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Scar Tissue: Lessons from Years of Teshuvah

Alison B. Hornstein | The Bronfman Fellowships | Yom Kippor

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*"A broken and crushed heart, oh G-d,
Do not despise"
(Psalms 59:19)*

In his lowest moments, reeling from his adultery with Batsheva, David wrote to G-d of his broken heart as a sacrifice, adding that G-d should not despise it. I've read David's words dozens of times, but I've never been able to make out whether he meant them as plea or declaration. And I've wondered whether for David, as for so many of us in our moments of most extreme self-honesty and rawness, the distinction was muddy.

David could not undo his adultery, and he could not undo his part in the series of events that led to the death of Batsheva's first husband. But from his broken heart he could not only heal but also change, and become a better version of himself. In his broken heart was hope, and from what began as an unholy union with Batsheva sprang forth a line of kings.

Repentance in Jewish tradition is a three-pronged process: we recognize our misdeeds; we apologize to those we have wronged; we resolve not to repeat these acts. "Teshuvah," the Hebrew word for "repentance," literally means "return." For much of my life I assumed that encapsulated in "teshuvah" is the notion that to repent is literally to go back, to restore ourselves and the world to



prior, purer states. I assumed that to set things right, to apologize and to acknowledge, was essentially to recalibrate and to go back to zero; I assumed that we begin again and again from the same newly cleansed surface.

It's a comforting thought, that no matter how painful or challenging or even heart-breaking a process of repentance might be, the end result is, ultimately, a clean slate. If only we could fully rid ourselves of our mistakes solely by throwing pieces of bread into water or sending a goat into the wilderness, and watching as the bread pieces or the goat move away from us as we stand still.

But the required dynamism lies in *us*; in order to fully repent, we must ourselves move internally and externally, and we must ourselves change. The work of teshuvah thus lies primarily in that third prong of repentance, which deals with us as *actors* rather than merely with us acknowledging and apologizing for our actions. And the work of teshuvah is not easy.

Maturing seems to bring with it a process of learning and relearning that time goes in only one direction. And so at the ripe age of 34 I understand, in a way I didn't and maybe couldn't at earlier periods in my own life, that part of what makes regret and remorse so powerful is the recognition that there really are moments that are forever gone; that there really are words that will never be said and others that, for all we might wish otherwise, can never be unsaid.

We get second chances, but they are new chances. What is in the past has passed us by, or perhaps it is we who have passed by the past; either way, as infinite as the paths before us may be, they all lead forward. And if we don't do teshuvah, we are doomed to repeat our actions and inactions over and over – in psychoanalytic terms, those parts of our unaddressed unconscious will continue to sculpt our fate. Teshuvah directs us to address them so that, finally, we can move forward freed of their yoke. And in so-doing, we take new control of our futures.

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Teshuvah, then, is not quite a literal return. Its goal is **alteration**. It propels us, it changes us, it challenges us to break down what is often deeply held, and then to reassemble ourselves from the inside out. In his [discussion of repentance, Maimonides wrote](#) that the final step of that internal work we are to do – that third prong in which we resolve in our hearts not to repeat those misdeeds for which we are repenting – is to become versions of ourselves who, when faced with challenges identical to those which led to our misdeeds, would act differently. He goes so far as to suggest that one who successfully does teshuvah ought to change his name, “as if to say, ‘I am somebody different, and I am not the same person who did those deeds.’” ([Laws of Repentance 2:5](#)) It seems to me, then, that the return contained within teshuvah is perhaps a return to our ability to live with ourselves, a return to an ability to go forth and to go forward rather than merely being stuck. Teshuvah results in a return to a state of movement, and accordingly to a state of hope. It gives us new possible futures, because it has given us new selves. When we recover from a flesh wound, we grow scar tissue; when we recover from a cold we develop antibodies. We are physically healed, but we are altered by the experience. I have been told that scar tissue is the strongest skin, and I find that very powerful. Teshuvah may break our hearts, but it returns and restores us to hope.

Solomon (who is born out of that initially illicit union between David and Batsheva) writes in Proverbs: "A righteous person falls seven times and gets up" (Proverbs 24:16); the wise [Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner](#) commented that this man is not righteous *because* he got up again and again; rather, he *became* righteous through the process of falling and [getting up. Not wholly dissimilarly, the 13th-century moral philosopher Rabbeinu](#) Yonah compared repentance to the law of ritual purity: An earthenware vessel, once contaminated, cannot again be made pure, but if that vessel is smashed, its shards can be reassembled to create a new vessel free of the impurity which tainted the original.

That a dismantling, even a destruction, would be inextricably linked with redemption is threaded throughout Jewish thought and history, so it's not surprising that this dialectical link would also play out on an individual level. On the day the Temple was destroyed, the Messiah will be born; in Lamentations we plead with G-d to return us as we mourn the loss of our city and our unity; we treasured the broken tablets of the Ten Commandments and kept them in a holy place; we acknowledge in the Yom Kippur liturgy that the rituals in which we partake are derivative of those that were undertaken in the Temple, which we no longer have due to our forefathers' iniquities.

But in the Yom Kippur liturgy we also speak of G-d as clothed in light, and light is what we need to do teshuvah. Light not only reveals those corners of ourselves of which we are least proud and with which we most must deal; it also nurtures us and allows us to heal, to change, and to grow anew.

People sometimes say that on Yom Kippur we are like angels – we dress in white; we do not eat or indulge in physical comforts; we stand for most of the day; we recite aloud the angelic blessing of G-d and His kingdom. All true. But on Yom Kippur we are also at our most human and our most raw; we are never more aware of our own flaws and our own need for teshuvah, for a reckoning and, ultimately, for change.

Angels may tremble on Yom Kippur, but it is we humans who have the capacity to alter ourselves, to move forward, and to work toward new iterations with which we can better live and better go through the world. Angels are said to have no knee joints, and so they remain always erect; it is we humans who traditionally prostrate ourselves on this holiday and who, through teshuvah, fall down and get up, even as we know that we will fall again in new and

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different ways in the year to come. And it is in the falling, in the broken hearts and in the arising, that there lies infinite hope.

May you all have a meaningful Yom Kippur and a joy-filled, sweet 5775.

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