

**The
Twenty Principles
of
Teshuvah**

**based on
Sha'ar haRishon
of
Sha'arei Teshuvah l'Rabbeinu Yonah**

Feedback Welcome:
The Twenty Principles of Teshuvah
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1) Among the good things that Hashem has done with His creations, is that He has prepared for them a way to arise from their low deeds and aveiros, a way to save themselves from destruction and remove from upon them His anger. He has taught and warned them to return to Him if they do aveiros, because He is good and fair, and because He knows their yetzer hara.

Even if they do many aveiros, He does not shut the doors of teshuvah from before them. He has warned us many times in the Torah, to do teshuvah.

Teshuvah is accepted even when it is motivated by the troubles one is suffering, and surely when it is done through fear and love of Hashem.

The Torah tells us that Hashem helps ba'alei teshuvah reach levels which otherwise they could not reach, and renews within them a spirit of purity to love Him.

The nevi'im have spoken so much about doing teshuvah, that all the rules and details of doing teshuvah have been discussed by them, as we will explain.

2) Every day one postpones doing teshuvah on the aveiros he has done, his punishment becomes greater, for he knows that he can escape the anger which is upon him by doing teshuvah, and he does not.

Chazal¹ compare this to a group of thieves which the king had locked in jail. The thieves dug a tunnel, and all but one prisoner escaped. When the jail guard found this man he hit him saying "You fool! A tunnel has been dug before you and you do not use it to escape!?"

3) Postponement of teshuvah is only found by amei ha'aretz, who, sleepily, are not concerned. They are not equipped with the knowledge and understanding to save themselves. Some do not even believe that there is punishment for aveiros. However, a talmid chacham, one can assume, does teshuvah immediately.²

4) There is another downside to postponing teshuvah. When one does teshuvah immediately, with a bitter heart, worry and tears, this will help him overpower his yetzer hara in the future. This is because, when the yetzer hara will approach him again with an opportunity to do the aveirah, he will conquer it when he remembers the bitterness he experienced, and will not wish to repeat it.

On the other hand, by postponing teshuvah, if the opportunity to do the aveirah arises again, he will stumble again. Hashem will consider the second time as a greater aveirah than the first time. This is because the first time he may not have expected to stumble. However, after seeing how weak and gullible he could be, and how strong the yetzer hara could be, he should have prepared himself better. He should have thought of ways to add yiras Shamayim, to protect himself from doing an aveirah again.

Shlomo Hamelech³ compared this to a dog which eats unpleasant foods, and re-eats it after it has been spit up, when it is even more unpleasant. So too, a silly person does a disgraceful act, and by repeating it does an even more disgraceful act.

5) Another point to realize is, that when one repeats an aveirah it becomes more difficult for him to do teshuvah. The more one does an aveirah, the weaker his guilty conscience becomes. This makes the aveirah even more severe. It is bad enough to do an aveirah, let alone feel that

1. Medrash Koheles Raba 6:32

2. Berachos 19a

3. Mishlei 26:11

it's okay to an aveirah.

Chazal⁴ tell us that generally one does not get punished for just planning to do an aveirah. However, one who does an aveirah and repeats it, will from here on be punished even for just planning to do the aveirah.

6) Now, while it is true that even a tzaddik will sometimes do an aveirah, they will afterwards get control of themselves and not repeat what they have done. But one who completely refuses to accept upon himself to guard from even a small aveirah, is called by Chazal a mummar - a disloyal person who betrays his religion. This is because a servant who tells his master "Everything you ask I will do, except for one thing" has removed from himself the yoke of his master. He is no longer a "servant" if he does things according to his own will.

7) Doing the same aveirah many times over is not any less than doing that same amount of many different types of aveiros. The punishment for both is the same.

8) This is actually a common problem. Many people have certain aveiros which they simply do not consider. This would be a problem with even one aveirah, never mind many aveiros, and serious ones too. The list includes; swearing for nothing, cursing with Hashem's name, mentioning Hashem's name for nothing ("Oh my G-d!"⁵), or an in an unclean place or with unclean hands. Other aveiros included are; ignoring the plight of a poor person, lashon hara, hatred for no halachically accepted reason, misplaced pride, looking where one shouldn't, and above all, bittul Torah.

There are other ones too. We have just mentioned a few. Each person should make their own list of mitzvos and aveiros which they need to work on, and read it daily.

9) Teshuvah comes in many levels. The better the teshuvah, the closer one comes to Hashem. However, at every level, one gets forgiven somewhat, although not forgiven completely. For one to cleanse his soul completely, so that the aveirah does not exist anymore at all, one will need to do as we will soon explain.

This can be compared to laundering ones clothing. Some cleaning will remove some of the stain. The more one cleans it, the brighter the clothing becomes. However, to have it completely clean, one will need to put in the right amount of effort.

So too, as much as one cleans his heart, will his neshamah be cleansed from aveiros.

Again, all teshuvah is worthwhile, but the best teshuvah is when one is still young and strong. This is when overpowering ones yetzer hara is worth the most.

We will now explain the 20 principles of teshuvah.

4. Kidushin 40a

5. Mishnah Berurah 215:19

The Twenty Principles of Teshuvah

1) The first principle of teshuvah is to regret the aveiros one has done. One needs to understand how terrible it is that he has left Hashem. He needs to realize that there is punishment for the aveirah he has committed. He should say to himself “What have I done? How was I not scared of Hashem and the harsh punishments that the wicked suffer? How did I not have pity on myself? All for a little enjoyment?! I am compared to one who commits a theft, and enjoys the stolen goods knowing full well the price he will have to pay when he is caught.

“I have been cruel to my soul. I have caused it to become impure from the filth of the yetzer hara. Of what benefit is all its value, if it is bad in the eyes of its Master? How have I exchanged a world which lasts forever, for a temporary world?!

“I have acted as a beast! I have followed after my yetzer hara with the understanding of a horse and mule! I have strayed from the logical path.

“Hashem has given me an intelligent neshamah so that I can know and fear Him, and control all that I do. For this I have been created. Now that I have done just the opposite, how am I benefiting from my life?

“Even an animal is mindful of its master, and I was not! I have let my soul go astray, and have not recalled the day of my death.”

2) The second principle of teshuvah is to stop doing aveiros. One must leave his bad ways behind, and make a firm decision with his whole heart not to repeat them.

The order of these first two principles, first to regret what one has done and afterwards stopping to do aveiros, applies to one who only does aveiros occasionally, when the yetzer hara overcomes him. Being that he is not a habitual sinner he need not “stop doing aveiros”. He needs only to regret what he has done, and then “stop doing aveiros” for the future by adding to his yiras Shamayim until he is sure that he will not stumble again.

However, one who is totally on the wrong path, and constantly sins at every opportunity that arises, must first stop doing aveiros, and only afterwards begin to regret what he has done.

This can be compared to someone wishing to purify himself after having come into contact with an impure item. Obviously he must first break his contact with that item before beginning to purify himself. Regret can only mean something after one has already first resolved to stop doing aveiros.

3) The third principle of teshuvah is to feel distressed about having done aveiros. Think about how bad it is to betray ones Creator. Feel pained. Feel bitter. Regret is not enough. One who loses a few dollars does not feel as bad as one who lost his whole fortune. One who loses his whole fortune will mourn his loss and groan bitterly. If a tragedy happens ones pain is everlasting. One who betrays Hashem should feel even worse. How could one forget their Creator who constantly does kindness for them, and guides and guards them? How could one have the audacity to anger Hashem? A wise person will take this to heart.

The quality of ones teshuvah will depend on the level of how distressed one feels about his aveiros.

The distress one feels about his aveiros comes from the purity of the soul and the clarity of the mind. According to how clear ones mind is, is how distressed one will be able to feel about their aveiros.

When the neshamah feels distressed, Hashem feels compassion and mercy, stops His anger

and forgives ones aveiros. Through the distress of the neshamah one becomes desirable to Hashem, more than when the body feels distressed through being punished with aches and pains. This is because the neshamah is closer to Hashem, being from a higher level world, and having been created by Hashem with no one else involved. This is just as a king will feel more compassion for his household and most honorable officers, than the rest of his kingdom.

David Hamelech has said, “Hashem! You know that all that I desire is to be able to serve You, and all that I am distressed over is my aveiros and inability to serve You properly”.

4) The fourth principle of teshuvah is to be broken-hearted over the aveiros one has done, and to cry over them with tears in his eyes. The Gemara⁶ tells us that aveiros are brought about by ones heart and eyes. We are therefore commanded not to follow after our hearts and eyes⁷.

When one is broken-hearted about the aveiros he has done, he uses the heart which has caused the aveiros, for teshuvah. This attains forgiveness for the heart. This can be compared to a vessel which has become impure. It becomes free of its impurity when it is broken.

When one cries with tears in his eyes, he uses his eyes which have caused the aveiros, for teshuvah. This attains forgiveness for the eyes.

5) The fifth principle of teshuvah is to worry about, and be afraid of, the punishments one will suffer for his aveiros. There are some aveiros for which teshuvah alone is not enough, but one must also suffer the consequences for, in order to correct.

Another worry is whether one is fulfilling his requirement of teshuvah. Is he distressed enough? Is he bitter enough? Is he fasting enough? Is he crying enough?

Even if one has felt terrible distress over his aveiros, and has cried a lot, he should still fear for maybe he has also done a lot of aveiros.

One who contemplates how much one must serve Hashem, and how bad it is to disobey Hashem, will realize that no matter how much one serves Hashem, and does teshuvah, it is still not enough.

A wise person will be concerned even after doing teshuvah, and a fool is comfortable even before doing teshuvah.

An angry person will likely do aveiros and cause himself trouble. One who cannot control himself is like a city without its protective wall⁸, exposed and vulnerable.

One should also worry about his yetzer hara overpowering him. One must not trust himself, especially one who has already been overpowered before. One must constantly be on guard of the yetzer hara lying in ambush at all times. One must add daily doses of yiras Shamayim in order to protect himself against future dangers of the yetzer hara.

Shlomo Hamelech speaks of this in Mishlei. He writes⁹ that the righteous honor others for every virtue they have, but the wicked seek out the flaws and mistakes of others, in order to put them down. They do this even after those others have done teshuvah and corrected those mistakes.

This teaches us that one must not disclose his aveiros to others. This is something the wicked do.

6. Yerushalmi Berachos 1:5

7. Bamidbar 15:39

8. Mishlei 25:28

9. 28:12

On the other hand, in the next passuk Shlomo Hamelech writes that one who hides his aveiros will not succeed, and one who confesses and leaves his aveiros will be treated with mercy. These two ideas seem to contradict each other.

Chazal¹⁰ have clarified this. They say that aveiros which are between one and his fellow man, must be disclosed so that one corrects what he has done and requests forgiveness. One must also admit to aveiros between man and Hashem which have become publicized. This is so that there be a kiddush Hashem when ones teshuvah becomes publicized, to counteract the chillul Hashem which the aveirah has caused.

However, other aveiros between man and Hashem must be left undisclosed to others, but must be confessed to Hashem. One who refuses to confess will be held guilty not only for the aveirah but for the denial itself.

Shlomo Hamelech continues¹¹ by telling us that one who admits his faults will be treated with mercy. Admitting ones faults includes regret, confession and stopping to do aveiros. This is the minimum that teshuvah must consist of. But there are many levels to teshuvah.

To this Shlomo Hamelech continues¹² that one who constantly worries is fortunate, and one who hardens his heart will fall into trouble. Meaning, one who constantly worries whether or not he has fulfilled his obligation of teshuvah at the highest possible level, and worries that the yetzer hara will succeed in trapping him again, and therefore constantly guards himself and makes sure to grow in his yiras Shamayim, and davens that Hashem help him and protect him, he is fortunate.

On the other hand, one who hardens his heart, and convinces himself that he has completed his obligation of teshuvah, and does not strive to do better and grow in his yiras Shamayim, he will be punished for this itself. He will be punished for being arrogant, and not recognizing that which he is lacking.

If one does not recognize his great obligation to perfect his ways before Hashem, he also will not guard himself properly from his yetzer hara which lies in ambush waiting for him. He therefore will again fall to the hands of his yetzer hara.

6) The sixth principle of teshuvah is to be ashamed of oneself that he has done aveiros.

One would be very embarrassed to do an aveirah in front of others, and one would be embarrassed if others would realize that he had done an aveirah. How then could one not be embarrassed of doing aveiros before Hashem? This is because it is hard for us to imagine Hashem.

When Rabi Yochanan ben Zakai was being niftar, his students asked him for a berachah. He blessed them saying, "May you fear Hashem as much as you fear people". They were very surprised. "Is that all?" they asked. He answered them, "If only this would become true! People do aveiros privately, and what they're concerned about is 'I hope no one sees me'".¹³

One should not only be embarrassed of having done aveiros before Hashem, but one should feel the embarrassment physically, as when one blushes.

Another thing to be uncomfortable of is how patient Hashem is being with him, and not punishing him immediately according to what he deserves. Imagine how one who has sinned and rebelled against a king of flesh and blood would feel if he were simply let off free by the

10. Yoma 86b

11. 28:13

12. 28:14

13. Berachos 25b

kindness of the king's heart. Would he not feel guilty?

Chazal¹⁴ have told us that one who is ashamed of what he has done is forgiven on all his aveiros.

One will begin to feel embarrassment when he contemplates the greatness of Hashem, how truly bad one who disobeys Him is, and that Hashem is constantly viewing our actions and thoughts.

7) The seventh principle of teshuvah is feeling humble, and realizing how low one becomes when he does aveiros. One who recognizes the greatness of Hashem, knows that one who disobeys Him has reduced his value. Through feeling this way he will once again be desired by Hashem. Hashem will forgive his aveiros, help him leave those aveiros behind, and empower him over the yetzer hara in the future.

Humbleness at its highest level is when one is able to serve Hashem well and nevertheless not feel smug about it. Everything one does in the service of Hashem should be considered not yet enough, compared to how much Hashem should be served. One should therefore be humble, and serve Hashem without seeking honor. One should try, to the best of his ability, to hide his beautiful and honorable deeds from his acquaintances and friends and serve Hashem secretly.

The navi Michah¹⁵ has taught us that one who does aveiros even though he receives so much kindness from Hashem must feel extremely humble. He explains that the way to show this is by living honestly, having a strong drive and desire to be kind to others, and humbly serving Hashem secretly without seeking honor.

One must not seek honor for his righteous deeds, and surely not for other admirable qualities such as financial success, physical strength or sharpness of mind, attributes from which Hashem has no particular pleasure.

Attaining humbleness is very important for one who wishes to do teshuvah, because one must rid himself of that which has caused him to do the aveirah; arrogance.

Arrogance causes many aveiros. Arrogance allows for ones yetzer hara to overpower him. One who is arrogant is liable to forget Hashem.¹⁶ The arrogance of the wicked is compared to a plowed field from where many aveiros can grow.¹⁷ Arrogance is an aveirah in itself, and one who is arrogant is disgusted by Hashem¹⁸. The arrogant person is left to fend for himself, for Hashem will not help one who He disgusts.

Through humbling oneself, one attains many good virtues. One who is humble will not get angry, and will not be strict with their friends. He won't be easily offended, and won't be always busy getting even with those who have wronged him. This in turn will cause his aveiros to be forgiven, for we know that he who does not pay back measure for measure, is forgiven on all his aveiros¹⁹, measure for measure. This is a wonderful idea for one who would like a sure way to have his slate cleaned!

8) The eighth principle of teshuvah is not just to feel humble for having done aveiros, but to also act humble. This is done by speaking with a soft and low tone of voice, the opposite

14. Berachos 12b

15. 6:6-8

16. Devarim 8:14

17. Mishlei 21:4

18. Mishlei 16:5

19. Rosh Hashanah 17a

of an arrogant person, who speaks harsh and rough. One must not involve himself with the beauty of ones clothing and jewelry. He must walk calmly and keep his eyes low. Eventually this will lead to a true humbleness of the heart.

9) The ninth principle of teshuvah is to diminish ones attraction to physical desires. Indulging in physical desires can cause one to do aveiros. One must limit ones indulgence of even permitted physical desires, in order to keep on the path toward teshuvah. Eat to stay healthy. Whatever you do should be for the sake of Hashem. The more one indulges in physical desires, the more one is drawn toward the materialistic things in life. This will prevent him from achieving levels in spirituality, and in turn will allow his yetzer hara to overpower him²⁰.

The more one satisfies his desires, the stronger his desires will get. On the other hand, the less one satisfies ones desires, the weaker ones desires will get.²¹

The desire in ones heart is the root of all that one does. Therefore, by conditioning ones desires, all ones faculties will follow, and all ones ways and deeds will be perfected.

When one lessens his attachment to even permitted desires, one succeeds spiritually. One eventually enjoys immense pleasure when ones mind becomes victorious over ones desires. On the other hand, a silly person who will not work on overcoming his physical desires, but will continue to indulge, will not be able to control himself even when indulging will require some sort of aveirah.²²

Chazal tell us that those who indulge in physical desires as if all their days are holidays will be punished severely.²³

Much strife and conflict comes from being too obsessed with the physical pleasures in life. A wise person will not let his physical desires control him, and he will be well liked among his friends.

There is an additional benefit to one who controls himself from indulging in even permitted desires. If a prohibited desire comes his way, he surely will not succumb to the yetzer hara. He will say to himself, "I do not even indulge in permitted physical desires, should I then indulge in prohibited ones!?"

Another great big benefit in breaking ones attachment to physical desires is the fact that by doing that he is showing Hashem how interested he is in becoming better. He is showing that he is ready to give up all that caused him to do the aveirah, and through this he will find favor in Hashem's eyes. Hashem does not degrade a person who has broken his ties to physical indulgence.²⁴

Chazal²⁵ tell us that breaking ones ties to physical indulgence is one of the attributes through which one is considered a student of Avraham Avinu.

10) The tenth principle of teshuvah is to do good deeds which will counteract the bad deeds that were done. For example, if one used his eyes for the wrong thing, he should now make up for that by using them for good things. If one used his mouth to talk lashon hara, he should now use his mouth to learn Torah. With whatever limb one did the aveirah, one should try

20. Devarim 8:12 and 32:15

21. Sukkah 52b

22. Mishlei 13:19

23. Shabbos 151b

24. Tehillim 51:19

25. Avos 5:19

to counteract that by using that part of the body for good deeds. The righteous become favored through that exact thing which they used to do the aveirah. One who ran to do aveiros, should now run to do mitzvos. One who spoke lies, should now use his mouth to speak truth. Hands used to do aveiros should now be used to give tzedakah. One who used his eyes to view people negatively, should now use them to view people positively. One who used his heart for the wrong type of thoughts, should now concentrate his efforts on thinking only holy thoughts. One who used to cause fights between others, should now work on creating peace among others.

11) The eleventh principle of teshuvah is to keep inventory of ones aveiros. First of all, this is necessary in order to be able to say viduy and confess, which is a mandatory part of teshuvah. Secondly, it is very humbling to see a list of aveiros one has done. Thirdly, with a list of things that he has stumbled in, he will be better equipped to prepare himself in those areas for the future.

12) The twelfth principle of teshuvah is to study the severity of punishment for each individual aveirah in which one has stumbled. One must know which one of the aveiros he has done deserves malkus, which deserves kareis, and which deserves the death penalty. This is very important so that one realizes the severity of the aveirah when one confesses on it. This will make one realize how bitter he should be feeling when he sees how much anger he has caused. This will help humble him, and give him the right perspective on having done those aveiros. There are some serious aveiros for which one must suffer some consequences in addition to doing teshuvah. This is fully discussed in the third sha'ar of the Sha'arei Teshuvah of Rabbeinu Yonah.

13) The thirteenth principle of teshuvah is to consider even the seemingly small aveiros as serious as the seemingly harsher ones. First of all, don't focus so much on the size of the aveirah, rather focus on the greatness of the One who commanded us to stay away from that aveirah. Secondly, it's the seemingly smaller aveiros that the yetzer hara is so successful in getting people to stumble in. A few of the small ones will then equal a big one. Thirdly, getting used to doing small aveiros will become a bad habit, which can put someone into the category of a mummar as we have mentioned in section 1 no. 6. Fourthly, once the yetzer hara succeeds at the small things he goes on to bigger and better things. Chazal²⁶ tell us that one who breaks something out of anger should be viewed as if he did Avodah Zarah. Today the yetzer hara tells one to do this, and tomorrow he'll convince him to do that.

The same should be done regarding mitzvos. One who takes doing as many mitzvos as possible, as serious as not doing any aveiros, can look forward to receiving his full reward.²⁷

14) The fourteenth principle of doing teshuvah is saying viduy and confessing the aveiros one has done. When one does an aveirah that ones parents have also done, one must also confess on their parents' aveirah since one is punished for ones parents' aveirah when one repeats it after them.²⁸

15) The fifteenth principle of teshuvah is to daven that one is forgiven on any aveiros he

26. Shabbos 105b

27. Mishlei 13:13

28. Vayikra 26:40

has done. Mitzvos that one does before he does teshuvah are negatively affected by his aveiros. When one does teshuvah and his aveiros are forgiven, that negative affect is removed, and the mitzvos return to their original state. One must daven that he merit this forgiveness.

One must also daven that Hashem erase the aveiros completely, as though they were never done. One must daven that Hashem take pleasure in him, and be interested in him again, as though he never did the aveirah at all. This is very important, because it is possible that although the aveirah is completely forgiven, and the one who did the aveirah is absolved of any punishment, he nevertheless does not yet find favor in the eyes of Hashem. The righteous desire not only to be forgiven and freed of punishment, but that Hashem again take interest and pleasure in them.

Lastly, one must daven to Hashem to help him do a complete and proper teshuvah.

16) The sixteenth principle of teshuvah is to, as much as possible, repair any damage that the aveirah has caused. Any theft must be returned. One cannot be forgiven on stealing while the stolen goods are still in his possession. One who has pained others, caused them embarrassment, or spoken lashon hara about them, cannot be forgiven by Hashem if he has not requested forgiveness from those who he has wronged.

Correcting the problems which have been caused, should be done before one does the viduy and confesses to Hashem, in order that the viduy have the desired effect.

17) The seventeenth principle of teshuvah is to seek out opportunities to do kindness and support truth.

Doing kindness will protect one from any suffering the aveirah is supposed to cause him. As we mentioned, there are aveiros which teshuvah alone is not enough, but one must also suffer certain consequences. This is discussed by Rabbeinu Yonah in detail in the fourth sha'ar of Sha'arei Teshuvah.

Making a kiddush Hashem by supporting the truth and standing by those who stand for truth, counteracts any chillul Hashem one has caused.

18) The eighteenth principle of teshuvah is to always remember the aveiros one has done. As time goes on it is easy to forget the aveiros one has done. One should not allow this to happen.

19) The nineteenth principle of teshuvah is to resist the temptation to repeat the aveirah one has done, when one is still in the stage of his life when he would otherwise have an interest and desire for this aveirah. This type of teshuvah reaches all the way to the Kisei Hakavod. This is a show of overpowering the yetzer hara through fear of Hashem. Even one who never comes across the opportunity to repeat his aveirah, can attain such teshuvah by growing in his yiras Shamayim, up to the point that if he were to come across the opportunity again, he would resist.

20) The twentieth and final principle of teshuvah is to motivate others who have done this aveirah, to do teshuvah. One who has the ability to stop others from doing an aveirah and

does not, is held responsible for those aveiros.²⁹

29. Vayikra 19:17

We have covered all twenty principles of teshuvah. Now we must discuss the things which stop one's teshuvah. These are things which if one is totally not concerned with, and constantly commits any one of them, will have a very difficult time with teshuvah. If one is in this category, he must beg Hashem to help him, and make sure to do all of the twenty principles of teshuvah, and add more to the teshuvah according to what Rabbeinu Yonah writes in the fourth sha'ar of Sha'arei Teshuvah, and Hashem will be gracious and merciful to him.

Here is a list of some of the things that can stop ones teshuvah.

Rechilus

Lashon hara

Anger

Sinful thoughts

Joining with a rasha

Taking from a meal which is not even enough for its owner

Gazing at a woman who one is not permitted to marry

Sharing in the booty with a thief

Doing an aveirah with the plan of being able to correct it with teshuvah

Enjoying when others are shamed

Separating oneself from the tzibbur

Degrading ones parents or Rabbeim

Cursing the tzibbur

Preventing the tzibbur from doing a mitzvah

Influencing another to leave the good path for the bad

Finding a lost object and not fulfilling ones obligation to return it

Seeing ones child leading down the wrong path in life and not stopping them

Arguing against the words of Chazal

Accusing the innocent

Hating mussar

Mocking mitzvos

May we all merit to do teshuvah shelaimah.