



# On Christian Teshuvah: The Open Heart of the Jewish People

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**Rabbi Dr. Michael A. Signer writes: "I'm sending along something I've written about Christian Teshuvah and Jewish attitudes toward it, with many greetings to all of you who are spread out so far and yet are so close to me and brought me to the insights that are in this little homily."**

## On Christian Teshuvah: The Open Heart of the Jewish People

by Michael A. Signer \*

On these High Holy Days we focus our efforts on our Teshuvah, our return to God and the covenant. We recite the confessional litany and come to a more profound understanding of our selves as we are and ourselves as idealized. The *refrain ayn banu ma'asim..a'se imanu tsedaqa ve chesed vehoshiaynu* comes from our sense that Teshuvah is a sysephian task, an endless rolling the rock of our

misdeeds up the hill  
only to have them  
roll down upon us  
for another year.  
That image is  
pessimistic, but it  
does give us the  
sense that  
Teshuvah: our  
confession, our  
regret and our  
resolve is an  
ongoing process.  
Throughout the  
month of Elul and  
through *the 'aseret  
yemei teshuvah*, we  
focus on our  
Teshuvah and not  
on the question of  
whether or not in  
the arena of *ben  
adam lamaqom* we  
are forgiven.

Some of us will  
focus our efforts on  
those  
transgressions *ben  
adam lechavero* and  
ask *slichah*, pardon  
from those against  
whom we have  
transgressed. When  
they come to us  
asking for  
forgiveness, we are  
enjoined to act  
according to  
Maimonides Hilkhos  
Teshuvah II:10, "It is  
prohibited for a  
person to be cruel  
[akhzari] and not be  
reconciled. Rather,  
let a person be  
inclined to be  
forgiving and hard  
to anger. When the  
sinner asks him for  
forgiveness, let him  
be forgiving with a  
whole heart and a  
generous soul.

Even if one has been oppressive and sinned frequently against him, let him not be rancorous or petty. This is the way of the seed of Israel for their heart is predisposed in this fashion [*libam nachon*]. Rambam then makes a remarkable contrast between the predisposition of the heart of the Jew and the '*oved kochavim* – those of uncircumcised heart: He defines their characteristics as 'they keep their anger forever.'

Therefore, when the Jewish community approaches the recent call by the [Vatican] Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews for Christians to make Teshuvah for two millennia of sins against the Jewish people we need to think about whether or not we want to judge that call from the standpoint of what Rambam calls the Jewish heart which is *lev nachon* – a heart predisposed to generosity and forgiveness or the characteristic which he ascribes to the idolaters who keep their anger forever. Do we sit like Jonah

under the shade of the gourd and rage against God for the Teshuvah of the Ninevites? Or, should we listen to the admonition of God who feels compassion for those in the city who have heard the words of the prophet and made their turn? The books of our Tanakh, especially the Neviim make it abundantly clear that the nations of the world are subject to the judgment of the God of Israel – both reward and punishment. The universality of this claim is manifest in the proclamation of Cyrus whose conquest is ascribed to the God of Israel. That God expects and accepts the genuine repentance of non-Israelite nations is the lesson of the book of Jonah – even if we read the book as an ironic critique of the people of Israel.

In order to make our decision about this judgment we might want to think about the nature of the call to repentance by Pope John Paul. First, we have to acknowledge that what the Pope said is not accepted by

all of Christendom. It is an admonition to those who belong to the Catholic Church. There are many non-Catholic Christians whose ecclesiastical groups have engaged in similar sentiments. Some of these churches have made statements of confession of sins that are stronger than the Pope's, but none of them have done so on the universal scale and in the global realm of action. There is a danger in thinking of all of Christendom as homogeneous. There are many churches that retain a triumphalistic attitude towards the Household of Israel. With those churches our work and conversations will be of a different nature. With Catholics – and with many of the Protestant churches – we have a very clear agenda.

On some levels the attitude of Teshuvah is a measure of the success of the Jewish-Christian conversations in both the international, national and local levels. Since the end of World War II and with the growing

consciousness of the enormity of the crimes of the Shoah, Jews and Christians have met face to face and really heard each other. From the meeting between Jules Isaac and Pope John XXIII to the countless gatherings in many lands with John Paul II a new Christian theological attitude toward Judaism has shaped itself. This dialogue has even taken on the shape of a choreography: first comes dialogue; then a statement from the Vatican Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews; and then the cacophony of voices from the Jewish community with some responding 'Not enough!' and other responding 'We have gone further on the journey. We shall continue.' Both responses have contributed to furthering the dialogue for more than forty years. However, since 1994 the Catholic side under the leadership of Pope John Paul II has moved the consequences of the dialogue deeply inside the Church.

In 1994 the Pope issued a document called *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* in which he set an agenda for the entire Church to greet the year 2000-01. Part of this pastoral plan was a series of dialogues with non-Christian communities who had been the object of harsh treatment by the Church during the previous two millennia. The Jewish people to be part of the Churches inner reflections. This call was now part of the inner thinking of the Church. 1995 was the fiftieth year of the liberation of Auschwitz, and every council of Bishops in Europe including Poland and Hungary issued a statement that focused specifically on the crimes which the Church and its members had perpetrated against the Jewish people during the Shoah. To read these statements which can be found in a book edited by Eugene Fisher, *Catholics Remember the Shoah*, is to experience a sense of profound regret and loss – the loss of an opportunity to have acted truly in

response to the highest ideals of Christendom. In these statements we will find the language of ‘co-responsibility’ or ‘sin’ that so many of us found lacking in the more generalized statement, ‘*We Remember*’ that emerged in 1998 from the Vatican Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews. No matter what our initial reaction to the statement by the Vatican Commission, we observe the significant linguistic phenomenon that two Hebrew words appear ‘Shoah’ in place of ‘Holocaust’ and – more important for our purposes – ‘Teshuvah’ instead of ‘Repentance.’ We shall return to this subtle linguistic shift in a moment. Even the lacunae in the Commission’s statement have engaged Jews and Catholics in serious conversations. The responses from Cardinal Cassidy and Cardinal Keeler have been generous and forthcoming. They have reminded us again and again that in some theologies the Church is an abstraction – a



platonian ideal – which cannot be tainted by sin. [Not all Catholic theologians agree with this interpretation]. However, the use of the term ‘sons and daughters’ of the Church applies to everyone – Popes, Cardinals, Bishops, and lay members of the Church.

Some members of the Jewish community have condemned the Catholic Church for not issuing an ‘apology’ to the Jewish people for its sins. Rabbi David Novak has responded that an apology would be a cheapening of the action required. An apology would be a once and done with moment. By shifting the term to Teshuvah – a Hebrew term – rather than simply using penitence the Catholic Church is calling for a process. It will be long and it will require many many years. As we observed this past Easter, it even enters the altar of the Church at the heart of the liturgy.

Regret and confession of sins of mistreating the Jewish people is

articulation of misdeeds that require reflection and resolution so that the actions will not be repeated again. Regret and confession of sins for Catholics means that they will pray for divine assistance to discover ways to end the hatred and stereotypes that produce hatred. Regret and confession of sins may lead Catholics to be more sensitive to and stand in solidarity with the Jewish people. Beyond the Pope's confession many local bishops have spoken directly to the Jewish people and to their dioceses about the necessity for Teshuvah. Cardinal O'Connor was among the first to issue this message. Bishop Rembrand Weakland OSB of Milwaukee issued a magnificent litany of regret. Many of our colleagues have experienced the fruits of their long-standing relationships with their local Bishops or senior pastors in the local parish. These local statements and liturgical occasions are the 'signs of the future' because we are now moving to an era where the

main outlines of Catholic-Jewish reconciliation have been set during the present papacy.

What are the signs or actions of teshuvah demonstrated by Pope John Paul II? He visited the synagogue in Rome indicating that the synagogue was a place where God dwells with the People of Israel. He has knelt in prayer at Auschwitz and made it a leitmotif of preaching throughout his papacy. He was particularly sensitive to the Jewish outcry during the controversy over the Auschwitz Carmel in 1988/89 and encountered considerable opposition from the local communities there. He established diplomatic relations with the state of Israel. He initiated a theology of Teshuvah with respect to the Jewish communities that climaxed in the liturgical ceremony in Rome during April 2000. He made a pilgrimage to Israel – not just the Holy Land –but Israel where his actions demonstrated respect and deference to both

civil and religious authorities. He met with the chief Rabbis in Hechal Shelomo; He met with President Weizmann and Prime Minister Barak. He prayed at Yad VaShem and put a petition into the kotel expressing deep sorrow over the behavior of sons and daughters of the Church. The example is set. Will others follow? We have indications that they will. But the new areas of activity are in the national councils of bishops, the diocese and in the parish churches and Catholic institutions of education.

What will be the consequences of Teshuvah for Christians with respect to the Jewish people? They have and they will continue to reject targeted proselytism of the Jewish people. Cardinal Cassidy has told my classes at Notre Dame that the new attitude toward the Jewish people does NOT mean the Church has lost its evangelical message to the nations. But the relationship with the Jewish people is a relationship with the

roots of the Church.  
He said to them, "If  
the roots are false,  
then what are we?"  
Clearly, Teshuvah  
towards the Jewish  
people will call for  
continuing  
rethinking of  
Christian self-  
understanding.  
Subtle and not-so-  
subtle stereotypes  
will continue to be  
removed. The  
Christian story will  
need rethinking and  
Professor Mary  
Boys' new  
book, *Has God Only  
One Blessing?* will  
help that process.  
Perhaps the  
greatest  
consequence of  
Christian Teshuvah  
will be the resolution  
to work in  
collaboration with  
the Jewish  
community 'to be a  
blessing to one  
another and to the  
world.'

This lengthy litany  
of the  
consequences of  
Christian teshuvah  
and action is  
unprecedented and  
unnerving for us as  
Jews. We know how  
to defend ourselves  
against  
proselytizing. We  
have the stories of  
our martyrs both in  
the Medieval World  
and during the  
Shoah. We have not  
yet faced a  
Christian world that  
is turning toward us

with respect for our integrity as a people whose covenant has never been revoked. Teshuvah requires the *baal teshuvah* to be vulnerable. It also makes a claim upon the one who has been wronged. Can we, at a moment of our own sense of weakness against the forces of assimilation and secularism afford to let our guard down? If we receive Christian Teshuvah with a *lev nachon*, do we betray our ancestors and those who died at the hands of *malkhut zadon*?

We might consider some rather elementary and self-evident steps that would be very much in continuity with what we have done in the past. We can work in collaboration with Christians on local projects that promote mutual understanding. In these projects we do not need to consider homogenizing Judaism, but we can present it with integrity – emphasizing where we differ and where we can find ideas in common. We can continue, as we already do, to forge

alliances for social justice with local parishes. Clearly we will not agree on every issue of the social and economic agenda, but the work for social justice can be more explicitly grounded in the prophetic books that we share in common.

It might also be the time to step forward more boldly and adopt a less defensive attitude toward those Christian groups, especially the Catholic Church, who have changed their theology towards Jews. We can teach our people something about what has happened in Christendom so needn't continue to recite the same litany of negative images that is so easy and comforting to us.

A new book edited by David Sandmel, Peter Ochs, Tykvah Frymer-Kensky, David Novak and myself, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, will be available by mid-September 2000. Many of our colleagues including Rabbis Yoffee, Zimmerman, and Menitoff have signed a statement acknowledging the

changes that have come about in Christian attitudes towards Judaism that will appear in the national press. It is time to publicly acknowledge the Teshuvah without predicting its outcome. This spirit of generosity might not be seen as weakness, but as helping those Christians like Fr. John Pawlikowski who have stood up prophetically and changed the direction of theological thinking in their community. This assurance of our support for the process of Teshuvah may encourage further steps toward reconciliation.

We surely can have empathy for many Catholics who feel quite beleaguered about the continuity of their communities. So much has changed for them since 1965. Many of their children do not know the Church of the 1950's and those children have a sense of rootlessness that resonates with what our own children sense. Many Catholic young people want more ritual and to find a deeper spiritual



foundation for their faith. Their parents are concerned about intermarriage and what will be the shape of their families and faith. Empathy from the Jewish community will surely be taken as a sign that at least the change with respect to Judaism will help their faith community to become stronger.

If we view our response to Christian teshuvah as acknowledgment and encouragement then we need not think that we have betrayed our sacred martyrs. We are in no position to forgive for specific acts. But those who are making Teshuvah did not commit those acts and many of them are dedicated to ensuring that they do not happen again. We will not preserve the Jewish people by conserving our anger about the sins of the past. Teshuvah does not imply forgetting, but the ritualization of memory so that the deed will not be performed again as it was in the past.

So, as we contemplate the nature of Teshuvah

on these High Holy Days, we ask ourselves about the remarkable changes and turning of hearts and minds in the Catholic church and some other Christian communities. We might ponder these words of Rabbi Harold Schulweis, "A revolution is taking place and we dare not sleep through it. Teshuvah is a process" Teshuvah is real. People change. Prelates change. Institutions change. We must be prepared to change. That change will not be easy for us. We own deep wounds, deep angers, and deep memories. We have locked up in us, understandably and justifiably, a rage that the philosopher Max Scheler characterized as "the secretion in a sealed vessel of prolonged impotence." That anger must be understood, appreciated and mastered. For if not mastered, it will inadvertently lead us to betray the homage we pay to those martyred in the Holocaust. Those victims of the killers of the dream did not want us to dwell in the valley of

the shadow of the Shoah, but to go through it and create a better future for their children and our children's children. To put it differently – paraphrasing the Rambam – shall we respond to the recent call for Teshuvah as B'nei Yisrael with a *lev nachon*, with generosity and open acknowledgment, or shall we respond as idolaters those who keep their anger forever. As with everything we ponder on these Holy Days, the choice is in our hands. Let us choose life – life with others who want to find the path to life.

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