

# Repentance and Knowledge: Building a Relationship with the Creator<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Maimonides, in his *Code*, gives us the specific formula for repentance: "*I beseech Thee, O Lord, I have sinned, I have deviated, I have been negligent before You, and I have done such and such; behold, I have repented and am ashamed of my deeds, and I will never again repeat this deed.*" "*This is the essence of the verbal formula for repentance,*" says Maimonides, "*but whoever wishes to add to it may do so, and this is even considered praiseworthy.*"

## The Role of Verbalization in Repentance

It is important to note that while repentance is accepted by God even if it is not verbalized—that is, even if it is done in thought alone—it is not considered complete until one has verbally expressed these thoughts. The essence of repentance is in the heart and mind, as it is stated in Deuteronomy, "*And you shall know this day and return to your heart...*" (Deuteronomy 4:39). Why, then, does the Torah call for verbalization?

The answer lies in a principle of Halacha that verbalization is the most complete expression of human thought. The ideas of the mind, as profound as they may be, reach their full fruition only when they are translated into tangible statements. For this reason, one may think in Torah without reciting a blessing before doing so, while verbalizing Torah or even writing Torah ideas demands a blessing.

The Torah considers verbal expression to be the final stage of the thinking process—the crystallization of one's thoughts. Repentance is not complete until one can stand before the Creator and enunciate one's thoughts clearly concerning his or her misdeeds.

## Invoking the Creator in Repentance

Why is it necessary for one to invoke the Creator in one's expression of repentance? Is not the essence of repentance the recognition of one's error and the conviction never to return to the misdeed—that is, never to perform it again? Why, then, is it necessary to begin the repentance formula with the expression "*I beseech Thee, O Lord*"?

## The Insight of the Torah

Here, we get an opportunity to see the great insight of Torah. The objective of the entire Torah is to give man the correct idea of God. This idea is the one idea that must never be distorted. Hence, the Torah rails constantly against idolatry or attaching any form to the Creator. Once the idea of God is distorted in any way, man is doomed.

## The Nature of Man's Thoughts

Man is a creature guided by thoughts. This is true even in his most mundane actions. But aside from the activities that are vital for man's existence, there exists a realm of behavior that involves man's higher nature—that part of him which is truly human. Here, man's activities are determined by his value system or what he considers to be good or not good.

## The Dependence on One's Idea of God

The Torah teaches us the remarkable concept that this is all dependent on one's idea of God. If one sees God as a big daddy in the sky who metes out punishment for infractions and gives rewards for certain actions, then one's entire life will be spent trying to gain reward and avoid punishment.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally appeared as *More on Repentance* in "The Gap". Edited by B. Silberstein

If one thinks God has a physical form, one will ascribe to Him human traits and act toward Him as he would toward a human being. He will also think that physical reality is the underlying reality of all existence. If one knows that God is not physical, nor can He be compared to any of His creation, as the prophet states, "*And to whom can you compare Me? Sayeth the Holy One*" (Isaiah 40:25), and that this God is the source of all existence, as stated in the first verse of Genesis, and that all we perceive as physical stems from the underlying reality of God's infinite knowledge, then one will spend one's life reaching for God as He reveals Himself through His infinite knowledge and wisdom.

All the actions of such a person will have just one objective: to know God, as the prophet states, "*In all your ways you shall know Him...*" (Proverbs 3:6). Such an individual will indulge in physical and psychological pleasures only insofar as is necessary to pursue his relationship with the Creator via the divine element God has implanted in man's soul.

### **The Consequences of Sin**

Whenever man sins, he lacks, of necessity, knowledge either of the Creator or himself. Because of his error, he sways from his course and engages in activities that take him away from God. He must therefore first and foremost approach God, reestablish his relationship with Him, and turn to Him with the words "*I beseech Thee, O Lord.*"

With this one most powerful phrase, one comes to realize that sin is not just a misdemeanor and repentance a childish resolution, but that sin involves a necessary turning away from the Creator—a deviation from one's program in life—and repentance is a return to that way of life that involves an endless reaching out toward the Creator.

### **Knowledge and the Laws of Repentance**

Maimonides, in his ingenious formulation of the laws of repentance, taught us an important truth. He stated that in order to repent, one must have knowledge of certain principles of Torah. In his heading for the laws of repentance, he states, "*The explanation of this commandment and the principles that are drawn along with it and because of it are in these chapters.*" These principles include free will, the afterlife, how God judges man, what is apostasy, knowledge of God, the value of repentance, which things prevent repentance, and the correct way to serve God. Why is it necessary to know all these things in order to repent?

The answer is plain: since repentance is not a mere act of contrition but a qualitatively new relationship with the Creator, one must have a sound knowledge of these principles, which are the very basis of man's relationship with God. One must review these principles and seek in them new depths of understanding to establish one's relationship with God on a higher plane.

The Torah and the prophets have made it clear that without knowledge, one cannot serve God. David charged his son Solomon, upon taking leave from this earthly existence, with the words "*Know the God of your fathers and serve Him*" (Chronicles I 28:9). As the Rabbis say, "*First, one must know Him, and then one may serve Him.*" All perfection involves knowledge of the Creator, and the more perfected one is, the greater that knowledge. As man strives for higher levels throughout his life, his knowledge of God is forever changing, forever deepening.

### **The Measure of a Human Being**

The measure of a human being is in direct proportion to his knowledge of God. As such, there are various degrees of human existence until one reaches the level of our great teacher Moses, whose knowledge of God was the very highest attainable by the human species.

### **Conclusion: The Quintessence of Repentance**

Repentance, as seen by the Torah, is not a mere act but the quintessence of man's relationship with God.