



Teshuva

by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz is about to complete his monumental project, a 45-volume translation and commentary on the Talmud, begun in 1965. This accomplishment will be celebrated worldwide with a Global Day of Jewish Learning on Nov. 7, 2010. We are proud to be partnering with the Global Day. For more information and to find a Global Day event in your community visit www.theglobalday.com.

The Hebrew word *teshuva* is commonly translated in English as "repentance," but this does not convey its full meaning. Teshuva is both broader and deeper than repentance, as reflected in its more literal definition: "return."

Thus, teshuva embodies a lifelong journey back in time. It is a process of unflagging soul-searching that emerges from a pervading sense of spiritual disquiet, rather than simply a pang of guilt. We feel the need to look back - and to go back - because we feel we are no longer the right person in the right place, because we are alienated from ourselves and from the world.

The "return" route that each of us will take will depend on who and where we are in life. The uniqueness of our personalities logically ensures that each person will follow his or her own path, and that we will have no traveling companion on whom to rely. Fortunately, the Gates of Heaven are numerous, so that each of us may lay claim to our own portal, as long as our desire to go through it - that is, to repent and return - is sufficiently sincere.

The urge to repent grows out of the realization that it is necessary to change. Lamenting our past wrongdoing will not serve us, for contact with evil is inescapable. We must avoid, too, pondering the past and reliving it as it happened - complete with faults and mistakes. Rather, we should meditate on it, as it ought to have been. The main thrust of teshuva is not only to redeem, but to rebuild, the past.

But here, we must address a looming epistemological obstacle: Because time is strictly unidirectional, we cannot revert to some previous moment. As a result, our efforts to engage in teshuva (as I have defined it) are, at best, paradoxical. We must remember, however, that we do not undertake teshuva in a conventional universe; we do teshuva in a universe that transcends physical laws - a universe in which the present, the future, and

the past merge into a timeless continuum, a universe in which a lethal arrow can fly back into its quiver and be as free of suspicion as if it had never left. In brief, teshuva transports us into a state of weightlessness, where opposing polarities (of plus and minus) reverse at will and standard metrics are suspended.

To enter this state, we will have to truly know ourselves; we will have to sound our souls. And if our goal is not only to repent, but to accomplish an about-face, our challenge will be still greater, for we will have to reach the innermost depths of our being, the nadir of the abyss, as it were. In this realm, we are entitled to believe that our souls are not far from God. Unless we reach this zone, we cannot be convinced that a radical change has taken place deep down in our hearts, a change that is capable of transcending all the rules of the universe.

Making this journey back is obviously a difficult undertaking, the more so because it is an ongoing process. Indeed, when we believe, for a few moments, that we have reached the required depth, we are obliged to dive down yet further, without delay. As we evolve, so does our sensitivity to the "triggering disquiet" that stimulates us to teshuva. Actions that may have been laudable in the context of our former self, may now be sensed as faults in need of further refinement. As we attain each deeper level of teshuva, we understand ? with a greater intensity each time ? how we must begin doing teshuva all over again.

And as we plumb the depths, we must be honest with ourselves. Each of us has things on this lowly earth of which we are particularly fond, but they are not the same for all of us. For you, giving money may be a molehill and apologizing for offending someone may be a mountain; for someone else, the two may be reversed. Beware, then, that the sacrifice you offer to God is something that really costs you dearly, for God recognizes a fool's deal.

The goal of teshuva is far-reaching: It should cast our faults as seeds of virtue, for the recognition of our misdeeds is the mechanism that triggers the journey back, which is what enables us to rebuild our personality and our past.

In the Kabbalah, we read that "those who are the highest of all - those who can turn darkness into light and bitterness into sweetness - enter Heaven 'by the higher gates.'" This is the transformation I am describing: Achievements of this magnitude signify the pinnacle of repentance, the complete transformation of the past, a sign of perfect inversion.

In this season of teshuva, do not be satisfied with asking forgiveness for the evil you may have done. This is only the beginning. Come to grips not only with your failing, but also with your past that gave birth to it. In this way, you can regard the faults as harboring creative potential for the beginning of a new and beautiful story.