

THE RAV, HA-RAV, & THE REBBE: THREE APPROACHES TO TESHUVA

PART I, THE RAV

I. "Classic" Repentance

1. *Mussaf* Liturgy for Rosh Hashana & Yom Kippur

On Rosh Hashana their decree is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many will pass away and how many will be created, who will live and who will die; who will come to his timely end, and who to an untimely end; ...

1. מוסף לראש השנה ויום הכיפורים

בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן וּבַיּוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתְּמוּן. כַּמָּה יַעֲבְרוּן. וְכַמָּה יִבְרָאוּן. מִי יַחֲיֶה. וּמִי יָמוּת. מִי בְּקֶצֶוּ. וּמִי לֹא בְּקֶצֶוּ. ...

2. Rabbenu Yonah, *Shaarei Teshuva*

[1:13] The levels and degrees of repentance correspond to the magnitude of bitterness and the intensity of sorrow.

[1:16] Sorrow pertains to the past and worry to the future. He must worry, too, lest he has fallen short in repentance; in suffering, bitterness, fasting, and weeping. And although he may have suffered and wept much, he must tremble and fear that he may have sinned over and against this and that with all of his suffering, weeping, and fasting, he has not paid his debt.

One who wishes his day of death to lead to eternal life will resolve within himself that since he is destined to leave the earth and his bodily desires and, in the end, to despise and abjure them, he will abandon them in his lifetime and make use of the earth only in the service of the exalted God. Then, his day of death will lead to life without end.

3. David Bashevkin, *Sin•a•gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought* (2019), 134–135

Rabbi Yaakov. B Yehudah Weil, the fifteenth-century German rabbi, was asked for the proper course of penance for someone who swore falsely. Invoking the regimen of the Rokeah, he recommends that the man, named Phoebus of Munich, should fast for forty days accompanied with a biweekly flogging and fasting (following the initial forty day fast). In an earlier responsum to an adulteress, Rabbi Weil concedes that the regimen of the Rokeah may be too intense to tell a penitent sinner all at once. Rabbi Weil refers to the program of the Rokeah as an obligation but suggests that the requirements, including rolling around in the snow and sleeping on the floor, can be delayed until a proper confession is extracted.

II. Acquittal and Purification

4. Leviticus 16:30

For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you of all your sins; you shall be pure before the Lord.

4. ספר ויקרא פרק טז פסוק ל

כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תִּטְהָרוּ:

5. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, p. 50

Kapparah means forgiveness or withdrawal of claim. This is a legal concept, borrowed from the laws of property. Just as one may release his fellow man of debt owed to him, so may God absolve one of penalty to which he is liable due to sin. *Kapparah* removes the need for punishment.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52

However, sin also has a polluting quality. The Jewish view recognizes a state of “impurity of sin” (*tum'at ha-ḥet*). 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 man’s head, impairing his spiritual integrity. ...

Indeed, true *teshuvah* not only achieves *kapparah*, it should also bring about *taharah* from *tum'ah*, liberating man from his hard-hearted ignorance and insensitivity. Such *teshuvah* restores man’s spiritual viability and rehabilitates him to his original state.

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

7. Rambam, *M.T. Laws of Testimony* 12:6

When is it considered that dice-players have repented? When they break their dice on their own volition and manifest complete regret over their actions to the extent that they do not even play without monetary stakes.

7. מ"ת לרמב"ם הלכות עדות פרק יב הלכה ו

מאימתי חזרת המשחקין בקביא? משישברו את פסיפסיהם. ויחזרו בהן חזרה גמורה שלא יעשו אפלו בחנם:

8. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Makkot* 2:6

They asked Wisdom, what is the punishment of the sinner? She told them, “evil will pursue sinners.” They asked Prophecy, what is the punishment of the sinner? She told them, “the sinning soul is the one which will die.” They asked the Holy One, praise to Him, what is the punishment of the sinner? He said to them, let him repent and it will be atoned for him.

8. תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת מכות פרק ב הלכה ו

שאלו לחכמה. חוטא מהו עונשו? אמרה להם: “חטאים תרדף רעה.” שאלו לנבואה. חוטא מהו עונשו? אמרה להן: “הנפש החטאת היא תמות:” שאלו לקודשא בריך הוא: חוטא מהו עונשו? אמר להן “יעשה תשובה ויתכפר לו.”

9. *On Repentance*, 63

How does one arrive at repentance of purification? This repentance does not come about as the result of fear of punishment. Abigail and her message of warning may bring Jews to the synagogue but not to the ritual act of purification. To submerge oneself in these waters, it is necessary to bend one’s head, and it is not within the power of Abigail to demand this of any man. Fear of punishment is not enough to bring repentance of purification; only ritual immersion may achieve this end. We are referring to a double baptism of water and of fire. Immersion in water represents an analytical plunge into the sea of knowledge which is done through intense self-contemplation and profound soul searching. The baptism of fire, in contrast, represents the great act of breaking one’s own will, passing through the fire of one’s passion. This is proof of man’s self-transcendence, when he succeeds in subjugating his animal will to the supernal will. These two immersions are what bring man to the stage of repentance of purification.

III. Analysis

10. Lawrence Kaplan, “Hermann Cohen and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on Repentance,”
Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 13:1–2 (2004), 213–258

The absolution obtained as a result of repentance out of fear is granted by God Himself in a transcendent act of grace. The purification accomplished by repentance out of love is accomplished by man himself.

11. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, p. 74–75

It would seem to me that this world perspective was the primary factor in the refusal on the part of such halakhic men as R. Hayyim of Brisk, R. Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin of Volozhin, and such like to admit the Musar program of R. Israel Salanter into the yeshiva of Volozhin. ... The emotion of fear, the sense of lowliness, the melancholy so typical of *homo religious*, self-negation, constant self-appraisal, the consciousness of sin, self-lacerating torments, etc., etc., constituted the primary features of the movement’s spiritual profile in its early years. It was the practice in Kovno and Slobodka to spend the twilight hour when Sabbath was drawing to a close in an atmosphere suffused with sadness and grief, ... and there to engage in a monologue about death, the nihility of this world, its emptiness and ugliness. ... Halakhic man fears nothing. For he swims in the sea of the Talmud, that life-giving sea to all the living. If a person has sinned, then the Halakhah of repentance will come to his aid. One must not waste time on spiritual self-appraisal, on probing introspections, and on the picking away at the “sense” of sin. Such a psychic analysis brings man neither to fear nor to love God nor, most fundamental of all, to the knowledge and cognition of the Torah. ... The disjunctive emotions of fear and anxiety, if not rooted in Halakhah, will give rise to destructive consequences that will far outweigh any putative gains.