

Repentance

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

When I was a child in England, I often used to see men and women standing at street corners holding placards saying such things as, "The End of the World is Nigh! Repent before it is too late!" or some variation on that theme. It struck me as silly. Even in the era of the atomic threat, I had much more important things to worry about, such as the next soccer game. And repent? What exactly had I done that was so terrible? A few little lies to my parents like, "No, I did not eat that chocolate"?

Every Shabbat afternoon my father always made us learn one brief quote from Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, and that was where I came across "Repent one day before you die." So, it seemed, our religion took the idea seriously after all. So what did it mean?

The Hebrew word "Teshuvah" is used in the Torah of God and Israel in the context of "returning" to each other after Israel betrayed its covenant and suffered exile. It is not used as we do today, to mean personal repentance. That doesn't mean there is no such concept in the Torah, but it is implicit rather than explicit.

The sacrificial system talks about sin offerings and the need to confess one's errors before seeking forgiveness and atonement. Kapara, atonement, has the root of the name of Yom Kipur. The Torah requires atonement but also a process of confession, Vidui. Unlike the Catholic concept, it does not require confessing to a priest. Instead one addresses oneself directly to God (or to one's own conscience). In true Freudian terms, it requires one to give full expression to what it is one has done wrong. Only after that has been completed and any restitution effected can one be forgiven.

Maimonides adds a rider. Only when one finds oneself in exactly the same position as one was when one did wrong and with the capacity to do it again, and this time one desists, then can one be said to have completely wiped away the misdemeanor. But since one can atone at any time in the year there is some debate as to why one also needs a Yom Kipur, be it for individuals, serious crimes, or the community.

We need to be reminded of our limitations and forced into facing the consequences of our actions. Most of us just let things slip or fade from our immediate consciousness. This period of the year is designed precisely for that: reflection and introspection. But on the other hand, it could equally and simply be that the community needs this group catharsis, and it is there to reinforce our sense of community and national shortcomings.

Nevertheless, there is no actual, specific command in the Torah to repent, Teshuvah in the obligatory sense. I believe this has a lot to do with the

“psychology” of sin in early Judaism, before we were influenced first by Greek and then by Christian and Muslim theologies.

The three main Biblical words for sin are instructive. “Cheyt” derives from “missing the mark or the target.” “Aveyra” come from the word to pass off the straight and narrow. “Avon” means to be deficient in some way. All of them imply an error of judgment that can easily be rectified by adding a quality to our armory, by standing in a better or more appropriate position, or by acting more skillfully or wisely. It is no wonder that the Talmud says, “A person only sins when he is possessed of stupidity.” (Sotah 3a)

There is no hint here of a “state of sin”, so beloved of hellfire and brimstone preachers. No heavy, awesome weight that can be debilitating and psychologically damaging. Just a recognition that people make mistakes that can usually, and often easily, be rectified.

The idea of “fearing sin” plays an important part in rabbinic literature. But I don’t think this is intended to induce guilt. It is nothing more than simply an instruction to always be aware, on the look out, and sensitive to possible mistakes.

The concept of “Original Sin” does not loom large in our thinking. Certainly not in the Christian sense of believing that humanity is born naturally evil and can only be redeemed by faith (specifically in Christian dogma). We do have the idea that Adam’s (emblematic) sin in the Garden of Eden changed the course of human history. And this is often referred to in the Talmud. But we are usually much more relaxed about such issues (except for intense movements like Mussar). Guilt is not a healthy emotion, and despite the myth of the guilt-ridden Jewish mother, I think we are much more laid back.

I believe the weight of Talmudic opinion is that humans tend to make the wrong decisions, to undo all the good that others achieve, to bring selfishness in to dethrone altruism. These, rather than intrinsic evil, are the features of human beings in general that make this world a less pleasant place to live in.

In theory, the most evil person has the capacity to change and to repent. Perhaps that is what we should all be praying for over Rosh Hashana and Yom Kipur. Instead of weighing ourselves down with guilt and regret over our own relatively minor mistakes, we should be thinking of the wider world. On Rosh Hashana, as the Talmud says, “All God’s creatures pass before Him.” We should be thinking of everyone else. We should be praying for all the sad human beings, all the evil, violent people in this world who are destructive, selfish, and corrupt, and hoping that they might see the light.

Despite all the things I say to the contrary, I really am an optimist!