

# Yom Kipur 2013

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

People are often surprised when I say there is no actual command in the Torah to repent. You might compare it to the afterlife. It is something that was so obvious on a spiritual level and so universally accepted by every civilization at that time that it did not need to be stipulated in a book concerned with living life in the present. But still, repentance is such a crucial part of our tradition and at this time of the year it is such an omnipresent theme that it is worth examining what message it conveys.

There are words in the Torah for doing the wrong thing, for confessing, for making reparation, for atoning, and you might think that one cannot do all that without a change of heart. But there is no specific command to have a change of heart. Perhaps this is because you cannot command people to change their hearts. You cannot know if they are sincere or not. You can only judge by actions.

I always like to start by going back to language and the origin of words. The Hebrew word SHAV ("to return") is the root of the word most commonly used for repentance, teSHUVA. Throughout the Torah it simply means returning property, position, or status to the situation before, to a given moment in the past. It is like land returning to its original owner during the Jubilee. The only time it is used outside of the legislative part of the Torah is when it talks about the rift between the Children of Israel and God. There it is as much about God returning to humans as about humans returning to God. In other words, it is not repentance, as such, but rather reconciliation. And since reconciliation is a two-way process, it cannot be legislated for in terms of a single party.

A similar word to teShuvah that the Torah uses is LENACHEM. It is used anthropomorphically of God regretting such things as giving humans the freedom to disobey Him, to behave in a corrupt manner (Genesis 6:6 or Exodus 32:14). But the very same word means to be comforted (Genesis 24:67 and 38:12) or to reconcile. It is another example of words in Biblical Hebrew sometimes meaning opposites. One might say that the very things that cause alienation and fracture are the means of reconciliation and healing. That part of the human brain that distances mankind from God and good is the very feature that brings humans closer to God and to good.

The fact is that such terms are metaphors. We don't actually come back or return, because most of us were never there in the first place. There's an interesting term used in the Talmud to describe someone who never, ever experienced Jewish life. He or she is called "a child captured and brought up by non-Jews". Or, to use the Hebrew, "Tinok Shenishba bein HaGoyim". Since the breaking down of the physical and cultural barriers of the ghetto, this term has been applied to those born Jews who have assimilated, never knowing what it was they were assimilating from. I believe it was first used this way by the Chafetz Chayim, a scholarly and saintly rabbi of the nineteenth

century, known for commentary on parts of the Shulchan Aruch, the Mishnah Berura, and for his books against gossip and telling tales.

But this principle has been used by recent and current authorities because if someone has never known better, he or she cannot be punished or blamed for disobeying Jewish law. Such a person does not become a returnee, a Baal Teshuvah, the equivalent to "born again". A Jew who comes to Torah for the first time is conceptually closer to a convert.

But it seems to me that the very notion of repentance is really a metaphor for a relationship, any relationship. Most people have some sort of idea of God, however vague and ill defined. Such relationships are often taken for granted and ignored until a crisis brings them to the fore. Indeed like all relationships, associations, and pathways through the brain, they need to be reinforced, repeated, worked upon, and nurtured before they become part of one's mental makeup.

It is for precisely this that Yom Kipur exists. It is to reinforce a certain kind of relationship. It is not the festive, fun, pleasurable experiences of other festivals. It's the hard and painful exercise that all relationships need to reinforce them. It is not that there are no festivals celebrating the pleasurable, positive and even fun side of our relationship. They are in the majority. But sadly the occasional visitor to a synagogue usually comes on the sadder or more serious occasions. We need both the happy and the serious.

The teshuva we emphasize on Yom Kipur, what we call repentance, really means to come closer. It is not a formulaic ritual of performing a mitzvah, a command, as such. It is rather the process through which both parties remember each other, remember what needs to be done, and devote time to nurturing that relationship.

We anthropomorphize God all the time, in our liturgy and in the Talmud. God is happy, sad, angry, and, yes, misses us. He yearns for us as much as we for Him. He is disappointed and alienated as we are, and yet we can and do come together. That is what teshuva really is. Relationships vary in kind and intensity, but they all share the need for the parties to be reminded of one another.