

## Ten Teachings for *Teshuvah*

Once there was a rabbi named Zusya who loved all of creation with all his heart and soul, and who treated all beings with respect and kindness. Reb Zusya of Hanipol studied Torah, kept Shabbat, visited the sick, and praised God for all the goodness in the world. Zusya had very little but gave generously to those in need. Students came from far and near to learn from this gentle and wise rabbi. Tonight, we will learn from the example of Reb Zusya (also pronounced Zusha), a [Third Generation] Hasidic master who lived at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in what is now Ukraine. Zusya was a master of *teshuvah*, which is our topic for tonight.

What is *Teshuvah*?

The word is a gerund – a noun that connotes an activity. Turning. Returning. *Teshuvah* was said to be one of the 7 things created before Creation. That means that it’s foundational to Judaism that human beings will mess up, and that we have it in our power to change our ways. But it’s much bigger than the words of “return” or “change.” The **process** of *teshuvah* is **how we wake up** to our own lives, and wake up to what is at stake in the choices we make. It speaks to our inner lives and to our behavior; it speaks to all our relationships and our very demeanor. It’s an exciting concept to me that we have this tool called *teshuvah*, to enable us to return to what matters, over and over and over again. It’s meant to be a way of life, not only for the Days of Awe – but now is when we have the space to think about it.

I have compiled “Ten Teachings on Teshuvah” to share with you tonight. Some of these ten teachings on *teshuvah* are ways to understand it, some are ways to practice it. The literature on *teshuvah* is vast; and the project of *teshuvah* continues as long as we live. So what follows is a smorgasbord of teachings that inspire me, and I hope will inspire you. I invite you to listen with two questions in mind:

1. Which teachings resonate for you?
2. And what practice might you take on, realistically?

1. *Teshuvah* begins with *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, accounting of the soul. Where have we harmed another, or our relationship with ourselves? This is the time to drop pretense, to let our conscience speak. The rabbis teach that complete *teshuvah*<sup>i</sup> requires verbalizing our regrets over the wrongdoing, making amends and restitution where appropriate, and then when given another opportunity to do that same thing, making a different choice. This is not small!!
2. Lest we believe that it’s only about our actions, the Laws of Teshuvah say we must also search our hearts, and turn in repentance from anger, from hatred, from jealousy, from deceit, from excessive pursuing after wealth, honor, feasting and such like these; “Indeed,” wrote the RamBaM, “these iniquities are more grievous and more difficult for a person to be separated from than those which require action.”<sup>iii</sup> The Jewish field of Mussar gives us a tool set for making sure our inner and outer lives align with our kindest and most ethical intentions. *Hitlamdut* is a Hebrew word used in Mussar to signify a stance of self-examination or self-awareness. *Hitlamdut* presumes that we have a lot more choice in the matters of our words and our behaviors than we may believe, if only we’re willing to pay attention. A stance of *Hitlamdut*

means that we study and learn from our own responses. For example, we are cultivating *hitlamdut* when we look inside for why we snapped at a loved one. We examine our behaviors and patterns with the intention of taking more responsibility for what was once mindless behavior that is hurtful to ourselves and others. We don't begin with an effort to change ourselves; rather we begin by noticing, with an open mind and open heart, the ripple effects of our words and actions. And loving ourselves enough to trust that we can change, if we bring our habitual responses to conscious awareness.

3. *Teshuvah* is NOT about perfection. It is not about casting away displeasing parts of ourselves. It IS about wholeness, *shlemut*. That means embracing all of our brokenness, finding ways to live life **with** all of its messiness – not in spite of the messiness. Rabbi Alan Lew, in a book everyone should read called *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* quotes Sharon Salzberg, a Jewish Buddhist: “If I have an idea about how I should be (more compassionate, for example), and I go through a process of rejecting myself every time I don't meet this standard, I will never find that compassion.” Lew elaborates: “One kind of emotional process cannot possibly produce another kind of emotional process. Rejection will not lead to compassion. Only compassion can lead to compassion. Rejection will only lead to rejection.”<sup>iii</sup> *Teshuvah* involves facing into our own embarrassing feelings and actions with compassion, so that we may transform the pain into a teacher of the heart. “When we experience ourselves exactly as we are, we sense our oneness with everything....When we pay attention, everything enlightens us, even the things we think of as our mistakes. Everything in life comes to us as a teacher.”<sup>iv</sup>
4. See the good – in ourselves and others!<sup>v</sup>

A man once came to Reb Zusya's teacher, Rabbi DovBer, the famed "Maggid of Mezeritch," with a question. "The Talmud tells us," asked the man, "that 'A person is supposed to bless G-d for the bad in exactly the same way that the person blesses God for the good.' How is this humanly possible? I mean, if our sages had taught that we must accept without complaint or bitterness whatever happens — this I can understand. But how can a human being possibly react to what they experience as bad in exactly the *same way* they respond to what they experience as good?"

Rabbi DovBer replied: "For **this** question, you must go see my disciple, Reb Zusha of Anipoli. Only he can help you in this matter."

Reb Zusha received his guest warmly, and invited him to make himself at home. The visitor decided to observe Reb Zusha's conduct before posing his question. Before long, he concluded that his host truly modeled the Talmudic teaching which puzzled him. He couldn't think of anyone who suffered more hardship in his life than did Reb Zusha. Yet Reb Zusha was always good-humored and cheerful, and constantly expressing his gratitude to the Almighty for all God's kindness.

But what was his secret? How does he do it? The visitor finally asked Reb Zusya, “Our teacher the Maggid of Mezrich sent me to you for my question: How can a person be as grateful for his troubles as he is for his joys?!” “You raise a good point,” said Reb Zusya, after thinking the matter through. “But why did our Rebbe send you to me? How would I know? He should have sent you to someone who has experienced suffering...”<sup>vi</sup>

Zusya didn’t experience his suffering as suffering – and that is a way of staying in what I would call the flow... or a sustained state of *teshuvah*. What constitutes suffering for you, and what is just life?

5. Some of *teshuvah* is about return to God, to our connection with the Source of Life. Pray. Use the liturgy. Our Machzor contains a feast of poetry, longing, and aspirational language.

It is good to talk to God, even if you have no prior relationship! R. Nachman of Breslav embraced the practice of *Hitbodedut* as a form of *teshuvah*. He said, “Set aside time each day to meditate and pray alone in a room or some meadow and express your innermost thoughts and feelings and personal prayers to God. You should tell God everything you feel, be it contrition and longing to repent over the past or requests and supplications to come truly close to God from now on. Even if you think you cannot speak to God, if you long and yearn to do so – this itself is very good. You can even make a prayer out of this itself. You can cry out to God that you are so far from God that you cannot even speak. You can ask God to have mercy on you and open your mouth so that you should be able to express your longings to God<sup>vii</sup> [that God bring you back, literally support your *teshuvah*].

6. Be generous and kind to everyone. There was once a man who lived in the same town as Reb Zusya, who saw that he was very poor. So each day he put 20 coins into the little bag in which Zusya kept his prayer phylacteries, so that he and his family might buy the necessities of life. From that time on, the man grew richer and richer. The more he had the more he gave Zusya, and the more he gave Zusya the more he had. One day it occurred to this man that Zusya was the disciple of a great Maggid, and he thought, “if what I gave the disciple was so lavishly rewarded, I might become even more prosperous if I made presents to the master himself.”

So he traveled to Mezritch and gave Rabbi Dov Baer a substantial gift. From this time on his means shrank until he had lost all the wealth he had acquired during the more fortunate period. He took his trouble to Reb Zusya, telling Zusya the whole story and ask him what his present predicament was due to, for had not the Reb himself told him that his master was immeasurably greater than he?

Zusya replied, “Look, as long as you gave and did not bother to whom, whether to Zusya or another, God gave to you and did not bother to whom. But when you begin to seek out especially noble and distinguished recipients God did exactly the same.”

Never underestimate the power of doing something that makes you like yourself! And let others help you – that is a mitzvah as well!

7. *Teshuvah*, return, lives in our bodies, in the present moment. Breathe deeply, play, create, move, dance, draw, write, be in nature, cry, make music, cook, garden, laugh. Life moves through our bodies, not just our minds.
8. *Teshuvah* is about becoming as much as returning. Rabbi Jan Urbach describes *teshuvah* as a creative act, rather than a simple return. “We return to who we are meant to be, but have not yet become. We return to growth and possibility that has lain dormant within us and not yet flourished, much as a sculpture lies hidden within a brute block of stone. That is why the process of *teshuvah*, as painful and even humiliating as it can be, is in fact very joyous and hopeful.”<sup>viii</sup> We turn to the most well-know Zusya story, which takes place at his deathbed, his disciples surrounding him, wanting to help. “There is nothing you can do,” answered Zusya. “I’m dying and I am very frightened.” “Why are you afraid?” the youngest student asked. “Didn’t you teach us that all living things die?” “Of course, every living thing must die some day,” said the Rabbi. The students tried to comfort Rabbi Zusya saying, “Then why are you afraid? You have led such a good life. You have believed in God with a faith as strong as Abraham’s. and you have followed the commandments as carefully as Moses.” “Thank you. But this is not why I am afraid,” explained the rabbi. “For if God should ask me why I did not act like Abraham, I can say that I was not Abraham. And if God asks me why I did not act like Rebecca or Moses, I can also say that I was not Moses.” Then the rabbi said, “But if God should ask me to account for the times when I did not act like Zusya, what shall I say then?” The students were silent, for they understood Zusya’s final lesson. To do your best is to be yourself, to hear and follow the still, small voice of your own *neshamah*.<sup>ix</sup>
9. Joy is not incidental to our spiritual quest; it is vital.<sup>x</sup> R. Nachman is not the only teacher who said, “do anything to bring yourself to joy. Despair does terrible damage.”
10. Where is this thing called *teshuvah* located? the Torah answers, in Deuteronomy: Surely this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It’s not up in heaven, nor is it beyond the sea. No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart.”<sup>xi</sup> It is in each one of our hearts, right now.

I leave you with an image from Dr Rachel Naomi Remen: she calls it integrity; I call it *teshuvah*. Her medical colleague describes reclaiming his integrity as like the moment before an orchestra concert “when the concertmaster asks the oboist to sound an A. ‘At first there is chaos and noise as all the parts of the orchestra try to align themselves with that note. But as each instrument moves closer and closer to it, the noise diminishes and when they all finally sound it together, there is a moment of rest, of homecoming. That is how it feels to me,’ he told [her] ‘I am always tuning my orchestra. Somewhere deep inside there is a sound that is mine alone, and I struggle daily to hear it and tune my life to it. Sometimes there are people and situations that help me to hear my note more clearly; other times, people and situations make it harder for me to hear. A lot depends on my commitment to listening and my intention to stay coherent with this note. It is only when my life is tuned to my note

that I can play life’s mysterious and holy music without tainting it with my own discordance, my own bitterness, resentment, agendas, and fears.”<sup>xii</sup>

In 5780, may we be patient and compassionate enough to attune to our own notes, so that we may play our best in the orchestra of life. May we return to who we are meant to be, but have not yet become. May we return to growth and possibility that has lain dormant within us and not yet flourished. Shana Tova.

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<sup>i</sup> Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:1

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid* 7:3

<sup>iii</sup> Alan Lew, **This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation**, Little, Brown and Company, 2003. p. 130.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid*, p. 135

<sup>v</sup> Neuroscientists have shown that when we are focused on positivity, there is no room in our psyches for heightened anxiety. With sustained anxiety, according to Dr. L. Read Sulik, our functioning suffers; our relationships suffer; our sense of meaning and purpose suffers; and we become prone to avoiding or controlling types of behaviors. Just at a time when more collaboration and more creativity are called for, systemic anxiety – individually and collectively – can impede not only our sense of wellbeing but also the crucial work to be done. Positivity scans push out the space for anxiety. (From “Moving from Anxiety to Optimal Wellbeing” presented to Twin Cities Interfaith Mental Health Collaborative presentation May 5, 2019)

<sup>vi</sup> [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/2262/jewish/Perspective.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2262/jewish/Perspective.htm), adapted.

<sup>vii</sup> R. Nachman of Breslav, *Likutey Moharan* II, 25

<sup>viii</sup> Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, “*Teshuvah – A Creative Process*” in *Rosh Hashanah Readings*, edited by R. Dov Peretz Elkins, pp 5-6

<sup>ix</sup> Story from *Partners with God* by Gila Gevirtz, Behrman House

<sup>x</sup> *Machzor Mishkan HaNefesh*, Yom Kippur, p. 312, quoting R. Nachman. Also in *Likkutei Moharan* II, 24; See also Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Parshat Re’eh* 5779 for discussion of *simcha* or joy being at the locus of community. <https://rabbisacks.org/collective-joy-reeh-5779/>

<sup>xi</sup> Deuteronomy 30:11-14

<sup>xii</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, “*Teshuvah: Is my Life Tuned to My Own Note?*” in *Rosh Hashanah Readings*, edited by R. Dov Peretz Elkins, pp 215-216