

Rav Soloveitchik on Teshuva

Exploring Action and Emotion in Jewish Tradition

Rabbi David Stein

“Repentance,” wrote Rav Soloveitchik in *Halakhic Man*, is the process through which one “creates himself.” Yet we don’t generally think of *teshuva* in such grandiose terms - if at all. Sure, there’s much to look forward to during this time of year: the sweet honey dripping off the apples, the piercing call of the *Shofar* blast, or even the beloved melodies of the *mussaf* service. But somehow “create yourself” or “happy repentance” don’t figure too prominently in our customary Rosh Hashana greetings.

The truth is that the challenge we face with the experience of *teshuva* makes a lot of sense. Repentance - reflecting upon an action in the distant past, resolving to avoid it in the future, and then repeating the process for the untold deficiencies we see in ourselves - isn’t easy. Furthermore, the liturgical formula we use for the process of *teshuva* doesn’t make it any easier. *Selichot* - the centerpiece of our Elul and *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* prayer experience - are long, unfamiliar, and written in difficult language. Yet there may be an even more fundamental challenge at play here: even if we understand the words, at times it feels like we may sit or mumble through the service without feeling - or knowing what to feel - when we recite the text of *selichot*. In a word, the act of reciting the prayers is at times disconnected from the emotion or experience of *teshuva*.

In his work *Al HaTeshuva* (“On Repentance”), Rav Soloveitchik provides two useful categories to describe mitzvot that can help us understand the challenge of *teshuva*. On one level, he writes, *mitzvot* generally involve a physical act or performance, which he refers to as the *maaseh ha-mitzvah*. On the other hand, there is an experiential or emotional component to every mitzvah as well, which he labels the *kiyyum*, or

fulfillment, of the mitzvah. In many cases, such as the shaking of a *lulav* or the sitting in a *sukkah*, the *maaseh* and *kiyyum* are identical and contemporaneous - the act itself is the fulfillment of the mitzvah. In other cases, however, the action is meant to lead to or enable a separate feeling or emotion. Giving *tzedakah*, for example, is not just a mechanical or rote activity. At its core, the commandment to give charity is rooted in an emotional experience - care, compassion, and empathy for a fellow human being. Similarly, the mechanical act of praying - moving your lips to produce a particular sound or word - is not, according to Rav Soloveitchik, an end in of itself. Instead, *tefillah* is an activity that is designed to lead to a particular experience - in this case, an encounter or relationship with *Hashem*. Without the action, there can be no experience; without the experience, the mitzvah itself has not been fulfilled.

This formula, argues Rav Soloveitchik, finds expression in the *selichot* liturgy as well. The act - recitation of *selichot*, and, more specifically, the *viduy*, or confession - is meant to facilitate a specific experience: self-creation or actualization. Rav Soloveitchik detects this relationship in the Rambam’s description of repentance in his opening introduction to *hilkhot teshuva*:

[The laws of repentance encompass] one positive mitzvah - and that is to do *teshuva* and to confess.

מצות עשה אחת, והוא שישוב החוטא מחטאו לפני ה' ויתודה.

Here Rav Soloveitchik identifies the exact formula we discussed above: a mitzvah, experience, or process called *teshuva*, which is

accompanied or facilitated by a specific action - the formula of confession found at the core of the *selichot* service.

Our *selichot* liturgy, then, captures a foundational value in Jewish tradition: our religious and personal goals can only be accomplished through concrete action. To be sure, Judaism has been criticized throughout history for this very notion, with Christian disputants arguing that we have reduced religion to dry laws and rote performances that miss the point of religious experience. Paul's "by faith alone" aphorism neatly captures the critique. And, of course, the argument is not without merit. How often - as both individuals and as a community - do we lose the proverbial forest for the trees, going through the religious motions of our traditions while failing to experience the depth of religious encounter or spiritual transcendence that we must always aim for? Yet Judaism has unabashedly and systematically responded with an axiom of human experience: both action and emotion are essential to our

lives. Faith, personal growth, and inspiration do not develop in a vacuum, and instead must be continuously nurtured by the ritual structure of our daily lives in order to crystalize our emotions and maintain our spiritual momentum.

In the final analysis, then, Rav Soloveitchik's notion of repentance as "self-creation" is not merely an attempt to atone for the sins of the past. Instead, it is the continuous journey of self-discovery and improvement, of learning from past mistakes and harnessing them towards a better future. Like all journeys, however, *teshuva* can only begin with small, sometimes uncertain steps. Whether we understand the words today or not, the lifelong process of self-transcendence and transformation does not happen by itself, and is certainly not instantaneous. Instead, it can only be achieved through the determined and sustained performance of our liturgical routines and daily rituals - by showing up to our Judaism each day and trying to connect as best we can - beginning every year with the *selichot* service.