Sh'ma
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Addressing Collective & Indivdual Sin:
A Roundtable on *Teshuvah*

Our sages viewed repentance as a powerful tool that would help us wrestle with our failures and repair our wrongdoings. Resh Lakish wrote "Great is repentance; by it, intentional sins are made like merits..." A few years ago in these pages of Sh'ma, *the philosopher Robert Gibbs commented on the talmudist's writing: "Sins would become something held in my favor, something good....A mended relation can be stronger and better precisely because each party has had to transform the relation." In this Roundtable, rabbis, a philosopher, and a therapist look again at* teshuvah — *focusing both on how individuals repent and how — as a collective — we address our communal sins.*

Or Rose: Teshuvah, *often translated into English as repentance, is more accurately translated as "return." Would you reflect on the place of return in the* teshuvah *process?*

Michelle Friedman: Is *teshuvah* the return to something that had been broken, ruptured, or strained? Perhaps *teshuvah* can refer to a person's relationship with another person, or a sense of internal integrity, or an individual's relationship with a religious worldview. Return goes hand-in-hand with repair, working out what it was that went wrong, making restitution, asking forgiveness. But *teshuvah* can also be an internal process.

Sue Fendrick: When we're engaged in serious *teshuvah*, we push ourselves to grow, to go to new places, or to go places in new ways so that they feel like new places. At the same time, we want to find ways to return to those places — metaphorically speaking — that serve as points of departure, but that we want also to be "home," places we want to live. There is a tension between exploring new ground and wanting to come back to the fundamentals — running and returning.

David Ingber: Sue, I understand your comment on running and returning as a dialectic — a traveling back and forth between the new, the newly discovered, and the newly recovered. *Teshuvah* really is more like the spiral of return than the circle of return. There's progress, but there's familiarity at the same time.

Or Rose: *Our rabbis tell us that, on the one hand, the gates of* teshuvah *are open every day, and yet we also set aside a holiday season for return or spiraling, as David put it (ala Arthur Waskow). How do you understand the relationship between these Days of Awe, the* Yamim Noraim, *and the rest of the year?*

Sue Fendrick: I think that each of the holidays and seasons in the Jewish year gives us a chance to exercise a particular part of our Jewish religious lives, a particular aspect of our relationship with God. Some holidays — Yom Kippur, for example — are more retreat-like than others. There is an opportunity to exercise certain muscles, to recognize how important the work is — work that we need to be doing all year. We need a time when we can focus specifically on *teshuvah*; we have times to focus on joy, on learning, on liberation, and on Torah, but if we don't have an intense opportunity to engage with the dynamics of repair, we'll never get very good at it.

David Ingber: The *Yamim Noraim* are like a chiropractic adjustment on the Jewish spine. These days create the conditions for a very powerful awakening and adjustment in the "life force" of the individual, whose effects last throughout the year. After this awakening, what was stored densely in a "zip file" is unpacked over the course of the rest of the year.

Michelle Friedman: The *Yamim Noraim* provide a large communal opportunity for people to come together and share in this experience. It feels to me as if an archaic power is invoked when the community responds to this ritual observance that's gone on for such a long time.

Sue Fendrick: There might be a mutually supportive relationship between the journeying-returning dynamic, and the individual-communal dynamic. Both provide a holding container, a grounding, an anchor for work that is in some ways lonely, certainly solitary, and often very hard. Coming back to a place of collectivity, I think, helps support very personal work.

David Ingber: Often, we give lip service to this notion that *teshuvah* is a practice for the whole year. It would be nice if we did call people back to their original commitments — letters they wrote to one another about what they were going to do throughout the year — if we had benchmarks. There should be a sense that what we began in *Elul* and *Tishrei* is extended throughout the year.

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Or Rose: ***Following on the last piece of the conversation, I would like to invite you to reflect further on*** **teshuvah** ***as a group experience, whether as a family, synagogue, corporation, or government.***

Jeff Helmreich: We now have corporations and countries that are apologizing and forgiving one another as institutions. Forgiveness and repentance in general are not states of mind. An individual can't say, "I hereby apologize to you and guarantee that from now on I will have a properly remorseful state of mind." Old bitternesses bubble up and return. Rather, repentance and, for that matter, *teshuvah* and forgiveness, are commitments — the kind of thing that we endeavour to do and we renew all the time. For that reason, groups and countries can do it as well. The ritual of repenting and then having the commitment to *teshuvah* in place is a stance that we adopt, not a feeling that overtakes us.

David Ingber: The Rambam asserts that true *teshuvah* is when one comes back to the same place and acts differently in a similar situation. There is a notion that even contemplating *teshuvah* can turn a *rasha*, someone who's done evil, into someone who tips the whole world in the direction of good and compassion.

Michelle Friedman: I think Jeff is saying that *teshuvah* has to have a starting point — a discreet X and Y coordinate — that will be part of a larger arc. And David, you're saying that we have to begin with at least a seed of repentance that will grow into something larger.

In psychotherapy, we look at the individual experience as it's housed within a communal or authority-driven, tradition-driven experience. We'd ask: Who is the locus of authority? What is the role of transference in the *teshuvah* experience? Is it to a sense of God or to some other agency outside of the self? What are the goals of the personally driven efforts in *teshuvah*? Are they limited to the realm of relieving personal suffering? Or is there a goal that relates to a larger sense? How much do the processes of psychotherapy and *teshuvah* overlap and how much are they parallel?

Sue Fendrick: The comparison between psychotherapy and *teshuvah* actually points to one of the reservations I have about the notion of collective *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* has to be done by an actor, an agent. Though there can be *teshuvah-dik*, *teshuvah*-orientated, *teshuvah*-inspired conversations on a communal level, there needs to be an agent of change. It's hard to imagine the Jewish people going into therapy.

David Ingber: As useful as that might be.

Sue Fendrick: We need to distinguish between a *teshuvah*-orientated process and the actual work of *teshuvah*. What does it mean to say that a group has done *teshuvah*? Though there are behavioral aspects of *teshuvah* that can be manifest in a group, I can't imagine how the internal work would be accomplished by a collectivity.

Today, there are tribunals in Rwanda in which people are being forced to confront victims and one another, and formally admit, forgive, and resolve to reconcile. This type of legal, institutional process takes time to filter down to the individual.

Jeff Helmreich: As a proponent of the collective *teshuvah* model, reconciliation in a place like South Africa illustrates what might be meant by collective *teshuvah*. When we investigate those processes, it turns out that they involve a lot of the fundamental teachings of *teshuvah*, like committing to change, or acknowledging and taking responsibility for doing wrong; adopting a stance of regret, and acting toward the victim as someone who owes the victim penance.

These are fundamental features of *teshuvah*, and it turns out that they translate remarkably well on the collective institutional level. It doesn't feel the same; there are differences, and yet the various stances we adopt, the commitment, the public acknowledgements can be performed at a collective level. This model can work when there are groups that have been aggrieved — even while we agree that it is ultimately just a model.

Sue Fendrick: In the South African situation, to the extent that we're talking about a government or state, there is an agent or an actor saying, "We, this state of South Africa, has committed wrongs and we, as a state, are seeking to undo those wrongs." This doesn't mean that every member of that collectivity is brought along in the *teshuvah* process. When we say collective *teshuvah*, how do we understand the relationship between the individual and the collectivity?

Beyond the fact that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission heard what South Africa as an entity did wrong, was the fact that individual people told their stories and individuals apologized for the wrongs they committed. It's worth noting the relationship of individual and collective *teshuvah* and change, how they might work together, and how they may be in conflict.

When Barack Obama was elected president, something fundamentally shifted in the United

States (that can never be unshifted) in having elected an African-American president. At the same time, we shouldn't be seduced by the notion that we're done with racism, that America's done *teshuvah*, and we can simply move on.

Jeff Helmreich: There are two different notions on the table of collective *teshuvah*. One is of a group that serves as an agent; it's an agent made of many people like a government, a group doing *teshuvah*. The second model is a community of individuals that we might say did *teshuvah*, though some of the people may not have been brought on board. As with the election of Barack Obama or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *teshuvah* happens only later.

Today, there are tribunals in Rwanda in which people are being forced to confront victims and one another, and formally admit, forgive, and resolve to reconcile. This type of legal, institutional process takes time to filter down to the individual. But this illustrates how *teshuvah* is a starting point. Sometimes, formal processes and monumental acts, like the election of a president, are really just the beginning of what ultimately will become a change of heart in people. It's interesting that we think of *teshuvah* as a monumental event. But the collective case illustrates the fact that *teshuvah* is not something that happens to us. Rather, it's the commitment to begin a process that ultimately takes time; psychologically, it could take years for things like resentment and guilt to be replaced by reconciliation.

David Ingber: When Rav Kook wrote his book *Orot Teshuvah* (*Lights of Penitence*), he described two different modes of *teshuvah*, two different styles. One he calls *teshuvah pit'omit*, or sudden *teshuvah*, the kind of change of direction that begins with an epiphany rather than as a process. The second he calls *teshuvah hadragatit*, or gradual *teshuvah*, where repentance unfolds over time. Both of these have their place in the dynamic of personal relations. Rav Kook also speaks about a global level, called the *teshuvah olamit*, where the world "soul" does *teshuvah*, a combination of moments of epiphanies and the slow drip, drip, drip of how things eventually change.

Or Rose: ***One of the major motifs of the*** **Yamim Noraim** ***is memory; one of the names for Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaZikaron. What is the relationship between memory and*** **teshuvah?**

Jeff Helmreich: It feels like an impoverished attempt at repentance when someone says, "Let's forget the past; it is water under the bridge that we can't change. Let's not dwell on what I did; let's just move on from that."

Michelle Friedman: It doesn't work, because the adage "forgive and forget" is completely untrue — both psychologically and Jewishly, where we take seriously the commandment to remember. One aspect of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee experience was that people felt validated for their suffering. Public acknowledgement, people bearing witness to horrific experiences, is profoundly important, something that, for example, has not occurred with regard to the Armenian genocide. As David mentioned, the Rambam commands that you be in the same place with the same temptation to be tested. It is not as though if one does *teshuvah*, it eradicates the impulse to wrongdoing. One must constantly work to chaperone those impulses differently going forward. In other words, you have to remember in order to do *teshuvah*.

Sue Fendrick: Memory is so important to *teshuvah* for several reasons — all related to the fact that *teshuvah* is, among other things, about healing. Like when the body heals, in *teshuvah*, we return and restore something to the state that it was in when it was healthier. Second, it is a false kind of healing that happens if we refrain from looking honestly and squarely at what happened. This is also true in psychotherapy. The third way that memory comes into play is evoked by both the *zichronot* section of the Rosh Hashanah *musaf* and by *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur. God is remembering us, helping us remember what we are capable of. God has a wider view of us than we might have at a moment when we are focused on our sins. Memory here plays a role in that there is something more to our lives — and to who we are, how we are known, and what we can be — than what is captured in the present. And as we look toward growth in the future, we remember those who have known us in the past and who hold all that we are and have been — more than what might be present in that moment — and we bring these people and their relationships with us into the present as we work on *teshuvah*.

David Ingber: Based loosely on the thinking in Ernest Becker's book, *The Denial of Death*, as well as the work of Otto Rank and other psychoanalytic thinkers, my thought is that *Yom Hakipurim* can also be translated as the "day of coverings up" or "substitution day." In *Zikaron* is the sense of either a primal innocence or something that was known but for-

gotten that has been covered over that now has to be discovered and then recovered. *Yom Hakippurim* is a process of uncovering what usually replaces our deepest desires, intuitions, and yearnings. The remembrance that happens during the *Yamim Noraim* is a remembrance of a prior forgotten knowledge — an amnesia. The shofar blast *teruah* reminds us to remember.

Parokhet and *kaporet* use the same Hebrew letters; both are words for coverings, what separates and divides us from our own Holy of Holies. The Days of Awe try to awaken that memory.

I heard about a shul in Israel that holds a pre-High Holiday day of learning. As part of the experience, members of the community explore what will be the prayers of the *kahal* on the *Yamim Noraim*. In that way, when a person is crying or moved by the davening or *drash*, his or her neighbors on the bench can pray for the individual. We can open our hearts to breathe in what the other is breathing out, to take in their deepest need, their ultimate concern, and the yearning in their hearts. This practice can open our hearts and allow our deepest *tefillah* to emerge.

Sue Fendrick: In a lot of communities, when the *aron* is open at *Ne'ilah*, anyone who wants to can come individually, or as families, or in other groups, and stand and pour out their hearts. The *kahal* doesn't hear what it is that people are praying for, but there is an awareness of the many deep stories in the room. Wherever we are, we're not just saying our own prayers (fixed, spontaneous, or unspoken), but also on some level witnessing and accompanying others who are pouring out their own hearts.

Jeff Helmreich: The *Gemarah* says *"Ain Yom Hakippurim mechaper ad she'yiratze et chavero."* "Yom Kippur does not bring about atonement for anyone until he appeases his fellow." So the specifics of what happened — the particulars of a person's narrative — have to be noted. Atoning is never routine; it's the least uniform of any mitzvah in the Torah for that reason.

Or Rose: *Finally, how do you understand your role in helping others in the work of* teshuvah?

Michelle Friedman: I hope to help people feel trusting and vulnerable — that they can acknowledge their needs, their wounds, their sins, some of which may be egregious.

Sue Fendrick: I am not a congregational rabbi; right now my work is about encouraging teachers to research their own practice. Obviously, this has parallels in terms of the *teshuvah* process. Whatever we do in any context to make our work and endeavors safe and possible, and to give people tools for the kind of work that can seem scary, but that ultimately can be very healing, is incredibly important.

The most significant way that professionals — leaders, teachers, mentors, rabbis — can make the work of *teshuvah* possible is to model that kind of work. That doesn't mean that we must do our *teshuvah* work publicly, but to the extent that we hold ourselves out as learning, growing people who, when given the choice, decide to look reflectively at ourselves, whether personally or professionally, we invite others into a journey of *teshuvah*. I know that when congregational rabbis choose to speak personally (if judiciously), about their own struggles, whether about observance or family relationships, the payoff is extraordinary.

The only sincere apology is one that acknowledges itself as inadequate; it is paradoxical but a very important feature of *teshuvah*.

David Ingber: During a sermon I recently gave, I apologized to the community for an oversight that had created pain to a group of members. For me, this was an exercise in *teshuvah*, and modeling the act of seeking forgiveness was important. Before the *Yamim Noraim*, we have opportunities connected with returning — returning to the body as Rav Kook wrote about in *Orot Teshuvah*. In coordination with a nutritional group, we offer a one-week cleansing ritual before the *Yamim Noraim*. We have text classes on various elements of *teshuvah* and the *Vidui*. And we help people understand that they do *teshuvah* throughout the year; this, though, is a time to intensify that practice.

Jeff Helmreich: I am writing my dissertation on apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. But it has happened that when I apologize for something, someone will comment, "You are the one writing on apology and that is all you came up with?" Professionally, I don't really help people with *teshuvah*, but I do think about it a great deal on a theoretical level. And one feature that I've studied has a lot of practical relevance. One can't go into *teshuvah* thinking that you are entitled to forgiveness and entitled to a response. The only sincere apology is one that acknowledges itself as inadequate; it is paradoxical but a very important feature of *teshuvah*. To do genuine *teshuvah* requires not regarding it as genuine. I struggle with this all the time.