T
he first step in the teshuva process is hakarat haCheit (recognition of the sin). The natural state of the Jewish neshama is that it seeks to be close to G-d. It is considered an aberration for a person to desire to sin. Thus, hakarat haCheit stems from the sinner’s feeling that he is distant from G-d. He wants to return because of the sense of loneliness he experiences.

The pasuk says, אֲשֶׁר חָטָא... קֵץ מְחִילָה וּסְלִיחָה (Vayikra 2:7):

If his sin that he committed becomes known to him, he must repent. If he did sin, he would not be able to use that animal, because it was sanctified as a korban prior to a person knowing he had sinned. The obligation to offer a Korban Chattat does not exist prior to yediat haCheit, just as there is no chiyuv teshuva without hakarat haCheit and yediat haCheit.

Rabbeinu Yonah writes that there is a special mitzvah of teshuva on Yom Kippur, beyond the constant obligation to repent every day. He bases himself on the pasuk, קֵץ מְחִילָה וּסְלִיחָה (Vayikra 16:30), which he understands as a directive to cleanse ourselves on this day. The Rav pointed out a similar statement of the Rambam (Hilchot Teshuva 2:7):

“Yom Kippur is... a specific time of pardoning and forgiveness; therefore, all people are obligated to do teshuva and to confess their aveirot on Yom Kippur.”

Rav Soloveitchik suggested the nature of the obligation may be different on Yom Kippur than during the rest of the year, specifically in regard to the requirement of yediat haCheit. In general, if a person becomes aware of an aveirah he committed and thus has yediat haCheit, he has an obligation to do teshuva. The unique obligation on Yom Kippur is for one to search through all of his actions. In reviewing all his actions, including those he believed to be permissible in the past, he may well come to the realization he had been committing an aveirah all along that he did not recognize. He may find a yediat haCheit he was unaware of until this point, for which he is now able to do teshuva.

The Rav suggested a parallel halacha that illustrates this additional requirement. In discussing the destruction of avodah zarah specifically in Eretz Yisrael, the Torah commands:

אֶת אֱלֹֽהֵיהֶם... וְאִבַּדְתֶּם אֶת שְׁמָם מִן אַבֵּד תְּאַבְּדוּן אֶֽת כָּל הַמְּקֹמוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָֽבְדוּ־שָׁם (Devarim 12:2-3).

Based on this, the Rambam (Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 7:1) rules, ובְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִצְוָה לִרְדֹּף אַחֲרֶיהָ עַד שֶׁנְּאַבֵּד אוֹתָהּ (Hilchot Avodah Zarah 7:1) rules, “In Eretz Yisrael, there is a mitzvah to chase after avodah zarah until we destroy it from our entire Land.” In chutz laAretz, no such requirement exists; the chiyuv only applies to avodah zarah we know about in an area we occupy. The additional teshuva obligation on Yom Kippur is thus similar to the increased obligation to destroy avodah zarah in Eretz Yisrael.

Adapted from Rav Schachter on the Moadim.

1. Shavuot 4b, s.v. vene’elam; see Kovetz Ha’arot, Yevamot, 63a.
2. Sha’arei Teshuva 4:17.

Rabbi Hershel Schachter is Rosh Yeshiva and Rosh Kollel at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University.