

Introduction

For a long time now an inner struggle goes on in me, and I feel prodded by a mighty force to speak about penitence, and all my thoughts are focused on this theme alone. Penitence holds a primary place in the teachings of the Torah and in life; all the hopes of the individual and of society depend on it. It embodies a divine commandment that is, on the one hand, the easiest to carry out, since a stirring of the heart toward penitence is a valid expression of penitence, and on the other hand, it is the most difficult to perform, since it has not yet been effectuated fully in the world and in life.

I find myself constantly tending to think and to speak on this subject. 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 penitence. 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.

My inner being impels me to speak about penitence, but I recoil inwardly from my intention. Am I worthy to discuss the subject of penitence? The greatest spirits of past generations wrote on the subject of penitence, including the prophets, noblest of the sages, the greatest of the saints, and how dare I place myself in their category? But no reticence can e me of this inner claim. I must speak about penitence,

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particularly about its literary and practical aspects, to understand its significance for our generation, and the manner of its implementation in life, the life of the individual and the life of society.

Chapter One

Penitence According to Nature, Faith and Reason

We encounter the phenomenon of penitence on three levels: penitence according to nature, penitence according to faith and penitence according to reason. Penitence according to nature may be divided into two parts: the physical and the spiritual.

Physical penitence is related to all transgressions against the laws of nature, and such laws of morals and the Torah as are linked to the laws of nature. Every act of wrongdoing must in the end engender illness and pain, and the individual as well as society is exposed to much suffering as a result of this. After it becomes clear that the person himself, as a result of his misbehavior, is responsible for his distress, he necessarily gives thought to correcting his condition, to conforming to the laws of life, to becoming obedient to the laws of nature, of morality and of the Torah, that he may be renewed in life's vitality.

The science of medicine concerns itself a good deal with this, but this important phenomenon has not yet been fully clarified. We have not yet found the answer to all questions pertaining to physical penitence, to clarify how far it is possible within the delimitations of existence to restore to a person all the losses he sustained as a result of those offenses that damage the body and its functions. It appears that this phase of penitence is linked in a profound way with other forms of penitence—the spiritual phase of natural penitence, and penitence according to faith and penitence according to reason.

The spiritual dimension of natural penitence is more

inward. It embraces the role of what is called the “reprimand of the conscience.” It is a requisite of human nature to pursue the righteous path, and when a person strays from the right course, when he lapses into sin, then, if he has not suffered a total spiritual degeneration, his sensitivity will cause him disquiet, and he will suffer pain. He will become zealous to repent, to redress his wrongdoing, until he can feel that his sin has been purged away. This dimension of penitence is very complicated. It is dependent on many subjective and objective conditions, and it is open to many possibilities of misjudgment that one must guard against. This is, however, one of the foundations on which the essence of penitence depends.

After the natural phase of penitence comes penitence inspired by religious faith. This phase of penitence is operative as a result of religious tradition, which frequently concerns itself with penitence. The Torah promises the penitent forgiveness. The sins of individuals and of the community are purged away through penitence. The prophets abound with exalted utterances on the subject of penitence. In a general way all the admonitions of the Torah deal with penitence from the perspective of religious faith. From its conceptual depth flow endless details. A clarification of their basic principles alone calls for considerable discussion and many explanations.

Penitence according to reason comes after penitence according to nature and religious faith have already taken place. It represents the peak of penitential expression. This level of penitence is inspired not only by a natural malaise, physical or spiritual, or by the influence of religious tradition, whether it has induced in the person a fear of retribution or conditioned him to the acceptance of some law or precept. It is also inspired by a comprehensive outlook on life that came to crystallization after the natural and religious phases of penitence had registered their influence. This phase of penitence, in which the previous are included, abounds in endless delight. It

transforms all the past sins into spiritual assets. From every error it derives noble lessons, and from every lowly fall it derives the inspiration for the climb to splendid heights. This is the type of penitence toward which all aspire, which must come and which is bound to come.

Chapter Two

Sudden and Gradual Penitence

In terms of time, penitence may be divided into two parts: sudden penitence and gradual penitence.

Sudden penitence comes about as a result of a certain spiritual flash that enters the soul. At once the person senses all the evil and the ugliness of sin and he is converted into a new being; already he experiences inside himself a complete transformation for the better. This form of penitence dawns on a person through the grace of some inner spiritual force, whose traces point to the depths of the mysterious.

There is also a gradual form of penitence. No sudden flash of illumination dawns upon the person to make him change from the depth of evil to the good, but he feels that he must mend his way of life, his will, his pattern of thought. By heeding this impulse he gradually acquires the ways of equity, he corrects his morals, he improves his actions, and he conditions himself increasingly to becoming a good person, until he reaches a high level of purity and perfection.

The higher expression of penitence comes about as a result of a flash of illumination of the all-good, the divine, the light of Him who abides in eternity. The universal soul, the spiritual essence, is revealed to us in all its majesty and holiness, to the extent that the human heart can absorb it. Indeed, is not the all of existence so good and so noble, and is not the good and the nobility in ourselves but an expression of our

relatedness to the all? How then can we allow ourselves to become severed from the all, a strange fragment, detached like tiny grains of sand that are of no value? As a result of this perception, which is truly a divinely inspired perception, comes about penitence out of love, in the life of the individual and in the life of society.

Chapter Three

Particularized Penitence and General Penitence

There is a form of penitence that addresses itself to a particular sin or to many particular sins. The person confronts his sin face to face, and feels remorseful that he fell into the trap of sin. Slowly he struggles to come out of it, until he is liberated from his sinful enslavement and he begins to experience a holy freedom that is most delightful to his weary self. His healing continues; rays of a benign sun, bearing divine mercy, reach out to him, and a feeling of happiness grows within him. He experiences this at the same time that his heart remains broken and his spirit bowed and melancholy. Indeed this lowly feeling itself, which suits him in his condition, adds to his spiritual satisfaction and his sense of true peace. He feels himself drawing closer to the source of life, to the living God, who but a short time before was so remote from him. His wistful spirit recalls with joyous relief its previous inner anguish, and is filled with a feeling of gratitude. It breaks into a hymn of thanksgiving: "Praise the Lord, O my soul, forget not all His kindnesses, He forgives all Your sins, He heals all your afflictions, He rescues your life from the pit, He adorns you with grace and compassions, He sates you with every good, He renews your youth like an eagle; the Lord performs merciful acts, He vindicates the cause of the oppressed" (Ps. 103: 2-6). How anguished the soul was when

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the burden of sin, its dark, vulgar and frightfully oppressive weight, lay upon her! How depressed she was, even if outer riches and honors fell to her lot! What good is there in all the wealth if the inner content of life is impoverished and dry? And how blissful she now is in the inner feeling that her sin has been forgiven, that the nearness of God is already alive and shining in her, that her inner burden has been made lighter, that she has already paid her debt and is no longer oppressed by inner confusion and distress. She is at rest, and filled with an innocent peace. "Return to your peace, O my soul, for the Lord has bestowed His kindness on you" (Ps. 116:7).

There is another kind of feeling of penitence, unspecified and general. A person does not conjure up the memory of a past sin or sins, but in a general way he feels terribly depressed. He feels himself pervaded by sin; that the divine light does not shine on him; that there is nothing noble in him; that his heart is unfeeling, his moral behavior does not follow the right course, worthy of sustaining a meaningful life for a wholesome human being; that his state of education is crude, his emotions stirred by dark and sinister passions that revolt him. He is ashamed of himself; he knows that God is not within him, and this is his greatest misfortune, his most oppressive sin. He is embittered against himself; he can find no escape from his oppressive thoughts, which do not focus on any particular misdeeds; his whole being is as though in a torture chamber. For this state of spiritual malaise penitence comes as the therapy from a master physician. The feeling of penitence, with an insight to its profound nature, its basis in the deepest levels of the soul, in the mysterious workings of nature, in all the dimensions of the Torah and our religious tradition comes with all its might and streams into his soul. A sense of assurance in the healing, the general renewal that penitence extends to all who embrace it, distills in him a spirit of grace and acceptance. He senses the fulfillment of the verse

“I will comfort you as the person who is comforted by his mother” (Isa. 66:13).

Day by day, inspired by this higher level of general penitence, his feeling becomes more firm, clearer, more illumined by reason and more authenticated by the principles of the Torah. His manner becomes increasingly brightened, his anger recedes, a kindly light shines on him, he is filled with vigor, his eyes sparkle with a holy fire, his heart is bathed in rivers of delight, holiness and purity hover over him. His spirit is filled with endless love, his soul thirsts for God, and this very thirst nourishes him like the choicest of foods [lit. “like marrow and fat” as in Ps. 63:6]. The holy spirit rings out before him like a bell, and he is given the good news that all his transgressions, the known and the unknown, have been erased, that he has been born anew as a new being, that the whole world, all realms of being, have been renewed with him, and that all things now join in a chorus of song, that the gladness of God fills all creation. “Great is penitence, for it brings healing to the world, and even one individual who repents is forgiven and the whole world is forgiven with him” (Yoma 86a).

Chapter Four

Private Penitence and Public Penitence – in the World and in the Jewish People

1. The currents of particular and general penitence rush along. They are like the streams of flame on the surface of the sun, which in an unceasing struggle break out and ascend, and endow life to countless worlds and numberless creatures. One is powerless to absorb the multitude of varying colors that emanate from this great sun that shines on all the worlds, the sun of penitence. They are so many, they come with such

mighty sweep, with such wondrous speed. They come from the source of life itself, for whom time is only a limited expression of His providential design. The individual and the collective soul, the world soul, the soul of all realms of being cries out like a fierce lioness in anguish for total perfection, for an ideal form of existence, and we feel the pain, and it purges us. Like salt that seasons the meat, it purges away all our bitterness. It is impossible to express this vastly profound concept. We will place all things in the context of the divine unity, we will invoke the mystical meanings of the names of God: a punctuation mark—a new heaven and a new earth, and all their fullness are contained in it; a letter—and worlds become revealed; words—and [we have before us] countless worlds and multitudes of creations, tranquil and joyous, abounding with a mighty gladness, full of peace and truth. And the soul grows toward perfection.

2. Through penitence all things are reunited with God; through the fact that penitence is operative in all worlds, all things are returned and reattached to the realm of divine perfection. Through the thoughts of penitence, its conceptual implications and the feelings it engenders, the basic character of all our thinking, our imagination and our knowledge, our will and our feeling, is transformed and placed again within the context of the holy order of the divine.

3. General penitence, which involves raising the world to perfection, and particularized penitence, which pertains to the personal life of each individual, including the smallest constituents of special penitential reforms that the holy spirit can itemize in tiniest details—they all constitute one essence. Similarly all the cultural reforms through which the world rises from decadence, the improvements in the social and economic order through this redress of every form of wrongdoing, from the most significant to the minutest ordinances of later sages and the most extreme demands of ethically sensitive spirits—all of them constitute an inseparable whole. “All of

them integrate to form one entity” [based on Zohar II 162b].

4. The nature of all existence and every particular creature, the whole of human history and the life of every individual person, must be seen from one comprehensive perspective, as one essence constituent of many particularities. Then will come readily the perception that will condition the emergence of penitence.

5. In truth one cannot rise to the spiritual level of seeking the reformation of society without a deep inner repentance of every sin and wrongdoing. An individual who has repented in this sense is forgiven and the whole world is forgiven with him. Similarly many may be raised to the ideal state hidden in the soul of the Jewish people through the penitence of one individual who is motivated by the goal of bringing to fruition his people’s noblest aspiration for greatness.

6. The highest sensibility in the soul of the people of Israel is the quest for universality. The people aspire for this by the very essence of its being, and this affects all existence. The desire for penitence in its highest form is rooted in this hidden longing.

7. The soul of the people of Israel expresses itself in the striving for absolute justice, which, to be effectuated, must include the realization of all moral virtues. It is for this reason that any moral misdeed committed by an individual Jew weakens his link with the soul of the people. The basic step in penitence is to attach oneself again to the soul of the people. Together with this it is mandatory to mend one’s ways and one’s actions in conformity with the essential characteristic of the people’s soul.

8. The highest form of penitence is penitence inspired by the ideal of honoring God. All other expressions of penitence are auxiliary to it. As our enlightenment progresses, our perceptions are raised to a higher level and the ideal of honoring God with all its comprehensiveness seems too narrow to include the entire sweep of all penitential strivings. Their sub-

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stantive content appears too rich to be encompassed by wisdom or God's honor. But the concept of honoring God as the foundation of penitence will become clear at the inception of the enlightenment in the messianic age, and it will be seen as embracing the lower forms of penitence. The larger light of penitence appears initially as negating the lesser light, and rash spirits arise and attempt to formulate ideologies accordingly, but they will fail. The failure results from the claims of the lesser lights, which seemed to have been negated. The great light will continue to do its work and it will not cease until it will be recognized in its higher and lower manifestations. "Repair the breach with the son of Peretz [a metaphor for the Messiah] and pluck a rose from a thorn."¹

9. Various forces will stimulate the emergence of penitence. A special factor in this process will be the anguish felt over the humiliation visited on the great spiritual treasure of our ancestral heritage, which is of incomparable vigor and nobility. This great spiritual treasure derives from the source of life, from the highest order of the divine, which has been transmitted from generation to generation. When one is attentive to it one can find everything in it, everything precious and beautiful, but a crude denial of our religion has led many to detach themselves from this "fruitful corner" and to stray in alien fields, which have no sustaining nourishment for us at all. This great anguish will erupt powerfully and with it will come discretion and moderation to know what positive elements may be garnered from the different paths of straying on which they stumbled. The free stirring of holiness inside the soul will emerge from its imprisonment, and every sensitive

1. The essence of penitence is the surge to perfect life on all levels, which thereby enhances the glory of God. The particularized expressions of this surge often take on purely secular forms and seem remote from the concept of honoring God but the messianic enlightenment will clarify this. Conventional pietists, the "rash spirits," detach God's glory from the various efforts to reform the world on an existential level, but they fail because the excluded values assert their claim. The result is that the reformers and the pietists clash and the glory of God remains in a low state, but this will be set right in the more enlightened state in the end of days.

spirit will begin to drink avidly from this exalted source of life. Then there will be engendered and become revealed, as one whole, knowledge and feeling, the enjoyment of life, a world outlook and a desire for national revival, the redress of spiritual defects and the revitalization of physical vigor, the ordering of the political system and the love for the improvement of the community in good manners and tolerance, together with a lively impatience with everything ugly and evil. To support these goals we need a conditioning of the human heart toward the true inner Torah, the mystical meanings in the Torah, whose influences on ill-prepared students have led so many to reject them and to mock them. It is, however, this very source of life-giving light whose influence on the ill-prepared engenders peril and trouble for the world that will prove to be a source of enduring deliverance. From this source will come the healing light by which to revitalize the community as well as the individual, to "raise the fallen tabernacle of David" (Amos 9:11) and to "remove the humiliation of the people of God from all the earth" (Isa. 25:8)

10. The impudence encountered prior to the coming of the Messiah derives from the fact that the world is ready for the concept that links all particulars within the universal, and any particularity not linked within the larger scope of the general cannot offer satisfaction. If people pursued the study of Torah in this spirit, to enlarge our spiritual perspective so as to recognize the proper connection between the particulars and the universal categories of the spiritual, then penitence and the resultant perfection of the world would arise and come to fruition. However, as a result of negligence, the light of the inner Torah whose pursuit needs a high state of holiness has not been properly established in the world. The result is that the call to regard the particulars as embraced within the general comes at a time that is not ripe for this concept. This has led to the frightful nihilism now rampant. We must make use of the higher therapy, to strengthen the

spiritual disposition so that the realization of the link between the teachings and the actions emanating from the Torah with the noblest of principles will be readily understood on the basis of common sensibilities. Then will the vigor of the spiritual life, in action and in thought, be reasserted in the world. General penitence will then begin to bear its fruit.

11. In the deep recesses of life there is always stirring a new illumination of higher penitence, even as a new light radiates in all the worlds, with all their fullness, to renew them. According to the degree of the light, and the wisdom and the holiness it embodies, do human souls become filled with the treasures of new life. The highest expression of ethical culture and its programmatic implementation is the fruit grown as a result of this illumination. It thus turns out that the light of the whole world and its renewal in its diverse forms depend at all times on penitence. Certainly the light of the Messiah, the deliverance of Israel, the rebirth of the people and the restoration of its land, language and literature—all stem from the source of penitence, and all lead out of the depths to the heights of penitence.

Chapter Five

The Inevitability of Penitence and its Effects in Man, in the World, and in the Jewish People

1. Penitence is the healthiest feeling of a person. A healthy soul in a healthy body must necessarily bring about the great happiness afforded by penitence, and the soul experiences therein the greatest natural delight. The elimination of damaging elements has beneficent and invigorating effects on the body when it is in a state of health. The purging away of every evil deed and its resultant evil effects, of every evil thought, of every obstruction that keeps us away from the

divine spiritual reality, is bound to arise when the organism is in a state of spiritual and physical health.

2. Over against every measure of ugliness that is withdrawn from a person through his inner conformity to the light of penitence, worlds resplendent with higher sensibility come to expression in his soul. Every removal of sin resembles the removal of an obstruction from the seeing eye, and a whole new horizon of vision is revealed, the light of vast expanses of heaven and earth and all that is in them.

3. The world must inevitably come to full penitence. The world is not static, but it continues to develop, and a truly full development must bring about the complete state of health, material and spiritual, and this will bring penitence along with it.

4. The spirit of penitence hovers over the world, and it is that which endows it with its basic character and the impetus to development. With the scent of its fragrance it refines it and endows it with the propensity to beauty and splendor.

5. The stubborn determination to remain with the same opinion and to invoke it in support of a sinful disposition to which one has become habituated whether in action or in opinion is a sickness resulting from a grievous enslavement that does not permit the light of penitence to shine in full strength. Penitence is the aspiration for the true original freedom, which is the divine freedom, wherein there is no enslavement of any kind.

6. Were it not for the thought of penitence, the peace and security it brings with it, a person would be unable to find rest, and the spiritual life would not be able to develop in the world. The moral sense demands of man justice and what is good, perfection—but how difficult it is for a person to realize moral perfection, and how weak he is to conform his behavior to the pure ideal of full justice! How then can he strive for that which is beyond his attainment? Therefore, penitence is natural for a person, and it is this that perfects

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him. The fact that a person is always prone to stumble, to deviate from justice and morality, does not discredit his perfection, since the basis of his perfection is the constant striving and the desire for perfection. This desire is the foundation of penitence, which is constantly a directing influence on his way in life, and truly perfects him.

7. Penitence was planned before the creation of the world, and it is for this reason the foundation of the world. The quest for the perfection of life is a phase of its manifestation according to its nature. Since nature, by its own workings, is without probing and discrimination, sin thus becomes inevitable. "There is no man so righteous that he will [always] do good and not sin" (Kohelet 7:20). To nullify the basic nature of life that man shall become a non-sinner—this itself would be the greatest sin. "And one must make atonement for the sin committed against the self" (Num. 6:11).² Penitence redresses the defect and restores the world and life to their original character precisely by focusing on the basis of their highest attribute, the dimension of freedom. It is for this reason that God is called the God of life.

8. The future will disclose the remarkable power of penitence, and this revelation will prove of far greater interest to the world than all the wondrous phenomena that it is accustomed to behold in the vast areas of life and existence. The wonders of this new revelation will draw all hearts to it, exerting an influence on everyone. Then will the world rise to its true renewal and sin will come to an end. The spirit of impurity will be purged away, and all evil will vanish like smoke.

9. The people of Israel, because of their added spiritual sensitivity, will be the first with regard to penitence. They are the one sector of humanity in whom the special graces of penitence will become manifest. They experience a prodding

2. As interpreted in Nedarim 10a, that the nazirite vows of abstention were a sin that called for atonement.

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to conform to the divine light radiant in the world, which is beyond sin and wrongdoing. Every deviation from this disposition damages the perfection that is characteristic of this people. In the end, the vigor of its life's rhythm will overcome the deviation, and they will attain full health, and they will assert it with great force. The light of penitence will be manifest first in Israel, and she will be the channel through which the life-giving force of the yearning for penitence will reach the whole world, to illuminate it and to raise its stature.

Chapter Six

The Prevalence and Inner Action of Penitence in the Hidden Depths of Man, the World and the Jewish People

1. Penitence 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. The desire for penitence is related to the universal will, to its highest source. From the moment the mighty stream for the universal will for life turns toward the good, many forces within the whole of existence are stirred to disclose the good and to bestow good to all. "Great is penitence for it brings healing to the world, and an individual who repents is forgiven and the whole world is forgiven with him" (Yoma 86a). In the great channel in which the life-sustaining force flows, there is revealed the unitary source of all existence, and in the hovering life-serving spirit of penitence all things are renewed to a higher level of the good, the radiant and the pure.

Penitence is inspired by the yearning of all existence to be better, purer, more vigorous and on a higher plane than it is. Within this yearning is a hidden life-force for overcoming every factor that limits and weakens existence. The particular

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penitence of the individual and certainly of the group draws its strength from this source of life, which is always active with never-ending vigor.

2. Penitence is always present in the heart. At the very time of sin penitence is hidden in the soul, and it releases its impulses, which become manifest when remorse comes summoning to repent. Penitence is present in the depths of existence because it was projected before the creation of the world, and before sin had occurred there had already been readied the repentance for it. Therefore, nothing is more certain than penitence, and in the end everything will be redressed and perfected. Certainly the people of Israel are bound to repent, to draw closer to their original goal to activate in life the nature of their soul, despite all the obstructions that impede the manifestation of this mighty force.

3. The natural fear of sin, in the general area of morals, is the healthiest expression of human nature. It is the singular characteristic of the nature of the Jew in reacting to every form of wrongdoing that violates the Torah and the commandments, the heritage of the community of Jacob. This disposition will not return to the Jewish people except through a program of popular education in Torah, to raise scholarly individuals and to establish fixed periods of study for the general populace. It will not be possible to restore the Jewish people to natural health without a full restoration of its spiritual characteristic, one aspect of which—the most vital one—is the fear of sin, a recoiling from it, and a turning to prescribed penitence if they, God forbid, lapse into any sin. As the people's vitality is strengthened in all its aspects, there will come an end to the maddening restlessness, and our national institutions will resume their concern with reasserting the unique, natural interest in morality among the Jewish people which is so exacting in differentiating between the forbidden and the permitted. All the minutest details in the teachings of the Torah and the sages will then be recognized

as an independent way of life, without which it is impossible to maintain a thriving national existence.

4. The moral defects that originate in a deviation from the natural moral sense complete their effect in a deviation from the divine moral norm by a defection from religion. The repudiation of and rebellion against the divine law is a frightful moral regression, to which a person succumbs only through an absorption in the vulgarity of materialistic existence. For a time, a generation, or some part of it, in some countries or provinces, may remain entangled in this moral blindness, to a point of not sensing the moral decline involved in abandoning the laws of God. But the moral sense does not lose its value because of this. Penitence is bound to come and to be made manifest. The sickness of forgetting the divine order cannot gain a firm foothold in human nature. Like a muddy spring, it returns to its purity.

5. The nature of existence, man's choice of action and his disposition constitute one chain of being that can never be detached one from another. What man desires is tied up with what he has 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 penitence, which God established before He created the world. I mean to say that He expanded the potency of the spiritual life with reference to actions and to existence so that it also embraces the past. The evil deed continues to be reenacted, it causes ugliness and evil, deterioration and destruction, as long as the will did not put a new complexion on it. Once the will has put on it a configuration of the good, it itself becomes a stimulant for good and delight, the joy in God and His light.

6. Actions speak within the soul. Every noble action is generated by a chain of many causes in the realm of the good, the holy. There is no limit to chains of circumstances that were activated in the mysterious realm of the inner life until

this noble action became manifest. And just as every noble action originates in the realm of holiness, so, once it has been effectuated, does it release a light back to its source. It sends waves reverberating backward and enlarges the activities of the zone of the holy, and enhances it through the influence of the lower on the higher. The same process is at work in the opposite direction, with reference to every activity corrupt at its source; just as the impure source generates every corrupt activity, so does the corrupt activity manifest its sickness in the inwardness of the spirit that fashioned it. This will go on until the person who is master of his action and his will, will uproot it from its source through the power of penitence. Then, once it has been integrated within the pattern of love, it will transfer its abode to the depths of the good, and it will send up waves from below to above, just as the good actions, generating the good.

7. At the inception of creation it was intended that the tree have the same taste as the fruit (Genesis Rabbah 5:9). All the supportive actions that sustain any general worthwhile spiritual goal should by right be experienced in the soul with the same feeling of elation and delight as the goal itself is experienced when we envision it. But earthly existence, the instability of life, the weariness of the spirit when confined in a corporate frame, brought it about that only the fruition of the final step, which embodies the primary ideal, is experienced in its pleasure and splendor. The trees that bear the fruit, with all their necessity for the growth of the fruit have, however, become coarse matter and have lost their taste. This is the failing of the "earth," because of which it was cursed when Adam was also cursed for his sin. But every defect is destined to be mended. Thus we are assured that the day will come when creation will return to its original state, when the taste of the tree will be the same as the taste of the fruit. The earth will "repent" of its "sin" and the way of the practical life will no longer obstruct the delight of the ideal, which is sus-

tained by appropriate intermediate steps on its way toward realization, and will stimulate its emergence from potentiality to actuality.

Penitence itself, which activates the inner spirit that had been sunk in the depths of the chaotic and the antithetical to the ideal goal, will enable the aspiration for the ideal to penetrate all the conditioning influences, and in all of them will be tasted the splendor of the ideal goal. It will do this by enlarging the scope of action for the ideal of justice. Man will then no longer suffer the disgrace of indolence on the way of true life.³

Chapter Seven

The Value of Thoughts about Penitence, its Vision and Conception

1. It is in the nature of penitence to endow a person with peace and with solemnity at the same time. Even the mere thought of penitence is a comfort to him. In one tiny glimmer of its great light there is already to be found the noble happiness of a whole world, but together with this it confronts his spirit constantly with the obligation of completing it. This saves him from pride and invests him with a sweet light, which endows his life with great and abiding value.

The vision of penitence transforms all sins and their resultant confusion, their spiritual anguish and ugliness, to concepts of delight and satisfaction, for it is through them that a person is illuminated with the profound sense of hatred for evil; and the love for the good is strengthened in him with a mighty force. Beyond all calculation and knowledge, he finds delight in the joy of remorse wherein he feels that divine

3. This passage is based on the Midrashic homily that attempts to account for the inclusion of the earth in the curse that was pronounced on Adam after his sin in the Garden of Eden (Genesis Rabbah 5:9).

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satisfaction uniquely experienced by penitents. This feeling comes appropriately together with the sense of refinement released by the heartbreak and the troubled spirit that are linked with the deep faith in liberation and continued assistance.

2. Every thought of penitence joins all the past to the future, and the future is uplifted through the ennoblement of the will inspired by penitence out of love.

3. Through the thoughts of penitence a person hears God's voice calling him, from the Torah and from the feelings of the heart, from the world and its fullness, and all that is contained therein. The desire for the good is strengthened within him. The flesh itself, which engenders the sin, becomes increasingly more refined to a point where the thought of penitence penetrates it.

4. The thoughts of penitence disclose the profound potency of the will. The heroism of the soul is made manifest thereby in all its splendor. The degree of penitence is also the degree of the soul's freedom.

5. I see how the sins serve as an obstruction against the bright divine light, which shines so brightly on every soul, and they darken the soul. Penitence, even if it is only entertained in thought, effects a great redress. But the soul can reach full liberation only when the potential of penitence is translated into action. However, since the thought is tied up with holiness and with the desire for penitence, there is no need to be concerned. God, may He be praised, will surely make available all the circumstances for the attainment of full penitence, which illumines all the dark places in its light. The degree of the penitence achieved is also the measure by which the person's study of Torah is blessed and made clearer. The study becomes clear and lucid. "A broken and contrite heart God will not spurn" (Ps. 51:19).

6. It is necessary to be so profoundly committed to the faith that even by entertaining the thought of penitence one mends a great deal in oneself and in the world. It is inevitable

that after every consideration of penitence a man should be happier and more at peace with himself than he was before. This is certainly the case if he has a firm decision to repent, and has become attached to the pursuit of Torah and wisdom and the fear of God, and especially if the disposition of divine love has begun to vibrate in him. He is then to comfort himself and console his weary spirit and strengthen it with every kind of encouragement, for we have the assurance of God's word: "As a person is comforted by his mother so will I comfort you" (Isa.66:13). If he should recall offenses he has committed against another person and he is too weak to redress them, he must not despair of the great efficacy of penitence. The offenses committed against God of which he has repented have already been forgiven. It is legitimate to assume, therefore, that the residual offenses are outweighed by the greater number that have been forgiven through penitence. However, he must not cease in his vigilance not to stumble over any offense against another person, and to rectify whatever he can of the past through wisdom and great resoluteness. "Save yourself as a deer from the hand of the hunter and as a bird from the hand of the fowler" (Prov. 6:5). But let him not become depressed because of the portion of offenses he has not yet managed to rectify. Instead let him hold firm to the pursuit of the Torah and the service of God with a full heart in joy, in reverence and in love.

Chapter Eight

The Pangs of Sin, the Suffering of Penitence and the Healing of its Affliction

1. The pain felt in the initial inspiration to penitence is due to the severance of the evil layers of the self, which cannot be mended as long as they are attached to and remain part of

the person, and cause deterioration of the whole spirit. Through penitence they are severed from the basic essence of the self. Every severance causes pain, like the pain felt at the amputation of deteriorated organs for medical reasons. This is the most inward kind of pain, through which a person is liberated from the dark servitude to his sins and his lowly inclinations and their bitter aftereffects. "We learn this from the law that liberates a slave if he lost a tooth or an eye on being struck by his master." "Happy is the person whom You instruct, O Lord, and You *teach him out of Your law*"; the latter phrase may be read as meaning "this matter You have taught us from Your Law" (Berakhot 5a).

2. The great pains that overcome the soul as a result of the thought of penitence sometimes appear as a consequence of the fear of retribution. But in their inner essence they are intrinsic sufferings felt by the soul because it is afflicted by sin, which is contrary to all the condition of its being. However, these sufferings themselves cleanse it. The person who recognizes the goodly treasure imbedded in these sufferings accepts them with unreserved love and he is at peace. Thus he rises in many good qualities. His knowledge remains with him, his inner character is improved and the imprint his sins deposited on him is erased. His sins are transformed into reminders of the good, from which a spiritual beauty is revealed.

3. Every sin oppresses the heart because it disrupts the unity between the individual person and all existence. It can be healed through penitence, which is radiant with the light [of the higher influence] of the ideal embodied in universal existence. Thereby it becomes possible for the harmony with existence to become once again manifest in him; when he repents he finds healing. However, the basis of the anguish experienced is not merely the result of sin itself. It is rather to the basic nature of sin and the nature of the life process has become disoriented from the order of existence,

which is resplendent with divine light radiant in all being in unity and high purpose. It is for this reason that those whose lives are basically evil and whose sins are rooted in their thoughts and aspirations and in the dispositions of their hearts become pessimists and see the whole world in such unduly dark colors. They are the ones who complain against the world and against life. They are the masters of the “melancholy spleen” (Zohar II 227b), whose mockery of existence is the laughter of a fool who does not realize that the Lord is good to all (Ps. 145:9).

4. What is the reason for the rage evinced by evil doers? What is the meaning of their anger with the whole world, what is the basis for the bitter melancholy that consumes spirit and flesh, that poisons life, that is found among them? Whence comes this degenerate source? With clear inner certainty we reply to this: All this stems from the source of evil, “from the wicked emanates wickedness” (I Sam. 24:13). The will is free, life dawned that a person might be heroic and truly free. When the will refuses to leave evil reposing in the depths of the soul, it unbalances life, it disturbs the equitable relationship of the soul with all existence, its overall character and its constituent particularities. The disruption of harmony brings about many pains. When it penetrates to the spirit there is an aggravation of suffering that manifests itself in fright, anger, impudence, dishonor and despair. The righteous, the people of goodness and of kindness, the men who know the happiness of life, therefore, call out to the miserable wrongdoers: Come and live, come back, come back from your evil way—why should you die? (Ezek. 33:11). Find delight in the goodness of the Lord and enjoy a life of pleasure and light, of peace and of quiet, of faith and honor, “as dew from the Lord, as showers on the grass” (Mic. 5:6).

5. Every righteous person experiences great anguish because he does not feel sufficiently close to God, and his great thirst remains unquenched. Because of this anguish all his

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organs are tense with endless longing, and he finds no peace in all the delights and pleasures of the world. This is in essence the anguish of the *shekinah*, the anguish of the divine Presence, for all life in all the worlds is astir with longing that the supreme perfection of godliness be made manifest in them. This manifestation, in all its expanse and its delights, is contingent on the perfection of the free will in people, with all the talents and the good works that hinge on it. It is for this reason that the righteous always long for the penitence of the general public, and in the inwardness of their hearts they seek to see offenders in a light of innocence, as one seeks life itself, for in truth this is our very life and the life of all worlds.

6. When the righteous perform acts of penance, they reveal the holy light that they find in the dark and broken-down alleys in their own lives. The strategies they devise for themselves to rise out of depression and despair into the bright light of holiness and a nobler level of equity become in themselves great lights to illumine the world. Every person who feels within himself the depth of penitential remorse and the anxiety to mend his flaws—both those whose redress is within his reach and those he hopes to redress in time by the mercy of God—should include himself in the category of the righteous. Through their thoughts of penitence the whole world is renewed in a new light.

7. The whole world is pervaded by harmony. The unifying congruence penetrates all branches of existence. The inner moral sense and its mighty claims represent an echo of the unitary voice of all parts of existence, all of which interpenetrate, and the self is permeated with them and united with all. Every moral severance in thought or deed, in character or disposition, creates many wounds that inflict many inner pains in all aspects of the soul. The basis of these spiritual pains is the disturbing force of withdrawing the light of life emanating from the general order of existence from the life channels of the sinning soul. The purer a soul is the more it will

experience the disturbance of its pains, until it will still the pain in the life-stream of penitence, which flows from the divine source, which mends all the torn parts, and sends forth a life-restoring dew flowing directly from all realms of existence. There will be a reunion, the life-restoring flow will reach the soul that has been restored to its higher life in great mercy and abiding joy.

8. When the anguish, which is the pain of penitence brought about by the person's own spiritual state and that of the whole world, becomes very great, to a point of blocking the creative sources of thought, speech, prayer, outcries, feeling and song, then one must rise in a leap to seek life-giving lights in the source of silence. "The parched land will become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water" (Isa. 35:7).

9. When the thinking person withdraws into solitude and his inner spiritual strength is activated, he then feels all the flaws that have damaged his soul because his actions and dispositions are not what they should be. He then suffers a deep sense of anguish and he probes within himself how to mend his flaws. When the inner anguish becomes outwardly manifest with full gravity or when his outer condition deteriorates, as in times of disaster and trouble, then the inner feeling will not be firm. But even then it may lead to its climactic end, for penitence, even when induced by suffering, is still penitence.

10. The inner anguish that is a concomitant of penitence is excellent raw subject matter for poets of melancholy to express through their music and for artists of tragedy to show through their talent.

11. Sins are the essence of melancholy. When the soul undergoes cleansing, it experiences the very essence of its sins, and then does the melancholy of penitence assert itself; a fire of anguish, remorse, shame and a terrifying fear burns inside it. But in this very process it is purified. After some time, when the agitation subsides, it will return to its state of

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health, to function again with self-control and self-respect.

12. One must be very cautious not to fall into depression to the extent that it will inhibit the light of penitence from penetrating to the depths of the soul. Otherwise the feeling of depression might spread as a malignant disease throughout the body and spirit; for sin grieves the heart and causes feelings of depression to settle over the festering bitterness of the agitation for penitence. The latter has melancholy aspects but they are like cleansing fire that purges the soul and sustains it on a basis of constant natural joy appropriate to its state.

13. Every sin produces a special anxiety of the spirit, which does not recede except through penitence. Depending on the level of penitence, this anxiety itself is transformed into a feeling of security and firmness of heart. One can recognize the anxiety that comes through in marks on the face, in gestures, in the voice, in behavior, in the handwriting, in the manner of communication, in speech, and especially in the style of writing, in the way one develops thoughts and arranges them. Whenever sin has obstructed the light, there is the defect noticeable. And according to the gravity of the sin, and its relevance for the viewer, will its imprint be discernible to those who look with clear eyes.

14. One cannot overestimate the distress caused by a lack of will for goodness and holiness. Wisdom is of no efficacy except to the extent that it is pervaded by the blessing of the will for the good. Sin inhibits the will from rising to a higher state. One must, therefore, repent in order to purify the will, that wisdom might appropriately assert itself. Especially is it important to repent of offenses against another person, above all, of robbery, which obstructs the ascent of the will. One must vigorously attend to this and trust in God's help to reach a state of perfection that will inhibit one's hands from touching anything tainted with oppression.

15. The despair that registers in the heart is itself an

indication of a refined inner revolt, which stems from a higher recognition of morality and holiness. It is, therefore, fitting that the despair itself shall strengthen a person's heart to be unafraid and to repent of every sin, which will bring him peace and firmness of spirit.

16. When a person entertains the thought of penitence and of mending his actions and feelings, even if it is only in thought, he must not be disturbed because he feels agitated over his many sins, of which he has now become more conscious. This is the nature of this phenomenon. As long as a person is being driven by the coarser aspects of nature and by bad habits surrounding him, he is not so sensitive to his sins. Sometimes he feels nothing, and he sees himself as a righteous person. But once his moral sense is awakened, the light of the soul becomes at once manifest, and by that light his whole self becomes subjected to probing and he sees its defects. Then he becomes agitated with a deep sense of anxiety because of his low state of perfection and his grave deterioration. It is, however, precisely then for him to consider that this awareness and this anxiety that comes with it are the best signs pointing to full deliverance through the perfection of the self, and he should strengthen himself thereby in the Lord his God.

Chapter Nine

The Significance of the Will that is Manifest in Penitence

1. The steady concentration of one's thought on penitence forms a person's character on a spiritual foundation. He continually draws into himself a refined spirit, which places him on a spiritual plane of life.

When the concern with penitence is always active in the heart, it confirms to a person the great value of the spiritual life. The important principle that the goodness of the will is

4

Reverence for Sin

May it be your will, our God and God of our ancestors, that you renew for us this month for goodness and blessing, and grant us ... a life marked by reverence for heaven and reverence for sin.

**Prayer for Rosh Chodesh,
the beginning of the new month**

“Reverence for heaven and reverence for sin” seems like a very odd pairing. Why should we have the same attitude to sin as we have to God? And what would it mean to have reverence for sin, anyway?

Reverence, especially in the Hebrew (*yirah*), suggests high honor, deference, and even awe. To revere sin, then, is to honor its power and to respect its influence in our lives. It is the very opposite of taking it lightly or minimizing the likelihood that it will hold sway over us. To understand why this is the appropriate attitude toward sin, we need to delve a bit into the ways that the Rabbis understood this element in human nature.

The Rabbis were keenly aware of the evil impulse in the human heart and repeatedly warned against succumbing to its calling. In many places they personify the *yetzer ha-ra*, “the evil inclination,” and ascribe all sorts of devious qualities to it. Rabbi Simon ben Lakish, a third-century Sage, is quoted as saying, “The *yetzer* of man assaults him every day, endeavoring to kill him, and if God would not support him, man could not resist him” (Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah* 52b). The idea of our sinful nature as something that threatens to kill us—and not just once, but daily—is meant

to be a terrifying image. This impulse is so powerful, in fact, that Rabbi Simon ben Lakish imagines we would be powerless to defend ourselves from this assault were it not for divine intervention. The struggle with the evil impulse, then, is a matter of life and death, and the very persistence of this impulse is the first reason for us to respect its power in our lives. This view, of course, is somewhat in tension with the texts discussed earlier, where sin appears less ominously as a kind of sickness that is relatively manageable.

Yet if the evil impulse attacked us persistently but directly, we would perhaps be better positioned to defend ourselves. In fact, the Rabbis tell us, the impulse to do evil is wily and seductive. It may introduce itself to us as a modest traveler, then as a guest, and finally it takes over our home and makes itself master of the house (Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah* 52a). In another analogy, the Rabbis compare the evil inclination to something that appears at first to be insubstantial, like a cobweb, but eventually becomes a thick rope that ensnares us and from which we cannot free ourselves (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 9b). These and similar metaphors reinforce the message that the evil impulse is devious and difficult to defend against. It catches us off-guard by masquerading as something much less threatening than it actually is. Anyone who has struggled to overcome an addiction surely recognizes the truth of this teaching.

In yet another insightful observation, the Rabbis suggest that the evil impulse knows how to find our weaknesses and takes advantage of them. If we are inclined to be charitable to others, it tempts us to give the money instead to our own family (Exodus Rabbah 36:8). If we are inclined to resist sinful behaviors, it will assure us that we can sin and rely on God's mercy to forgive us (Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigah* 16a). In these and other ways, the Rabbis tell us, we are prone to rationalizations to justify our transgressions, and this is itself part of how the evil inclination works to undermine our determination to pursue a righteous course of action in life.

No wonder, then, that the traditional liturgy includes many prayers imploring God to help us resist the evil inclination.

May it be your will, our God and God of our ancestors, that you ... not lead us into sin or transgression, nor into temptation or disgrace. Don't give the evil inclination dominion over us, distance us from evil people and bad companions, make us cleave to the good inclination and to good deeds, and bend our will to serve you....

(Traditional morning service)

The assumption behind these repeated pleas for assistance is the reality that resisting the *yetzer ha-ra* is enormously challenging. Only with the help of God, or what those of us in twelve-step groups refer to as “a higher power,” can we overcome the seductive power of the evil within us.

This is hardly news to those of us who have looked deeply at our own tendency to do what we know we shouldn't. We cheat a little on our taxes because we convince ourselves that everyone does it, so we can, too. We pass off responsibility for our own mistakes onto others because we are afraid to accept the consequences. We turn our backs on those who need our support because we convince ourselves that what we have to give won't make a difference or, worse, that our financial support will make them dependent, and so we can feel righteous about our stinginess. In all these ways, we are susceptible to the power of the evil inclination precisely because it is so insidious.

Persistent, powerful, and devious—the evil inclination is a formidable adversary, indeed. Revering it entails an attitude of constant vigilance, knowing that, even when we have resisted it many times before, we may succumb at any point. It strikes many of us as old-fashioned, even downright medieval, to imagine ourselves each day in a pitched battle with the forces of evil within us. But the wisdom of this tradition is that we cannot make progress on the path of repentance if we underestimate the countervailing forces in our lives. Revering sin is the corollary of revering God, and the prerequisite for pursuing righteousness.



9

Freedom, Fate, and Repentance

“The stranger need not lodge outside” (Job 31:32).
The Holy One declares no creature unfit—He
receives all. The gates [of repentance] are always
open, and he who wishes to enter may enter.

Exodus Rabbah 19:4

Throughout history and across cultures, people have been drawn to the idea of fate. Certain experiences, it seems, lead us to believe that there is something—a god, or perhaps a force of necessity to which even the gods are subject—that dictates the course of our lives. Things happen to us, especially painful or tragic things, and we are left feeling that they were destined, that we could not have avoided this misfortune. There is a shadow hanging over us, and we are powerless to control the effects it has on the course of our lives. At times, of course, fate is invoked in a happier sense, as when we believe we were fated to find the love of our lives when we serendipitously crossed paths in the unlikely of ways. But even when the results are favorable, the belief in fate stems from a deep-seated sense that there are powers in the universe that determine our destiny in important ways.

This idea of fate is closely connected to the classic debate about determinism and free will, which has preoccupied philosophers for centuries. On the one hand, it seems that the law of cause and effect requires that we see all events as determined by earlier events in the causal chain. Despite what we may believe, there can be no free will, at least no in any meaningful sense. On the other hand, our own experience leads us to feel that we do

exercise real choices, that we are free to choose a course of action, and that the future depends on what we do in the present, at least in most respects.

We need not delve into the intricacies of this debate, let alone attempt to resolve it, to see how these views shape an understanding of human freedom and so of repentance. If even some events in the future are fixed and immutable, then it is only reasonable to resign ourselves to the inevitable. To struggle against fate may be heroic, but it is ultimately futile. Indeed, much of the pathos of Greek tragedy derives from the ways in which the protagonists are unwittingly caught in a web of fate from which they cannot escape. Oedipus has been fated to kill his father and marry his mother, and no choices he makes can alter this horrible conclusion to the tale.

This tragic outlook on life is precisely antithetical to the view that gives rise to the idea of repentance. For if repentance means anything, it points to a radical human freedom, especially to the possibility of freeing ourselves from the effects of our own past transgressions. The past does not determine the future; our destiny is not fixed and beyond our power to change. No matter what we have done, we can make a decision to “turn” in a different direction tomorrow. In the most profound sense, no choice we made in the past is final or irredeemable, and even our most awful misdeeds can propel us in a radically new direction.

There are many implications of this idea of human freedom that I will address later in this book. But for now I want to highlight the ways in which this moral freedom is embedded in a still more general conviction that the world is conducive to our moral growth. As Jews have read in the biblical account of creation, the world is intrinsically “good,” not only in the sense that it fulfilled God’s expectations, but also in the sense that it has positive value. The natural world around us and the human soul that God breathes into us are both good. This doesn’t mean that natural evils don’t exist or that they don’t matter. Earthquakes, storms, and disease afflict humankind, and the biblical writers were certainly not blind to the devastation they can cause. But none of this detracts from the fundamental conviction that the world, as the product of God’s creative will, is good. Similarly, the Bible is

quite focused on the evil that we do—indeed, human moral failing and God’s response to it could be said to be the central theme of the Bible. But here again the irreducible goodness of human life is generally assumed. It is this perspective that finds expression in the Rabbis’ statement, which comes to have a prominent place early in the traditional daily morning worship service, “LORD, the soul that you have give e ’s pure.”

It follows from this perspective that God has created us with the potential to live righteously and has placed us in a world that supports, rather than impedes, our moral striving. As the text of Deuteronomy repeatedly reminds us, the good and evil that happen to us are responses to our moral choices. If we live a life of righteousness, God will reward us with abundant sustenance and peace, while if we stray from God’s requirements of us, we will be met with hardship and material deprivation. Most modern people find these beliefs untenable. And, taken literally, they are. But surely the point of the biblical author is really just this: the world is designed in a way that it rewards our efforts to maximize our innate goodness. Life is stacked—not against us, but in our favor, in support of our desire to express our goodness and our efforts to maintain right relationship with our Creator. When we do what is good, the goodness of the world meets us and affirms our choice. In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Seek the LORD while He can be found,
 Call to Him while He is near.
 Let the wicked give up his ways,
 The sinful man his plans;
 Let him turn back to the LORD,
 And He will pardon him;
 To our God,
 For He freely forgives.

Isaiah 55:6–7

In such a world, there is no room for moral despair. The notion that I am destined for some terrible fate or that the choices I have already made condemn me to a future I cannot change is here completely negated. I am free to choose against my own past, and

not only this, but God promises to meet me more than halfway when I do. Rather than resign myself to the blind forces of fate, or even to some iron law of causality according to which I cannot undo what I have already done, I can turn to the Jewish view of repentance, which affirms that we are free. And when we use that freedom to choose the path of righteousness, we are simultaneously expressing our truest nature and aligning ourselves with the goodness of the world as God created it.



Repentance, Prayer, and Righteousness

But repentance, prayer, and righteousness
avert the severity of the [divine] decree.

Traditional High Holy Day prayer book

Teshuvah can be understood properly only when we appreciate its many dimensions and the ways in which they intersect. These dimensions have been identified in different ways, and perhaps no single set of categories is quite adequate to capture the subtleties of everything the Jewish tradition has said about *teshuvah*. But at the outset it is helpful to think about *teshuvah* as a psychological, moral, and spiritual concept. In some of these reflections, a single dimension of *teshuvah* comes into focus; in others, we see the intersection of two or all three of these dimensions. Indeed, much of what Judaism has to say about *teshuvah* can be organized around the ways in which various thinkers across the centuries have understood the interrelationships among its psychological, moral, and spiritual dimensions.

On the psychological level, *teshuvah* is about the inner life. Here the key questions are: Who am I really? How do I understand my own “evil inclination” and its relationship to my “good inclination”? How can I turn myself, literally reorient my life, so as to maximize my own potential for goodness? Answering these questions is the work of *cheshbon hanefesh*, which I have translated literally as “soul reckoning.” It involves what the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) refer to as “taking a searching and fearless moral

inventory of ourselves.” For many, this entails profound therapeutic work with the help of a professional psychologist or psychiatrist. As we peel away the layers of our psyches, we discover where we harbor pain and distrust, which sorts of experiences tend to trigger strong reactions, which sorts of people we are drawn to and repelled by, the ways in which our own personalities have been shaped by many forces and experiences over many years, and so on. Taken together, these insights help us see where our own blind spots are and how to minimize the likelihood that they will hamper our ability to behave morally. Needless to say, this work can be extremely difficult and can stretch over many years until we reach a point where we can say we truly know ourselves. Let us call this work of reorientation and moral self-exploration “repentance” in the narrowest sense.¹

On the spiritual level, *teshuvah* is about restoring a broken relationship with God. Judaism teaches us that all our transgressions against one another are also violations of our obligations to God. This is one of the most profound insights that Judaism offers us about the moral life, namely, that it is a life lived before God and in relation to God. However we understand God—and we certainly don’t need to imagine God in the anthropomorphic terms that many biblical texts and prayers use—we know that we are accountable for the choices we make before the Source of life, goodness, and truth. So when we fail our family members, our friends and co-workers, our community, we also fail God and need to reestablish a connection to the Divine. We have strayed and we are asked to turn again toward God, and to place a relationship to goodness and truth—which are the hallmarks of the Divine—at the center of our lives once again. This takes us beyond the inner work of repentance into the realm of supplication. For in our heart of hearts we know that we do not do this work alone. Rather, it involves opening ourselves up to the help that comes from outside us. Traditionally, this sort of spiritual reconnection occurs in the context of worship, so let’s call this aspect of the process of turning “prayer.”

On the moral level, *teshuvah* is about restoring our relationships to those we have hurt, to the best of our ability. This is the part of the process that most of us immediately associate with

teshuvah—offering our sincere apologies, asking for forgiveness, and, where possible, making restitution. These gestures all involve giving something to the person or people we have offended. For whether the harm involved was emotional (a harsh word, a failure to show appropriate concern or to acknowledge some other wrong we committed in the past) or material (something we stole, some physical damage we caused), our actions have deprived others of something that was theirs. We right the wrong we have done by giving back what we have taken away, sometimes by words that express our concern to counteract our prior lack of concern, sometimes by material possessions that replace those that we took or ruined. In all of these cases, the moral requirement is that we make those we have hurt “whole” by righting the scales again, restoring what we have wrongfully taken. This social aspect of *teshuvah* is, perhaps, the hardest part of all. It requires us to face those we have hurt and, in facing them, to humble ourselves through frank admission of wrongdoing, offering amends, and restoring what we have taken. Let us call this moral dimension of the process “righteousness.”

Teshuvah operates at all these levels, and Jewish tradition insists that we cannot sidestep any of them. There are no shortcuts. We cannot do the necessary inner work of self-evaluation and overlook the restitution to our neighbors. Similarly, we cannot reconnect with God and then suppose that we are free to ignore the challenges of taking our moral inventory. To truly “turn” we must restore our broken relationships on all levels—with ourselves, with God, and with others.

This is what *teshuvah* involves; nothing less will suffice. It is arduous work, for it is nothing else than the work of building moral character, creating spiritual connection, and restoring interpersonal relationships, day after day, continuously. It is also enormously powerful work, capable of changing the course of our lives and even of our standing with God. That is why one of the high points of the traditional High Holy Day liturgy occurs when we imagine God judging each of us individually, determining our destiny in the coming year—who shall live and who shall die—and tremble with the realization that our fate hangs in the balance.

At precisely the moment of greatest trepidation, as we consider that we are all guilty and vividly conjure up the reality that we live under a (temporarily suspended) death sentence, the tradition also affirms that our fate is finally in our own hands. “Repentance, prayer, and righteousness aver the severity of the decree.” There is nothing arbitrary about the choice of these three behaviors. Together they are the perfect triad, for they capture the psychological, spiritual, and moral dimensions of *teshuvah*. Doing *teshuvah*—completely, on every level—forestalls the divine sentence. For when we are truly reconciled to our true selves, to God, and to our neighbor, we earn another year of life. Even God’s most severe decree for us cannot stand in the face of true penitence, by means of which we are able to live the kind of life for which we were created. *Teshuvah*, encompassing as it does repentance, prayer, and righteousness, has the power to override even God’s judgment.



Ahead of the Righteous

Rabbi Abbahu said, “In the place where penitents stand, even the wholly righteous cannot stand.”

Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 34b

This is surely among the most puzzling statements on *teshuvah* in the classical sources. How can it be that the penitent is on a higher level than the wholly righteous person? Leaving aside the question of whether anyone could ever meet that description, surely a “wholly righteous” person, by definition, must be better than one who has sinned, even if that sin was followed by acts of repentance. After all, transgressors can never undo the past, and so their former life remains forever a part of their life story and their identity. Surely it is better never to have sinned at all than to have sinned and repented.¹⁵ How could it be otherwise?

The Talmud provides no explanation for Abbahu’s puzzling view, leaving ample room for speculation. We can begin to penetrate his thought if we abandon the seemingly self-evident idea that the fewer sins we have on our record, the better off we are. This quantitative perspective treats people like merchandise—we have greater value if we have fewer defects. But Abbahu apparently understands human life to be dynamic, where process is primary and the perfection of the product is secondary. Somehow there is a value in doing *teshuvah* that exceeds the value of a completely clean slate. But what is this?

Abbahu’s point may be that we gain something through the process of repentance—a degree of self-awareness, an appreciation for human frailty, or a level of humility—that is valuable in

its own right. When we look deeply into the causes of our misdeeds and apologize to those we have harmed, we emerge from that process with a richer sense of our own humanity. There is something noble, at once profoundly shattering and healing, about the process of soul reckoning. The perfectly righteous person might have a “perfect record,” but if she hasn’t done *teshuvah*, she may not have the depth or soulfulness of the penitent. The perfectly righteous person could be akin to a very finely tuned machine, programmed to perform morally under all circumstances. But only the penitent has the merit that comes with self-scrutiny and self-love.

A related possibility is that the penitent has a higher status than the wholly righteous individual because “the reward is according to the trouble” (*Pirkei Avot* 5:25). By analogy, the naturally gifted athlete who can set a world record with relative ease does not earn as much admiration from us as the less-gifted competitor who trains far harder and longer just to come in second. The work involved in overcoming obstacles has its own intrinsic virtue. To the wholly righteous person, doing what is right may be effortless. Only the penitent knows what it takes to get up each morning and do battle with the evil impulse, as well as the satisfaction of constructing a new moral life out of the ruins of a failed one.

One final interpretation builds upon the transformative quality of *teshuvah* for an explanation of Abbahu’s striking teaching. Adin Steinsaltz offers this explanation:

The highest level of repentance, however, lies beyond the correction of sinful deeds and the creation of independent, new patterns that counterweigh past sins and injuries.... This level of *tikun* [repair, transformation] is reached when a person draws from his failings not only the ability to do good, but the power to fall again and again and, notwithstanding, to transform more extensive and important segments of life. It is using the knowledge of the sin of the past and transforming it into such an extraordinary thirst for good that it becomes a Divine force. The more a man was sunken in evil, the more eager he becomes for good.... This is the significance of the statement in the Talmud that in the place where a completely

repentant person stands, even the most saintly cannot enter; because the penitent has at his disposal not only the forces of good in his soul and in the world, but also those of evil, which he transforms into essences of holiness.¹⁶

According to this view, the penitent is higher than the wholly righteous person because she has harnessed the forces of evil within her and redeemed them, turning them into forces for goodness. The righteous person is powered, as it were, only by the forces of good, while the penitent has unleashed the energy of the evil impulse as well and channeled it into righteousness. We do not earn a demerit when we transgress as long as we repent and thereby use our failure as the occasion to uncover more and more elements within us that have inclined us to evil in the past and now can be redirected toward a life of good deeds.

In a world where only results matter, we could never put the penitent above the person with a perfect record. But that is not the world in which we live. The practice of repentance itself is meant to teach us this. For repentance invites us to live in a world where process takes precedence over product, effort over perfection. Above all, it invites us to see our failures as opportunities to transform ourselves by transforming the roots of evil within us into sources of goodness.



Repentance and Redemption

Rabbi Yohanan said, "Great is repentance, for it brings redemption, as it is said: 'A redeemer will come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob' (Isaiah 59:20)...." We have been taught that Rabbi Meir used to say, "Great is repentance, for on account of one individual who vows repentance, pardon is given to him as well as to the entire world, to all of it, as it is said, 'I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, when my anger is turned away from him' (Hosea 14:5). Hosea does not say, 'From them,' but, 'From him.'"

Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 86b

The connection between repentance and redemption is easy to understand. Both involve a process of turning to God and reestablishing a relationship of trust and loyalty. The difference would seem to lie only in the frame of reference: repentance is an individual matter, while redemption concerns the Jewish people and ultimately the world as a whole. But these Talmudic teachings say more than just that these two processes mirror one another, operating, as it were, on parallel planes. Rather, they claim that individual repentance actually brings national redemption. How can this be so?

If we think again about the path of repentance, we realize that the goal of *teshuvah* is a three-tiered process of healing. Penitents reclaim a lost sense of integrity and wholeness within themselves, repair broken relationships with those they have injured, and return

to God, the Source of all life and goodness. Psychologically, ethically, and spiritually, repentance is all about healing, a restoration of the situation that existed within us, among us, and between us and God before our transgressions undermined those relationships.

In another sense, though, *teshuvah*, as we have seen, involves the creation of something altogether new and unprecedented. Penitents were sometimes known to take new names to indicate that they were utterly new people. Hasidic sources in particular emphasize that *teshuvah*'s less about the repair of something broken than it is about the possibility of completely transcending the past. In this way the penitent can create a new reality that makes it as though the transgressions of the past never happened at all.

Both of these views have their place in theories of redemption. Gershom Scholem, the twentieth century's greatest scholar of Jewish mysticism, explained that Jewish messianism encompasses both "restorative" and "utopian" dimensions. By this he meant that the ultimate culmination of history, which biblical and Rabbinic sources have always connected with the coming of a messianic figure, was sometimes imagined as a return to an idyllic state (the closeness that God and Israel experienced at Sinai, for example) and sometimes as a new state of being utterly unlike anything that has ever existed before (when we will choose to obey God's laws willingly and consistently).¹⁷ Either way, redemption is a transformative process. Our current state of existence, marked by struggle, transgression, and discord, is to give way to a condition of peace, obedience, and harmony.

In a sense, then, repentance and redemption are less parallel processes than two parts of a single process. The restorative and/or utopian forces at work in the world transcend both individuals and nations. In the words of Rabbi Soloveitchik:

For what is redemption from exile? Redemption means returning to one's true origins. The sinner has removed himself from his roots, his origin; repentance serves to restore him to the source of his being. As in spiritual redemption, so it is in bodily redemption—the ingathering of the exiles and repentance, two things which are really one.¹⁸

Return and renewal are the essence of God's desire for the world as a whole and also for all individuals within it. The great drama of human history and the drama that unfolds in the privacy of an individual's soul are the very same drama viewed macroscopically and microscopically, as it were.

But we might also see the relationship between repentance and redemption as sequential. As each of us does our individual work of transformation, we bring the world as a whole closer to redemption. Indeed, the latter depends entirely on the former. The world as a whole cannot be perfected until we do the individual work of repentance that uproots the influence of the evil impulse in our lives. This is what the Rabbis meant when they taught:

The world is judged by the majority [of its deeds], and an individual is likewise judged by the majority [of his deeds].... If a person performs one good deed, happy is he, for he has tilted the scale both for himself and for the entire world, all of it, toward the side of merit. If he commits even one transgression, woe to him, for he has tilted the scale both for himself and for the entire world, all of it, toward the scale of guilt.

(Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin* 40b)

There is an arithmetic logic at work here that is inescapable. Humanity as a whole can only move toward redemption when individuals do their part. The transformation of individual penitents through repentance, then, is primary and, as one of its consequences, contributes to the transformation of redemption.

But there is still another sense in which the individual's repentance affects the world at large. The Rabbis frequently invoke the concept of "the merit of the forefathers" (*zechut avot*). Israel is redeemed by God, not by virtue of their own deeds, but by virtue of the merits of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the words of one classical Rabbinic source, "The Holy One said, 'Israel has no good deeds that would justify their redemption, other than the merit of their elders'" (Exodus Rabbah 15:4). The reasoning here is spiritual rather than arithmetic or causal. Some people stand in a special relationship to God such that their good deeds transcend

their own lives and radiate down through the generations, benefiting infinite generations after them.¹⁹

This notion of vicarious merit is behind the startling statement of Rabbi Meir in the opening epigraph. The power of penitence extends outward beyond the individual who engages in it to the benefit of all people. Just as the individual sinner can point to the merits of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying to God, in effect, "Do not judge me on my own merits alone, but consider me as part of a people that includes these righteous ancestors, and allow their merit to help offset my deficits," so too can he point to the merits of all penitents. When we fear that God might just give up on us, either individually or collectively, we can appeal to the example of the penitent, whose righteousness proves that there is still hope for us. Each penitent demonstrates to God that profound personal transformation is truly possible, and this, in turn, is proof positive that humanity as a whole is worth redeeming. Just as God was once prepared to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of ten righteous individuals (Genesis 18:32), so too will God look favorably upon the world as a whole on account of the penitents among us. In precisely this way, the repentance of a single individual makes redemption more likely for us all.

Conclusion

Teshuvah in Our Time

The problem of sin persists. Whether we look at the private lives of individuals, where parents still abandon and abuse their children; the practices of corporations, where corruption is rampant; or the conduct of nations, where injustice and cover-ups are prevalent, the world is rife with sinful behavior. Clergy, too, have been caught up in scandal to a remarkable degree, as evidenced by the Roman Catholic priests found guilty of sexual abuse and by the Orthodox rabbis indicted for violating labor laws, abusing illegal immigrants, and participating in political corruption. Everywhere we turn, it seems, the moral fabric of our society is coming undone. And this is all just the commonplace sinfulness we encounter every day, before we begin to contemplate the enormity of genocide in Rwanda and Darfur or the fact that we tolerate a world in which over a billion people lack clean drinking water.

I do not mean to suggest that people are fundamentally more depraved today than they were in ages past. In fact, any careful reading of history would likely reveal that people are prone to transgression in roughly equal degrees, in fairly comparable ways, irrespective of time period, culture, religious affiliation, or any other factor. This confirms what our religious and moral teachers have been telling us since they first began reflecting on the human condition: sinfulness has been and continues to be an irreducible part of our humanity. Until the messianic redemption arrives, we are all sinners, to one degree or another.

The true test of the spiritual maturity of a civilization, then, is not really the level of its moral behavior, but the way it responds to moral misbehavior. The critical questions are these:

How deeply do we reflect upon the problem of human transgression? How sophisticated and honest is our public discourse on our moral failings? How rigorously do we hold people accountable for their misdeeds, and how actively do we encourage people to make amends for their errors?

When we ask ourselves these questions, the answers, I'm afraid, are not encouraging. There is widespread evidence that we have lost touch with much of what our western religious traditions have taught us about transgression and moral transformation. The practice of repentance is something of a lost art, and what is worse, most people appear to be unaware that it is lost and so are oblivious to the resulting moral impoverishment of our society. We rightly bemoan the loss of native arts, close-knit families, and the handwritten personal letter. But who among us protests that we have lost the fine art of public apology or the courage required to engage in serious soul reckoning? For all our technological and intellectual sophistication, we have become handicapped morally by our failure to nurture the habits of heart and soul that are required for addressing the moral mistakes that we inevitably make.

The evidence of this failure is all around us. I'd like to suggest that our society's response to moral transgressions tends to fall into one of three categories: avoidance, trivialization, and moralizing. Each of these responses, I think, testifies eloquently to the poverty of our collective understanding of the practice and meaning of repentance.

Those who avoid repentance are perhaps the easiest to identify and criticize. I have already mentioned the prevalence of politicians and businesspeople accused of wrongdoing who adamantly protest their innocence and assure us, sometimes through their attorneys, that they are eager for all the facts to come out so that they can be exonerated. And, almost invariably, when they have their day in court, the facts are pretty much as they seemed—they stand guilty as accused, only now we know that their professed innocence was nothing but an elaborate show designed to preserve a public facade of rectitude a little longer. They continue to act in bad faith because they are incapable of admitting their wrongs in public and atoning for them; perhaps some have even

convinced themselves through some mechanism of self-deception that they really are innocent. What we know is that they are not honest or humble, two of the virtues required for genuine contrition, self-disclosure, apology, and reconciliation. Some of them appear childish, others fiendish. But all of them are clueless about what repentance is.¹

Only slightly less clueless are the trivializers, those who make an effort at repentance, but one that is halfhearted, defensive, or otherwise ineffective. In the end, they only succeed in cheapening the whole process of repentance. They offer an apology, but in a way that is conditional (“I am sorry if I have offended you”) or that subtly shifts the blame to the other party (“I am sorry that you felt hurt by my actions”) or that simply is at odds with the facts (as when they claim that their behavior was accidental when, in fact, it is part of a well-established pattern). In these and a thousand other ways large and small, people can express remorse without really feeling it or claim to be repairing a broken relationship without doing the hard work that is required. But most of us know the difference between empty gestures of repentance and the real thing, and moral counterfeits are no more welcome than monetary ones. Such people give repentance a bad name, for they lead others to believe that all (or, at least, most) gestures of repentance are just that—gestures without substance. And once people come to think of repentance as largely worthless, they will rightly quit caring whether anyone even pretends to engage in it.

Of course, it is possible to trivialize repentance in even more blatant and grotesque ways. We need only think of those ever-popular TV shows on which people are invited to confess their sins in public for the entertainment of the audience.² To the extent that there is even a pretense of engaging in repentance here, these displays can only be regarded as a mockery of real repentance. For genuine repentance is a serious business that requires profound soul reckoning; it is born of brokenheartedness and remorse, and it happens, if at all, only in moments of profound intimacy between the offender and those the offender has hurt. Real repentance is not a made-for-TV drama designed to shock an audience or play to their voyeuristic instincts.

Finally, there are the moralists who have no time for repentance altogether, who say that those who have sinned must be held accountable, without hesitation and without mercy. Such people can be found among those who take a hard line on criminals, who insist that they be stripped of their rights, who believe that we should “lock them up and throw away the key.” For such people, of course, “sinners” are always others, in a separate category, safely distinguishable from the rest of us. The moralists affirm that it is good and right that convicted felons be forever deprived of their rights to vote, hold public office, be admitted to the bar, practice medicine, or otherwise participate fully in the life of society, notwithstanding whatever they may have done to repent for their crimes.³ Life is simpler and our moral categories are neater if we don’t allow for the possibility of repentance at all. For the practice of repentance presupposes that all of us (sometimes) transgress and all of us (always) have the freedom to change.

To be sure, the situation is not entirely so bleak. There are hopeful signs in some quarters that the meaning and power of repentance are appreciated. The famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, for all its shortcomings, demonstrated the possibility that there is the potential for enormous social healing when perpetrators are encouraged to confess their deeds publicly. The very fact that similar efforts have been undertaken (in Rwanda, Argentina, Brazil, and Germany, among other places) attests that the art of repentance is alive and well, especially in countries that have been torn apart by ethnic violence and genocide. So, too, do the apologies issued in 1988 by the United States to Japanese Americans for the internment camps established during World War II,⁴ the similar apology issued in 1997 to African Americans abused in the Tuskegee experiments on the effects of untreated syphilis,⁵ and Pope John Paul II’s apology in 2000 for the sins of those who acted in the name of the Roman Catholic Church.⁶ The entire movement associated with “restorative justice” has also developed in recent years as an alternative to more traditional retributive models of criminal justice. Its advocates, who explicitly draw on models of repentance, recognize that remorse and restitution, together with a direct encounter

between the perpetrators and victims of a crime, can enable the reintegration of the offender into society.⁷

For all these reasons, it would surely be an exaggeration to declare that the way of repentance is dead. But just as surely, it is far from thriving. The irony—some might say, the tragedy—of all this is that the wisdom we most deeply need, as individuals and as a society, is readily available to us, if we only take the time to study and absorb it. Our religious traditions have long understood the nature of transgression and the need to overcome it, and they have prepared a well-worn path to help us find the wholeness and reconciliation we seek.

As we have seen, Jewish sources point us toward a middle path, away from the simplistic alternatives of easy grace, according to which transgression is not a serious problem, and of rigid moralism, according to which moral failings are irredeemable. In the former case, *teshuvah* is not necessary; in the latter case, it is not possible. But we can afford to be neither so cavalier with respect to our transgressions nor so severe in our condemnation of the sinner along with the sin. What we need instead is the demand that we take our failings with the utmost seriousness, but that we take equal account of our ability to overcome them. What we need is the path of repentance.

The alternatives have led us into a quandary that has paralyzed our public lives. On the one hand, we permit criminals to confess their crimes, turn government witness, and avoid most penalties for their deeds. We allow others to plea-bargain, so that they confess to less serious crimes than the ones they committed and therefore never actually pay the price for their transgressions. And most of all we allow the flimsiest of defenses to exonerate those who commit serious crimes—the famous “Twinkie defense” in the trial of Dan White for the murders of George Moscone, mayor of San Francisco, and Harvey Milk, is perhaps the prime example. In all these ways, we fail to hold people accountable for their transgressions.

Yet, we also find ourselves trapped in precisely the opposite reaction. We refuse to tolerate even the smallest failings in our public figures. Someone who admits to smoking marijuana in his youth is declared unfit to hold public office, leading Bill Clinton

to insist famously, and surely dishonestly, that he “didn’t inhale.” We insist that the politician who made a mistake in paying his income taxes must resign, even after the monies owed have been repaid, and the one who had an extramarital affair must likewise resign, even after he has publicly confessed and his wife has forgiven him. Even when the offense is relatively minor, and the effort to apologize for it seems sincere, there are some who would insist that no repentance is possible or, at least, none is sufficient to restore an offender to her former status.

We seem to bounce back and forth between a pervasive failure to hold people accountable and an equally powerful obsession with doing so. It is as though we have lost our moral equilibrium. We can no longer find a proper balance between insisting on justice and insisting that, once the demands of justice have been met, compassion be extended to the offender. But Judaism offers us a third way, which marries accountability for the past with freedom from the past. It takes sin seriously, but no more seriously than the perennial opportunity to overcome it. For these two dimensions of human life are finally not opposed, but complementary. In *teshuvah*, accountability and freedom are revealed to be equally necessary and interdependent. We need to find inner wholeness, make peace with our neighbors, and sustain a connection with God.

In the final analysis, human nature being what it is, we will continue to need the interlocking concepts of guilt and repentance. The former indicates that we have internalized the moral law and recognize when we have transgressed it; the latter indicates our determination to restore, both in ourselves and in relationship to others, what we have broken. To mitigate the sense of guilt is to risk social and moral chaos, for it allows us to indulge the fantasy that everything is permitted. But to deny the possibility of repentance is to deny the need for and reality of human freedom. It is to suppose that, individually and collectively, we are enslaved to the past. In classical Christian terms, we need both law and grace, moral limits (which, when transgressed, yield guilt and remorse) and moral freedom, which, through repentance, enables us to correct our transgressions and repair ourselves and our world. *Teshuvah* is the means by which we marry law and

grace, accountability and freedom, responsibility for the past and openness to the future.

Our lives are marked not by our achievements, or certainly not by them alone, but rather by how we deal with our failures, especially our moral failings. Revealing to the world only our virtues, our achievements, the things that make us “proud,” contributes to our own moral impoverishment. For when we do not bring all of ourselves, our faults in particular, into the open, we not only conceal ourselves from those we love most, but we also become partially invisible even to ourselves. Worse yet, we come to believe that what is concealed in this way does not really matter, that the facade of goodness and rectitude that we present is the whole of who we are. Then, in those quiet moments of self-reflection when the lights on the stage of our lives have gone dark and we find ourselves alone with our thoughts, we confront the harsh truth—that we live bifurcated lives, that our lives lack wholeness and integrity. We not only deceive and falsify from time to time, but in a fundamental way we also live a lie.

It is into this dark and painful reality that *teshuvah* comes with its startling message of hope—that there is a way out of this truncated and stultifying life; indeed, that there is but one way out. But that road to wholeness and integrity—with ourselves, our neighbors, and God—lies in the commitment to truthfulness, responsibility, and humility. And, better yet, that following this path brings not only reconciliation but also a return to the person we most deeply, truly are and were created to be. *Teshuvah* in this sense is a true homecoming, which is simultaneously a turning away from transgression and brokenness and a turning toward the ones we have harmed, turning inward to ourselves but also toward God, who loves us even in our waywardness and calls us to truthfulness and wholeness.

For anyone who has encountered these teachings on *teshuvah*, there can be no question of how to begin the process of repentance. The path is carefully laid out, including the obstacles we are likely to encounter along the way and the strategies others have used to overcome them. Nor can there really be much question about the meaning and value of *teshuvah*, for these too have been expounded from Talmudic times to our own day. From

those who have claimed that *teshuvah* was woven into the fabric of the universe even before creation to those who have praised *teshuvah* as giving us access to divine energies, repentance retains its honored place as the key to moral rehabilitation and reconciliation, both divine and human.

The only question left unanswered is the question that can only be answered in the depths of each person's heart: how shall I finally find the will to undertake the arduous work of *teshuvah* and then, because I will inevitably fail, to begin it yet again? The path of repentance will be, by turns, difficult and easy, straightforward and circuitous. But, like all spiritual paths, the most difficult part may be the decision to embark upon the journey in the first place. There is much holding us back—fear, to be sure, but also shame, pride, and hopelessness. In this respect, we may take some comfort from one final text. It is the biblical text that is read in synagogues each year on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. In one of Moses's final addresses to the Israelites, he admonishes them one last time that God will bless them if they observe the law and curse them if they depart from it. He reminds them of the great gift of the Promised Land that they are about to enter and possess. He encourages them to love God and to "return to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul" (Deuteronomy 30:10), a phrase that echoes the theme of returning and repentance that marks this season of the year.

And then, anticipating the reticence of the Israelites to believe that all this is possible and to commit themselves to living by the terms of the covenant, Moses says:

Surely this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

(Deuteronomy 30:11–14)

May all who read these words and study these texts find the courage and willingness to take them to heart and embrace the way of *teshuvah*, with contrition for the past and with hope for the future.

