

The Spirituality of Imperfection

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1. Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk

"Only G-d is perfect. Man's actions must be basically defective in part. If one believes his good deed or holy study to be thoroughly pure and perfect, this is a sure sign they are thoroughly bad" (*Louis Newman, The Hasidic Anthology* [New York: Scribner, 1954], 315)

2. ברכות ל"ד ב

דאמר רבי אבהו: מקום שבַּעֲלֵי תְּשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין — צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִים אֵינָם עוֹמְדִין, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "שָׁלוֹם שָׁלוֹם לְרַחוּק וְלִקְרוֹב". "לְרַחוּק" בְּרִישָׁא, וְהֵדָר "לְקְרוֹב".

Berakhot 34b

As Rabbi Abbahu said: **In the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand**, as it is stated: "Peace, peace upon him who is far and him who is near." Peace and greeting is extended first to **him who is far**, the penitent, **and only thereafter** is peace extended to **him who is near**, the full-fledged righteous.

3. משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ז:ד'

(ד) וְאֵל יִדְמָה אָדָם בַּעַל תְּשׁוּבָה שֶׁהוּא מְרַחֵק מִמַּעַלְת הַצְדִּיקִים מִפְּנֵי הָעוֹנוֹת וְהַחֲטָאוֹת שֶׁעָשָׂה. אֵין הַדָּבָר כֵּן אֶלָּא אֶהוּב וְנִחָמָד הוּא לְפָנֵי הַבּוֹרָא כְּאִלוּ לֹא חָטָא מַעֲוָלָם. וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שֶׁשָּׂכְרוּ הַרְבֵּה שְׁהָרִי טַעַם טַעַם הַחֲטָא וּפְרַשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ וְכַבֵּשׁ יִצְרוֹ. אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים מְקוֹם שֶׁבַּעֲלֵי תְּשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין אֵין צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִין יְכוּלִין לַעֲמֹד בּוֹ. כְּלוּמַר מַעַלְתָּן גְּדוּלָּה מִמַּעַלְת אֵלוּ שֶׁלֹּא חָטְאוּ מַעֲוָלָם מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהֵן כּוֹבְשִׁים יִצְרָם יוֹתֵר מֵהֶם:

Mishneh Torah, Repentance 7:4

(4) A Baal-Teshuvah should not consider himself distant from the level of the righteous because of the sins and transgressions that he committed. This is not true. He is beloved and desirable before the Creator as if he never sinned. Furthermore, **he has a great reward for he has tasted sin and yet, separated himself from it, conquering his [evil] inclination**. Our Sages declared: "In the place where Baalei Teshuvah stand, even the completely righteous are not able to stand." The level of Baalei Teshuvah transcends the level of those who never sinned at all, for they overcome their [evil] inclination more.

4. דברים ל:י

(י) כִּי תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשַׁמֵּר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו הַכְּתוּבָה בְּסֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה כִּי תָשׁוּב אֶל־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לֵבְךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ: {ס}

Deuteronomy 30:10

(10) since you will be heeding your God and keeping the divine commandments and laws that are recorded in this book of the Teaching—once you return to your God with all your heart and soul.

5. העמק דבר על דברים ל:י

כי תשוב בכל לב ובכל נפש. היינו תשובה מאהבה ומי ששב מאהבה עומד לעד לעולם ואינו מתנווד כמו העובד מיראת העונש.

Haamek Davar on Deuteronomy 30:10

With all your heart and all your soul means repentance out of love. One who returns out of love remains that way permanently and never strays as does one who worships out of fear of punishment. Therefore, [for one who returns out of love] there is no suspicion to stray again.

6. הרחב דבר על דברים ל:י

(י) והיינו דברי ירמיה הנביא ד' בבאור... אם תשוב ישראל וגוי אלי תשוב. ביאור המאמר. ירמיה הזהיר את ישראל שבדורו אם ירצו לשוב יהי דווקא אלי. פיי מאהבת ה' ולא מאהבת עצמו היינו יראת העונש. וביומא שם אי עוד גדולה תשובה ומע"ט שהוא כתריס בפני הפורענות. וע"כ מיירי אפי' מיראה דאלו מאהבה לא שייך כתריס שהרי עונות נעשים כזכיות

Harchev Davar on Deuteronomy 30:10

Neziv establishes the priority of repentance out of love as he has done for Service out of love. Repentance, return, reversion can begin out of fear of punishment, fear of the natural dire consequences of foolish behavior but it can move beyond this to a genuine love of God, love of Torah and love of the world created by God.

7. יומא פ"ו ב

אמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות, שנאמר: "שובה ישראל עד יהיה אליך כי כשלת בעונך", ה' "עון" — מזיד הוא, וקא קרי ליה מכשול. איני? והאמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכיות, שנאמר: "ובשוב רשע מרשעתו ועשה משפט וצדקה עליהם (חיה) חיה!" לא קשיא: כאן מאהבה, כאן מיראה.

Yoma 86b

Reish Lakish said: **Great is repentance, as the penitent's intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions, as it is stated: "Return, Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity"** (Hosea 14:2). The Gemara analyzes this: **Doesn't "iniquity" mean an intentional sin? Yet** the prophet **calls it stumbling**, implying that one who repents is considered as though he only stumbled accidentally in his transgression. The Gemara asks: **Is that so? Didn't Reish Lakish himself say: Great is repentance, as one's intentional sins are counted for him as merits, as it is stated: "And when the wicked turns from his wickedness, and does that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby"** (Ezekiel 33:19), and all his deeds, even his transgressions, will become praiseworthy? The Gemara reconciles: This is **not difficult: Here**, when one repents **out of love**, his sins become like merits; **there**, when one repents **out of fear**, his sins are counted as unwitting transgressions.

8. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Transforming the Story (Family Edition Vayechi 5779)

Reish Lakish's statement about sins and merits is almost certainly **inspired by the words Yosef speaks to his brothers in the closing chapter of Genesis**: "You intended to harm me but God intended it for good." This is the paradigm that stands at the basis of Reish Lakish's argument. The brothers had committed a deliberate sin by selling Yosef into slavery; they (or at least Yehuda, the instigator of the decision to sell Yosef) had done teshuva. The result is that – through divine providence ("God intended it") – their action is now reckoned "for good." **Any act we perform has multiple consequences, some good, some bad.** When we intend evil, the bad consequences are attributed to us because they are what we sought to achieve. The good consequences are not: they are mere by-products or unintended outcomes. **So in the case of Yosef, many positive things happened once he had been brought to Egypt.** None of these consequences could be credited to his brothers, even though they would not have happened had the brothers not done as they did. **However, once the brothers had undergone complete repentance, their original intent was cancelled out.** It was now possible to see the good, as well as the bad, consequences of their act – and to credit the good to them.

9. Rav Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man p.116

The main principle of repentance is that the future dominates the past and reigns over it in unbounded fashion. **Sin, as the cause and beginning of a lengthy causal chain of destructive acts, can be transformed, underneath the guiding hand of the future, into a source of merit and good deeds, into love and fear of God.** The cause is in the past, but the direction and development is determined by the future... **When the future participates in the clarification and elucidation of the past – points out the way it is to take, defines its goals, indicates the direction of its development – then man becomes the creator of worlds...** (116) The idea of the reign of the future over the past is, no doubt, highly paradoxical, but it is no less true for all that... **A great man can utilize his past sins and transgressions for the sake of achieving great and exalted goals.** “in the place where the repentant sinners stand, even the wholly righteous cannot stand.” **Historical crimes, past aberrations, can at times, descend upon dry bones like the life-giving dew of resurrection, to which world history so amply testifies.**

10. Orot HaTeshuvah, end of chapter 1

Teshuvah from love is filled with endless joy. It transforms all sins into merits — **from every mistake it draws forth lofty lessons, and from every failure it creates exalted ascents.** This is the teshuvah for which all eyes yearn. It must come, and it will come.

11. Orot HaTeshuvah 9:8

Repentance operates on the very will that led to sin — a desire of great force, strong enough to even break moral conviction. Then, once the sin is uprooted and redirected, it does not disappear. Rather, with its full power, it is redirected into the foundation of the world, **imprinting in existence itself a mighty will for light and goodness.** And in this way, intentional sins are turned into actual merits.

משלי כ"ד:ט"ז .12

(טז) כִּי שֶׁבַע | יִפֹּל צַדִּיק וְקָם וְרָשָׁעִים יִכָּשְׁלוּ בְּרָעָה:

Proverbs 24:16

(16) Seven times the righteous man falls and gets up, While the wicked are tripped by one misfortune.

(ח) אֶל־תִּשְׂמַחַי אִיְבֹתַי לִי כִּי נָפַלְתִּי קָמְתִּי כִּי־אֲשׁוּב בְּחֹשֶׁךְ ה' אֹר לִי: {פ}

Micah 7:8

(8) Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy! Though I have fallen, I rise again; Though I sit in darkness, GOD is my light.

**14. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, The Spirituality of Imperfection
[New York: Bantam, 1993]**

(p.3) Fay Vincent, who served as MLB Commissioner from 1989 to 1992, famously said, "Baseball teaches us, or has taught most of us, how to deal with failure. ... I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, **considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth.**"

(p.27) Therapy offers explanations; spirituality offers forgiveness. Both may be necessary, but one is not the other. The therapeutic approach looks to origins, to **push-forces that compel**, as the psychological language of "drives" and the sociological focus on "the shaping environment" attest. Spirituality, in contrast, attends to directions, to the **pull-force of motives**, which attract or draw forward—the language of spirituality is the vocabulary of "ideals", of "hope". **Therapy may release *from* addiction, spirituality releases *for* life.**

(p.29 Quoting Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom*): One of the disconcerting –and delightful—teachings of the master was: **"God is closer to sinners than to saints."** This is how he explained it: "God in heaven **holds each person by a string**. When you sin, you cut the string. Then God ties it up again, making a knot—and thereby bringing you a little closer to him. Again and again your sins cut the string—and **with each further knot God keeps drawing you closer and closer.**"