



Sicha Summary

Chelek 17 | Acharei | Sichas 3

The Law:

Regarding the verbal formulation of confession, Rambam writes: “How does one confess? He says: “I implore You, G-d, I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity before You by doing the following.... Behold, I regret and am embarrassed for my deeds. I promise never to repeat this again.” (*Hilchos Teshuva* 1:1)

Later, however, Rambam rules that a more succinct formulation is acceptable:

“The confessional prayer customarily recited by all Israel is: “For we have sinned...” This is the essence of the confessional prayer.” (*Hilchos Teshuva* 2:8)

The Question:

The three words used for sin, “I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity,” {הטאתי, עויתי, פשעתי} refer to various degrees of malicious intent of the sinner. “Sin” refers to unintentional acts, “transgression” refers to intentional acts, and “iniquity” refers to rebellious acts performed in defiance of G-d. (*Yoma* 36b)

Why, then, is the “essence of the confessional prayer” only “we have sinned,” which refers to unintentional sins but does not include more severe transgressions?

The Preface to the Explanation:

The Talmud relates:

Rabbi Masya ben Charash asked Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya... Have you heard the teaching that there are four categories of atonement...? He said to him: There are three categories, and repentance is necessary with each one.

- 1) If one violates a positive *mitzvah* and repents, he is forgiven immediately....
- 2) If one violates a prohibition and repents, repentance suspends his punishment and Yom Kippur atones for his sin...
- 3) If one commits a transgression that warrants *karet* {Divinely imposed excision} or a sin punishable by death from the earthly court and then repents, repentance and Yom Kippur suspend his punishment, and suffering absolves and completes his atonement...
- 4) But one who has caused desecration of God's name — his repentance has no power to suspend punishment, nor does Yom Kippur have power to atone for his sin, nor does suffering alone have power to absolve him. Rather, all these suspend punishment, and death absolves him. (*Yoma* 86a)

Even though four categories are enumerated here, Rabbi Elazar only considers atonement granted in one's lifetime to be a relevant form of atonement. He does not consider the fourth category, where one who desecrates G-d's name is granted atonement through death, to be part of the process of atonement. Rabbi Masya, on the other hand, does consider this final case to be a distinct form of atonement.

The Alter Rebbe opens his work on repentance with this Talmudic passage and omits the clause about one who desecrated G-d's name. (*Iggeres Hateshuva*, ch. 1) This implies that in the context of repentance, only the first three forms of atonement are relevant. Why is this so?

The essence of the *mitzvah* of repentance, according to the Alter Rebbe, "is simply the abandonment of sin," and not regret over the past or verbal confession. (*Ibid*) The objective of repentance is for a person to reform his future behavior. Therefore, abandoning the sin and never returning to it again constitutes repentance. Nonetheless, the desired culmination of

repentance is for the person to be reconciled with G-d, to become close to G-d again. This is the meaning of atonement; the soul is cleansed from its association with evil and is now “desirable and precious before G-d.”

Thus, repentance consists of two steps: a) repentance itself — the practical reformation of future behavior; b) the culmination of repentance — the soul’s atonement and drawing closer to G-d by contrition over the past, and verbal confession.

Now, *mitzvos* can only be performed by a soul within a body, because the purpose of a *mitzvah* is to refine the physical world. Applied to repentance, this means that the categories of atonement that are relevant to the *mitzvah* of repentance are those that affect the embodied soul. Only if atonement and closeness to G-d can be achieved in this world can it be considered the culmination of the *mitzvah* of repentance.

Thus, Rabbi Masya considers there to be four categories of atonement because he is speaking about atonement of the soul detached from the context of repentance as a *mitzvah*. Rabbi Elazar, however, speaks of atonement in the context of repentance, and therefore only considers categories of atonement in which atonement is granted to a living body.

Dual Confession:

The same distinction between the essence of repentance and its desired culmination can be applied to confession. a) The essence of confession is for a person to express his commitment to change his future behavior; therefore, saying “I have sinned,” a bare-bones admission to guilt, is sufficient. B) The desired culmination of confession is for a person to express his contrition over the past and his desire to draw close to G-d once again; this is accomplished through a more detailed confession: “I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity before You by doing the following... Behold, I regret and am embarrassed for my deeds...”

The Deeper Dimension:

Kabbalah explains that the four categories of atonement correspond to the four spiritual worlds: a) neglecting a positive *mitzvah* corresponds to the world of *Asiyah*; b) transgressing a prohibition corresponds to the world of *Yetzirah*; c) a transgression that warrants *karet* corresponds to the world of *Beriah*; d) and desecrating G-d's name corresponds to the world of *Atzilus*.

Rabbi Elazar does not count the category of atonement corresponding to the World of *Atzilus* (desecration of G-d's name), for there is no semblance of a created being in this world; it is transparently G-dly, and so it is not relevant to the reality of an embodied soul.

The *Jerusalem Talmud* interprets Rabbi Elazar's teaching differently — the atonement for neglecting a positive *mitzvah* is not counted in his three categories of atonement. This would correspond to not counting among these categories the atonement of the world of *Asiyah*. Kabbalah sometimes identifies the number three with the spectrum of Divine *light* {i.e., revelation}, for there are three worlds where G-d's *light* is manifest (*Atzilus*, *Beriah*, *Yetzirah*), and identifies the number four with the Divine capacity for concealment, for the fourth world, *Asiyah*, which is devoid of revealed Divinity. Thus, according to this explanation, Rabbi Elazar counts only “three” categories of atonement, corresponding to the three worlds of Divine *light*.

There is consonance between these two divergent explanations: Chassidus explains that the world of *Atzilus* is intimately connected to the world of *Asiyah* — for the revelation of the Divine reality in *Atzilus* comes about through Divine service performed in the physical reality of *Asiyah*.

Thus the two interpretations of Rabbi Elazar's teaching — that he omits either the atonement corresponding to the world of *Atzilus* (desecration of G-d's name) or the atonement corresponding to the world of *Asiyah* (neglecting a positive *mitzvah*) — are related, for these two worlds are interconnected.