arms around, on the one hand, and on the other, a very easy one for us to understand and to implement. The Midrash informs us that a king had a son who was estranged from his father. His friend said to him, “Return to your father.” He said, “I cannot.” Then his father sent him a message, “return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way.” So G-d says to Israel in words of the third chapter of the Prophet Malachi, “turn back to Me, and I will turn back to you.”

The relationship between G-d and the people of Israel is one of intimacy. We wish to return to G-d and G-d wants to be closer to us. It is this intimacy that defines these High Holy Days. We may have been estranged from G-d during the year; we may have

erred, transgressed, and sinned. However, G-d wishes us to return, to effectuate Teshuva and turn around, change our ways, be better people and have a closer, more intimate relationship with G-d. For this to occur, both according to the language of Malachi and the Midrash, we must make the first move.

Rabbi Mark Borovitz is currently the Rabbi of Beit T'Shuvah in Los Angeles, the House of Return, a rehabilitation facility for addicts of all kinds. Borovitz has written a book entitled *The Holy Thief: a Con Man's Journey from Darkness to Light*. In it he describes his life, how he lived on the edge of an abyss, how he eventually redeemed himself from self-destruction and now is in the position of helping others.

In the first part of his memoir Rabbi Borovitz describes his life as a youngster, a young adult and then an irresponsible adult. When he was fourteen, his father died and his world came crashing down. He stole, gambled and drank and had a twenty-year life of crime. He describes his method of passing bogus checks to many people, stealing from one while paying off another. His life was filled with gambling, drinking binges and one-night stands. At one point, the Mob put out a hit on him and only because he knew other mobsters was he able to survive.

Eventually, he was caught and brought before a judge. His lawyer told him it would be better to be married. So he found a wife and eventually had a daughter. Though given probation he did not improve his conduct and was later incarcerated for a long period of time. When he left prison he immediately went back to his evil ways with a vengeance. He was caught once more. This time, just before he was taken into the holding cell something happened in his life. He writes: "I believe that we have a choice.

I believe that people are driven by free will. I believe it with all my heart. We have a choice. And I believe with all my heart that at that moment, riding in the backseat of that car, starting when I crossed the street at Fulton and Van Nuys, that I had no choice. This was my Red Sea. This was my miracle.”

“I shivered because I knew what was happening. I knew I was about to commit myself to a different life, a changed life, that it was going to take time and that it was going to be hard, and that I would be tempted a thousand times to turn back, to run away. I knew I was in for a fight. A fight against my inclinations, my tendencies, my temptations. A fight against myself. The fight of my life. The fight for my life.”

It was at that moment that Mark’s life changed. He went back to prison but this time became an exemplary prisoner. He worked for Rabbi Mel Silverman, the prison Chaplain, and began to find a purpose for his life. He learned more about his Judaism, something that he had forgotten since his youth. He helped Rabbi Silverman conduct services and learned more about proper values and Jewish tradition. Eventually, he was released and this time he was a changed man. He began to work for Beit T'Shuvah, and now divorced, met Harriet, who would become his wife. He was convinced by those who knew him that he should enter rabbinical school which he did.

His book begins at the end. He writes that on Tuesday, May 16, 2000, he was ordained a Rabbi at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles by the Ziegler Rabbinical School. He describes a very moving moment as he was introduced by his mentor, Rabbi Ed Feinstein, and the entire congregation rose in applause as he was presented as a candidate for ordination. I was present at that ordination as President of the Rabbinical Assembly.

The rector of the Rabbinical School, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, the Executive Vice President of the Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Joel Meyers, and I, as President of the Rabbinical Assembly, held Sifrei Torah as the ordines were presented to us for acceptance. We comprised the Bet Din, the court of Jewish law, which officially accepted them into the rabbinate. It was a moving moment and there were very few dry eyes in the congregation. From the depths of human behavior, Rabbi Mark Borovitz had now risen to serve the community through Beit T'Shuva and help others return to a life which would be a healthy one and a credit to society.

Thankfully, most of us don't have to take that long treacherous journey. However, all of us can be better human beings, correct some of our behavior and become models of exemplary living and proper values. How do we do it? I would like to give you this evening two theories. One stems from Jewish tradition, and the other, from research into human behavior.

Perhaps the most instructive passages on how to do Teshuva were written by the medieval Jewish philosopher and legal codifier Maimonides. In his laws of Teshuva Maimonides informs us of the process. He tells us that there are different stages which must be present for true repentance to take place. These steps include: recognition that a mistake has been made, remorse, and the rectification of the harm that that has been done to another human being. Then comes the true test: "What constitutes complete repentance? He who is confronted by the identical situation where he previously sinned and it lies within his power to commit the sin again, but he nevertheless does not succumb because he wishes to repent." Only then is true repentance really effectuated. The same

temptation is there, but the outcome is different. This is the true Teshuva and the person is deemed to be praised.

In a book entitled *The Power of Habit – Why We Do What We Do In Life* by Charles Duhigg, the author describes the golden rule of habit change. He writes that you can't extinguish a bad habit whether it be alcohol, smoking, gambling or any other misdeed, you can only change it. It is in that change that what we would call repentance really takes place.

He describes, for example, the success of Alcoholics Anonymous. He writes that an estimated 2 million people seek help from AA each year and as many as 10 million alcoholics may have achieved sobriety through the group. While it doesn't work for everyone, it has served as a model for treatment programs for overeating, gambling, debt, sex, drugs, hoarding, smoking, self-mutilation, video games addictions, emotional dependency, and dozens of other destructive behaviors. Duhigg suggests that what AA provides is a method for attacking the habits that surround alcoholic use. It asks alcoholics to search for the rewards they get from alcohol and then builds a system of meetings and companionship that strive to offer alternative meaningful rewards and new routines that can change the behavior. The success stories demonstrate that almost any habit can be changed.

He writes that researchers began finding that habit replacement worked pretty well for many people until the stresses of life got too high, at which point alcoholics often fell off the wagon. They asked why if habit replacement is so effective do some people seem to fail at such critical moments. As they dug into further research they found that

replacement habits only became durable new behaviors when they are accompanied by something else. That something else was a higher power, a belief in G-d. Belief was the ingredient that made a reworked habit loop into a permanent behavior.

After reviewing the literature and studies by psychologists, Duhigg states that what we do know is that for habits to permanently change, people must believe that change is feasible. The habit cannot be eradicated, it must, instead, be replaced. Your odds of success go up dramatically when you commit to changing as part of a group and belief is easier when it occurs within a community.

In short, both Maimonides and Charles Duhigg teach us the same things. We can change. It is up to us. We have free choice. We can turn it around if we so wish. Most of us aren't Mark Borovitz, and thankfully most of us don't live lives where our habits are so self-destructive. However, we can all improve; we can all change our habits. The first thing that we must do is want to change and then go through the difficult process of remorse and the change of behavior.

Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer in his book entitled *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past* writes: "Returning does not involve reversing one's actions, or pretending they did not happen; it is not an evolutionary regression, but rather a wildly progressive worldview. A person who can truly return and change direction has so obviously exceeded the merits of someone who has never been challenged." Life is indeed a challenge and on a daily basis we have the free choice to both make the proper one and also not to do so.

At our Neilah services as we conclude Yom Kippur we quote the prophet Ezekiel who states: "As I live – declares the Lord G-d - I do not desire the death of the evildoers, but that they turn from their paths and live." The theology of the High Holy Days tells us that G-d wants us to return and will meet us partway: "Turn back to Me, and I will turn back to you," states Malachi.

This is our task, this is our challenge and this is our great mission over these coming days. May we improve our conduct, change our habits, become better people and come closer to G-d. All it takes is for us to take that first step to effectuate Teshuva and create a better world for all.