

Repentance

By: Rabbi Yisroel Chait

The famous philosopher Spinoza states: "Repentance is not a virtue, or does not arise from reason; but he who repents of an action is doubly wretched or infirm." Spinoza explains his statement further, by saying, "For the man allows himself to be overcome, first, by evil desires, secondly, by pain." Spinoza, contrary to popular opinion, had a shallow understanding of Torah.

Repentance, as seen by the Torah, is the most vital institution man has in attaining perfection. It is based on a profound understanding of human nature. Repentance was an act of conscience, for Spinoza, an outburst of guilt over some sin, or evil act.

This is no doubt true for the man-made religions which admonish man to let his conscience be his guide. The man-made religions are based on man's need to restrict his desires. Although man is filled with instinctual desire he finds he is unhappy when he indulges himself in unrestricted fulfillment of these desires. He feels empty and worthless.

He is thus caught between two needs, the need to satisfy his desires and the need to feel a sense of worthiness. Religion solves this dilemma by placing restrictions on his desires and even instilling pain at times. The Indian sun dance was a tortuous ceremony through which the dancer's flesh was torn away by skewers. The participant walked away with a feeling of being whole and cleansed. His conscience was satisfied. Modern man-made religions, although not as grotesque, are nevertheless based on this same struggle between man's desires and his conscience.

Torah, the religion given to us by God, is not based on these conflicting urges of the human soul. Indeed many of the sins of the Torah make one feel very comfortable and are even satisfying to the conscience.

Idolatry, the Torah's worst sin, in which man uses some physical object to instill in himself fear of the Creator, does not evoke any sense of guilt. On the contrary, it makes one feel pious and God fearing. Yet the Torah states: you shall not make with me, gods of silver or gods of gold ..."(Exodus 20:20).

The words, "with me" clearly indicate that even if these images are used to evoke a sense of the reality of God's existence they are idolatrous. The sin of the golden calf is an illustration of this point. Here the Israelites, in seeking a sense of security due to the absence of their leader Moses, created a physical object to reassure them of God's presence (see Exodus 32:1). The idea that the idolater is not in conflict with his conscience, is stated in Deuteronomy 29:18, "and he will feel blessed in his heart saying peace will be with me..."

Similarly, having mercy on a loved one who has strayed from Torah and causes others to sin, does not carry with it pangs of conscience and yet is considered a sin. "You shall not have compassion and you shall not cover for him, but you shall surely kill him... because he has sought to draw you away from the Lord your God..."(Deuteronomy 13:9,10,11).

Complete abstention from sexual intercourse does not seem abhorrent to the conscience yet for the ben Israel is considered a most serious violation, a defiance of God's will. Ignorance and a lack of interest in Torah knowledge does not strike us as such a terrible thing, yet it is one of the most serious crimes, one that is punishable by God not listening to one's prayers, as it says, "He who turns away his ear from hearing Torah, even his prayer is abomination." (Proverbs 28:9).

God's system of Torah is not based on practices that are satisfying to the human conscience. They are based on God's infinite knowledge and a very precise system that leads man to perfection, Torah. Here, man cannot use his feelings to navigate toward his destiny. He must employ the full powers of his mind in the study of God's works before he can have any knowledge of what is good and what is evil. No emotional attitude, conscience or otherwise, can give man this knowledge.

In the religion of knowledge, Torah, repentance plays a major role. Although man may have gained sight of the good he has not yet attained perfection. Man must incorporate the good in his soul and express it through his actions. This is no simple matter. Man's instinctual life (and with instinctual we include conscience) is very powerful, "for the impulse of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21).

The Rabbis annotate that the instinctual life begins at birth and controls man fully until puberty when the good inclination, man's ability to live according to reason, starts to gain control. The instinctual life therefore has a head start, so to speak, and is forever lying in wait to distort man's judgements, as it says: "...sin crouches at the door, and to you shall be its desire" (Genesis 4:7).

Given the dynamics of the human soul and the multifarious experiences of human life it is virtually impossible that man shall not at some time fall prey to some powerful emotion, distort his vision, and sin. The wise king, Solomon, expresses it in Ecclesiastes 7:20, "For there is not a just man upon earth that does good and sins not."

When man sins he has not simply committed a violation. Man's nature demands that he have a good opinion of himself. He must thus distort the truth, change his value system and confuse evil for good in order to retain a sense of inner peace. Through sin man has become changed. He has abandoned a good and taken evil in its place. His ways are removed from God, the source of all truth.

What is the remedy? Man has a remarkable ability: he can envision experiences in his mind without actually living through them. This ability can save him from his misfortune. Quietly, in the recesses of his mind, when the instinctual forces have abated, when experience, with its freshness and alluring qualities is gone, the individual can replay the scenes he has lived through. He can relive and re-examine situations, impulses, and decisions he has made in an impassioned state of mind. He can reconsider, alter, change and improve on judgements and actions he has made at a previous time.

Free from the distorting forces of emotion, he can study logically his deeds, and determine whether or not they are in error. If they are, it is never too late to change them. While it is true that we cannot always undo the effects we caused in the external world, we may have to suffer their consequences, as the wise king states, "that which is crooked cannot be made straight..." (Ecclesiastes 1:15), this limitation does not apply to the internal life of man. He can undo the harm his soul has suffered by distortion of truth.

He need only see things clearly, recognize his error and understand why his action can only cause himself harm. His realization must be so complete that were he in the same situation he would not act as he did before. His repentance is complete when he reaches this point.

Repentance has converted the sinner from a man removed from truth and the ways of God, to one who is even closer than he was before he had sinned. Realization of error is so powerful that he is even further removed from evil than before. Repentance is not an act of conscience; but a profound learning experience.

It is accomplished through understanding and analysis of one's deeds, through logical introspection, and a careful examination of good and evil. The Torah does not construe repentance as a simple antidote for sin, to be done on the occasion of transgression. It is a process that is constantly ongoing in the life of the righteous individual. It is an integral part of the growth process of man.

The Talmud states that if you have seen a righteous person commit a sin in the daytime you can be certain he repented by night. Repentance is a daily preoccupation of the righteous. Man must learn through experience; but man cannot learn anything unless he can analyze his experiences.

Sometimes we can analyze our actions before we act, but at other times when we get too caught up, experience strikes at us too quickly and too forcefully. We are stunned and lose control of our abilities to think and judge properly. We give in to emotions of the moment and we fail. We can only do our analysis ex-post facto.

But this does not stop us from engaging in a profound learning experience. On the contrary, if we muster up the courage to be honest with ourselves, to search for truth, we may make use of our failures and convert them into great successes. Repentance offers man fresh insights, goads him on to search out truths of Torah, and gives him a sense of worthiness that is not based on hollow emotions of conscience but on living in line with God's reality.

By not identifying the sense of guilt with sin, the Torah has removed the stigma from repentance and has raised it to the level of a proud and vital institution, the very cornerstone of human perfection.

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, and 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."

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 *Halakhah* 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 demand 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.

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"?

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 Torah rails constantly against idolatry or attaching any form to the Creator. Once the idea of God is distorted in any way whatever, man is doomed.

Man is a creature that is 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 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 that 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.

If one thinks God has a physical form one will ascribe to him human traits and act towards him as he would towards a human being. He will also think that the 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)," that this God is the source of all existence, as is stated in the first verse of Genesis, and that all that we perceive as physical stems from the underlying reality of God's infinite knowledge, then one will spend one's life in reaching God as He reveals Himself through His infinite knowledge and wisdom.

All the actions of such a person will have just one objective, that is, 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 in order to be able to pursue his relationship with the Creator via the divine element God has implanted in man's soul.

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 towards the Creator.

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 in order 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 his 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 a knowledge of the Creator; and the more perfected one is the greater is 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 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.

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