

Repentance in Modern Jewish Thought?

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I. Medieval Teshuva and the Modern Critique

A.

ומדרגות התשובה ומעלותיה לפי גודל המרירות ועוצם היגון. והיא התשובה אשר תבא
מדרכי טוהר הנפש וזכות שכלה

And the levels of repentance and their stature is based on the greatness of the bitterness and the power of the grief. And that is repentance that comes by way of the purification of the soul and the purity of its intellect

R. Jonah Gerondi, *The Gates of Repentance* [GR] I:13

https://www.sefaria.org/Shaaarei_Teshuvah.1?lang=bi

B.

העיקר הה' הדאגה. כי ידאג ויפחד מעונש עונותיו. כי יש עונות שהתשובה תולה
כפרתן ויסורין ממרקין. כמ"ש (תהלים ל"ח) כי עוני אגיד אדאג מחטאתי. וענין היגון על
שעבר. וענין הדאגה על העתיד. ועוד שנית ידאג. אולי הוא מקצר בחובת התשובה
בצער ובמרירות ובצום ובבכי. וגם כי הרבה צער והרבה בכה יזחל ויירא אולי לעומת
זה הרבה אשמה. ולא השלים חוקו את כל ענותו ואשר יבכה בצום נפשו

The fifth principle is worry: As he will worry and fear from the punishment of his iniquities. For there are iniquities for which the repentance has the atonement depend upon cleansing afflictions, as it is stated ([Psalms 38:19](#)), "I acknowledge my iniquity; I am fearful over my sin." The content of grief is about the past, whereas the content of worry is about the future. And he will also doubly worry - maybe he is falling short in his obligation of repentance with pain, bitterness, fasting and crying. And even if he has multiplied the pain and multiplied the crying, he should crawl and fear - maybe corresponding to this had he multiplied his guilt; so that all of his affliction and having his soul cry in its fast did not fill his measure. (GR, I:16)

העיקר הט' שבירת התאוה הגשמית. ישיב אל לבו כי התאוה עוללה לנפשו לחטוא
ולמשוך העון בחבלי השוא. ויעשה נדר לשמור את דרך התשובה. יפרוש מן
התענוגים. ולא ימשך אחר תאותו גם בדברים המותרים. ויתנהג בדרכי הפרישות

And the ninth principle is the breaking of physical desire. One should put into his mind that desire causes harm to his soul - to sin and to be pulled after iniquity for worthless vanities. So he should make a vow to protect the path of repentance: He should separate from pleasures and not be drawn after his desire - even with things that are permissible - and follow the path of asceticism (GR, I:30)

**ועוד נתחייב בעל התשובה על הכניעה. מפני שהוא חייב להסיר מנפשו המדות
שגורמות לחטוא ומעוללות הפשעים.**

And the penitent is also obligated to submit, because he is obligated to remove from himself the traits that cause him to sin and to do rebellious deeds. (GR, I:26)

**העיקר הי"ב צריך שיחקור וידע ויכיר גודל העונש לכל אחד מעונותיו. באיזה מהן יש
מלקות. ובאיזה יש חייבי כריתות ובאיזה יש חייבי מיתות בית דין. למען ידע גדול עונו
בהתודותו. וימרר בבכי על אשר הכעיס תמרורים. ולמען יוסיף להכנע. ולמען יפחד
מעונותיו. כי העבירות החמורות. תשובה תולה כפרתן ויסורים ממרקין.**

The twelfth principle is that one needs to examine, know and recognize the greatness of the punishment for each one of his iniquities - for which of them is there lashes, for which of them is there a liability for excision, for which of them is there a death penalty from the court - in order that he know the greatness of his iniquity when he confesses it, and cry bitterly about that which bitterly angered [God. This is also] in order that he will enhance his submission and in order that he will fear from his iniquities. For [with] weighty sins, repentance only suspends their atonement whereas afflictions absolve them. (GR: I: 37)

**העיקר הי"ח היות חטאתו נגדו תמיד. כי ראוי לנפש החוטאת לזכור ענינה תמיד ואל
תשי (פי' תשכח) אותם לקץ ימים. ומלבבו לא חטפו עד בוא חליפתו. כענין שנאמר
:(תהלים ל"א) כי פשעי אני אדע וחטאתי נגדי תמיד**

The eighteenth principle is that his sin always be in front of him. For it is fitting that the soul of the sinner always remember its content and not neglect (forget) them to the end of days. (GR, I:48)

C.

**הדרך הו' כל עת יכון לקראת אלהיו. כי לא ידע האדם את עתו. על כן כליותיו ישתונן.
ובצדקה יכוון. להשיב רוחו בטהרה אל האלהים אשר נתנה. ויחפש דרכיו ומעלליו בכל
יום. יפקדם לבקרים ולרגעים יבחנום**

ויש על האדם לשער בנפשו בהיותו שאנן ושלו. איך ידאג לבבו ויראה ורעד יבא בו ביום המות בהיותו נכון לעלות ליתן את החשבון. ואיך יתודה בעת מותו בלב נשבר. וככה יעשה כל הימים יתודה בלב נדכה ויהיה מורא שמים עליו

The 6th path is that he should prepare to meet his God every instant. Therefore he should darken his conscience and prepare in righteousness to return his soul in purity to God who gave it [to him]. He should search his ways and plans every day; record them in the mornings and examine them all the time.... And when a person is at ease and tranquil, he should assess in his soul how his heart will worry, fear and tremble when the day of death comes; that he should be prepared to rise and give an accounting; and how he will confess with a crushed heart at the time of his death and the fear of heaven will be upon him. (GR, II:15)

ויש אנשים אשר לא ירגישו בענין המות לעשות צדה לדרך ולתקן מעשיהם ולא יעלו על לבם יום מותם עד בואו. והם נמשלים כבהמות אשר לא ירגישו בענין המות עד יום הטביחה

ואמרו רבותינו זכרונם לברכה במסכת דרך ארץ. רצונך שלא תמות. מות עד שלא תמות. ביאור הענין הרוצה שיהיה לו יום המות לחיי עד ידבר אל לבו אחרי אשר סופו לעזוב את האדמה ולהניח חפצי הגוף ובאחריתו ישטמם ויטשם. יעזבם בחיים ולא ישתמש באדמה רק לעבודת הבורא יתעלה. ואז יהיה לו יום המות לחיים שאין להם הפסק

But there are people that do not sense the matter of death, to make provisions for the road and to rectify their actions; and they do not pay attention to the day of their death until it comes. So they are compared to animals that do not sense the matter of death until the day of slaughter...

And our Rabbis, may their memory be blessed, said in Tractate Derekh Erets, "Is your will not to die? Die before you die." The explanation of the matter is [that] the one that wants that the day of his death be [a gateway] for him to eternal life should speak to his heart - since his end is to leave the ground and to leave the matters of the body, and in his end, he will despise them and abandon them; he should leave them when he is [still] alive, and only use the ground for service to the Creator, may He be blessed. And then the day of death will be [the beginning] of life without end for him.

(GR, II:17)

D. The Modern Critique

[Religion] has debased the concept “man”. Its ultimate consequence is that everything good, great, true is superhuman and bestowed only through an act of grace.

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1901 & 1906), tr. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), §136

[Man] has seized upon the presupposition of religion so as to drive his self torture to its most gruesome pitch of severity and rigor. Guilt before God: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him.... In this psychical cruelty there resides a madness of the will, which is absolutely unexampled: the will of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for.

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), tr. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1969), II §22

One need only ask psychiatrists what happens to patients who are methodically subjected to the torments of repentance, states of contrition, and fits of redemption.... In the wake of repentance and redemption *training* we find tremendous epileptic epidemics...; as another aftereffect we encounter terrible paralyses and protracted states of depression ... (Ibid., 142).

I have a *precursor*, and what a precursor! . . . Not only is his over-all tendency like mine – making knowledge the *most powerful* affect – but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; . . . he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergences are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the difference in time, culture, and science.

‘Postcard to Overbeck,’ tr. W. Kaufman in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 92.

Repentance is not a virtue, i.e. it does not arise from reason; he who repents of his action is doubly unhappy and weak

B. Spinoza, *The Ethics*, tr. S. Shirley, in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (ed.) M. Morgan, (Indianapolis, 2002), 348.

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II. Teshuva and the Metaphysics of Time

A.

A good deal is written on this subject in the Torah, the prophets, and the writings of the sages. But for our generation this subject is still a closed book and is in need of clarification. Our literature, which explores every area where there is manifest the poetry of life, did not probe at all into this wonderful treasure of life, the treasure of repentance. Indeed, it has not even begun to take any interest in it, to discover its character and value, not even from its poetic side, which is a source of endless inspiration. It certainly has thus far failed to touch its practical aspect, especially insofar as it bears on the conditions of our modern life.

Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot ha-Teshuvah* [*The Lights of Repentance*], tr. Ben Zion Bokser in *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, The Mora Principles, Essays, Letters and Poems* (Mahwah, NJ, 1978), 41

[*Homo religiosus*] views repentance only from the perspective of atonement, only as a guard against punishment, as an empty regret which does not create anything, does not bring into being anything new. A deep melancholy afflicts his spirit. He mourns for the yesterdays that are irretrievably past, the times that have long since sunk into the abyss of oblivion From this perspective repentance is an empty and hollow concept. It is impossible to regret a past that is already dead.... Similarly, one cannot make a decision concerning a future that is as yet “unborn”. Therefore Spinoza and Nietzsche – from this perspective - did well to deride the idea of repentance.

J. B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, tr. Lawrence Kaplan (New York, JPS, 1983) 113-4. [Henceforth HM]

B.

Kapparah means: forgiveness or withdrawal of claim. This is a legal concept, borrowed from the laws of property. Just as one may release his fellow man of a debt owed to him, so may God absolve one of penalty to which he is liable due to sin. *Kapparah* removes the need for punishment. . . According to Rashi, the words “*kapparah*” (acquittal) and “*kofer*” (indemnity payment) are derived from the same Hebrew root [“*kfr*”] and have a common signification. Punishment is not a self-negating phenomenon – an indemnity must be offered and paid in order to withdraw the liability claim. . .

All this concerns the liability incurred by the sinner. The moment acquittal is granted and punishment is wiped from the books, man’s liability is terminated.

Pinchas Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 58-9.

Have these genealogists of morals had even the remotest suspicion that, for example, the major moral concept *Schuld* [guilt] has its origin in the very material concept *Schulden* [debts]? . . . And whence did this primeval, deeply rooted, perhaps by now ineradicable idea [that every injury has its *equivalent* and can actually be paid back, even if only through the *pain* of the culprit] draw its power - this idea between the equivalence between injury and pain? I have already divulged it: in the contractual relationship between *creditor* and *debtor*, which is as old as the idea of “legal subjects” and in turn points back to the fundamental forms of buying, selling, barter, trade, and traffic.

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), tr. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1969), II §4

C.

שבעה דברים נבראו קודם שנברא העולם ואלו הן תורה ותשובה וגן עדן וגיהנם וכסא הכבוד ובית המקדש

ושמו של משיח

מסכת פסחים נד, א

Seven phenomena were created before the world was created, and they are: Torah, and repentance, and the Garden of Eden, and Gehenna, and the Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of Messiah.

D.

The traditional view is that the *t'shuva* idea is penitence. For the Christian theologian, *t'shuva* is a transcendent act dependent upon the grace of God.... The erasure of man's sins is, from the rational standpoint, incomprehensible. Only the supernatural, miraculous intercession of God on behalf of the sinner may effectuate this cleansing. . .

But the halakhic concept of *t'shuva* contains yet another element: *tabara*, purification.... [The sinner] strives to convert his sin into a spiritual springboard for increased inspiration and evaluation. This act is not supernatural but psychological. . .

[. . .] Besides *kappara* we still possess a lofty idea, far superior to absolution. Indeed, we have been bereft of the ceremonies and sacrifices that are relevant to the transcendent act of the erasure of sin by supernatural grace and incomprehensible divine benevolence that alter the past and disrupt the causal chain.... But we Jews have brought another message of *t'shuva* to man, that of *tabara*. There is nothing transcendent, miraculous, or nonrational about *tabara*.

Soloveitchik, 'Sacred and Profane', in J. Epstein (ed.), *Shiurei Harav* (Hoboken NJ: Ktav, 1974), 27-30

Both “cause” and “effect” appear in an active-passive “garb”; both act and are acted upon; each influences and is influenced by the other. The future imprints its stamp on the past and determines its image. (*HM*, 115)

Man molds the image of the past by infusing it with the future, by subjecting the “*was*” to the “*will be*” (*HM*, 117).

E.

Existence, in its overall character, is sinless. Sin appears only in the evaluation of particulars. In the perspective of the whole everything is related in eternal harmony.

Kook, *Orot ha-Teshuvah*, 12.10

Repentance emerges from the depths of being, from such great depths in which the individual stands not as a separate entity, but rather as a continuation of the vastness of universal existence. (*Ibid.*, 6.1)

The nature of existence, man’s choice of action and his disposition constitute one chain of being that can never be detached from each other. What man desires is tied up with what he had done. The deeds of the past, too, are not eliminated from the thrust of life and its basic disposition. Since nothing is totally eradicated the will can impose a special configuration on past actions. This is the secret of repentance, which God established before He created the world, that is to say, He expanded the creative powers of our spiritual life in relation to actions and existence so as to also embrace the past within its power. (*Ibid.*, 6.5)

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III. The Psychology of Teshuva

A.

The very term repentance (literally “return”) . . . is not “remorse” or “acknowledgement” and does not depend upon depression or a sense of despair. Repentance is “return”, “restoration.”

Pinchas Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*[OR] (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 83. [Henceforth OR]

Sometimes, one will “erase” certain years of a lifetime.... But when one blots out a part of his past he also severs part of his being; his past shrinks and his personality is dwarfed. An “operation” of this sort is easily carried out.... I have seen penitents do just that, and the consequence? They become different and estranged from their families and friends, who appeared to them to belong to another eon, a different world, a period when they were entrenched in sin which has now been erased from their consciousness. All feelings and experiences connected with that period were dead to them to such an extent that they even severed all ties with their parent, children, brothers, sisters. (OR, 271-2)

Repentance of this sort leaves a man with only a limited sense of feeling of “return” He returns to his starting point, to where he stood prior to embarking upon the road of sin, and everything that has occurred in the meantime disappears, as if it had never been. The Holy One, blessed be He, then recompenses him for this loss by pardoning his sin and erasing it from the books. (OR, 253)

This is the first way of repentance, but there is another way – not by annihilating evil but by rectifying it and elevating it. This repentance does not entail making a clean break with the past or obliterating memories. It allows man, at one and the same time, to continue to identify with the past and still return to God in repentance. . .

[. . .] Sin is not to be forgotten, blotted out or cast into the depths of the sea. On the contrary, sin has to be remembered. It is the memory of sin that releases the power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before. (OR, 254-5)

When he repents out of love there at once shines on him the light from the world of unity, where everything is integrated into one whole, and in the context of the whole there is no evil at all. The evil is joined with the good . . . Thus, the willful wrongs become transformed into real virtues.

Kook, *Orot ha-Teshuvah*, 12.5

B.

It was Christianity, with its *ressentiment* against life at the bottom of its heart, which first made something unclean of sexuality: it threw *filth* on the origin, on the presupposition of our life.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), tr. W. Kaufman in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) X, §4.

Affect, great desire, the passion for power, love revenge, possessions --: moralists want to extinguish and uproot them, to “purify” the soul of them.... Instead of taking into service the great sources of strength, those impetuous torrents of the soul that are often so dangerous and overwhelming, and economizing them, this most shortsighted and pernicious mode of thought, the moral mode of thought, wants to make them dry up. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power [WP]* (1901 & 1906), tr. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), §383.

Christians... developed the theory of contempt for this world; indeed, some went further and developed the doctrine of hatred for this world. Judaism did not. The beauty of Judaism is that it did not want to separate this transient temporal world from the eternal transcendental world... Judaism forbade the Jew to hate this world or to have contempt for it.

Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Morality: Essays on Ethics and Masorah*, eds. Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler (New Milford, CT and Jerusalem: Toras Horav Foundation/Maggid Books, 2017), 204

C.

Our task now is to investigate the cogency of the almost dogmatic assertion that the Bible proclaimed the separateness of man from nature and his otherness.

It is certain that the fathers of the Church and also the Jewish medieval scholars believed that the Bible preached this doctrine. Medieval and even modern Jewish moralists have almost canonized this viewpoint... Yet the consensus of many, however great and distinguished, does not prove the truth or falseness of a particular belief. I have always felt that due to some erroneous conception, we have actually misunderstood the Judaic anthropology and read into the Biblical texts ideas which stem from an alien source.

Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man* ed. M. S. Berger (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2005), 6

Man in the story of creation does not occupy a unique ontic position. He is, rather, a drop in the cosmos that fits into the schemata of naturalness and concreteness. The Torah presents to us a successive order of life-emergence and divides it into three phases; the last of those living structures is man. The viewpoint is very much akin to modern science. Christianity splits the story of creation in two, and analyzed the story of man without taking cognizance of that of animal and plant. That is why it arrived at half-truths and misrepresented the Biblical anthropology. (Ibid., 12)

D.

I taught them to work on the future and to redeem with their creation all that *has been*. To redeem what is past in man and to re-create all “it was” until the will says, “Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it” – this I called redemption and this alone I taught them to call redemption.

Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, III:12.

Rather than rejecting Nietzsche’s claims, [Rav Kook] accepted some of his seemingly basic assumptions.

Nietzsche’s basic interest, the aggrandizement of selfhood, becomes Rav Kook’s own, yet he proposed a truly alternative view.

Benjamin Ish Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism* trans. Ora Wiskind-Elper (Albany, 1993), 77.