

## Part 4 — Afflicting Oneself for *Kaparah*

It seems that a group of scholars known as the *Chasidei Ashkenaz* had a *mesorah* (tradition) about transgressors afflicting themselves in order to get a *kaparah*. People would ask them for advice in terms of what they should accept upon themselves to facilitate this. One of the earliest *seforim* discussing this was from the *Rokeach* who gave specific guidance about what should be done for each particular *aveirah*.

The *Sha'arei Teshuva*<sup>1</sup> speaks about this practice —

Fasts, afflictions, shedding tears, and depriving oneself from pleasures can be in place of *yissurim*... [In addition,] if the transgressor acknowledges G-d's justice in the *yissurim* which occur to him, and accepts them with love, this will [also] shield him from many more *yissurim* which were fitting to have come upon him.

Rav Oelbaum, in his collection of sources which relate to the Rambam's *Hilchos Teshuva*, points out that the Rambam never explains the degree of *yissurim* we would need to have a *kaparah* for our *aveirot*. There is an argument with this among authorities who came after the Rambam.

Rav Oelbaum quotes the *Teshuvot Chatam Sofer*<sup>2</sup> who writes —

One who wants to exempt himself from *yissurim* being imposed upon him from *Shamayim*, should afflict himself with afflictions and fasts.

The *Chatam Sofer* brings a proof to this from the *halacha* that one who is *chayav krisut* (obligated to be cut off), but does *teshuva* and gets lashed, will be exempt from the *krisut*. This tells us that one who is *chayav krisut* requires *yissurim* like lashes besides doing *teshuva*. And the *Chatam Sofer* furthermore establishes that every day one fasts [during the daytime, meaning from sunrise to sunset], even in the winter months, counts like a single lash. This idea, that one needs difficult *yissurim* like lashes for a complete *kaparah*, is a very great stringency. After all, the evaluation of the *Beis Din* to determine how many lashes the transgressor should receive, means right up until the point where he would actually die. Therefore, according to the *Chatam Sofer*, a *kaparah* seems to require *yissurim* which are close to death.

The *Chatam Sofer* discusses this in a different *teshuva*<sup>3</sup> —

To exempt oneself from a *kareis* prohibition, one should fast 39 days for every time one had illicit relations. Even in the winter, a fast day is equal to one lash given by *Beit Din*. This, however, is only when it is combined with the embarrassment of confessing publicly. Without this, the private affliction [of the multiple fast days] will not be similar to lashes in *Beit Din*, which was public. One also needs much *tefillah* (prayer) and supplication to remove the Divine anger, and to not be subject to curses, *Rachmana litzlan* (G-d should save us from this). More than this, I don't know.

The *Teshuvot Nodeh b'Yehuda*<sup>4</sup>, on the other hand, says there is no fixed amount of *yissurim* required for a *kaparah*. Rav Oelbaum explains that, according to the *Nodeh b'Yehuda*, the afflictions themselves are not the essence of the *kaparah*. Their main purpose is to bring one to a complete *teshuva*, and to stimulate a sincere regret, as well as a broken heart. In fact, he writes explicitly — “one who is able to slaughter his desires, should do it through [learning] Torah...which weakens one's strength. I am, therefore, very lenient with fasts and afflictions.”

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<sup>1</sup> 4:12

<sup>2</sup> #125

<sup>3</sup> *Orach Chaim* – 1:175

<sup>4</sup> #141, *Orach Chaim*, *siman* 35

And while the Rambam himself does not mention fasting for the sake of a *kaparah*, he does write about *galut* (exile) — “One may exile himself from his place, because exile is *m'chapeir* for transgressions, since it causes one to be humble.”<sup>5</sup>

The *Maharam m'Lublin*<sup>6</sup> presents a very demanding process for the transgressor to receive a *kaparah* —

Initially, this person should fast 40 consecutive days [i.e., during the daytime], and afterwards, fast three days out of every week. He should not eat meat or drink even beer, [during the night following] every one of these fast days. He should not sleep on mattresses or sheets for an entire year, except for Shabbat and holidays. He should not bathe his body or wash his hair, except once every month... He should lay down in the doorway of the *Beit Medrash* at the time when people are leaving the *Beit Medrash*, and allow the people to walk on top of him... He should go once every month with 10 people and prostrate himself on the grave of the Gaon, with tears, crying out, and asking for *mechila*. He should do this for 12 months. He should not go to any festive meal or celebration, trip or enjoyment, for this entire first year. And he should continue to fast every Monday, Thursday, and Monday until a total of 3 years are finished. He should drink no beer, and certainly no honey, or whiskey for intoxication, for 5 years, neither with friends nor in his own home.

And the *Marshal Hasheni*<sup>7</sup> outlines an even more extreme regimen for a particular woman to receive *kaparah* —

The beginning of the week, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Iyar, she should begin to fast every day for 365 consecutive days, besides days when the *tachanun* prayer is not said. And she should eat no meat and drink no wine except for Shabbat and holidays until the 21<sup>st</sup> of Iyar of the following year, plus however many days she will need to fast to make up the total of the 365 days... During this year she should wear black, wrap herself in a veil made from coarse fabric, with a belt of Egyptian rope, and change her robe only once a month. She should wash her hair only once a month for *k'vod Shabbos*, and only bathe in hot water *erev Yom Tov*. And even so, this should be minimal, not too enjoyable, but just what is necessary for *k'vod Yom Tov*. She should sleep only on straw which is on the ground, or on a couch, except for Shabbat and holidays... She should get 39 lashes, as is customarily given in our times, but not more. She should sleep by herself, in the place of the mourners, but away from the other female mourners...

She should sit [among women] for a short period of time during the summer, in a place where she will be exposed to ants or flies, every Monday and Thursday. She should then say the *viduy* in front of these women while covering her upper body. And, in the winter, she should sit this period of time in cold water in a cold bathtub every Monday and Thursday. All of this should be done according to the judgment of the Rav, and the Sages of the city, whether strict or lenient. This includes other things as well as the fasting, depending on how much she can endure. During this period of the fasting, she should go to no festive meals, even for a *mitzvah*, and even on the days she is allowed to eat, like Shabbat and holidays. She should be careful to not hear any singing or music, and avoid social gatherings and excursions. She should not speak with men or boys, unless there is a pressing need. After the 365 days of fasting have ended, she should fast for an additional year, at least every Monday and Thursday. If she can handle two additional years of fasting every Monday and Thursday, that would be even better. She should also fast her entire life on the terrible day she actually stumbled, so that her transgression will always be in front of her, and she should say *viduy* privately. If, however, she marries a different man, she

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<sup>5</sup> *Hilchos Teshuva* 2:4

<sup>6</sup> #44

<sup>7</sup> A *Talmid* of the Marshal, and the *Rebbe* of the Shelah and the Bach

will be exempt from fasting so she should not be displeasing in his eyes. The rest of her life, she should be extra vigilant to avoid involvement and unnecessary speaking with men... *Perhaps* there is hope, since Hashem is merciful, that with this she will have a *kaparah* for her transgression.<sup>8</sup>

As was discussed previously, the *Nodeh b'Yehuda*<sup>9</sup> had a much different understanding of this entire issue —

I was requested to provide guidance for a *Ba'al Teshuva* in terms of his transgression...

It is a problem to ask this difficult question from me, since I am not accustomed to responding to questions where I am unable to find a source in the words of the *Gemara* and the *Poskim*. I never found [this idea of] multiple fasts on specific days according to how serious the *aveirah* was. It is true that fasts are written in the verses of the Prophets for the purpose of *teshuva*. But the extent of the number of fasts is not spelled out in either the verses or the *Gemara*; only in the *sifrei mussar* (books dealing with self-improvement). The *teshuva* discussed there, and most of the ideas, are built on speculation with no sources, one book relying on another book, with no foundation at all. We find much which is stringent and lenient with this, and therefore it is difficult for me to respond...

And the guidelines we find, where the *ba'al teshuva* must do something three times, corresponding to each transgression, is lacking any foundation...

The truth is that the fasting is really secondary to the *teshuva*. The essential *teshuva* is to abandon the *aveirah*, say the *viduy* with a broken heart and a sincere regret, which is inspired to draw close to and love the Creator. That is a *teshuva* which is returning to Hashem and His mercy, and clinging to Him. But other things like fasting and affliction, are not the main point. We need to know, without any doubt, that *teshuva* [itself] is *m'chapeir* a complete *kaparah*. This is well known in the Torah, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, in both Talmuds, and in all of the *Medrashim*...

One who violated *krisus* or *misus Beit Din* (prohibitions obligated in being cut off or death by a Jewish court) does, however, require *yissurim* to be cleansed, and therefore, the *yissurim* are essential to the *kaparah*! But, while it is true that one does need *yissurim* [in that case], the Chazal have told us — “The minimum of *yissurim* [may be the small annoyance of] putting one's hand into one's pocket to take out three coins, but only removing two.”...

Ultimately, regret, a broken heart, and crying are all very effective, and much crying in private is praiseworthy...

Although I am very lenient with fasting and afflictions, and *teshuvat hamishkal* (*teshuva* which corresponds to the *aveirah*), however to [completely] exempt the transgressor with nothing is impossible...

Rav Dessler<sup>10</sup> points out that if one violated either *krisus* or *misos Beis Din*, we know that — *Kaparah* is impossible without *yissurim*. But one need not wait until he is afflicted from Heaven. One can accept *sh'virat haYetzer* (breaking the *Yetzer Hara*) upon himself, since *sh'virat haYetzer* is the greatest *yissurim* of all.”

Rav Aryeh Kaplan<sup>11</sup> explains —

It is customary by some to receive the 39 lashes administered by the courts on the eve of Yom Kippur as a sign of *teshuva* and *kaparah*.

A person can avert suffering by the hand of G-d by imposing it upon himself in the form of fasting and other self-mortification... In a sense, fasting can take the place of

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<sup>8</sup> An Abbreviated Order of *Teshuva* for a Woman

<sup>9</sup> *Orach Chaim* – #35 – First printing

<sup>10</sup> *Michtav M'Eliyahu* (5:170 – *HaYissurim HaGedolim* – *Shvirat HaYetzer*)

<sup>11</sup> *Handbook of Jewish Thought* – Vol. 2 Atonement – 17:11,19,20

sacrifice, where one's own flesh is offered in place of the animal's, thereby strengthening the spiritual in man. Fasting alone, without *teshuva*, however, has no purpose.

One can similarly undertake other forms of self-mortification such as self-exile. In order to *m'chapeir* for an *aveirah* completely, one must undertake *yissurim* equal to the enjoyment gained by the *aveirah*, and also equal to the penalty prescribed for it.

Rabbi Touger<sup>12</sup> writes —

Since the *Gemara*<sup>13</sup> speaks about *yissurim* coming upon the transgressor, the *Iggeret HaTeshuva* of the Rambam<sup>14</sup> derives from this that there is no need to combine one's *teshuva* with fasts or other penances. *Yissurim* should be left “to come upon him” — i.e., by Divine decree. This is also implied by the verse in *Tehilim*, where G-d says — “I will be the One to punish...” Nevertheless, many texts of *mussar* do suggest fasts and penances to avoid *yissurim* from Heaven, and to expedite the conclusion of the *kaparah*... In the present day, however, most authorities suggest that we devote our energies to positive activities without inflicting *yissurim* upon ourselves.

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<sup>12</sup> In his notes to his translation of *Hilchot Teshuva*, pg. 17

<sup>13</sup> *Yuma* 86a

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 1