

CHAPTER XXXIX

REPENTANCE OR THE RETURN TO GOD

1. The brightest gem among the teachings of Judaism is its doctrine of repentance or, in its own characteristic term, the return of the wayward sinner to God.<sup>1</sup> Man, full of remorse at having fallen away from the divine Fountainhead of purity, conscious of deserving a sentence of condemnation from the eternal Judge, would be less happy than the unreasoning brute which cannot sin at all. Religion restores him by the power to rise from his shame and guilt, to return to God in repentance, as the penitent son returns to his father. Whether we regard sin as estrangement from God or as a disturbance of the divine order, it has a detrimental effect on both body and soul, and leads inevitably to death. On this point the Bible affords many historical illustrations and doctrinal teachings.<sup>2</sup> If man had no way to escape from sin, then he would be the most unfortunate of creatures, in spite of his god-like nature. Therefore the merciful God opens the gate of repentance for the sinner, saying as through His prophets of old: "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live."<sup>3</sup>

2. The great value of the gift of divine grace, by which the sinner may repent and return to God with a new spirit, ap-

<sup>1</sup> See J. E., art. Repentance; Claude Montefiore: "Rabbinical Conceptions of Repentance," in J. Q. R., Jan. 1904; Schechter, *Aspects*, 313-343. The works of Weber (p. 261 f.), Bousset (p. 446 f.), and Davidson (l. c., 327-338) do not do justice to the Jewish teachings.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. XVIII, 4; Ps. XXXIV, 21; Prov. XIV, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ezek. XVIII, 32; XXXIII, 11.

pears in the following rabbinical saying: "Wisdom was asked, 'What shall be the sinner's punishment?' and answered, 'Evil pursues sinners';<sup>1</sup> then Prophecy was asked, and answered, 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die';<sup>2</sup> the Torah, or legal code, was consulted, and its answer was: 'He shall bring a sin-offering, and the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.'<sup>3</sup> Finally God Himself was asked, and He answered:<sup>4</sup> 'Good and upright is the Lord; therefore doth He instruct sinners in the way.'<sup>5</sup> The Jewish idea of atonement by the sinner's return to God excludes every kind of mediatorship. Neither the priesthood nor sacrifice is necessary to secure the divine grace; man need only find the way to God by his own efforts. "Seek ye Me, and live,"<sup>6</sup> says God to His erring children.

3. *Teshubah*, which means return, is an idea peculiar to Judaism, created by the prophets of Israel, and arising directly from the simple Jewish conception of sin. Since sin is a deviation from the path of salvation, a "straying" into the road of perdition and death, the erring can return with heart and soul, end his ways, and thus change his entire being. This is not properly expressed by the term repentance, which denotes only regret for the wrong, but not the inner transformation. Nor is *Teshubah* to be rendered by either penitence or penance. The former indicates a sort of bodily self-castigation, the latter some other kind of penalty undergone in order to expiate sin. Such external forms of asceticism were prescribed and practiced by many tribes and some of the historical religions. The Jewish prophets, however, opposed them bitterly, demanding an inner change, a transformation of soul, renewing both heart and spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Prov. XIII, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Lev. I, 4; IV, 26-31.

<sup>3</sup> Yer. Mak. II, 37 d; Pesik. 158 b. See Schechter, l. c., p. 294, note 1.

<sup>4</sup> Amos V, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ezek. XVIII, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ps. XXV, 8.

"Let the wicked forsake his way,  
And the man of iniquity his thoughts;  
And let him return unto the Lord, and He will have compassion upon  
him,  
And to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."<sup>1</sup>

Judaism considers sin merely moral aberration, not utter corruption, and believes in the capability of the very worst of sinners to improve his ways; therefore it waits ever for his regeneration. This is truly a return to God, the restoration of the divine image which has been disfigured and corrupted by sin.

4. The doctrine of *Teshubah*, or the return of the sinner, has a specially instructive history, as this most precious and unique conception of Judaism is little understood or appreciated by Christian theologians. Often without intentional bias, these are so under the influence of the Paulinian dogma that they see no redemption for man corrupted by sin, except by his belief in a superhuman act of atonement. It is certainly significant that the legal code, which is of priestly origin, does not mention repentance or the sinner's return. It prescribes various types of sin-offerings, speaks of reparation for wrong inflicted, of penalties for crime, and of confession for sins, but it does not state how the soul can be purged of sin, so that man can regain his former state of purity. This great gap is filled by the prophetic books and the Psalms. The book of Deuteronomy alone, written under prophetic influence, alludes to repentance, in connection with the time when Israel would be taken captive from its land as punishment for its violation of the law. There we read: "Thou shalt return unto the Lord thy God, . . . with all thy heart, and all thy soul, then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee."<sup>2</sup>

Amos, the prophet of stern justice, has not yet reached the idea of averting the divine wrath by the return of the sinner.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Isa. LV, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Deut. IV, 30; XXX, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Amos IV, 6 f.

Hosea, the prophet of divine mercy and loving-kindness, in his deep compassion for the unfaithful and backsliding people, became the preacher of repentance as the condition for attaining the divine pardon.

"Return, O Israel, unto the Lord thy God;  
For thou hast stumbled in thine iniquity.  
Take with you words (of repentance),  
And return unto the Lord;  
Say unto Him, 'Forgive all iniquity,  
And accept that which is good;  
So will we render for bullocks the offering of our lips.'"<sup>1</sup>

The appeal of Jeremiah is still more vigorous:

"Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord. . . .  
Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against  
the Lord thy God. . . .  
Break up for you a fallow ground, and sow not among thorns . . .  
O Jerusalem, wash thy heart from wickedness, that thou mayest  
be saved;  
How long shall thy baleful thoughts lodge within thee? . . .  
Return ye now every one from his evil way, and amend your ways  
and your doings."<sup>2</sup>

Ezekiel, while emphasizing the guilt of the individual, preached repentance still more insistently. "Return ye, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so shall they not be a stumbling-block of iniquity to you. Cast away from you all your transgressions, wherein ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God; wherefore turn yourselves, and live."<sup>3</sup> The same appeal recurs after the exile in the last prophets, Zechariah<sup>4</sup> and Malachi.<sup>5</sup> The latter says: "Return unto Me, and I shall return unto you." Like-

<sup>1</sup> Hos. VI, 1; XIV, 2 f.

<sup>2</sup> Jer. III, 12-13; IV, 3; 14; XVIII, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ezek. XVIII, 1-32.

<sup>4</sup> Zech. I, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Mal. III, 7.

wise the penitential sermon written in a time of great distress, which is ascribed to the prophet Joel, contains the appeal:

“Turn ye unto Me with all your heart,  
And with fasting, and with weeping, and with lamentation;  
And rend your heart, and not your garments,  
And turn unto the Lord your God;  
For He is gracious and compassionate,  
Long-suffering, and abundant in mercy,  
And repenteth Him of the evil.”<sup>1</sup>

This prophetic view, which demands contrition and craving for God instead of external modes of atonement, is expressed in the penitential Psalms as well,<sup>2</sup> especially in Psalm LI. The idea is expanded further in the parable of the prophet Jonah, which conveys the lesson that even a heathen nation like the people of Nineveh can avert the impending judgment of God by true repentance.<sup>3</sup> From this point of view the whole conception took on a larger aspect, and the entire history of mankind was seen in a new light. The Jewish sages realized that God punishes man only when the expected change of mind and heart fails to come.<sup>4</sup>

5. The Jewish plan of divine salvation presents a striking contrast to that of the Church, for it is built upon the presumption that all sinners can find their way back to God and godliness, if they but earnestly so desire. Even before God created the world, He determined to offer man the possibility of *Teshubah*, so that, in the midst of the continual struggle with the allurements of the senses, the repentant sinner can ever change heart and mind and return to God.<sup>5</sup> Without such a possibility the world of man could not endure; thus, because no man can stand before the divine tribunal of stern justice, the paternal arm of a merciful God is extended to

<sup>1</sup> Joel II, 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> See Ps. XXXII, 1 f.

<sup>3</sup> Jonah III-IV.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew *teshubah* is translated in Greek *metanoia*, meaning a change of mind.

<sup>5</sup> Pes. 110 a; P. d. R. El. XLIII.

receive the penitent. This sublime truth is constantly reiterated in the Talmud and in the liturgy, especially of the great Day of Atonement.<sup>1</sup> Not only does God's long-suffering give the sinner time to repent; His paternal love urges him to return. Thus the Haggadists purposely represent almost all the sinners mentioned in the Bible as models of sincere repentance. First of all comes King David, who is considered such a pattern of repentance, as the author of the fifty-first Psalm, that he would not have been allowed to sin so grievously, if he had not been providentially appointed as the shining example of the penitent's return to God.<sup>2</sup> Then there is King Manasseh, the most wicked among all the kings of Judah and Israel, who had committed the most abominable sins of idolatrous worship. Referring to the story told of him in Chronicles, it is said that God responded to his tearful prayers and incessant supplications by opening a rift under His throne of mercy and receiving his petition for pardon. Thus all mankind might see that none can be so wicked that he will not find the door of repentance open, if he but seek it sincerely and persistently.<sup>3</sup> Likewise Adam and Cain, Reuben and Judah, Korah, Jeroboam, Ahab, Josiah, and Jechoniah are described in Talmud, Midrash, and the apocalyptic literature as penitent sinners who obtained at last the coveted pardon.<sup>4</sup> The optimistic spirit of Judaism cannot tolerate the idea that mortal man is hopelessly lost under the burden of his sins, or that he need ever lose faith in himself. No one can sink so low that he cannot find his way back to his heavenly Father by untiring self-discipline. As the Talmud says, nothing can finally withstand the power of

<sup>1</sup> Pes. 54 a; Gen. R. I, 5; P. d. R. El. III; Singer's *Prayerb.* 267 f.

<sup>2</sup> Shab. 56 a; Ab. Z. 4 b-5 a; Midr. Teh. Ps. XL, 2; LI, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ter. Sanh. X, 78 c; Sanh. 103 a; Pes. 162; Prayer of Manasseh.

<sup>4</sup> Pesik. 160 a-162; Shab. 56 a, b; Gen. R. XI, 6; XXII, 12-13; XXXVIII, 9; XLIX, 6; P. R. El. XX; XLIII; Num. R. XVIII, 6; Ab. d. R. N. I, 32; Sanh. 102 b.

sincere repentance: "It reaches up to the very seat of God;" "upon it rests the welfare of the world."<sup>1</sup>

6. The rabbis follow up the idea first announced in the book of Jonah, that the saving power of repentance applies to the heathen world as well. Thus they show how God constantly offered time and opportunity to the heathens for repentance. For example, when the generation of the flood, the builders of the Tower of Babel, and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were to be punished, God waited to give them time for repentance and improvement of their ways.<sup>2</sup> Noah, Enoch, and Abraham are represented as monitors of their contemporaries, warning them, like the prophets, to repent in time lest they meet their doom.<sup>3</sup> Thus the whole Hellenistic literature of propaganda, especially the Sibylline books, echoes the warning and the hope that the heathen should repent of their grievous sins and return to God, whom they had deserted in idolatry, so that they might escape the impending doom of the last judgment day. According to one Haggadist,<sup>4</sup> even the Messiah will appear first as a preacher of repentance, admonishing the heathen nations to be converted to the true God and repent before Him, lest they fall into perdition. Indeed, it is said that even Pharaoh and the Egyptians were warned and given time for repentance before their fate overtook them.

7. Accordingly, the principle of repentance is a universal human one, and by no means exclusively national, as the Christian theologians represent it.<sup>5</sup> The sages thus describe Adam as the type of the penitent sinner, who is granted par-

<sup>1</sup> Yoma 86 a, b; Pes. R. XLIX.

<sup>2</sup> Mek. Shira 5; Gen. R. XXI, 6; XXX, 4; XXXII, 10; XXXVIII, 14; LXXXIV, 18; Ex. R. XII, 1; Num. R. XII, 13; B. Wisdom XI, 23; XII, 10, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Sanh. 108; Sibyllines, I, 125-198.

<sup>4</sup> Cant. R. VII, 5, ref. to the name *Hadrach*, Zech. IX, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Weber, l. c., 261 f.; Bousset, l. c., 446 f.; comp. Perles: *Bousset*.

don by God. The "sign" of Cain also was to be a sign for all sinners, assuring them they might all obtain forgiveness and salvation, if they would but return to God.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the prophetic appeal to Israel for repentance, vain at the time, effected the regeneration of the people during the Exile and gave rise to Judaism and its institutions. In the same way, the appeal to the heathen world by the Hellenistic propaganda and the Essene preachers of repentance did not induce the nations at once to prepare for the coming of the Messianic kingdom, but finally led to the rise of the Christian religion, and, through certain intermediaries, of the Mohammedan as well.

However, the long-cherished hope for a universal conversion of the heathen world, voiced in the preachments and the prayers of the "pious ones," gave way to a reaction. The rise of antinomian sects in Judaism occasioned the dropping of this pious hope, and only certain individual conversions were dwelt on as shining exceptions.<sup>2</sup> The heathen world in general was not regarded as disposed to repent, and so its ultimate fate was the doom of Gehenna. Experience seemed to confirm the stern view, which rabbinical interpretation could find in Scripture also, that "Even at the very gate of the nether world wicked men shall not return."<sup>3</sup> The growing violence of the oppressors and the increasing number of the maligners of Judaism darkened the hope for a universal conversion of humanity to the pure faith of Israel and its law of righteousness. On the contrary, a certain satisfaction was felt by the Jew in the thought that these enemies of Judaism should not be allowed to repent and obtain salvation in the hereafter.<sup>4</sup>

8. The idea of repentance was applied all the more intensely in Jewish life, and a still more prominent place was

<sup>1</sup> Gen. R. XXII, 27; comp. Sanh. 107 b.

<sup>2</sup> Mek. Yithro 1.

<sup>3</sup> Erub. 19 a.

<sup>4</sup> Mid. Teh. Ps. I, 21 f.; IX, 13, 15; XI, 5.

accorded it in Jewish literature. The rabbis have numberless sayings<sup>1</sup> in the Talmud and also in the Haggadic and ethical writings concerning the power and value of repentance. In passages such as these we see how profoundly Judaism dealt with the failings and shortcomings of man. The term *asa teshubah*, do repentance, implies no mere external act of penitence, as Christian theologians often assert. On the contrary, the chief stress is always laid on the feeling of remorse and on the change of heart which contrition and self-accusation bring. Yet even these would not be sufficient to cast off the oppressive consciousness of guilt, unless the contrite heart were reassured by God that He forgives the penitent son of man with paternal grace and love. In other words, religion demands a special means of atonement, that is, *at-one-ment* with God, to restore the broken relation of man to his Maker. The true spiritual power of Judaism appears in this, that it gradually liberates the kernel of the atonement idea from its priestly shell. The Jew realizes, as does the adherent of no other religion, that even in sin he is a child of God and certain of His paternal love. This is brought home especially on the Day of Atonement, which will be treated in a later chapter.

9. At all events, the blotting out of man's sins with their punishment remains ever an act of grace by God.<sup>2</sup> In compassion for man's frailty He has ordained repentance as the means of salvation, and promised pardon to the penitent. This truth is brought out in the liturgy for the Day of Atonement, as well as in the Apocalyptic Prayer of Manasseh. At the same time, Judaism awards the palm of victory to him who has wrestled with sin and conquered it by his own will. Thus the rabbis boldly assert: "Those who have

<sup>1</sup> See Maimonides, Bahya, and others on *Teshubah*; comp. J. E., art. Repentance; Tobit XIII, 6; XIV, 6; Philo II, 435.

<sup>2</sup> See Schechter, l. c., 323 f.

sinned and repented rank higher in the world to come than the righteous who have never sinned," which is paralleled in the New Testament: "There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repenteth than over ninety and nine righteous persons, who need no repentance."<sup>1</sup> No intermediary power from without secures the divine grace and pardon for the repentant sinner, but his own inner transformation alone.

<sup>1</sup> Sanh. 99 a, Luke XV, 7. The third Gospel more than the others preserved the original Jewish doctrines of the Church.