



Repentance and Forgiveness

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During the spring of 1996, with the support of the American Jewish Committee, I was privileged to be in Rome to teach Jewish Studies at the Gregorian Pontifical University. The entire Rome experience was amazing (see my "Letter from Rome," Cross Currents, fall 1996, pp. 388-393). This paper is part of a continuing conversation with colleagues and friends in Rome as well as elsewhere in the Catholic world.

In the spirit of ongoing Catholic-Jewish dialogue, I offer the following reflections on the Jewish teaching on repentance and forgiveness, which is an old tradition, reaching back thousands of years and drawing on the wisdom of untold numbers of sages. As a further part of the dialogue, I include here the Hebrew terms, accented for proper pronunciation, together with a short bibliography. (Note: the Hebrew "ch" is pronounced as in the German "Loch.")

What Judaism Does Not Teach

The spiritual task of interfaith dialogue requires each party to understand what the other teaches and what the other does not teach for, in reaching out to the other, we tend to assimilate what we hear to what we already know. It seems, therefore, prudent to note those conceptualities which Judaism does not embrace in the hope that Catholics will, then, better be able to set aside ideas already familiar and reach out to encompass ideas that are not already-known. (I hope that I have not misrepresented Catholic thinking in this effort.)

Judaism does not recognize confession of personal sin to a religious figure as part of the process of sin and repentance. There is no designated authority to whom one can confess sins; rather, sins are confessed privately, in prayer, before God. Nor does Judaism recognize penance as a necessary part of the process of sin and repentance. Although the practice of penances did exist in Jewish life for part of the middle ages, largely under Christian influence, this was never formalized into classic rabbinic theology and practice. Further, there is no rabbinic authority who can prescribe penances, either of a therapeutic or a ritual kind; rather, spiritual discipline in the presence of sin is undertaken voluntarily, by individuals who are so inclined, sometimes after consultation with a rabbi.

Judaism does not recognize absolution as part of the process of sin and repentance. There is no designated authority who can dispense forgiveness of sins after confession and penance; rather, sins between persons require the asking and granting of forgiveness by the parties concerned while sins between persons and God require the asking of forgiveness by the penitent and the granting of forgiveness only by God. Finally, Judaism does not recognize reconciliation (the whole-hearted yielding of all inner negative feeling) as a necessary part of the process of sin and repentance. Although reconciliation is known and even desirable, rabbinic Judaism realizes that there are other modes of rapprochement that are fully adequate and, perhaps, more realistic.

Teshuva (Repentance)

Teshuvá is the key concept in the rabbinic view of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. The tradition is not of one mind on the steps one must take to repent of one's sins. However,

almost all agree that repentance requires five elements: recognition of one's sins as sins (hakarát ha-chét'), remorse (charatá), desisting from sin (azivát ha-chét'), restitution where possible (peira'ón), and confession (vidúí).

"Recognition of one's sins as sins" is an act of one's intelligence and moral conscience. It involves knowing that certain actions are sinful, recognizing such actions in oneself as more than just lapses of praxis, and analyzing one's motives for sin as deeply as one can. For example, stealing from someone must be seen not only as a crime but also as a sin against another human and a violation of God's demands of us within the covenant. It also involves realizing that such acts are part of deeper patterns of relatedness and that they are motivated by some of the most profound and darkest elements in our being.

"Remorse" is a feeling. It is composed of feelings of regret, of failure to maintain one's moral standards. It may also encompass feelings of being lost or trapped, of anguish, and perhaps of despair at our own sinfulness, as well as a feeling of being alienated from God and from our own deepest spiritual roots, of having abandoned our own inner selves.

"Desisting from sin" is neither a moral-intellectual analysis nor a feeling; it is an action. It is a ceasing from sin, a desisting from the patterns of sinful action to which we have become addicted. Desisting from sin involves actually stopping the sinful action, consciously repressing thoughts and fantasies about the sinful activity, and making a firm commitment never to commit the sinful act again.

"Restitution" is the act of making good, as best one can, for any damage done. If one has stolen, one must return the object or pay compensation. If one has damaged another's reputation, one must attempt to correct the injury to the offended party.

"Confession" has two forms: the ritual and the personal. Ritual confession requires the recitation of the liturgies of confession at their proper moments in the prayer life of the community. Personal confession requires individual confession before God as needed or inserting one's personal confession into the liturgy at the designated moments. The more specific the personal confession, the better.

A person who follows these steps to teshuva is called a "penitent" (chozér be-teshuvá).

The tradition is quite clear, however, that recognition of sin, remorse, restitution, and confession, if they are done without desisting from sin, do not constitute teshuva. Without ceasing one's sinful activity, one has only arrived at the "preliminaries to teshuva" (hirhuréi teshuvá). Actual desisting from sin is what counts. Thus, if one desists from sinful action because one has been frightened into it, that is still teshuva and the person is considered a penitent. For example, if a person ceases to gamble compulsively because someone threatens to beat him severely the next time he does it, such a person is considered a penitent. Or, if a person ceases to steal because he has been told he will be sent to jail the next time it happens, such a person is considered a penitent. Furthermore, if a person becomes convinced that he or she will be punished in the life-after-death and ceases sinful action on that account, this person too is considered a penitent though this motivation for desisting is higher than the previous ones because it is a function a larger religious worldview which considers the wrongdoing as actual sin.

Teshuva which is rooted in fear of humans or God is called "repentance rooted in fear" (teshuvá mi-yir'á) and, while not the highest form of teshuva, it is the core thereof. Reform of one's character through analysis of sin, remorse, restitution, and confession, when combined with the ceasing of sinful action, is called "repentance rooted in love" (teshuvá mei-ahavá). "Repentance rooted in love" is desirable but, without cessation of sin, reform of one's

character is useless. Maimonides, the foremost halakhic (legal) and philosophic authority of rabbinic Judaism, lists desisting from sin as the very first step to teshuva.

Rabbinic tradition teaches that all the steps to teshuva are necessary. Their interrelationship is best described as a spiral which touches each of the five points, yet advances with each turn. Thus, one may begin at any point -- with action, analysis, remorse, restitution, or confession. However, as one repeats the steps of teshuva again and again, one's analysis and remorse deepen, one's restitution and commitment-to-desist become firmer, and one's confession becomes more profound. As one cycles through the five phases of teshuva again and again, one's teshuva becomes more earnest, more serious. At its height, one achieves "full teshuva" (teshuvá gemurá) which would require full consciousness and action such that, given the same situation, one would refrain from the sin for which one had repented. Sinfulness is a very deep dimension of human existence and dealing with it calls upon all our spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and moral resources -- even when we recognize that ceasing to sin is the base line of repentance.

Forgiveness

Sin disrupts our lives on the human level; it distorts our relationships with other persons, with social institutions, and with our selves. Sin also disrupts our spiritual lives; it distorts our relationship with God and with our deepest inner spiritual being. Because, sin alienates us from humanity and from God, there is more than one kind of forgiveness.

In a civil contract, one party incurs a debt to, or obligation toward, or claim against another. In such a situation, the creditor can forgo the debt, waive the obligation, or relinquish the claim. The creditor can do this for no reason at all though, usually, the creditor has some grounds for being willing to forgo the debt. Similarly in the matter of sin. When one sins against another, one incurs an obligation to right the wrong one has committed. This is a debt toward the offended party borne by the offender. The more serious the wrong, the more serious the obligation to set it straight. In rabbinic thought, only the offending party can set the wrong aright and only the offended party can forgo the debt of the sin. This means that, if I offend someone, it is my responsibility to do whatever it takes to set matters aright and, conversely, if someone has offended me, it is my responsibility to allow the offender to do teshuva, that is, to correct the wrong done to me. Teshuva is part of the structure of God's creation; hence, the sinner is obligated to do teshuva and the offended person is obligated to permit teshuva by the offender.

The most basic kind of forgiveness is "forgoing the other's indebtedness" (mechilá). If the offender has done teshuva, as described above, and is sincere in his or her repentance, the offended person should offer mechila; that is, the offended person should forgo the debt of the offender, relinquish his or her claim against the offender. This is not a reconciliation of heart or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender no longer owes me anything for whatever it was that he or she did. Mechila is like a pardon granted to a criminal by the modern state. The crime remains; only the debt is forgiven.

The tradition, however, is quite clear that the offended person is not obliged to offer mechila if the offender is not sincere in his or her repentance and has not taken concrete steps to correct the wrong done. Maimonides is decisive on this subject: "The offended person is prohibited from being cruel in not offering mechila, for this is not the way of the seed of Israel. Rather, if the offender has [resolved all material claims and has] asked and begged for forgiveness once, even twice, and if the offended person knows that the other has done repentance for sin and feels remorse for what was done, the offended person should offer the sinner mechila" (Mishne Torah, "Hilchot Chovel u-Mazzik," 5:10). Mechila is, thus, an

expectation of the offended person but only if the sinner is actually repentant. For example, a woman who has been battered by her husband, or abused by her father, is not obliged to grant such a person mechila unless he has, first, desisted from all abusive activity; second, reformed his character through analysis of sin, remorse, restitution, and confession; and third, actually asked for forgiveness several times. Only then, after ascertaining that he is sincere in his repentance, would a woman in such a situation be morally bound, though not legally obligated, to offer the offender mechila.

The principle that mechila ought to be granted only if deserved is the great Jewish "No" to easy forgiveness. It is core to the Jewish view of forgiveness, just as desisting from sin is core to the Jewish view of repentance. Without good grounds, the offended person should not forgo the indebtedness of the sinner; otherwise, the sinner may never truly repent and evil will be perpetuated. And, conversely, if there are good grounds to waive the debt or relinquish the claim, the offended person is morally bound to do so. This is the great Jewish "Yes" to the possibility of repentance for every sinner.

The second kind of forgiveness is "forgiveness" (selichá). It is an act of the heart. It is reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner. It is achieving an empathy for the troubledness of the other. Selicha, too, is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human, frail, and deserving of sympathy. It is closer to an act of mercy than to an act of grace. A woman abused by a man may never reach this level of forgiveness; she is not obliged, nor is it morally necessary for her, to do so.

The third kind of forgiveness is "atonement" (kappará) or "purification" (ahorá). This is a total wiping away of all sinfulness. It is an existential cleansing. Kappara is the ultimate form of forgiveness, but it is only granted by God. No human can "atone" the sin of another; no human can "purify" the spiritual pollution of another.

Sin and Forgiveness: Jews and the Catholic Church in Dialogue

Given the Jewish teaching on repentance and forgiveness, it is clear that Jews are under a moral and halakhic expectation to hold open the possibility of mechila, of forgoing the heavy indebtedness of the Catholic Church and Catholic community to the Jewish people for the sins of murder, persecution, injurious teaching, and indifference. Forgiveness, in the sense of relinquishing the obligation that sin creates (mechila), is part of the structure of creation. It is a confident expectation from God, and it should be possible.

There are, however, two difficulties. First, Jewish teaching also makes clear that there is no spiritual or halakhic mechanism in Judaism by which Jews can formally "forgive" the Catholic Church, or the community of Catholics, for the centuries of injurious teaching and persecution of Jews culminating in the shoah. Corporate forgiveness between communities, either in the form of mechila or in the form of selicha, has no theological ground in rabbinic Judaism. Further, there is no designated halakhic, or political, authority which could assume such a task. In theological terms, forgoing of debt (mechila) and forgiveness rooted in empathy (selicha) are possible, though there is no formal mechanism which could authorize this; atonement, purification, or ultimate reconciliation (kappara) can come only from God.

Second, as noted, even mechila cannot be granted unless the offended party has sure grounds to think that the offending party has done teshuva. In the context of Jewish-Catholic dialogue, this would mean, first, desisting from the sin of persecuting Jews, including desisting from teaching doctrines and supporting popular attitudes that encourage, or even tolerate, the persecution of Jews; second, the making of appropriate restitution where there are material claims that can be compensated; and, third, the reform of character through

intellectual-moral analysis, remorse, and confession. Reform of character without desisting from sin, however, is not repentance and all the words, documents, and genuine expressions of contrition will avail naught without concrete actions -- as would be the case between two Jews in a situation of prolonged sinful conflict. The way the Church deals with terrorist incidents, antisemitism, Church files on the period of the Shoah, Judaica deposited with various Church entities and not returned, Catholic education about Jews and Judaism, the nature of Catholic mission, relations with the State of Israel, relations with local Jewish communities everywhere, etc. are, thus, the action-yardsticks by which Catholic teshuva is measured. Given forthright action and enough time -- Catholic conflict with the Jews and Judaism is centuries old, not a product only of this century -- a growing sense of mechila among Jews is possible, indeed a legitimate moral expectation. Selicha, in the sense of forgiveness of the heart rooted in empathy, however, would seem to be very premature.

Further, it seems clear that, although the Jewish people does not have a central authority to speak for it, publicly acknowledged entities such as the State of Israel or other world-wide Jewish bodies may enter understandings and negotiations with other political and religious entities on behalf of the Jewish people to determine what actions are to be taken to begin the process of righting long-standing wrongs, even though the decisions of these bodies would not bind their constituents and vica versa. A public engagement in this process by legitimate authorities, if pursued in good faith and productive of appropriate acts, would generate a moral and social consensus rooted in desisting from sin, restitution, and reform of character. This moral and social consensus would, given the Jewish teaching on repentance and forgiveness, lead to a consensus of mechila, perhaps of selicha which, in turn, would find some appropriate public inter-communal expression.

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