

# How to do Teshuva without Killing Yourself in the Process



[Picture: Bochorim actors in Yeshiva Bais Yisrael Purim Shpiel, 2005]

**[In context:** The topic of teshuva for p'gam habris is enormous. I will not be discussing it at length in this paper. Another point to consider is that some Jews engage in sexual behaviors as a result of a medical addictive disorder, and not entirely out of free will. In these cases, the free-will is often located on the point of seeking out help and complying with therapy, but not necessarily a matter of stopping the compulsive behavior itself. This is addressed by famous Tzadikim like R' Volbe, R' Avigdor Miller, and others, and it will not be discussed here either. In areas where a person had no free will, nothing is construed as "sin" and therefore does not need teshuva. However, teshuva may be required on peripheral issues such as not seeking help, or for the initial behaviors that kicked off an addictive cycle before becoming addicted. People never choose to become addicted because addiction itself is horrific and painful, but they can choose to get help, and they could choose to avoid engaging in behaviors that form addiction in the very beginning. Even on this point, some people form an addictive cycle before even reaching bar mitzvah age, when they are too young to reach out for help and not even obligated in mitzvos. These issues are complex and will not be discussed here at all. God willing, other papers in the future may feature these topics.]

- Avi Tenenbaum, is a recovery Rabbi & addiction specialist residing in Jerusalem Israel. [avi@jnars.org](mailto:avi@jnars.org)

---

## ***Table of Contents***

<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>p. 3</i>
<i>The Golden Rule about these things.....</i>	<i>p. 4</i>
<i>Fasting-Mitzvah or Sin.....</i>	<i>p. 5</i>
<i>Mikva and Tikunim.....</i>	<i>p. 5</i>
<i>Alternative methods of Teshuva that won't kill you.....</i>	<i>p. 6</i>
<i>What if I hear advice from Tzadikim but feel it isn't good enough for me.....</i>	<i>p. 9</i>
<i>How long does it take to become perfect, forever.....</i>	<i>p. 11</i>
<i>How do I know if my teshuva was accepted.....</i>	<i>p. 13</i>
<i>Teshuva as an ongoing process.....</i>	<i>p. 14</i>

Rabbi Avi Tenenbaum MSc CASAP [www.AviTenenbaumTherapy.com](http://www.AviTenenbaumTherapy.com) 054 845 1458

[avi@jnars.org](mailto:avi@jnars.org)

# *Introduction*

**The** Gemara relates a story about (Rebbi) Elazar Ben Durdaya, who was heavily involved in promiscuity until the last day of his life. On that very day he did teshuva but died as a result of his overwhelming remorse.

I was told that “Dov”, a famous member of the [www.gaurdyoureyes.com](http://www.gaurdyoureyes.com) community, once said “it is a feat to do teshuva; it is a bigger feat to do so without dying in the process!”

In order to repent for p’gam habris, one can find a multitude of correct suggestions found in our Torah, all from our Tzadikim. Yes, they are all correct. Fasting until feeling dizzy, rolling unclothed in freezing snow, vowing to never taste sweet foods again for one day a week, and more.

The question is, though, who are these suggestions correct for?

Which generation?

Which type of person?

What age?

And what if they make you worse off spiritually and psychologically more so than before you started?

**The purpose of this paper** is to offer a few suggestions offered by these same Tzadikim that may be more appropriate for people in our times.

## 1.1 If there's only one thing you choose to remember, let it be this:

**The Golden rule:** Remember this rule throughout the paper. Any idea offered by a genuine Torah source is a good idea. You can certainly try it. However, pay attention whether the thing that you decided to do is effective for your Avodas Hashem.

In other words, is it really helping you to get close to Hashem, or not?

Does it add more anxiety to your life?

Do you do it out of compulsion and desperation, or out of a mature sense of taking responsibility upon yourself for your actions?

While you do it, do you feel like you have a relationship with Hashem and you want to make it better, or that Hashem hates you and you must do this in order to plead for him to take you back?

The **core of the golden rule** is this: If by doing this "tikun" you indirectly wind up acting out even more, it is impossible to believe that Hashem actually wants you to do this! For example, if one compulsively forces himself to tovel in the mikva every day, causing himself anxiety, thought rumination, as well as guilt when he has no time to go, then I am confident to say that **Hashem does not want this**. If you are not sure, you can rely on me. I am %100 positive about this.

I am going to write in a very confident tone throughout this paper because I am contending here with the Yetzer Harah, who tricks most people with p'gam habris that they must do teshuva in harsh, taxing ways that mitigate their sobriety and mental/spiritual health. I am going to tell you here that "NO!-you don't need to do that, and shouldn't if you can't handle it. I will tell you alternative ways of teshuva instead that you could try which won't "kill you in the process".

**Source:** See Sefer Sichos HaRan 235

## 1.2 Fasting-Mitzvah or Sin

Should a person fast?

No. For most people this is a bad idea. Are you an exception? Maybe; but I highly recommend against this. Some Tzadikim say that if somebody fasts he actually has to repent for fasting as well, as it is a sin! Most people, out of haughtiness, think they can handle it, but the truth is that they really can't—they get all edgy at others or they blow up like a ga'avah-blimp. Don't fall for this trick.

Below you will find healthier and more effective ways to do teshuva that will actually be misakein your bris, and not ruin it further. You can see what to do instead below in this paper.

**Source:** See Likutei Moharan 10; See Sefer Tziyunim Yikarim on Shovevim, p. 25, from R' Elimelech of Lizhensk, the Shidlovitze, Menoras Hameor, Sforno, R' Ahron of Karlin, Opter Rav, and more.

## 1.3 Mikva and Tikunim

Should a person go to the mikva every day and say lengthy tikunim?

You could do this, but not compulsively. Not if it brings you closer to acting out. Remember the **golden rule** above. Mikva is great; so is saying stuff like Tikun Klali, Tikun 48 of the Zohar, and more. However, this is only if it helps you to get closer to Hashem and tikun habris. ***Otherwise, Hashem clearly does not want you doing this!*** Why would God want you to force yourself compulsively to say tikunim just so you could act out more?! As crazy as that sounds, many people rationalize that Hashem prefers dreadful tikunim, even at the expense of additional acting out. Don't fall for this trick.

There are other roundabout ways that this trick works too—I remember one guy who would go on Friday afternoons to join a group of Tzadikim performing the “Tikkun HaRashash”, only to return home late each week to a very angry wife who needed his help to prepare for shabbos. They'd fight about it, go into shabbos depressed and angry....and his big “tikun” was only more destructive than if he had stayed home and read a good book about the “Battle of the Bulge”. It is better to stay home and read a clean book about the “Battle of

the Bulge” than to do fancy tikunim at the expense of your Kedusha or wife’s feelings. I am %100 positive about this.

**Bottom line:** Fancy Tikunim is only for-

- **Humble people** (& not ga’avah blimps who will say ‘look at me-I’m doing a fancy tikun’),
- **With healthy motivations** (& not ‘Hashem hates my guts-the only way to please him is to mutilate myself with 5000 chapters of tehillim’),
- **Who can handle doing it** (& not if it jeopardizes his sobriety, midos, or shalom bayis by making him edgy, etc.)

**Source:** See Sefer Sichos HaRan 235

## 1.4 What else can a person do for teshuva which is safe and effective? What else can be done to accomplish “tikun habris”?

- ❖ **Don’t do it again:** The Sefarim say that the main way to demonstrate teshuva to Hashem is.....badabum.....to stop doing the behavior! This includes making an effort to stop as well, speaking to somebody that can possibly help you, and sitting down and making a list of healthy strategies to help you cut down and stop. If it is compulsive for you and you cannot stop, so what?!-you can still be mikayeim “don’t do it again” by getting in touch with something or somebody that can help you stop.

**Source:** See Sichos HaRan 71; Alim Litrufa , letter 71

- ❖ **Torah study:** People mistakenly think that only litvish Tzadikim suggest Torah study for p’gam habris. In fact, most people think that they say this as a way to just “brush off” the issue of p’gam habris and “get back into learning”.

**The truth about Torah study as a “tikun” is twofold:**

Rabbi Avi Tenenbaum MSc CASAP [www.AviTenenbaumTherapy.com](http://www.AviTenenbaumTherapy.com) 054 845 1458  
[avi@jnars.org](mailto:avi@jnars.org)

a) All groups, including Chasidim, Litvaks, and Sefardim suggest Torah study as a way to accomplish tikun habris. It is universal.

b) They discuss it as a direct way of fixing one's bris, and not just an "excuse to distract you" from feeling depressed.

**Source:** Sefer HaMidos, Teshuva 50, Sefer Kedushas Einayim p. 103 from Chida in Tziporen HaShamir 10, 152; Steipler in Krayna Di'igarta vol. 1, 12; there are innumerable sources for this across all types of Torah Jewry.

- ❖ **Helping others:** In my opinion, this one is the most comforting and eye-opening method-even if one is still struggling to stop, he can do teshuva by helping others to stop!

There is an age-old debate amongst the Tzadikim whether a person can be involved in helping others to keep mitzvos if they themselves are still having a rough time with those issues. According to one side of Tzadikim, you can certainly be involved in helping others-not as an authority per se, but as a support person who gives chizuk or practical advice which once helped you.

Accordingly, it is not strange to find some Tzadikim write that helping others to be shomer bris, or even just strengthen Torah observance in general, is a way to do teshuva and tikun habris.

#### **Here are examples:**

- ✓ **Spread Torah and Shmiras Bris to others**
  - Ask a Rav in your town to start an inspiring shiur on Chassidus, Mussar, or Halacha that will make an impact in your area. Find some friends to attend, do a little advertising, and bring a soft drink and cups. Of course, you also need to attend and pay attention!
  - Donate money to an organization that is already helping people with shmiras bris, or for keeping Torah in general. For example, go to [www.gaurdyoureyes.com](http://www.gaurdyoureyes.com) or call up the Chofetz Chaim Heritage foundation and donate money there.

Doing sincere teshuva requires *effort* and so merely donating the customary \$18 isn't enough—I'd recommend giving enough that it makes you cringe and clench your teeth while you give over your credit card number! This is a good step, but make sure it is something you do periodically and not just one time. After all, teshuva is a way of life, not a one-time-task to get off your head.

- You could also call up a Torah/kiruv institution and ask the secretary to let you know if there's any way you could volunteer to help their institution. Maybe they need someone to help arrange their yearly fundraising dinner or something else that will enable them to continue their work.
- Alternatively, try and rally some of your friends to donate to these important causes as well—make an informal parlor meeting or a bunch of phone calls to friends who could give some money to tzedaka. When you've really put an effort into this and sweated significantly for Hashem, you can consider that a form of Teshuva.
- Offer to learn Torah with a person who cannot study on his own, or who has questions in yidishkeit and wants to know more.

There are so many ways to help spread yidishkeit or support organizations already helping with shmiras habris and other areas of chizuk HaTorah. Get involved, and make a sincere effort to contribute.

**Source:** See Sefer Chayei Moharan 457, Sefer Kedushas Ha'adam p. 94 from Chida in Tziporen Shamir 69, 136 & 130; and from Reishis Chachmah, Sha'ar Hakedusha ch. 17;

✓ **Helping at Home/in Yeshiva:**

I was pleasantly surprised to see this “tikun habris” mentioned by two of Yerushalayim's prominent Mekubalim and Poskim:

- To make time to **help clean up/babysit/do laundry/wash dishes at home!**
- If you're in yeshiva you can still do this by humbly **putting away the piles of sefarim** flying all over the beis medrash.

It is much easier to do chessed for others than it is for the people you “love” at home. In your house you get very little recognition and appreciation for



what you do-and that's exactly why the Arizal says one is measured in shamayim by how much chessed he did at home. By looking at this Hashem measures up if a person is really a true ba'al chessed, or just a "kavod-chaser".

R' Mendel Kaplan once said that people fly across the world to do chessed for poor people in obscure countries while the truth is that if they really wanted to find chessed to do, there is enough chessed in one's own apartment building to keep them busy for a full work day; but one gets more gratification out of helping Albanian people build a new farm after the earthquake than to help out one's own wife by cleaning up the house each day *without being told*.

Don't underestimate this tikun-it is much harder to do than to roll in snow naked.

If you feel this tikun isn't good enough for you then I recommend you take five minutes to stop what you're doing and consider why you have this urge to disagree-R' Nachman teaches that it is actually a result of "p'gam habris" that causes Jews have an urge to disagree with Tzadikim.

**Source:** See Alon Parsha "Lireyacha Kamocha" in the name of R' Benayahu Shmueli and R' Ben Tzion Mutzafi, Parshas Vaeira 5775

## 1.5 Hearing advice from Tzadikim, but feeling it's not good enough

**What if I feel that what the Tzadikim are telling me to do just isn't enough to satisfy me?**

My reply: Did you stop to ask yourself "*why* do I feel so intensely like I *know better* than the Tzadikim", "*why* do I think that when they offered these suggestions they did not include me in their words", or "*why* do I feel so intensely that even if I listen to them, it is not enough?"

I'll keep this short and simple. There can be a lot of reasons for this. Here are a few common ones:

**You caught a case of “P’gam Habris” syndrome:**

The sefarim write that when a Jew has an urge to disagree with Tzadikim, it is because he was pogeim his bris. In other words, a common side effect of “p’gam habris” is that one has a feeling to disagree with Tzadikim-this is a common side effect and will go away with teshuva. Accordingly, ignore the urge to disagree and put the advice we listed above into action *anyways*. In short time your neshama should get cleaner and this feeling will go away.

**You fell for the “Zohar trick”:** There’s a famous Zohar which supposedly says that one cannot do teshuva for zera livatala. All of the holy sefarim ask “but teshuva works for everything in the world-so how can this Zohar seem to imply that teshuva doesn’t work for zera livatala?”

If you only know this scary Zohar and question but not the numerous answers given to it by our Tzadikim, then it makes sense why you aren’t that willing to believe that any tikun could ever help you, short of dipping yourself in a pool of Sulfuric Acid while simultaneously swallowing molten lead with razors in it.

The Tzadikim have already addressed this Zohar and offered numerous answers and explanations. It’s not our topic, but the point is, you can definitely do teshuva even for this, and it does not contradict the Zohar in the slightest bit!

**Faulty Perceptions of God:** One’s belief in Hashem is skewed. Hashem is perceived as an angry God that hates you and bears a resentment against you, and not like Hashem as the way he is depicted by our Tzadikim-a loving God with endless patience, and a true desire to take anybody back to teshuva, no matter what. Put simply, some frum Jews believe in a God, but the wrong one! They believe in a God that you wouldn’t want to meet alone in a dark alley, instead of Hashem, who has *ein sof* mercy and love.

My friend Dr. Yehoshua (Josh) Mark once described it in fancy words like this:

“God is anthropomorphized as malevolent, punishing, tyrannical, and never ever satisfied”.

**Faulty Perceptions of self:** There’s a deep-seated belief about one’s self like “God is very benevolent but I have sinned too much for it to be possible for me to ever fix

my mistakes. I am too broken to be fixed. My only possible tikun is to hurl myself into Piranha-infested waters with pieces of raw meat duct-taped to my chest”.

**Need to be in control:** Some people, due to trauma and poor relationships in their home of origin, never learned how to trust others. “Trust” means that I am willing to make myself *vulnerable* to do something even if I don’t exactly feel that way or understand-because I “trust” that you care for my good and are competent enough to give this advice.

People with nasty parents, for example, may have never felt comfortable enough to trust their own parents, and as a result they never learned how to trust others. For these people the world is a scary place, and they feel everyone is out to get them or at least not interested in their good. In order to protect themselves they try to control everything they do. By controlling things they suffer a lot and feel desperately lonely but they get the illusion as if no one can harm them because they have blocked everyone out of their life. People like described above will not feel comfortable relying on the advice of Tzadikim because they have a need to control, and don’t trust people outside of themselves.

## 1.6 How long does it take to become perfect, forever?

### Getting a reality check

Teshuva is supposed to take 5 seconds, and once you do teshuva you will never act out again....Just kidding! Teshuva and stopping to acting out do not necessarily go together. Of course, I wish you a hearty bracha that you should never act out again; but our Tzadikim tell us that the reality is otherwise-that stopping to act out usually takes time and patience, sometimes years.

This isn’t just a warm “Chasidische” idea, but one that is universal and very real. It is meant to be applied to the real world; specifically, people doing teshuva for acting out are supposed to do their best and keep moving forward, but be prepared in case of a fall with bags full of patience, chizuk, and broad-mindedness.

Why broad-mindedness? Because only somebody who is narrow minded would think that after doing teshuva he would be free of sinful behavior. Of course one must stop sinful behavior, because that is the first of the three steps of teshuva; but at the very same time, it takes practice to change behaviors that a person performed many times. Even the commentators in the Shulchan Aruch point out that it is extremely hard to change any behavior related to sexual acting-out, because the yetzer harah for these things is much greater than by other areas. So realize this-according to the Torah outlook, you are a person who is trying to change one of the hardest things that is possible to change in all realms of human behavior! It is therefore no wonder that you will need some patience for this journey.

Our Tzadikim also teach that if a person falls and gets all frustrated and broken, that is a strong predictor of acting out again. So instead of getting depressed when a person falls after doing teshuva, he should remember to consider the reality of how long it takes to “be perfect from acting out, forever”.

If you went to medical school and didn't become a doctor in two years, would you be frustrated? Maybe; but if you knew before you walked into school that medical school can take 7-10 years to complete, you'd feel a lot better, because you'd have a realistic frame of reference to measure yourself to.

**Bottom line:** Do teshuva, and move forward. If you fall and take a few steps backwards, just get back up and do teshuva and move forward again. Keep moving forward, always. Be realistic, have patience, and for every step you may take backwards, take two steps forwards. There is so much to say on this subject that can be helpful, but is beyond the scope of this paper (for an incredibly fundamental piece of advice on how to do teshuva, see Likutei Moharan 6).

**Source:** See Sefer Likutei Eitzos, Teshuva 5; Steipler Goan in introduction to Sefer “Keeping Holy”; R' Volbe quoting the Chazon Ish in Sefer Igros Uksavim, Volume 1, letter 21

## 1.7 “But how do I know if my teshuva was accepted?!”

### **A classic trick of the Yetzer Harah that makes well-meaning people “lose their marbles”**

A lot of people have anxiety because this thought lurks deep inside their psyche- “How will I know if all this teshuva stuff worked or was enough?!”

Because they don’t immediately receive prophecy about this and find the answer they seek amidst thunder and lightning, they panic and then over-do it with their “tikunim”. Their logic is “I don’t know if what I’m doing is enough-so I’ll crush myself to near-death with 1000 dips a day in the mikva until I know “for-sure” that my teshuva was sufficient”.

Our reply to this: What’s the difference? Is Hashem an evil taskmaster with an 8-tailed cattle-whip in his hand, just waiting to mercilessly strike you down and bleed you to death? No, no, and no. If you are making a sincere effort to change, despite the results that you see, you can be assured that Hashem is very happy (understatement) with your efforts. If you are already doing what the Tzadikim suggest, in a healthy way which works for you, then that is sufficient. Believe me.

Are you just waiting to “feel something” by doing your teshuva, in order to feel satisfied? Is Avodas Hashem some sort of video game where you expect certain things to happen in order to get to the next level, like seeing Mario toss Bowser over the side of the castle wall into oblivion?

If you are waiting to feel something as a result of your teshuva, then you have fallen for **the oldest yetzer hara trick in the book!**

**Take this advice instead:** Just keep moving, with the powerful emunah (belief) that Hashem appreciated what you did, it worked, and now it’s time to keep walking. If after five minutes an intrusive thought returns again (for the 10, 000<sup>th</sup> time) and tells you “but maybe you really didn’t do enough?!” then just watch it drive by in your mind and keep moving.

Hashem wants people to do teshuva, and he helps them. If you extended yourself to do teshuva, then Hashem will help you, is helping you right now, or has already helped you, and what you did or are already doing (healthily) is good enough for him.

Take this **iron-clad rule**: If you do what you think Hashem wants, and you really mean it sincerely, you will never be harmed. “In all your ways you shall know Hashem, and he will straighten out your path for you”. “Hashem did not give the Torah to angels”. “Hakadosh Baruch Hu does not come and try harassing his creations [giving them tasks that are too hard]”. Good work, now keep moving!

**Source:** See Sefer HaMidos Teshuva 74; Sichos HaRan 140; Sichos HaRan 131; Alim Litrufa 71; (see Sefer Hamidos, Tzadik 38, vidok); Sichos HaRan 3; See Tzidkas HaTzadik 1

## 1.8 Teshuva is an ongoing process and a way of life

### **Teshuva’s not limited to saying a few tikunim or listening to a nice shiur**

Teshuva is all about coming back to Hashem. All of us are far from Hashem, even Tzadikim, because ultimately Hashem is infinitely good, perfect, benevolent, and all else. We humans, and even big Tzadikim, are mere humans. The sefarim say that even the angels are aware of their shortcomings in comparison to the Ain Sof. Therefore, we all have to teshuva, always. We all have room to grow, and even in regards to the teshuva which we did in the past-can we honestly say it was genuine enough and sufficient in tandem with the infinite greatness of Hashem? Of course not. When we daven, is it with always with great yearning and concentration? Of course not. Do most people perpetually live in a state of yiras shamayim? No. Do we kvetch at least a little bit when we miss our bus, showing a lack of emunah in the concept “all that Hashem does is for the best”? Yup.

**But there’s a good thing about always doing teshuva**-it always keeps you humble, and connected to Hashem. That’s why Tzadikim like the Ramchal teach to make a “cheshbon hanefesh” each night, and Reb Nachman tells us how every Jew must talk to Hashem each day in his own words and connect with him through “hisbodedus”. Look at the Igeres HaRamban which says “make a cheshbon hanefesh every morning and night, and by *doing this all of your days will be spent doing teshuva*”.

The Gra says that a Jew with bitachon who has a genuine connection to Hashem but also occasionally commits serious sins *is more valuable* to Hashem than a frum-faker and kavod-chaser who never sins.

By always keeping teshuva on our daily and weekly agenda, we are always in close proximity of Hashem, emess, emunah, tefilah, anava, and all-else involved in Avodas Hashem.

**Source:** See Sefer Likutei Eitzos, Teshuva 6-7; See Sefer Even Shleimah 3, 2

There's much more to say about teshuva, but this is enough for now, vio'd chazon limoed.

**Tam Vinishlam Lichvod Hashem Yisbarach, Rishon liparshas Bo, 5775.**

Hatzlacha Rabba,

*Avi Tenenbaum*

[avi@jnars.org](mailto:avi@jnars.org)

[www.AviTenenbaumTherapy.com](http://www.AviTenenbaumTherapy.com)

054-845-1458