

we want about changing, but we know we have changed when we find ourselves in a situation where we have transgressed before, and feel tempted to do so again, but choose a different course (TB, *Yoma* 86b). Our remorse over the past is genuine and soul-searching is profound when it



### Making Amends Isn't Always Possible in Person

Gestures of remorse and reconciliation are not always possible directly. In some cases, we may no longer have any way of contacting those we hurt. Perhaps the person died and is beyond the reach of our amends. Even in such cases our tradition teaches us we can still engage in *teshuvah*, if only indirectly. The Talmud (TB, *Yoma* 87a) suggests we can, for example, assemble ten people (a *minyan*, representing the community) at the grave of the deceased and there we can declare the offense we committed. This is a powerful, symbolic way of acknowledging our transgressions and demonstrating our desire to repent. If we offended a stranger, we can decide to treat another person with extra concern and compassion. The famous

twentieth-century Jewish thinker, Martin Buber (1878-1965), once wrote: "The wounds [we cause]... can be healed in infinitely many other places than those at which they were inflicted."

### Soul-Searching and Change

The final stage of *teshuvah* requires that we look beyond our misdeeds and their effects to discover their causes. What in us makes us impatient, selfish or unkind? What can we do to change ourselves to make it less likely we will fall into the same pattern of hurtful behavior in the future?



The belief we can indeed change is essential. We have the God-given capacity to reflect on our character defects and make ourselves anew. This is why *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, is linked in the Jewish calendar to *Rosh Hashanah*, the New Year. Tradition teaches us that *Rosh Hashanah* represents the day on which the world was created. So too, atoning on *Yom Kippur* represents the perennial option we have to make a new life for ourselves.



### Teshuvah Enriches Spiritual Life

*Teshuvah* is a gift from God and essential for developing a rich spiritual life. It gives us the opportunity each and every day to live with integrity and wholeness, to deepen our understanding of ourselves, to repair our relationships with others and to make ourselves available for deeper connection with God. May we all find the courage and wisdom to avail ourselves of this wondrous, divine gift!

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### Issues of Guilt and Responsibility

Recently a middle-aged man returned an overdue library book along with a check for \$456.25. The check covered the five-cent daily fine for 25 years. He felt guilty for holding onto it for so long, responsible for not returning it earlier, and wanted to make things right.

This story speaks to profound issues of guilt and responsibility that we all face throughout our lives. It reminds us that transgressions, even small ones committed many years earlier, can cause feelings of guilt that continue for a lifetime. It also reminds us that it is never too late to correct mistakes.

By recognizing our errors, feeling remorse and making restitution, we can undo mistakes repair damaged relationships and find inner peace; all of which can profoundly transform our lives.

### God Desires Repentance

We are all flawed, imperfect creatures. At one time or another, we fail to live up to

our ideals of being honest, generous, forgiving or loving. Almost every day, in ways large and small, we find we hurt others, most often those closest to us, in ways we regret. Depending on the nature of the offense, we may feel guilty about our behavior and profoundly ashamed of ourselves. We know that our words and actions did not reflect our best selves.

Judaism teaches us that we are obligated to acknowledge our misdeeds to those we harmed, to ask for forgiveness and, where necessary, to make restitution. Judaism also teaches that we should engage in *heshbon ha-nefesh* (soul-searching) to determine the cause of the transgression and to avoid the same mistake in the future.

This process is called *teshuvah* ("turning" or "repentance") and is at the very heart of what it means to live a moral, spiritually fulfilling life. Traditional Jews invite God to help them find the strength to engage in *teshuvah* every day: "Enable us to return to you in complete repentance. Blessed are you, O God, who desires repentance."



### Being Honest and Humble in Teshuvah

Doing *teshuvah* requires a willingness to engage in a serious moral inventory. Perhaps we've hidden the ways we wronged others from ourselves or rationalized our behavior to avoid claiming it as ours. Perhaps we want to protect our reputation and are afraid of losing face, so we continue living double lives: projecting one image outwardly, but keeping secrets inside. *Teshuvah* requires us to admit that our act (or failure to act) was truly painful. This almost always involves pushing past rationalizations as well as letting go of the pride that prevents us from owning our faults.



The Sages of the Talmud teach that humility is the greatest of all virtues (TB, *Avodah Zarah* 20b) for it enables us to acknowledge that we have been insensitive, greedy, unfaithful or cruel. Humility allows us to take the first step, which is recognizing our failings and allowing ourselves to feel genuine remorse.

### Taking Action to Repair and Heal

The next step in *teshuvah* involves taking action to repair the damage we caused. For many of us this is hard to do because we believe we cannot change the past. Yet, Judaism teaches us we can make choices every day to follow a different path than the past one. This is the root meaning of *teshuvah*, "turning," implying that we turn away from the transgressions of the past toward a new beginning.

While it is true we cannot literally take back the hateful words we spoke, or remove the embarrassment we caused, we can act in ways to heal the pain we inflicted. Believing this is possible is essential to the process of *teshuvah*. The Hasidic master, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), once wrote: "If you believe that you can damage, then believe that you can fix. If you believe that you can harm, then believe that you can heal." Believing in the possibility of healing—ourselves and relationships with others—is at the heart of *teshuvah*.

We can begin to heal broken relationships when we offer heartfelt apologies to those we hurt. When others know we regret the pain we caused, it can be healing for them and us. At times some tangible effort of caring behavior must accompany the apology to show that we are genuine in our intentions. *Teshuvah* demands not only words, but also positive deeds. How can we know whether we have really done *teshuvah*? The Sages of old insist the ultimate test is behavioral. We can talk all