

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE MEANING OF SIN

1. Sin is a religious conception. It does not signify a breach of law or morality, or of popular custom and sacred usage, but an offense against God, provoking His punishment. As long as the deity is merely dreaded as an external power, not adored as a moral power ruling life from within for a holy purpose, sin, too, is considered a purely formal offense. The deity demands to be worshiped by certain rites and may be propitiated by other formal acts.¹ For Judaism, however, sin is a straying from the path of God, an offense against the divine order of holiness. Thus it signifies an abuse of the freedom granted man as his most precious boon. Therefore sin has a twofold character; formally it is an offense against the majesty of God, whose laws are broken; essentially it is a severance of the soul's inner relations to God, an estrangement from Him.

2. Scripture has three different terms for sin, which do not differ greatly in point of language, but indicate three stages of thought. First is *het* or *hataah*, which connotes any straying from the right path, whether caused by levity, carelessness, or design, and may even include wrongs committed unwittingly, *shégagah*. Second is *avon*, a crookedness or perversion of the straight order of the law. Third is *pesha*, a wicked act committed presumptuously in defiance of God and His law. As a matter of course, the conception of

¹ See Morgenstern, "The Doctrine of Sin in the Babylonian Religion," in Mitth. Vorderas. Gesellsch. 1905.

sin was deepened by degrees, as the prophets, psalmists and moralists grew to think of God as the pattern of the highest moral perfection, as the Holy One before whom an evil act or thought cannot abide.

The rabbis usually employed the term *aberah*, that is, a transgression of a divine commandment. In contrast to this they used *mitzwah*, a divine command, which denotes also the whole range of duty, including the desire and intention of the human soul. From this point of view every evil design or impulse, every thought and act contrary to God's law, becomes a sin.

3. Sin arises from the weakness of the flesh, the desire of the heart, and accordingly in the first instance from an error of judgment. The Bible frequently speaks of sin as "folly."¹ A rabbinical saying brings out this same idea: "No one sins unless the spirit of folly has entered into him to deceive him."² A sinful imagination lures one to sin; the repetition of the forbidden act lowers the barrier of the commandment, until the trespass is hardened into "callous" and "stubborn" disregard, and finally into "reckless defiance" and "insolent godlessness." Such a process is graphically expressed by the various terms used in the Bible. According to the rabbinical figure, "sin appears at first as thin as a spider's web, but grows stronger and stronger, until it becomes like a wagon-rope to bind a man." Or, "sin comes at first as a passer-by to tarry for a moment, then as a visitor to stay, finally as the master of the house to claim possession." Therefore it is incumbent upon us to "guard" the heart, and not "to go astray following after our eyes and our heart."³

4. According to the doctrine of Judaism no one is sinful by nature. No person sins by an inner compulsion. But

¹ Gen. VI, 3; Ps. LXXVIII, 39.

² Sota 3 a.

³ Suk. 52 a, b. Comp. Schechter, "The Evil Yezer, Source of Rebellion and Victory over the Evil Yezer," l. c., 242-292.

as man has a nature of flesh, which is sensuous and selfish, each person is inclined to sin and none is perfectly free from it. "Who can say: I have made my heart clean, I am pure from any sin?"¹ This is the voice of the Bible and of all human experience; "For there is not a righteous man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not."² The expression occurs repeatedly in Job: "Shall mortal man be just before God? Shall a man be pure before his Maker?"³ Even Moses is represented in numerous passages as showing human foibles and failings.⁴ In fact, "the greater the personality, the more severely will God call him to account for the smallest trespass, for God desires to be 'sanctified' by His righteous ones."⁵ The Midrash tells us that no one is to be called holy, until death has put an end to his struggle with the ever-lurking tempter within, and he lies in the earth with the victor's crown of peace upon his brow.⁶ When we read the stern sentence: "Behold, He putteth no trust in His holy ones,"⁷ the rabbis refer us to the patriarchs, each of whom had his faults.⁸ Measured by the Pattern of all holiness, no human being is free from blemish.

5. In connection with the God-idea, the conception of sin grew from crude beginnings to the higher meaning given it by Judaism. The ancient Babylonians used the same terminology as the Bible for sin and sin-offering, but their view, like that of other Semites, was far more external.⁹ If one was afflicted with disease or misfortune, the inference was that he had neglected the ritual of some deity and must appease the angered one with a sacrificial offering. Any irregularity in the cult was an offense against the deity. This became more moralized with the higher God-idea; the god

¹ Prov. XX, 9.

³ Job IV, 17; XV, 14 f.; XXV, 5.

⁵ Yeb. 121 b.

⁷ Job XV, 15.

² Eccl. VII, 20.

⁴ Num. XX, 12; XXVII, 14.

⁶ Mid. Teh. Ps. XVI, 2.

⁹ Morgenstern, l. c.

⁸ Midr. Teh. eodem.

became the guardian of moral principles; and the calamities, even of the nation, were then ascribed to the divine wrath on account of moral lapses. The same process may be observed in the views of ancient Israel. Here, too, during the dominance of the priestly view the gravest possible offense was one against the cult, a culpable act entailing the death penalty — *asham*, or "doom" of the offender. We shudder at the thought that the least violation of the hierarchical rules for the sanctuary or even for the burning of incense should meet the penalty of death. Yet such is the plain statement of the Mosaic law and such was the actual practice of the people.¹

The more the prophetic conception of the moral nature of the Deity permeated the Jewish religion, the more the term sin came to mean an offense against the holiness of God, the Guardian of morality. Hence the great prophets upbraided the people for their moral, not their ceremonial failings. They attacked scathingly transgressions of the laws of righteousness and purity, the true sins against God, because these originate in dullness of heart, unbridled passion, and overbearing pride, all so hateful to Him. The only ritual offenses emphasized as sins against God are idolatry, violation of the name of God and of the Sabbath, for these express the sanctity of life.² Except for these points, the prophets and psalmists insisted only on righteous conduct and integrity of soul, and repudiated entirely the ritualism of the priesthood and the formalism of the cult.³ This view is anticipated by Samuel, the master of the prophetic schools, when he says:

"Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to hearken than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,
And stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim."⁴

¹ Ex. XXX, 33, 38; Lev. X, 2; XVI, 1-2; Num. XVII, 28; XVIII, 7.

² Ezek. XVIII, 6 f.; XX, 13 f.; Isa. LVI, 2 f.

³ Hos. VI, 6; Mic. VI, 8; Isa. I, 11 f.

⁴ I Sam. XV, 22-23.

As soon as we realize that obedience to God's will means right conduct and purity of soul, we see in sin the desecration of the divine image in man, the violation of his heavenly patent of nobility.

6. Sin, then, is in its essence unfaithfulness to God and to our own god-like nature. We see this thought expressed in Job: ¹

"If thou hast sinned, what doest thou against Him?
And if thy transgressions be multiplied, what doest thou unto Him?
If thou be righteous, what givest thou unto Him?
Or what receiveth He of thy hand?
Thy wickedness concerneth a man as thou art;
And thy righteousness a son of man."

Thus the source of sin is the human heart, the origin of all our thinking and planning. We know sin chiefly as consciousness of guilt. Man's conscience accuses him and compels him to confess, "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned."² Not only the deed itself, but even more the will which caused it, is condemned by conscience. Such self-accusation constantly proves anew that there is no place for original sin through the fall of Adam. "I could have controlled my evil desire, if I had but earnestly willed it," said King David, according to the Talmud.³

7. Sin engenders a feeling of disunion with God through the consciousness of guilt which accompanies it. It erects a "wall of separation" between man and his Maker, depriving him of peace and security.⁴ Guilt causes pain, which overwhelms him, until he has made atonement and obtained pardon before God. This is no imaginary feeling, easily overcome and capable of being suppressed by the sinner with impunity. Instead, he must pay the full penalty for his sin, lest it lead him to the very abyss of evil, to physical and moral death. Sin in the individual becomes a sense of self-con-

¹ Job XXXV, 6-8.

² Ps. LI, 6.

³ Sanh. 107 a.

⁴ Isa. LIX, 2.

demnation, the consciousness of the divine anger. Hence the Hebrew term *avon*, sin, is often synonymous with punishment,¹ and *asham*, guilt, often signifies the atonement for the guilt, and sometimes doom and perdition as a consequence of guilt.² Undoubtedly this still contains a remnant of the old Semitic idea that an awful divine visitation may come upon an entire household or community because of a criminal or sacrilegious act committed, consciously or unconsciously, by one of its members. Such a fate can be averted only by an atoning sacrifice. This accords with the rather strange fact that the Priestly Code prescribes certain guilt offerings for sins committed unwittingly, which are called *asham*.³

8. But even these unintentional sins can be avoided by the constant exercise of caution, so that their commission implies a certain degree of guilt, which demands a measure of repentance. Thus the Psalmist says: "Who can discern errors? Clear Thou me from hidden faults."⁴ He thus implies that we feel responsible in a certain sense for all our sins, including those which we commit unknowingly. The rabbis dwell especially on the idea that we are never altogether free from sinful thoughts. For this reason, they tell us, the two burnt offerings were brought to the altar each morning and evening, to atone for the sinful thoughts of the people during the preceding day or night.⁵

9. At any rate, Judaism recognizes no sin which does not arise from the individual conscience or moral personality. The condemnation of a whole generation or race in consequence of the sin of a single individual is an essentially heathen idea, which was overcome by Judaism in the course of time through the prophetic teaching of the divine justice and man's moral responsibility. This sentiment was voiced by Moses

¹ Gen. IV, 13; XV, 16; XIX, 15; Ps. XL, 13.

² Gen. XXVI, 10; XLII, 21; Ps. XXXIV, 22.

³ Lev. IV, 13 f.; Num. V, 6. ⁴ Ps. XIX, 13.

⁵ Num. R. XXI, 10.

and Aaron after the rebellion of Korah in the words: "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt Thou be wroth with all the congregation?"¹ In commenting upon this, the Midrash says: "A human king may make war upon a whole province, because it contains rebels who have caused sedition, and so the innocent must suffer together with the guilty; but it does not behoove God, the Ruler of the spirits, who looks into the hearts of men, to punish the guiltless together with the guilty."² The Christian view of universal guilt as a consequence of Adam's sin, the dogma of original sin, is actually a relapse from the Jewish stage to the heathen doctrine from which the Jewish religion freed itself.

10. According to the Biblical view sin contaminates man, so that he cannot stand in the presence of God. The holiness of Him who is "of eyes too pure to behold evil"³ becomes to the sinner "a devouring fire."⁴ Even the lofty prophet Isaiah realizes his own human limitations at the sublime vision of the God of holiness enthroned on high, while the angelic choruses chant their thrice holy. In humility and contrition he cries out: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."⁵ The prophet must undergo atonement in order to be prepared for his high prophetic task. One of the Seraphs purges him of his sins by touching his lips with a live coal taken from the altar of God.

Under the influence of Persian dualism, rabbinical Judaism considers sin a pollution which puts man under the power of unclean spirits.⁶ In the later Cabbalah this idea is elaborated until the world of sin is considered a cosmic power of impurity, opposed to the realm of right, working evil ever

¹ Num. XVI, 22.

² Tanh. Korah, ed. Buber, 19.

³ Habak. I, 13.

⁴ Isa. XXXIII, 14.

⁵ Isa. VI, 5-7.

⁶ Pes. 45 b; Gen. R. XXIII, 9.

since the fall of Adam.¹ Still, however close this may come to the Christian dogma, it never becomes identical with it; the recognition is always preserved of man's power to extricate himself from the realm of impurity and to elevate himself into the realm of purity by his own repentance. Sin never becomes a demoniacal power depriving man of his divine dignity of self-determination and condemning him to eternal damnation. It ever remains merely a going astray from the right path, a stumbling from which man may rise again to his heavenly height, exerting his own powers as the son of God.

¹ See J. E., art. Cabala; Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism*, p. 127 f., 171 f.