

Healing and *Teshuvah*

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The Talmud in Masekhet Yoma 86a makes an extraordinary statement:

אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא: גדולה תשובה שמביאה רפאות לעולם, שנאמר: "אֶרְפָּא מְשׁוּבְתֵם אוֹהֲבֵם בְּדָבָר."

Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said: Great is *teshuvah*, as it brings healing to the world, as it is stated: "I will heal their backsliding. I will love them freely." (Hosea 14:5)



While possibly an example of rabbinic hyperbole intended simply to emphasize the significance of *teshuvah*, nevertheless the connection of *teshuvah* (the central spiritual task of the High Holy Days) with *refuah* (healing) is intriguing and inviting of inquiry.

For one thing, what kind of healing is being referred to? Perhaps it is spiritual healing only, and specifically the costly residue of sin. But the text itself neither defines nor limits healing, and the reference seems quite broad. Commentators have understood it to encompass healing of bodily illness or injury, as well as emotional or spiritual woundedness and, indeed, suffering or brokenness of all kinds: whether personal or societal, in the world as we know it, and in mystical realms regarding which we may only sense an inkling.

If so, what exactly is the connection that the Talmud is making here between the spiritual work of *teshuvah* and such a broad understanding of healing?

The Rabbis may be imagining healing as a Divine reward for the spiritual work of *teshuvah*. Personally, that's not a theology I can accept, and it doesn't ring true to experience. I do not believe that illness or suffering is a punishment for wrongdoing, and I do not believe that health or healing is a reward for goodness.

Alternatively, the Rabbis may be suggesting a direct causal connection: healing comes simply as a consequence of improved character and behavior arising out of *teshuvah*. Certainly we can identify circumstances in which this seems true. There are clear and direct causal links between many of the world's woes and human evil or overreach. If we turned from evil and began doing good, many of those woes would resolve, society would function better, and much pain and suffering would be healed. On a personal level, too, this makes sense. Our *teshuvah* may involve changing ways of living that have been harming our bodies. And holding onto guilt, shame, anger, or regret may sometimes manifest in emotional stress and disease and physical symptoms. As we do *teshuvah*, we may experience healing as a result. But it's equally clear that not everything would be healed, because not all pain and suffering—collective or individual, physical or emotional—are directly caused by human behavior in this way.

So I want to suggest that the Rabbis may be suggesting a more intimate connection between *teshuvah* and *refuah*: not that healing comes as a result of *teshuvah*, but that *teshuvah* is itself a healing, and *teshuvah* and *refuah* describe significantly overlapping processes or experiences involving the whole person.

This reading, I believe, opens a more generative and profound understanding of the nature of both *teshuvah* and *refuah*.

There are many translations and connotations of the word *teshuvah*. Translated as “repentance” or “penitence,” it may conjure something judgmental and punitive: We have sinned, and we must repent, making amends concretely, verbally, and relationally. We must pay the price of error, failure, and wrongdoing.

The *teshuvah* the Rabbis envisioned as healing certainly includes taking responsibility for harm we’ve caused. But more than that, it is, by definition, the process that responds to the injurious experience of lost or compromised integrity—not only from specific wrongful actions, but the larger ways in which we are not living in accordance with our deepest held values or perhaps not even aware of them. It involves shedding ways of being or self-images that have never been truly who we are and reclaiming aspects of the self we have lost touch with or banished. This is less about self-flagellating recounting of sin and more about relocating inner truth, inviting us into gentler, more forward-looking understandings of *teshuvah*. Instead of “repentance,” *teshuvah* may refer to an “answer” or “response” (as to respond to a sense of call or mission, something God or the moment demands of us), or to a process of turning or returning (changing our ways and our direction, turning away from one path toward a new one).

Similarly, envisioning *refuah* as intertwined with this work of *teshuvah* moves us to expand our conception of what healing might entail and especially to distinguish healing from cure. The spiritual work of *teshuvah* may or may not have the power to change the concrete life challenges we face, whether it be a devastating illness, heartbreaking loss, or shocking violation of our values or trust. But *teshuvah* always has the potential to change the meaning we make of those challenges; it can alter our suffering, if not our circumstances. The recently published *Siddur Lev Shalem for Weekdays* includes the following note by John Clayton next to our daily prayer for healing:

The spiritual work of *teshuvah* may or may not have the power to change the concrete life challenges we face . . . but *teshuvah* always has the potential to change the meaning we make of those challenges.

What does it mean to speak of healing? Simply to ask the question, to struggle with the question, is to step beyond the curing of disease or undoing of incapacity. Suppose the self that prays simply for healing of flesh finds something different, more important: an opportunity for deepening. A wholeness. May it be so with me. Open my lips and my mouth will declare Your praise.

The same can be said of *teshuvah*—stepping beyond atonement for specific sins and asking and receiving forgiveness, the self that engages in *teshuvah* may also find something different and more important: that very same opportunity for deepening. A wholeness.

This is so because both *teshuvah* and *refuah* demand an honest reckoning with what is true—by their very nature they demand that we abandon fantasies of human invulnerability, immortality, immutability, or

perfection. They move us toward a wholeness that does not need to deny failure, deterioration, loss, pain, and even sin, but which instead allows all of us to be the full human beings we are.

In this sense, both *teshuvah* and *refuah* partake of a certain paradox: both are processes of returning not back but forward—not to who we used to be, but to an integral, truer, and more whole self we have always and never yet been.

In times of illness, loss, or brokenness, it's only natural to wish for a restoration of what was, a return to who we once were, or to the life or world we once knew. But, except in the most trivial situations (like the common cold), that return is impossible, and from a spiritual perspective, it is undesirable.

Healing changes us. So does *teshuvah*. Learning to live with serious illness or significant loss, confronting our own inadequacies, failures, and wrongdoing, we will likely encounter previously unknown depths of our vulnerability, as well as our strength and resilience. We may attain new clarity about what matters to us—prioritizing certain values whose significance we previously underrated and freeing ourselves of pressures and stresses once seemingly important but now revealed to be trivial.

Often, our capacity for compassion and connection grows wider and deeper. Inevitably, we emerge with an altered sense of self. This is not to say there aren't losses to be grieved—there are, including the loss of who we used to be. But in both *teshuvah* and *refuah*, we're likely to discover that the self we have become is truer and more whole than the one we used to be. The Talmud (Berakhot 34b) famously quotes Rabbi Abbahu:

דָּאָמַר רַבִּי אֲבָהוּ: מְקוֹם שֶׁבָּעָלִי תְּשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין - צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִים אֵינָם עוֹמְדִין

“In the place where those who engage in *teshuvah* stand, even the fully righteous do not stand.”

Great is *teshuvah*, as it brings healing to the *world*. *Teshuvah* and *refuah* on the personal level are microcosms of what can happen societally and globally. There is no going back to what was—for a people, a country, or humanity—ever. But if a critical mass of humans have the courage to do the deep work of *teshuvah*, we can be healed forward into a societal vision that is more whole, more conducive to the flourishing of all of us, and truer to the fullness of the human condition.

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