

Parsha Ponders

Nitzavim / Vayeilech | September 9, 2020 | 20 Elul 5780

How easy is teshuva?¹

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא-נפלאות הוא ממך ולא רחקה הוא וגו' כי-קרוב אליך הדבר מאד
בפיך ובלבבך לעשתו

This *mitzvah* which I command you today is not beyond you, nor is it far away...Rather the matter is close to you in your mouth and in your heart to perform²

Which *mitzvah* is our verse telling us is close to our mouth and close to our heart to perform? The Ramban explains³ that it is referring to what was mentioned a few verses⁴ earlier. ושבתי עד-יקוק אלקיך, you shall⁵ return to Hashem, your G-d. The Torah is telling us that the *mitzvah* of *teshuva*, sincere repentance for our sins, is very easy. It's close to our mouths and to our hearts. Meaning, there are four requirements for complete *teshuva*: cessation of the sin, committing never to do it again, regretting the sin, and *vidui*, confessing one's sin⁶. The Torah is alluding to two of these requirements⁷. *Teshuva* is close to our mouths, to perform *vidui*, and our hearts, to accept in our hearts never to do this sin again. Why is the Torah alluding to only these two, and not the other two?

We must say that regretting the sin is included in *vidui*⁸. A person wouldn't confess their sin unless they regretted transgressing it. This is alluded to when the Torah says *teshuva* is close to our mouths. Further, we must say that ceasing the sin is included in accepting in our hearts never to do it again. This is alluded to when the Torah says that *teshuva* is close to our hearts. However, we could still ask: why did the Torah allude to the four aspects of *teshuva* this way, by selecting two, which include the other two?

Now, the Torah is telling us that *teshuva* is very easy to accomplish. But is that really so? I wouldn't have thought so. We all know how difficult it is for someone to abandon a bad habit that they have (to say the least). How can a person easily overcome their desires? How can they break free from the inertia of sin? It's so hard to go against one's nature, even if they know it's wrong.

¹ Based on Ohr Yisroel Kochavei Ohr § 6, by Rav Yitzchok (Peterburger) Blazer

² Deuteronomy 30:11,14

³ To v. 11. Cf. Rashi to v. 12,14, who understands that it's referring to the Torah. This is also how Bava Metzia 59b understands it

⁴ V. 2

⁵ The Ramban understands this verse to be a command. Cf. Ramban in Mishneh Torah Hilchos Teshuva 7:5 who understands this to be a prophetic promise that the Jews in the future will repent for their sins. Some understand that the Ramban doesn't hold there's a *mitzvah* of *teshuva* (Minchas Chinuch 364:2, HaEmek Davar to v. 11, Meshech Chochmah to Deuteronomy 31:17), as he writes *ad. loc.* 1:1: להתודות חייב מחטאו וישוב מחטאו וישובה תשובה וישבור מחטאו וישוב חייב להתודות. It sounds like there's a *mitzvah* of *vidui*, confessing one's sins, but not *teshuva* itself. This also seems apparent from his Sefer HaMitzvos Aseh § 73. He also cites Leviticus 5:5 as a source for the *mitzvah*, which discusses *vidui* when bringing one's offerings. Nevertheless, many hold that there is indeed a *mitzvah* of *teshuva*, such as this Ramban, Sha'arei Teshuva 1:1 and 4:17, Semak § 53. However, some say that the Ramban agrees that there is a *mitzvah* of *teshuva*, as we see from his words at the beginning of Hilchos Teshuva: מצות עשה אחת והוא שישוב החוטא מחטאו. לפני ה' ויתודה. This could also explain why the Ramban doesn't include a *mitzvah* of *teshuva* in his list of the 613 *mitzvos*. Perhaps he understood the Ramban included this in his *mitzvah* of *vidui*. See L'Dofkei BaTeshuva to Hilchos Teshuva 1:1:10 for various approaches on how to resolve the phraseology and opinion of the Ramban

⁶ Mishneh Torah Hilchos Teshuva 2:2

⁷ Reishis Chochmah Sha'ar HaTeshuva Chapter 1. See also Ramban loc. cit.

⁸ See L'Dofkei BaTeshuva loc. cit. § 27 and Sha'ar HaTziyun ad. loc. § 191 that this could be alluded to in the Ramban's text of *vidui*

Perhaps then the Torah isn't alluding to all four aspects of *teshuva*. Maybe the two that it mentions are truly the ones that are easy, but the ones it doesn't are in fact very difficult. It's very hard to stop sinning. It's very hard to honestly feel regret for one's actions. If a person is stuck in a bad habit, they'll have a terribly difficult time breaking free from it. However, once the lion's share of the work is done, they'll have an easy time. Once a person truly regrets their actions, and stops sinning, it should be very easy to take the next step. It's no big deal to verbally confess that they did wrong. If their regret is genuine, it should be simple to commit to never do it again. To this the Torah says that *teshuva* is close to one's mouth and close to one's heart.

However, if we contemplate a bit further, we'll realize that all the requirements of *teshuva* are in fact very easy to fulfill. Why is that? Let's imagine for a moment that there was no concept of *teshuva*. Hashem wouldn't forgive people who transgress the Torah, and there would be no way of rectifying past mistakes. Even still, it would be necessary for a person to consider regretting their sins, and ceasing to transgress them. Every sin comes with its requisite punishment. Even if there's no way to atone for prior sins, does that mean they should continue to accumulate them? Does it make sense that they should continue their lifestyle without considering the consequences? The only logical choice is to change one's ways. Why make the situation worse than it already is? All the more so once we know that there is a concept of *teshuva*, where past mistakes can be rectified.

While it's true that conquering one's inclinations can be very difficult, but that has nothing to do with *teshuva*. Even if *teshuva* didn't exist, it would be the best idea to consider improving one's ways! The fact that it's part of *teshuva* doesn't make it any more difficult. Once a person realizes the severity of their situation, and commits to improve, then *teshuva* will be very easy. Regretting their actions and abandoning their sins will come naturally. However, the *mitzvah* of *teshuva* adds two more requirements, which a person may not have thought of on their own. They must commit to never transgress the sin again. One could have thought that every moment they just need to be careful from transgressing, but not necessarily committing to anything. Further, they must verbally articulate what they did wrong.

Coming back to the verse we started with, we can understand now why it specifically alludes to committing never to sin and *vidui*, and not the other two requirements for *teshuva*. Regretting one's sin and ceasing to transgress it are logically required even without the concept of *teshuva*. The verse doesn't mention them, as it's focusing on what is unique to *teshuva*. While regretting one's sin and ceasing to transgress it, after careful consideration and contemplation, are very easy, perhaps the additional *teshuva* requirements are in fact quite hard. The verse tells us not to worry. It's something that's not far from us. It's very close to our mouths and our hearts to perform. *Vidui* and committing not to sin again, once the first hurdle is accomplished, come quite naturally. There's nothing holding us back then from complete *teshuva*. It just depends on our resolve to improve.

Good Shabbos