

## Parallel Thinking Part 14: The Torah Time-Machine Section I

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While scientists have debated whether time-travel is possible, the next two articles will discuss the reality of time-travel in the Torah, or at least our ability to change the effects of our past and to alter our future.

The 19th century Danish Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard crystallised the problem of free will – we cannot possibly fully know the consequences of our decisions at the time we make them. Yet once decisions are made, we cannot turn the clock back and undo them. He described the angst of decision making by stating that, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards”.

The Rambam (Maimonides d. 1204) discusses at length the mitzvah of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is often translated as ‘repentance’, but is more accurately translated as ‘return’. The Rambam delineates four stages of *teshuvah*: One must (i) recognise and discontinue the transgression, be it in thought or action, (ii) verbally confess it, (iii) regret the transgression and (iv) decide never to repeat it. While *teshuvah* cannot erase the action itself, it can erase the negative spiritual effects the transgression has had on the individual, thus returning him/her to the same spiritual state they were in before the mistake was made.

When returning the Sefer Torah to the Ark, we recite the verse from Eichah (Lamentations 5:21): “Turn us back, O Lord, to You, and we will return. Renew our days as of old” (green siddur, page 432). Whilst we cannot change the past, we ask God to change the *effect* it has had on us, to regain the state we were in before our transgression.

After Moshe completed his recounting of the grave sin of the Golden Calf, he said: “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord, your God, demand of you? Only to fear the Lord, your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, and to worship the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes, which I command you this day, for your good” (Devarim 10:12-13).

The first words “And now” seem superfluous; why did Moshe introduce this section by telling them what they should do “now”? It is common to look back at decisions we have made which, with the benefit of hindsight, we regret and wish we could undo. There is a danger that these regrets affect us so deeply, that even after doing *teshuvah*, we live our lives yearning for the past, failing to live in the present. Moshe reminds us that once we have gone through the *teshuvah* process, we should aim to live in the ‘now’ and focus on improving our future. God forgives us our past; we should also forgive ourselves for not having had the foresight to know those things we can only know with hindsight



Unfinished sketch of Kierkegaard c. 1840