

Soloveitchik on Repentance

I. Introduction

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (1903–1993) was the undisputed rabbinic leader and leading ideologue of American Modern Orthodoxy for much of the twentieth century. Known reverentially as “the Rav” (The Teacher), Soloveitchik, as rosh yeshiva of Yeshiva University from 1941 to 1985, trained scores of American Orthodox rabbis. During this period, he also served as the chief Posek (legal decider) of Modern Orthodoxy in America and one of its chief architects in shaping communal policy.

The book “On Repentance” was written by his disciple, Rabbi Dr. Pinchas HaCohen Peli. It is a collection of yearly oral discourses, each several hours long, that Rabbi Soloveitchik gave in Yiddish, in a yearly conference held during the Ten Days of Repentance (the days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur) over a period of 13 years (from 1962 to 1974). In the following hour, we’ll try to acquaint ourselves with a few of his thoughts, the way he looks at Torah, Halakha (mostly the Mishne Torah of the Rambam) and the High Holidays liturgy.

II. Reward and Punishment – a Fundamental Concept in Judaism

Sin and its punishment are born together. No sin goes without its retribution, whether it be meted out by a terrestrial or a celestial court. The belief in reward and punishment is fundamental to Jewish belief (Deuteronomy 7:9-10): Know, therefore, that only the LORD your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments and repays those that hate Him ... to destroy them”.

Sin is by no means a transitory phenomenon that passes by, leaving no trace and incurring no liability. Sin and punishment are always linked together. If you will, the very definition of sin is that it is an act that entails paying a penalty. If punishment exists, it is because sin does too.

III. The two Aspects of Sin

There are two aspects to the effect of sin on the human being: liability and defilement.

The most obvious one is the burden of culpable liability. This liability entails with it a punishment, restitution, penalties.

The Jewish view and Halakha (Jewish Law) recognizes a state of “impurity of sin” (tum’at haḥet – טומאת החטא). The entire Bible abounds in references to this idea of self-pollution, contamination, rolling about in the mire of sin. This impurity makes its mark on the sinner’s personality. Sin, as it were, removes the Divine halo from one’s head, impairing his spiritual integrity, a “metaphysical” corruption of the human personality. This does not constitute further punishment but is rather indicative of a change in his personal status. As a result of sin, man is not the same person he was before.

IV. The two Aspects of T’shuva: Kapparah and Taharah

The process of T’shuva has two aspects. Similarly, Yom Kippur, the ultimate opportunity for T’shuva, has two purposes. Both are tightly connected. The first is Kapparah – כַּפָּרָה –

expiation, or acquittal from sin. The second aspect is Taharah – טְהָרָה – catharsis, or purification.

The Kapparah part is expressed during Yom Kippur in the prayer of the High Priest (part of Yom Kippur Avodah Service): “לְפָנֶיךָ... .. חָטָאתִי, אָנָּה ה'שֵׁם, PLEASE, O God, I have sinned, I have done wrong, in front of your countenance. I have transgressed, I and my household. O God, כַּפֵּר expiate the sins, the wrongdoing, and the transgressions which I committed against you, I and my household, as it is written in the Torah of your servant, Moshe (Leviticus 16:30): ‘כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכָּפֵר עֲלֵיכֶם - For on this day atonement shall be made for you...’”:

The Taharah part is expressed in the continuation of the same verse: “לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל־ :חָטָאתֵיכֶם לְפָנַי יְהוָה תִּטְהַרוּ: – to purify you of all your sins; you shall be purified before the countenance of the LORD.” The purification motif repeats itself many times, also in conjunction with the purifying waters (Ezekiel 36:25): “I will sprinkle cleansing water upon you, and you shall be purified...”.

As a result of a sin, an indemnity must be offered and paid in order to withdraw the liability claim. Interestingly, in Hebrew, the word for indemnity payment is KOFER – כֹּפֶר – which comes from the very same root of Kapparah. That indemnity payment is made through T'shuva (repentance) itself. Kapparah (acquittal, expiation) is the result of the payment of this “ransom” which releases and redeems man from further punishment. The moment acquittal is granted and punishment wiped from the books, man’s liability is terminated.

Yom Kippur only facilitates the Kapparah part of the T'shuva. The emissary of the public, the High Priest, can help only that far. The Taharah part of the T'shuva each and every one has to do on his OWN. When the High Priest came out of the Holy of Holies and proclaimed to the People that they have Kapparah – their sins are expiated, acquitted, he concluded with the instruction: “תִּטְהַרוּ – Go and purify yourselves!”

T'shuva, true T'shuva, goes further. In addition to achieving Kapparah, it also brings Taharah from tum'ah (spiritual pollution, defilement), liberating man from his hard-hearted ignorance and insensitivity. Such T'shuva restores man’s spiritual viability and rehabilitates him to his original state.

And sometimes ... it makes man rise to heights he never dreamt he could reach.

V. *The two Ways of T'shuva: The Way of Sins and the Way of Sinners*

The Vidduy – וִידּוּי – confession is the first necessary step towards T'shuva. Even though the form and language of the Vidduy for both for Kapparah and Taharah is identical they are different in intent. To understand the difference, let us look at a Halakha that rules about a deed that would invoke a Jew from being reliable to testify in Jewish Court (an example for the defilement aspect of the sin). In Sanhedrin 25b we learn that the one that is playing games that involve exchange of money (cards, dice, and such) and those who are engaged in lending money with interest (both the lender and borrower) are disqualified and unfit to bear witness in court, in addition to penalties that may be ruled against the culprits (lashes or financial penalties).

One who confesses and in his T'shuva regrets the sin and commits not to repeat it is expiated – his T'shuva is accepted for Kapparah. He may continue playing the same games without gambling or money involved, or lend money with interest to non-Jew; these are no sins (according to Halakha)! This particular T'shuva removes one from the Way of Sinners.

We need to recognize that the Sin does not come out of nothing; it is an outcome of certain environment and conditions that make it happen.

For T'shuva of Taharah that is not enough. One needs to distance oneself from that environment, conditions and temptations that enable the sin to happen. For Taharah one needs to completely move away from the Way of Sins. As the Talmud says about these cases: "... abandoning this occupation entirely, **where they do not do this even for nothing**, i.e., they do not play even without betting.... ... **Once they tear their promissory notes and repent of them completely**, abandoning this occupation entirely, where **they do not lend with interest even to a gentile.**"

The complete T'shuva – T'shuva of Taharah - means that the person abandons completely the Way of Sins, the way and conditions that lead to performing a sin (Isiah 55:7):

עֲזֹב רָשָׁע דַּרְכּוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶגּוֹן מִחֻשְׁבֹּתָיו וְיָשֵׁב אֶל יְהוָה וְיִרְחַמֵּהוּ וְאֶל אֱלֹהֵינוּ כִּי יִרְבֶּה לְסִלּוֹם:

The wicked will give up his ways, The sinful man his thoughts; Let him repent-return back to the LORD, And He will be merciful to him; To our God, for He forgives in abundance.

Abandoning the thoughts mean here all the way of life and thinking that may lead to sinning. It is a complete morphosis of the "old" person and the creation of a "new" personality – a new person. This is what the Talmud calls a Complete and Final T'shuva, that enables one to be fit to be a witness.

VI. *The two Aspects of T'shuva in the High Holidays Liturgy*

In the "Avinu Malkenu" prayer, we ask:

אֲבִינוּ מִלְכֵנוּ מַחַה וְהַעֲבֵר פְּשָׁעֵינוּ וְחַטֹּאתֵינוּ מִנֶּגֶד עֵינֶיךָ:

Our Father, our King! blot out and remove our transgressions and sins from before Your eyes.

The first – Blot out – is for the T'shuva of Kapparah. The second – remove – is for the T'shuva of Taharah. Now, after reviewing the differences and the actions required, this makes sense, deeper than the mere beauty of the poetry in it.

Our Transgressions – those that we did knowingly and confessed, asked forgiveness for them.

Our sins – those that we have missed the mark, that we have committed unknowingly, and hence didn't know to confess and ask forgiveness for them.

We also recite

מַחַה וְהַעֲבֵר פְּשָׁעֵינוּ וְחַטֹּאתֵינוּ מִנֶּגֶד עֵינֶיךָ. כְּאִמּוֹר אֲנֹכִי אֲנֹכִי הוּא מוֹחֵה לְמַעַנִי וְחַטֹּאתֶיךָ לֹא אֶזְכֵּר: וְנֹאמֵר מִחִיתִי כָעֵב פְּשָׁעֶיךָ וְכַעֲנֵן חַטֹּאתֶיךָ שׁוֹבֵה אֵלַי כִּי גֹאֲלֶתֶיךָ:

Blot out and remove our transgressions and sins from before Your eyes, as it is said (Isiah 42:25): "I, I [alone] am He Who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and your sins, I

will not recall.” And it is said (Isiah 44:22): “I have swept away like a thick cloud your transgressions, and like a mist your sins; return to Me, for I have redeemed you.”

Please note the repetition of the “I” in Isiah 42:25; hopefully we’ll discuss it a little later.

When a person has reached the height of the T’shuva of Taharah the clouds that are above one’s head are dispersed, the Sun of Purification is shining upon the self and the feeling of being redeemed, changed, reborn as a new person, is filling one’s essence.

VII. *The Format of the Vidduy (Confession)*

Rabbi Soloveitchik relies heavily on the Rambam – the very first verse of the Laws of Repentance and expounds on it. Let’s refresh our memory on a few elements of that Halakha:

“...Such confession is a mandatory commandment.

...The sinner says thus:

אָנָּה הַשֵּׁם הַטָּאֲתִי עֲוִיתִי פָּשַׁעְתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ וְעָשִׂיתִי קֶדַּךְ וְרָדָךְ...

"Please! I beseech you, O HaShem (God)! I have sinned; I have been obstinate; I have committed profanity against you – when standing in front of you, to your countenance, particularly in doing thus and such...."

From the first portion, the Rabbi concludes that the confession itself IS the Positive Mitzvah that we are commanded upon. Also, the confession is the very first step of the T’shuva process. How come the Rambam does not count the T’shuva as a Mitzvah? The answer, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, is: T’shuva is an overarching Mitzvah, just as is the Commandment “Love to your fellow human as yourself”. He understands that the Maimonides differentiates between two types of Mitzvot: there are those in which the action and the fulfillment of the Mitzva are simultaneous, and then there are those that the fulfillment of the Mitzva is in one’s heart and entails more than a single action. Vidduy is the first type and T’shuva is the second type of Mitzva.

What does the cry PLEASE at the very beginning of the confession mean? After all, grammatically it is not needed, out of place. This is the heartbreaking cry that may enable the embarkation on the T’shuva journey: Please don’t slam the door in my face! Don’t lock the gates of repentance! (From the prayers of Yom Kippur – and every day’s supplication) “let our prayer come before you and do not ignore our supplication.” This is a cry for God, “Who opens the door to those who knock in repentance (From Rosh HaShanah prayers). Not to those who do repent or who already repented – but to those who want to confess, to start the process of T’shuva.

The sin takes us away from God. We are shunning away, hiding away from His Face (the Hebrew meaning of לְפָנֶיךָ is in front of you, in your face, to your countenance). No matter where we are – we are always in front of God’s face, His Countenance. The Vidduy is the call, the request to come back and stand in front of God’s countenance, His face, look at him and summon the courage to confess. The Sacrifice, when the Temple was in place, actually meant that. Sacrifice – in Hebrew Korban – uses the same root as to come near, be close to someone, to come closer to God.

VIII. *Adonoy, Adonoy, Merciful and Gracious God* - יהוה יהוה אל רחום וחנון

This verse with the 13 attributes of God is a verse we repeat so many times during the High Holidays. The Talmud (Rosh HaShanah tractate, 17b:6) explains: “**The Lord, the Lord,**” and it should be understood as follows: **I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins and performs repentance...**”

The first call out of God’s Name. before the person sins, is the God that the person is distancing away from when a sin is enacted (Isiah 59:2): “But your iniquities have been a barrier Between you and your God separating you from Him, your sins have made Him turn His Face away And refuse to hear you.”

The second call out of God, is the God that stays with us all the time, no matter what, as we acknowledge during the Ne’ila service of Yom Kippur: “**You** reach out Your hand to transgressors, and Your right hand is extended to receive those who [truly] repent.”

אתה נותן יד לפושעים, וימינך פשוטה לקבל שבים.

The transgressor is trying to release oneself from the shackles and binding ropes of the sin. He is working hard at it but does not have the required strength to get out. He needs help, a hand to pull her out. That is “You reach out Your hand to transgressors”. Then, that person, already on his feet, already starts to stumble along. How many obstacles are on the way? Numerous and countless. Just as a parent open the arms when the baby starts walking, ready to embrace the infant before the fall, so is the Right Hand of God stretched out to receive those who are making T’shuva.