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# TESHUVAH – PART I

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## Introspection and Growth or the Confession Box?

*Let's say you're an astronaut, far beyond the earth on a very long journey. Let's say you get fed up with the constant barrage of instructions coming in on your radio from home base. So you shut it off. With no regrets. And you relax, enjoying the awesome scenery out the window. And time flies by ...*

*But eventually, you realize you have no clue where you are. Or how to get back to where you want to be. And you remember that you had a mission, but you can't quite get straight exactly what it was. You panic.*

*Finally, you remember the radio. You reactivate it. You hold the hand piece and call, "Home base? Astronaut calling home base! Answer me!"*

*A faint reply is heard. It is the sweetest sound you've ever come by. Now you can get back on course.*

*We are all astronauts. We took off from Mount Sinai over 33 centuries ago with a plan to follow and a mission to accomplish. We've got to reconnect to our home base (Tzvi Freeman, *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*, p. 54).*

God created each individual with unique attributes and talents, and the ability to exercise free will in order to reach his potential. During the year we may make mistakes and use our free will to undermine our ability to reach our potential. As we shall see in this two-part series, God therefore gave us the precious gift of *teshuvah*, enabling us to correct our mistakes, regain our lost potential, and repair our relationship with Him.

There are two Morasha classes on *teshuvah*. In this first class, we will develop a general definition of *teshuvah* and explore its tremendous power. In the second class we will examine in detail the more "technical" aspects of *teshuvah*: the steps involved in the process of doing *teshuvah* and how to implement them.

The Morasha class on Free Will is a prerequisite for this class.

This class will address the following questions:

- ∞ What is the essence of teshuvah?
- ∞ Why don't Jews use a confession box?
- ∞ What is the power of teshuvah?
- ∞ Can we do teshuvah without having sinned?
- ∞ How is teshuvah connected with the final Redemption?

### Class Outline:

- Section I.     What is Teshuvah?
- Section II.    The Power of Teshuvah
- Section III.   Teshuvah Will Bring the Redemption

## SECTION I. WHAT IS TESHUVAH?

*Teshuvah* means return. Return to what? The Baal HaTanya explains that the word *teshuvah* is a composite word formed from the word *tashuv* and the letter *hei*. It means “return to God.” That is what *teshuvah* is. Remarkably, somebody who is distant from God, somebody who has strayed far afield, is able to make a miraculous return.

### 1. Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf, *Rosh HaShanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit*, Leviathan Press, p.102 – **Dealing with mistakes.**

One of the most common words in your prayer book is “sin.” It’s not a very pleasant sounding word. Certainly no one wants to look at himself or herself as a sinner. In Hebrew, the generic term for sin is *chet*. This term literally means “to make a mistake.” Sins, no thanks. But mistakes – sure – we all make mistakes.

The issue on Yom Kippur (and throughout the year) is this: How do we correct the mistakes of our past and avoid repeating them in the future? If we can understand this, then we possess the key to unlocking an enormous reservoir of latent potential for greatness that would otherwise lie dormant.

This is teshuvah. The common translation of teshuvah is “repentance.” Again, a rather foreign sounding idea. The proper translation of the word teshuvah is “to return.” Teshuvah is an animated technique for locating the rationalizations that lie at the root of our mistakes: recognizing them, dealing with them, and eliminating them.

Like an act of betrayal against a spouse or a close friend, which causes a tangible dent in the relationship, iniquity “dents” our relationship with God. In the words of the verse below, sin constructs a barrier, as it were, between man and God.

### 2. **Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 59:2 – Sin comes between man and God.**

For your iniquities have come between you and your God, and your transgressions have caused Him to hide His countenance from you, from hearing [you].

כי אם עונותיכם היו מבדלים בינכם לבין אלקיכם  
וחטאותיכם הסתירו פנים מכם משמוע:

The gift of teshuvah, however, allows a person to return to God – the far are drawn close.

### 3. **Hoshea (Hosea) 14:2 – Returning all the way to God.**

Return, O Israel, unto the Lord, your God, for you have stumbled in your transgression.

שובה ישראל עד ה' אלקיך כי כשלת בעונך:

This world is a place full of obstacles and stumbling blocks. Indeed, we stumble and fall, succumbing to at least some of the pitfalls that cross our path. As the Talmud teaches, there is no human being who never sins (Sanhedrin 46b, based on Kohelet/Ecclesiastes 7). God knows that our journey in this world is precarious and has therefore given us a great gift: the gift of teshuvah, the power to return.

4. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim – Mo'adim, Vol. I, pp. 249-250 – Transgression creates barriers between ourselves and God, and defiles our soul. Teshuvah removes those barriers and impurities.**

When a person transgresses he defiles his soul. This impurity cuts him off and separates him from God. As long as the impurity is present, he is distanced from God. The request “forgive us” [in the daily Shemoneh Esrei] is essentially a request to remove the barrier [between ourselves and God] ...

Every mitzvah brings a person closer to God [the root of the word *mitzvah* shares the same root as the word *tzevat*, a pair of pliers, a device for bonding two entities]. In contrast, every transgression distances a person from God. The main aspect of sin that is so terrible is ... that it causes him to be distant from God. Therefore, the ultimate aim of teshuvah is to return and regain our original closeness to God.

כאשר אדם חוטא מטמא הוא את נשמתו, טומאה זו חוצצת ומרחקתו מה', וכל עוד החטאים קיימים מרוחק הוא מהשי"ת. בקשת "סלח לנו" היא מחיקת החטא כדי להסיר את החציצה הזאת...

כל מצוה ומצוה שעושה מקרבת אותו יותר אל ה'. לעומת זאת החטא מרחיק מה'. האסון הגדול שבחטא הוא... בעיקר – הריחוק. מטרת התשובה היא אפוא – לשוב להתקרב אליו.

Rambam (Maimonides) provides an inspirational description of the teshuvah process. It is a true revolution, a demonstration of just how much a person is able to achieve by means of his deeds.

5. **Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance) 7:7 – How wonderful is teshuvah!**

How wonderful is repentance! One day a person can be separated from the Lord, God of Israel, as it is written, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God ...” – and on the next he can be attached to the Divine Presence, as it is written, “But you who are attached to the Lord your God ...”

כמה מעולה מעלת התשובה אמש היה זה מובדל מה' אלהי ישראל שנאמר עונותיכם היו מבדילים ביניכם לבין אלהיכם... והיום הוא מודבק בשכינה שנאמר ואתם הדבקים בה' אלהיכם...

Since our relationship with God is a two-way relationship, it follows that He desires our repentance. We need only make the first step, and the rest of the course will be met with fantastic Divine assistance.

6. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Handbook of Jewish Thought, Vol. II, 15:59 – Initiate the first move to return to God, and He will return to you.**

Even if one has lived a completely ungodly life, he should not give up hope and feel that it is impossible for him to change his way of life [Ramban/Nachmanides on Devarim/Deuteronomy 30:11]. Our Sages teach us that, “All beginnings are difficult” [Rashi on Shemot/Exodus 19:5]. God thus gives a person every opportunity, and once he makes the initial effort to do teshuvah, he is given Divine help [Shabbat 104a]. God told his prophet, “Return to Me, and I will return to you” [Malachi 3:7]. Our Sages teach us that God says, “Make an opening for Me like the eye of a needle, and I will open wide for you the gates of heaven” [Shir HaShirim/Song of Songs Rabbah 5:3].

We have said that teshuvah means returning to God – or, in the words of Rambam (Hilchot Teshuvah 7:6), to the Divine Presence. Yet, teshuvah also means returning to one's true self, an inner purity that is always connected to its Divine source.

7. **Siddur, Morning Prayer; Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 136 – Teshuvah is a return to the purity of one's soul.**

אלוקי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא, אתה בראתה, אתה יצרתה, אתה נפחתה בי ...

*My God, the soul you have given me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me ...*

Teshuvah, literally translated means “return.” We believe that the soul is intrinsically pure and began its sojourn in this world in a state of purity. Mistakes and wrongdoings are departures from the essential nature of the human soul. Therefore when a person has done something wrong, the process of teshuvah is really that of going back to his or her true essence.

Teshuvah is so vital to mankind, it was created along with the Torah before the world.

8. **Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 54a – Teshuvah was created before the world.**

Seven things were created before the world. They are: the Torah, teshuvah ...

שבעה דברים נבראו קודם שנברא העולם ואלו הן  
תורה ותשובה ...

The fact that teshuvah was created before the world itself implies that a person can do teshuvah even without having sinned. The world was created “at a distance” from God, and repentance draws it close. Repentance, in this sense, defines the most fundamental desire of God for the world. Fittingly, it is the only thing that the central blessings of the Shemoneh Esrei prayer describe as God's desire.

9. **The Shemoneh Esrei prayer – Of all the blessings, which include such concepts as wisdom, redemption, health, sustenance, etc., only repentance is expressed as God's “desire.”**

Blessed are You, God, Who desires repentance.

ברוך אתה ה' הרוצה בתשובה.

The theme of teshuvah is that of *relationships*. The relationship between God and Israel is compared to the relationship between husband and wife (see Shir HaShirim 1:1, with Rashi). Having strayed afar, teshuvah is the means by which we can draw close once again – close to God, and close to our inner selves.

Because of Judaism's profound understanding of relationships, there is no room for the idea of a confession box or of a third party affecting atonement. If we wrong a person, we must approach that individual himself. If we wrong God, it is up to us to approach Him. Only we can take responsibility to restore our original closeness to God by removing these barriers. Therefore, there is no room in Judaism for “third-party atonement.”

**KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:**

- ∞ The word *teshuvah* means return. It's a process of returning to God and to the deep essence of one's pure soul.
- ∞ Teshuvah involves a personal revolution. A person's condition is defined by his relationship with God. He can be in the dark (in a spiritual sense – sullied with sin), or in the light, sparkling clean. The gift of teshuvah is the ability to orchestrate a personal revolution.

- ⇒ Repentance is part of God's original plan for the world, created even before the world itself. It allows a person to rise beyond the levels he had achieved before he transgressed.
- ⇒ Additionally, teshuvah is possible even without sin. It means bringing a distant world closer to its Divine source. Teshuvah is the true desire of God; it is what God wants from the world – that we should bring ourselves, and the world, close to Him.
- ⇒ Because the essence of teshuvah is a matter of *relationships*, it follows that it is a deeply personal process, and certainly cannot involve the “absolution” of a third party – a concept entirely foreign to Judaism.

## SECTION II. THE POWER OF TESHUVAH

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There are two fundamental levels of teshuvah. The basic level involves the simple decision to return to the path of the righteous, to refrain from transgression, and cleave to goodness. Sounds easy? It is. But it is only the beginning. The decision to be righteous is enough to earn the title of *tzaddik* – “righteous person.”

However, to make a “full return” and restore the close relationship between the individual who has transgressed and God, and erase the deep effects of iniquity requires a higher level of teshuvah. This is the power of teshuvah in its highest form – the power not only to change a person from one who transgresses to a righteous person, but even to erase or to modulate the past.

The first element of teshuvah is demonstrated by the following extract of the Talmud, which teaches that a split-second decision can render a person a *tzaddik*, even if until that moment he had been a deeply wicked sinner.

### 1. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Kiddushin 49b – Split-second repentance.

If a person marries a wife on condition that he is an absolute *tzaddik*, even if he is totally wicked, the marriage is valid. The reason for this is because perhaps he had thoughts of repentance in his heart.

על מנת שאני צדיק אפילו רשע גמור מקודשת שמו  
הרהר תשובה בדעתו.

Although the Talmud calls him “totally righteous,” this split-second penitence cannot achieve the full effect of teshuvah. He may be righteous, but he still has the history and weight of transgression that requires atonement. As we find in the Shemoneh Esrei prayer, repentance and atonement are two separate stages:

### 2. Shemoneh Esrei Prayer – Prayers relating to teshuvah and forgiveness.

Return us, O Father, to Your Torah, and draw us near, O King, to Your service, and return us with complete teshuvah before You ...

Forgive us, O Father, for we have sinned, pardon us, O King, for we have transgressed, for You are forgiving and atoning.

השיבנו אבינו לתורתך וקרבתך מלכנו לעבודתך  
והחזירנו בתשובה שלמה לפניך...

סלך לנו אבינו כי חטאנו מחל לנו מלכנו כי פשענו כי  
מוחל וסולח אתה.

As we will see in the second class, reaching the highest level of teshuvah is a lifetime's labor. Yet, we do find one person, whose inspirational story is recounted by the Talmud, who managed to condense both levels of repentance (not only repentance where one is termed righteous, but even repentance that serves to erase all sin) into a very short time.

### 3. Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 17a – The repentance of Elazar ben Dordaya.

Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya made it his business to visit every prostitute in the world. He heard about a woman across the seas who demanded an exorbitant fee. He gathered the money and crossed seven rivers to reach her.

Just as they were about to be intimate, she passed wind and commented to him, “Just as this wind will never return to its source, so too the teshuvah of Elazar bar Dordaya will not be accepted, and he too will never return to his source.”

A broken man, he went outside and sat between two mountains and hills. He asked the mountains and hills to petition God on his behalf ... He asked the heavens and earth to petition God on his behalf ... He asked the sun and moon to petition God on his behalf ... He asked the stars to petition God on his behalf. After all of them refused to come to his assistance, he finally realized: “Only I can do teshuvah, it's not up to anyone else.” He placed his head between his knees and cried with regret until his soul departed him.

A Heavenly voice announced, “Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya is invited to the World to Come!” When Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi heard this he cried and said, “There are some people who acquire their World to Come over many years. And others acquire it in a single moment!”

אמרו עליו על ר"א בן דורדיא שלא הניח זונה אחת בעולם שלא בא עליה פעם אחת שמע שיש זונה אחת בכרכי הים והיתה נוטלת כים דינרין בשכרה נטל כים דינרין והלך ועבר עליה שבעה נהרות.

בשעת הרגל דבר הפיחה אמרה כשם שהפיחה זו אינה חוזרת למקומה כך אלעזר בן דורדיא אין מקבלין אותו בתשובה.

הלך וישב בין שני הרים וגבעות אמר הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים... אמר שמים וארץ בקשו עלי רחמים... אמר חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים... אמר כוכבים ומזלות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו... אמר אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו.

יצתה בת קול ואמרה ר"א בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם הבא ... בכה רבי ואמר יש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים ויש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת.

It is striking that Elazar ben Dordaya, who was clearly no Torah scholar, is given the title Rabbi at the end of the passage. Why was he a rabbi? What did he teach us? He is called Rabbi Elazar because he taught a tremendous lesson: Not only is teshuvah able to change a person from a rasha (wicked person) to a tzaddik, it is even able to cleanse a person of a lifetime's worth of sins, and bring him straight into the World to Come, the “consummation” of an intimate relationship with God!

When Rabbi Yehudah heard that this had been achieved in a single moment, he could do nothing but cry. To understand why Rabbi cried, we need to go further in understanding the power of teshuvah.

The following Talmudic statement, referring to two different motivations for doing teshuvah (one out of fear and one from love), teaches a remarkable principle, that the highest level of teshuvah has the potential to turn transgressions into merits!

#### 4. Talmud Bavli, Yoma 86b – Transgressions can even be transformed into merits!

Reish Lakish said, “Great is teshuvah, for when the sinner repents his sins are accounted as if he had committed them unintentionally ...” Yet surely, Reish Lakish said that teshuvah is great because [through it] a person’s sins are accounted as merits ... This is not a difficulty since the first statement refers to repentance out of fear, whereas the second statement refers to repentance out of love.

אמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות...

והאמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכות... לא קשיא כאן מאהבה כאן מיראה.

How are sins turned into merits? One explanation for this is that by learning from our mistakes, we turn the mistakes themselves into something positive (see the second Morasha class on Teshuvah, Section I, Source 2). This can be propelled from a sense of deep regret (Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits). Just as a vaccination relies on a small part of the disease to render a person immune, so too after we have done teshuvah, sin actually serves a positive purpose by allowing us to develop beyond our previous level.

Another explanation, however, is that the higher level of teshuvah, which the Talmud refers to as teshuvah out of love – a burning desire of love to return to God, entirely severs a person from his past misdeeds. His transgressions fall away as though he had never committed them and instead become merits.

As mentioned previously, there is no person who does not transgress. The potential for sin was placed in the world to give humanity free choice. Teshuvah was created as a gift to enable us to work on ourselves when we transgress so that not only can we regain our previous level, but also perfect our character. The verse states that a tzaddik “falls seven times, and rises” (Mishlei/Proverbs 24:16). Only by falling, explains Rav Hutner, is he able to rise. Teshuvah raises us beyond the point which we could otherwise have reached. This idea is lucidly expressed by Rambam.

#### 5. Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:4 – *Ba’alei teshuvah* are beloved, receive great reward, and “stand in a place where even the completely righteous cannot stand.”

A *ba’al teshuvah* should not think that he is less than a completely righteous person because he did transgressions in the past. Rather, a *ba’al teshuvah* is beloved and cherished by God, as if he never transgressed at all.

Additionally, his spiritual reward is great since he has tasted sin and abandoned it, and therefore he rules over his own drives. The Sages say, “In the place where *ba’alei teshuvah* stand, even the completely righteous cannot stand” (Berachot 34b). This means that *ba’alei teshuvah* achieve greater spiritual heights than those who never transgressed, since they have to exert themselves over their lower drives [and thus exercise their power of free will more often].

ואל ידמה אדם בעל תשובה שהוא מרוחק ממעלת הצדיקים מפני העונות והחטאות שעשה, אין הדבר כן אלא אהוב ונחמד הוא לפני הבורא, כאילו לא חטא מעולם,

ולא עוד אלא ששכרו הרבה שהרי טעם טעם החטא ופירש ממנו וכבש יצרו, אמרו חכמים “מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין אין צדיקים גמורין יכולין לעמוד בו”, כלומר מעלתן גדולה ממעלת אלו שלא חטאו מעולם, מפני שהן כובשים יצרם יותר מהם.

Now we can understand why Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi cried after learning of the teshuvah of Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya.

## 6. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Moadim, Vol. I, p.11 – Why did Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi cry?

Just as Elazar ben Dordaya was able to ascend in a short moment from the depths of his transgression to be called a Rabbi, all the more so ourselves – if each of us would take our lives seriously, not just for one hour, but for several hours, days, months and years – can you imagine what we could achieve?!

That is why Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi cried – because we neither see nor take advantage of the tremendous Heavenly assistance that God has granted each and every one of us.

ומה...זה שיצא ברגע קט מעומק טומאת חטאיו עד שנקרא רבי, ק"ו אנחנו – אם יקח כל אחד מאתנו את הדברים ברצינות, ולא רק בשעה אחת, כי אם בהרבה שעות, ימים, חודשים ושנים, עד היכן יוכל להגיע?!...

על כן בכה רבי, על שאיננו רואים ואיננו מנצלים את הסייעתא דשמיא העצומה שהקב"ה חונן בה את כל אחד מאתנו.

### KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ∞ Teshuvah has the power not only to change a person from being wicked to righteous, but can even have an impact on the past. A person can be spiritually affected by a lifetime's worth of sin, yet cleanse himself entirely by means of wholehearted repentance.
- ∞ Furthermore, teshuvah can even change a person's sins into merits. The sins are detached from the misdeed that "created" them, and become part of the Divine plan itself.
- ∞ A person must ultimately rely on himself to do teshuvah. God, however, grants tremendous assistance to anyone who so desires. Teshuvah can even be accomplished over a short period of time.
- ∞ A concerted effort in doing teshuvah can enable a person to achieve extraordinary levels of personal growth.

## SECTION III. TESHUVAH WILL BRING THE REDEMPTION

As explained in the previous sections, repentance is not merely a private matter. It pertains not only to the individual, but to the entire Jewish people, and even to the entire world. The "drawing close" of teshuvah extends far beyond the personal sphere. The Talmud expresses the great ramifications of teshuvah.

### 1. Talmud Bavli, Yoma 86b – Teshuvah is great for it brings the Redemption.

Rabbi Yochanan said, "Great is teshuvah for it brings the Redemption, as it is written, 'A Redeemer comes to Zion, and to those among Jacob who repent from sin' (Yeshayahu 59:20). Why does a Redeemer come to Zion? Because of those among Jacob who repent from sin."

אמר רבי יונתן גדולה תשובה (שמקרבת) [שמביאה] את הגאולה שנאמר ובא לציון גואל ולשבי פשע ביעקב מה טעם ובא לציון גואל משום דשבי פשע בי.



The final Redemption implies closeness to God – and teshuvah means drawing close to God. Teshuvah therefore brings the Redemption. Based on a different passage of the Talmud, Rambam expresses a similar theme:

2. **Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:5 – If every Jewish person would do teshuvah, the Redemption would come immediately.**

The Jewish people will only be redeemed by means of repentance. God guarantees us in the Torah that the Jewish people will all do teshuvah at the end of their exile. When this happens, the Redemption will come immediately, as the Torah states:

“...If you return to God, [and listen to His voice, doing everything that I Moshe/Moses) am commanding you *today*] ... God will then bring back your remnants [and have compassion on you]” [Devarim 30:1-3].

אין ישראל נגאלין אלא בתשובה, וכבר הבטיחה תורה  
שסוף ישראל לעשות תשובה בסוף גלותן, ומיד הן  
נגאלין, שנאמר,

“... וְשִׁבְתָּ עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ [וְשָׁמַעַתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ]... וְשָׁב ה'  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ [אֶת שְׁבוּתְךָ וְרַחֲמֶיךָ]...”

The Maharsha comments on the Talmud cited above that every person has to see himself as if the balance of the world's destiny is in his hands. His next mitzvah, and in particular his act of teshuvah, is able to bring success and redemption to all mankind.

To conclude this first class on teshuvah, we will end with the following true and moving story. It reminds us of our original definition of teshuvah – returning to who we really are.

*My childhood best friend's father traced his lineage back several generations to find that he was 1/16 Native American. Every year my friend would tell me the most amazing stories of his summer adventures with American-Indians, and I would wish I wasn't born “white.” I didn't have any spiritual heritage to speak of. To me, Judaism was nothing more than baggage. Like most American Jews, I felt completely devoid of spirituality and cultural identity other than bagels and lox, which I didn't like. But at the tender age of 13, I made up my mind – I would find a people of my own someday with their own unique spiritual tradition and rituals.*

*In high school I saw a few movies about Ireland and Scotland which sparked my imagination. I walked out of the theater with an Irish accent that stayed with me for months. I studied Gaelic for a year in school and listened exclusively to Irish music. I related to the struggles of the people as they fought for nationhood and independence and even contemplated joining the IRA. I desperately wanted a people and a cause worth dying for.*

*Sometime after my twentieth birthday, a friend of mine invited me to go for Shabbat to an ultra-Orthodox community in Upstate New York. I had never been to a Shabbat meal before. Friday night I entered our host's home with trepidation. Rabbi Rosen and his family were warm and friendly and I quickly got over my fear.*

*“You know I didn't always look like this,” he told me halfway through the meal. I was shocked. As his story unfolded, I learned that he had grown up in a completely secular Jewish home, just as I had. At one point he went to the wilderness of Montana to learn about American-Indian spiritual traditions. They told him, “You come from the ‘holy white rock man’ – Moses. Your people have great wisdom of their own. Go back to your people!” Rabbi Rosen arrived in New York City with two long braids on the side of his head and started searching for a yeshivah where someone would teach him to reconnect with his heritage. The rest is history. I was blown away. If he could give up all that and return to Judaism, maybe it was worthwhile for me to check it out.*

When I was offered a free trip to Israel, I jumped at the opportunity to learn more about my heritage. As I walked off the plane, a feeling started to well up in my stomach. Only upon entering the stone ramparts of the Old City of Jerusalem did it hit me why I felt so overwhelmed with emotion: a voice rose up from within that simply said, “You’re home.”

One of the kids on the trip told us that he was a Kohen. His family had kept a record of their tribe for 2,000 years since the destruction of the Temple. I couldn’t believe that such lineage was possible. I was jealous that he belonged to such a special tribe. My family had no such record that I knew of. When I got home, I told my father that one of the kids on the trip was a Kohen. Then he asked me, “Do you want to know what we are?”

“We know our tribe?” I asked incredulously.

“Of course,” he said flatly. “Levi.” We were members of the tribe of Levi, the third son of Jacob, and I had never known. The Levites were the musicians and the teachers who devoted themselves to spirituality and were supported by tithes from the other tribes.

The irony was tangible. There I was, searching my whole life for a people and a tradition, yet it was in my own backyard all along. For years I was envious of my best friend for his 1/16 Native American blood, while feeling completely devoid of my own heritage. Meanwhile I could trace my line back thousands of years all the way to Levi ben Yaakov, Levi the son of Jacob! A direct line to spiritual greatness, complete with a homeland, a people, and a rich tradition. At last I had found my long-lost tribe!

Indeed I had unearthed the greatest treasure, right in my own backyard. (Gavriel Horan, *Searching for My Lost Tribe*, aish.com)

### KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ⌘ Repentance is not merely a private matter. It pertains not only to the individual, but to the entire Jewish people, and even to the entire world. This is because each person’s teshuvah can help bring redemption to the world. How does that work?
- ⌘ The final Redemption implies closeness to God – and teshuvah means drawing close to God. Teshuvah therefore brings the Redemption.

## CLASS SUMMARY:

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### WHAT IS THE ESSENCE OF TESHUVAH?

The word *teshuvah* means return. It is a dual process of returning to God, as well as returning to the purity of one’s soul. Teshuvah cleanses the soul from any impurities caused by transgressions that form barriers between a person and God.

### WHY DON’T JEWS USE A CONFESSION BOX?

If a husband and wife feel distant, it is only they who can restore the warm intimacy to their relationship. Similarly, if a person feels distant from God because of wrongdoings that act as barriers, reconciliation can

only be made directly with God. Only we can take responsibility to restore our original closeness to God by removing these barriers. Furthermore, the process of repentance involves more steps than just confession, as will be discussed in the next class.

### WHAT IS THE POWER OF TESHUVAH?

Teshuvah was created before the world itself and has the miraculous power to erase sin. Furthermore, the highest level of teshuvah is able to turn sin into merit, and the concept of teshuvah can be applied even without the existence of a preceding sin in moving a distant world closer to God.

### CAN WE DO TESHUVAH WITHOUT HAVING SINNED?

In the deepest sense, teshuvah is possible even without sin. It means bringing a distant world closer to its Divine source.

### HOW IS TESHUVAH CONNECTED WITH THE FINAL REDEMPTION?

The final Redemption implies closeness to God – and teshuvah means drawing close to God. Teshuvah therefore brings the Redemption.

## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

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### Section I. What is Teshuvah?

Devarim 30:11-12 with commentary of *Ramban* – “The mitzvah I give you today is not hidden from you nor is it distant” refers to teshuvah, which is in everyone’s power to do.

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, *Sifsei Chaim, Mo’adim, Vol. I*

### Section II. The Power of Teshuvah

Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 17a – Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya; see Maharsha, *Chidushei Aggadot*.