Teshuba and the end of life

Maimonides enumerates four different categories of transgressions for which Teshuba represents an atonement. The first category is repenting for Mitzvot ‘Ase, or positive commandments (1:4).

Lately, I thought a lot about this apparently simple idea. “Transgressing a positive commandment” means: failing to do something good!. Normally, when we think of Teshuba we recall our mistakes, flaws, misdeeds, etc. But according to Maimonides’ statement: we need to regret (and act upon!) not only for what we have done wrong but also or primarily for what we have not done!

It reminds me of one of the deepest experiences I’ve been exposed to as a rabbi. When I visited in the Hospital patients who knew they will die soon, I found out that they are not focused that much on the mistakes they have made. Rather, those patients, at these sacred last moments, are regretful for the good things they should have done and they didn’t do. For the many opportunities they’ve missed to help others, to learn more Torah, to give more Tsedaqa, etc. In other words, people regret they have missed their full potential to do good. They feel they have had the capacity to do more than what they did. The greater the person was, or the highest position that person had, the bigger the feeling of having missed so many opportunities to make a positive change in himself and in others.

In a sense, if we take seriously the Jewish concept of Rosh haShana: the rabbis’ idea that

every new year we are judged weather to be granted or not an additional year of life, the days before rosh haShana are well suited to reflect, not just in our flaws, but (mainly?) in our potential to learn, to grow, to give, to help, to make a real change.

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