

JEWISH THOUGHT AND SPIRITUALITY

ON RELIGIOUS NEOPHYTES AND PENITENTS

by MIKHAEL NEHORAI

One may observe today an interesting phenomenon, in which significant numbers of individuals from the secular Jewish community are accepting upon themselves a commitment to Jewish religious belief and observance with love and enthusiasm. This phenomenon is popularly known as *ḥazarah be-teshuvah* – literally, “return in repentance” or, more simply, “penitence”.¹ The aim of this article is to clarify and elaborate upon one central fact: namely, that the spiritual and psychological processes underlying this movement of return to religion are in fact entirely different in character – and even diametrically opposed – to those characterizing repentance in its classical sense, as understood by the sources. As we shall see below, there are profound differences between these two phenomena, and their confusion with one another is not only misleading, but possibly also harmful.

We shall begin with an appropriate metaphor for each: if the initial encounter with religion may be described in terms of the taste of good wine, the penitent may be compared with one who is attempting to wean himself from alcoholism. Nevertheless, there seems to be a common element to both: namely, the

Rabbi Dr. Mikhael Nehorai is Lecturer in Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University. The present paper is one chapter of a larger forthcoming work containing a phenomenology of the concept of repentance and a close reading and analysis of Maimonides' *Hilkhot Teshuvah*.

1. The most comprehensive study of this phenomenon to date is that of the sociologist Janet Aviad, *Return to Judaism; Religious Renewal in Israel* (Chicago, 1983); for a serious journalistic account of the phenomenon in Israel, see Saul Meisles, *Ḥazarah be-Teshuvah* (Givatayim, 1984); for one of the more interesting personal accounts of this movement, see Ellen Willis, “Next Year in Jerusalem,” *Rolling Stone* (April 21, 1977), 64-76.

psychological state of lack of peace which fosters both the return to religion and repentance.

In very general terms, the lack of peace which precedes the turn to religion stems from a feeling of purposelessness and lack of meaning in life; one who feels himself to be in such a situation may attempt to deal with it by turning towards an ideal of holiness. The initial encounter with religion occurs in a state of freshness and innocence, which occasions an intense, loving response on the part of both body and soul. In both its source and its implications, it may be compared to the earliest, unconditional stage of love between a man and woman. This phenomenon may also be perceived in terms of a delayed entry into the Sinaitic covenant; there is the same *a priori*, unconditional commitment expressed in the phrase “we shall do and we shall hear.”² We are interested here in the nature of this experience of renewal, which many of those who were born within the established religious framework and are known as “religious” (*dati'im*) may never experience.

It is self-evident that a conscious decision of this sort, drawing upon the profoundest depths of the personality, cannot take place unless we assume the prior existence of potential religious longings, which ripen in the concealed depths of the soul. The very fact that a given person, who had considered himself a “secularist,” becomes religious — so doing separating himself from the large non-religious camp in which he was raised and of which he is a part, and with which he is now in disagreement — indicates that in his heart he had previously carried the seed of such a disposition. Return towards religion is thus an affirmation of this specific aspect of his personality. This is not to say, of course, that there may not be others in the secular camp who are also so disposed — particularly if one assumes, as the Jewish religious tradition does, that all human beings are created in the “image of God,” then it follows that at least the *potential* for religious experience may be part of human nature. Other factors, such as education, family background, or even such random factors as an encounter with the religious world or with the message of religion at a propitious moment in the biography of a given individual, certainly also play a role in explaining why this particular person, rather than another, turned towards religion.

The religious neophyte may later undergo a crisis of repentance if it becomes clear to him that his nature will tend towards breaking also this new framework he has chosen. In such a hypothetical situation, he will be compelled to do repentance even for his thoughts of sin (*hirhurey 'averah*) for which, according to Jewish law, one requires atonement. Nevertheless, this does not contradict our basic thesis that the initial tendency of one who turns towards religion is in essence idyllic, in that he seeks to find there that peace of mind found lacking in his previous way of life.

2. Ex. 24:7; in the Midrashic tradition, this phrase is read as reflecting an unconditional commitment to the commandments even before one knows their contents; see TB, Shabbat 88b.

Now the lack of peace experienced by the penitent is totally different. Unlike the psychological harmony characteristic of one who discovers religion, the penitent is in total disharmony; this, because the sin towards which his repentance is primarily directed – whether it be ethical or theological – is itself an expression of the lack of harmony among the powers of his personality, which do not obey the obligations of consciousness. Like the act of sin itself, the effort to repent is part of a continuous attempt to break the power of one of the components of the personality – in the one case the command of consciousness, in the other, the inclinations of the body.

If, for some reason, he were forced to return to his previous non-religious life-style, the religious neophyte might undergo pangs similar to those of the penitent. We must also emphasize that, among those who willingly take upon themselves the yoke of religion *ab initio*, one often finds a tendency to cut off connections with the past; in not-a-few extreme cases, family ties are hurt by this.³ These tendencies may be understood if we assume that these people feel that they have undergone an experience analogous to rebirth, as a result of which they see themselves as transformed into a different person – rather in the spirit of the rabbinic saying that one who converts to Judaism is likened to a new-born baby.⁴

This would seem to evince that the basis of true human freedom depends upon discovering and liberating his natural life forces, and that this is also the source of true joy in life. The discovery of one's fundamental hidden nature elicits a feeling of metamorphosis; this would seem to explain the tendency to ignore or even negate the past, on the one hand, on the part of "sinners" and, on the other, of those who turn towards religion.

But the elemental freedom enjoyed by the one who discovers religion for the first time is entirely denied to the penitent, the former taking pride in what the latter condemns. If the neophyte is praised for responding positively to his natural inclination, the penitent is profaned by that very same nature, as the natural inclinations which made him sin continue to exist as before even after he repents, and continuously threaten to again take him outside of the bounds of religion. R. Saadya Gaon explained the phrase "return" in penitence as referring to the sinner himself, who "returns" in penitence, and then "returns" to sin, and "returns" to a religious life, and so on and on and on...⁵

It follows that the very fact that a religious person violates the commandments of religion within a religious framework indicates that he is driven by the force of his

3. Aviad, *Return to Judaism*, p. 117-118; cf. Charles Selengut, "Cults and Jewish Identity," *Midstream* (January 1986), pp. 12-15, whose observations on the factors attracting young Jews to cults also seem relevant to these neophytes to Jewish observance.

4. Yebamot 22a; 97b.

5. *Emunot ve-De'ot* V:5.

own natural inclinations, which cause him to depart from his framework. His repentance is an attempt to return to his original point of departure, and not a rebirth. Thus, that very framework of religious community into which the religious neophyte strives to become integrated is, for the penitent, a rather problematic point of reference; the fact that he deviated from it indicates that he is unable to find there the harmony discovered by the neophyte. His sin is no more than a symptom expressing his own natural lack of harmony to the existing framework, while his repentance, as we have said, is an attempt at forced return, whether motivated by fears of social exclusion or by theological reasons, such as a belief in atonement.

We may therefore summarize to this point by saying that repentance is the concern of individuals who have lived within a religious context, who “know their Master” and recognize their obligation to Him, but are unable to withstand their natural tendencies – referred to as the Evil Urge or Impulse (*yezer ha-ra’*) – which prevent them from fulfilling their obligations. To attempt to break the force of this Urge is in effect to break one’s essential nature;⁶ the psychological state of the penitent in such a situation is similar to that of one who attempts to become healed from the rages of a disease. It is clear that there is nothing whatsoever in common between this frustrating situation and that of the lover who feels the response of his beloved, as is the case of one discovering religion for the first time.

It is a well-known, easily observed fact that a person may change his opinion in light of some truth which has become revealed to him; however, it is far rarer and bordering on the impossible for one to alter the natural inclinations of his own personality, as is required of the true penitent. Such an enterprise entails such intense sufferings of both mind and body that there are those for whom repentance is impossible to begin with. In the words of Maimonides, in the section of his code, *Mishneh Torah*, devoted to a theological, philosophical and legalistic discussion of the laws governing repentance, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*:

It is possible that a man may commit a sin which is so great, or many sins... that its retribution will be... that [the possibility of] repentance is withheld from him, and he is not allowed to repent of his evil, that he may die and be lost in the sin which he did. (*Hil. Teshuvah* 6:3)

Indeed, we know of a number of tragic figures who were unable to bear the burden of the sufferings of penitence and only found peace in their own death. R. Eliezer ben Derodai found it difficult to repent, and placed his head between his knees and cried out in tears until his soul departed (A. Z. 17a). Likewise, Elisha ben Abuyah, the famous heretic of the tannaic age, was unable to repent, and on his sickbed wept until he died (Hagigah 15b).

6. The typology of suppression or transformation of the natural impulses – *itkafya* and *ithapkhaya* – forms a central motif in the discussions of repentance in Habad Hasidism. See *Tanya*, ch. 10, 12-13, and especially 27.

A categorical distinction must therefore be drawn between those who turn towards religion out of willingness to take upon themselves consciously and in joy the yoke of religion, and those who return as penitents. The former have uprooted themselves from a certain way of life which displeased them to strengthen themselves in the bosom of their beloved, while the latter would of their own accord tend to stray from the religious way, but feel themselves somehow compelled to return to it.

We have noted above the uniqueness of the phenomenon of repentance as contrasted with return to religion from the psychological viewpoint. We shall now examine this distinction from a social point of view.

II

It is one of the conventional truths of our day that religious society loves and takes pleasure out of those who turn to it from outside, but at the same time expresses a certain measure of reservation or even hostility towards those from within their own number who dared to sin, even if they give every indication that they have in fact repented, and even if their repentance may in fact be sincere. This tendency is not in principle different from the reserved or even suspicious attitude of society in general towards those who have committed crimes, been punished, and are now attempting to become rehabilitated. Like that of crime, the stigma of sin is not forgotten, and the public does not tend to forget and to forgive. One may assume that this derives from the intuitive tendency of people to scoff or doubt the ability of a person to change his nature and to truly “correct” himself. In light of what we have said above, there is ground for such a suspicion. For our purposes, we shall only stress that this state of affairs receives full confirmation and support from Jewish law.

Every legal framework, including that of the Torah, tends to punish and ostracise those who violate its norms; this tendency is quite independent of the demand for repentance, which in no way relieves or excuses the sinner from the punishment due to him from society, as determined by law. In brief, repentance as such is essentially of religious significance, and directed primarily towards setting aright the relationship between man and his Creator. As a reward, the repentant sinner is assured of atonement on the part of Heaven, meaning that the punishment decreed in the judgment following his death will be mitigated or even nullified. This is the basis for the Talmudic interpretation of the saying in *Avot*, “Return one day before your death” – i.e., that one should be constantly involved with repentance because one never knows when one is going to die!⁷

7. Shabbat 153a; cf. Maimonides, *Teshuvah* 7:1, in which repentance and death are again closely intertwined: “As free will is given to every person... let him attempt to repent and to confess... and to free himself of his sins so that he may die as a penitent and merit the life of the World to Come” (my emphasis – MN).

The earliest rabbinic thinkers already noted that the concept of *teshuvah* (repentance) is a *novellum*, involving an element of Divine grace, as from the strictly human view-point the sinner must always be judged with the full force of the law:

...They asked [the books of] Wisdom, What is the sinner's punishment? He answered: "Evildoers shall be pursued by evil." (Prov. 13:21) They asked prophecy: What shall be the punishment of the sinner? It said: "the soul which sins shall die." (Ez. 18:4). They asked the Holy One, blessed be He: What is the sinner's punishment? He answered "let him do repentance, and it will be atoned for him... (Palestinian Talmud, Makkot 2:7 [31d])

It would seem that the last sentence, "let him do repentance, and I shall accept him," has far-reaching halakhic significance. In several passages in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides cites various sources from the Talmud in which those sinners who threaten society from a religious point of view are promised destruction, it simultaneously being indicated that one is to refrain from accepting them as penitents, that is, to restore them to their previous position in society:

The heretics – namely, those who worship idols or who perform transgressions deliberately [i.e., to defy the norms of the Torah]; even if one [only] ate unfit meat or wore fixed fibers deliberately, one is considered an heretic. And as for those who deny Torah and prophecy – it would be a commendable act to kill them. If he has the power to kill him publicly with a spear, then he should do so; if not, let him denounce them in such a way that he brings about their execution...(Roseah u-Shemirat Nefesh 4:10)

...Likewise the *apikorsin* from within Israel are not considered as Jews in any respect, and one never accepts them in repentance. And the *apikorsim* are those who follow the thoughts of their hearts according to the foolish things which we have mentioned, until we find that they violate basic matters of the Torah deliberately, with haughty spirit and high hand, and say there is no sin in this. And it is forbidden to speak with them or to answer them at all... (Hil. A.Z. 2:5)

Elsewhere, in Chapter 3 of *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, we find a discussion of whether or not these sinners have a portion in the World to Come:

And these are the ones who have no portion in the world to come, but are cut off and lost and judged forever and ever in their great wickedness and sinfulness: the various sorts of heretics (*minim* and *apikorsin*), and those who deny the resurrection of the dead and the coming of the Redeemer, and the apostates... And one who performs sins arrogantly, in public... (*Teshuvah* 3:6)

Maimonides concludes this chapter with the following words of comfort:

Of what do we speak here, when we say that all these have no share in the World to Come? When he dies without having repented; but if he repents of his wickedness and dies and is a penitent, then he has a portion in the World to Come, for there is nothing that can stand in the way of repentance. Even if he denied the Principle [i.e., the existence of God] his entire life, and at the end repented – he has a portion in the world to come... And all of the wicked people and the apostates and their like who repented, whether openly or in a concealed manner... are accepted in repentance. (*Ibid.*, 3:14)

One who reads these passages will certainly notice that the first halakhah cited above – i.e., that commanding us never to accept the sinner in repentance – concerns the laws of society, while the latter deals with the laws of Heaven and indicates that the sinner may yet have hope in the World to Come, because God, in His great mercy, will atone for him and accept his penitence. Maimonides draws this distinction quite clearly in a responsum dealing with a question on this very subject:

But know that there is no contradiction, that the saying, “One never accepts him in repentance,” is that he will not accept them as penitents and they will not be considered as *ba’aley teshuvah* (i.e., returned penitents)... Even if they behave honestly and piously... Perhaps because they do so out of fear or to fool people. But the other saying is that if they repent with all their hearts between themselves and their Creator, then they certainly have a portion in the World to Come. This, therefore, refers to a matter between them and their Creator; but the other law deals with [what is done] between them and other people.⁸

The 16th century commentator to Maimonides’ code, R. Abraham de Boton, also relates to this apparent contradiction in his glosses to the *Mishneh Torah*, in which he says much the same as was said by Maimonides in the above responsum. It is worthwhile citing his words here in full, as they reveal a profound psychological insight into sin, with the intention of resolving the contradiction between the halakhah which prevents the receiving of penitents and the statement that the way of repentance is always open to every person. These are his words:⁹

“Likewise the *apikorsin* from [within] Israel.”... It would appear that he wishes to state here that we will not accept them [i.e., the penitents] because it is difficult for a person to repent, for one who repents dies because of the forcing of his Urge, and one who has not died certainly has not repented properly... Therefore one certainly does not accept him or [treat him] under the presumption that he has repented, for he certainly has not repented, for if he had done so he would have died. But it is certainly possible for him to repent, and if he repented he has a portion in the World to Come. And what he wrote in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, namely, that if a person repents of his wickedness that his repentance is accepted, that is, that God, who knows that he has repented whole-heartedly, will accept his repentance.

It follows from this that the authentic components of the human personality are consciousness, intuition and the capabilities of the soul, and that all these are layered in the psycho-physio structure of man. It is possible for man to harness his spirit and behave in a way other than that of his natural inclination, but in practice we assume that the effort to change his character is virtually nil. Thus, for example, if a person harbors an “heretical” thought, it is highly unlikely that he will subsequently come to consider what he had considered as true to be untrue. The demand for repentance is thus one involving the utter negation of the personality as

8. *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. Freimann (Jerusalem, 1934), vol. II, p. 502.

9. *Lehem Mishneh to Avodat Kokhavim* 2:5; in the Warsaw edition of *Mishneh Torah*, p. 57.

given and as it exists in practice; that is to say, the repentant is required to “die”. Thus, if one does not die, this is a sign that he has not truly repented, even if he claims to have done so!¹⁰ This, in any event, is the interpretation offered by the *Lehem Mishneh* for the Talmudic saying in Avodah Zarah 17a: “ ‘Whoever separates himself from heresy dies’ – that is, that if the sinner claims to have repented for his sins, one must say that he certainly has not repented, for had he repented he would have died...” (*Ibid.*) In a similar vein, R. Simeon ben Lakish states that “the evil ones do not repent – even at the very mouth of Gehinnom!” (Eruvin 19a).

In conclusion, we must remind ourselves that the ultra-Orthodox community is steeped in the traditional spirit of the halakhah which, as we have said, commands one to be hesitant about showing too much favor or granting social prestige to penitents during their lifetime. Thus, we can only infer, from the fact that the religious neophytes under discussions here are accepted with such joy and celebration by the great sages of Israel, that we are dealing here with a movement of return, or even, in effect, of conversion to religion, which has no connection whatsoever with the phenomenon of repentance.

The analysis of the concept of repentance in Judaism found in this article presents a rather different picture from that typically found in contemporary presentations of Judaism, which often stress the “Jewish outlook on human nature” as essentially an optimistic one. While it is true that the sense of sin as an immanent part of human nature, which so pervades classical Christianity, is absent in Judaism, it nevertheless holds a pessimistic and even sceptical view of the realistic prospects for radical repentance, in the sense of a thoroughgoing change in the character of the sinner. While “complete *teshuvah*” is theoretically possible, only “He who knows the hidden things” (in the phrase of *Teshuvah* 2:2) – i.e., the Creator – and not the members of human society, can know that this is in fact the case.¹¹

Immanuel 20 (Spring 1986)

10. Death and/or night appear as metaphors for the extreme suffering entailed in radical personal transformation and religious awakening in Christian mystical literature. See, e.g., St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*; St. Augustine, *Confessions*; etc. On the other hand, the significant role played by the Crucifixion and Jesus’ vicarious atonement in the constellation of sin and repentance in Christianity may possibly mitigate the need for “death” in order to accomplish complete penitence.

11. On the seeming contradiction between the understanding of Maimonides’ view outlined here and the lyrical celebration of the unbounded possibilities of repentance in *Teshuvah* 7:4ff., see my forthcoming study of *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, in which I give a literary-conceptual-structural analysis of this central work. For a striking example of the unwillingness of society to accept a given individual’s repentance as authentic, see the incident recounted in Moed Katan 17a.