

# Atonement

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This has not been a good year for religion. In the West, scientists and rationalists of various hues and popularity have repeatedly assaulted it in bestselling books. Many of their arguments have appeared persuasive. Religion has a lot to answer for; or to be fairer, people who act in the name of religion have a lot to answer for. They have killed, tortured, and murdered vast numbers of human beings. It is little compensation that those rejecting religion and espousing other ideologies have exterminated an even larger number of human beings. Two wrongs and all that!

In the name of religion, free thought and expression have often been suppressed and attacked. Innovation and progress have been opposed, and societies have been thrown back to barbarism. It is "cold comfort" that so-called free and modern societies have often spawned excessive inequalities in wealth and opportunities. Crime and depravity have flourished, and values have been eroded. And, again, it's no compensation to point to disastrous nonreligious ex-Marxist leaders like Robert Mugabe and say that they are worse.

Wherever one looks, in every religion, there is hypocrisy. Power and authority corrupt. Materialism is endemic. Women are to some degree or other are treated as second-class citizens. Certainly attitudes toward them are expressed in derogatory or condescending language. And each group is composed of many people who are convinced (or at least declare) that God, Allah, Jesus (it matters not what name they use) is on their side and everyone else is wrong, doomed, and damned.

The case for the defense is that all human activity, whether it is tiddlywinks or Morris Dancing, is open to manipulation, corruption, and abuse. Humans seem to have an infinite capacity to either ignore the constraints of morality or to desecrate anything that is wholesome and good. The ideology is not to blame. It is the human who messes up anything and everything.

Yet such arguments are not entirely satisfactory. If an ideology sets itself up to achieve certain goals and manifestly fails to do this, then may we not conclude that it is flawed? If we can say the ideology of communism failed, why not the ideology of religion? If religion sets out to make humans better and more caring, but in fact it does not, and it has plenty of time to prove itself, then I suggest it too has failed. If the Bible tells us that our behavior should set an example that others will want to follow, and yet we behave in such a way, or make public declarations in such a way, as to make ourselves a laughingstock, have we not betrayed our own holy texts? And thereby cannot it be fairly said that the religion has not succeeded in helping us overcome our least attractive natures? It is not God's fault so much as ours.

The Mishna says that someone who finds favor in the eyes of humanity surely knows that he has found favor in the eyes of God, but remember the Mishna says that the converse is also true. Of course, it is not the opinion of the crude masses that counts, but the opinion of moral, caring humans that behave ethically that matters.

So what can we say? Is it an answer to shrug it all off and say that some religions are growing in membership? Is it an answer to say that even within religions that are losing numbers, the more committed are actually increasing in number and therefore they must be getting something right? All this tells us that there is a need for social cohesion, to belong, to identify, and religion is one of the means available to satisfy this need. Or that many, if not all, humans have a built-in spiritual dimension that needs to be satisfied one way or another, and religion meets this too. Or perhaps that we humans are poor weak easily deluded creatures who need certainties, and religion offers those. Or merely that we need props to live, and reassurance in the face of death, and religion does this too?

Perhaps this is all true. So why am I, a rational, reasonable fellow, open minded, I believe, and trying hard to be a good person, why am I so profoundly attached to my religion despite the antics I cannot identify with of so many of my co-religionists in both directions?

Most religions do indeed offer visions of things to aspire to, standards to strive for, and goals to be met even as we fail them. I think it is no coincidence that our holiest day of the year is one that asks us to look at ourselves, to examine our lives and values. And that the Talmud (Yoma) declares that the one thing you cannot atone for is desecrating the Name of God—giving religion a bad name, in other words!

On Yom Kippur we devote 25 hours to a special, solemn and introspective state. We judge ourselves and find us wanting. We cry for another chance. We determine to improve. Yet the minute it is over we return to where we were before. That's the human nature I'm complaining about. I'm sure Torquemada prayed and lacerated himself and was totally convinced he was being a good boy. My late father used to say that you could judge how effective Yom Kippur was by the way a person prayed the mundane routine evening prayer that follows after Neila at the end of the Day of Atonement. We all know that in most places Jews don't even wait to say the evening prayer. The synagogues empty out the moment the fast ends. Then by that criterion, the day was a waste. But was it? Is it a waste if for twenty-five hours in a year one lives a higher, nobler, less indulgent life, even if one cannot sustain it? Isn't something better than nothing? Isn't a sight, a glimpse of eternity worth it?

For all its failings, or manifest limitations, does not religion offer us a vision of something more, even if it is a measure too far for us? Forget the human hypocrites. No one is responsible for our actions but us. If humans need to imagine a god in a human format, inevitably the god, thus created, will appear to fail us, as all humans inevitably fail. The Bible does us anthropomorphic language but I do not have to take it literally. The Bible often uses language that is sometimes poetic, sometimes allegorical or metaphorical. If we take it too literally, that is a human failure, too, to

miss the wood for the trees. The criticisms we have are of humans, whether religious or not, who claim what they have no right to claim, or who impose what they should not, or who destroy what they should leave well alone. As the great Shimon Bar Yochai says in the Talmud, "I have noticed there are very few people who rise (to higher spiritual levels)! Maybe two in every thousand!" (Succah 45b, etc.)

The question we need to ask is not why others don't rise higher. The only question worth asking is, why we don't!