**HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION**
**NEW YORK SCHOOL**

**FINAL THESIS APPROVAL FORM**

**AUTHOR:** Andrew A. Goodman

**TITLE:** Out of the Depths I Call to You: The Psychology of *Teshuvah*

Nancy Heuser 2/4/08

**SIGNATURE OF ADVISOR(S)** **Date**

Dana Arnold 2/4/08

**SIGNATURE OF REGISTRAR** **Date**

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE OBTAINED BEFORE YOUR THESIS WILL BE CONSIDERED ACCEPTED.

***PLEASE TYPE OR PRINT ALL INFORMATION ON THIS FORM.***

# Out of the Depths I Call to You: The Psychology of *Teshuvah*

Andrew A. Goodman

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinical Program
New York, New York

February 4, 2008
Advisors: Rabbi Nancy H. Wiener and Dr. Lawrence A. Hoffman

Out of the Depths I Call to You:
The Psychology of *Teshuvah*

**Abstract**

What are the inherent psychological needs that humans have for the alleviation of guilt? Can people change? Does Judaism address this in its texts? How does Judaism address this in its rituals? This study attempts to find insights into the concept of *teshuvah* from different academic disciplines, at the intersection of the psychological and Jewish worlds. In so doing, it is hoped that a better understanding of the concept of *teshuvah* will emerge. Using a variety of disciplines to study *teshuvah* allows the study to benefit from the different experts in the fields of Judaism, social psychology, behavioral psychology, and neuropsychology.

This paper is divided into four chapters. First, there is the introduction of the topic including an analysis of definitions of key vocabulary and limitations of the paper. Second, there is a look at the different facets of *teshuvah* from the Tanach and how these interact to create a sense of process of repentance. Third, from various fields of psychology research, the conceptualization of repentance, guilt, and real behavioral change are addressed also yielding an understanding of process. Fourth, the second chapter of Maimonides' *Hilchot Teshuvah* from the *Mishneh Torah* is analyzed revealing a seven-step process of complete *teshuvah*, which is then understood in light of the aforementioned processes of repentance. Finally, as a summary, some liturgy from the Yom Kippur *machzor* is analyzed with this in mind in order to inspect the way the process of complete teshuvah is addressed in Jewish ritual.

**Table Of Contents**

## Introduction

### Psalm 130

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת מִמַּעֲמַקִּים קְרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה׃
אֲדֹנָי שִׁמְעָה בְקוֹלִי תִּהְיֶינָה אָזְנֶיךָ קַשֻּׁבוֹת לְקוֹל תַּחֲנוּנָי׃
אִם־עֲוֹנוֹת תִּשְׁמָר־יָהּ אֲדֹנָי מִי יַעֲמֹד׃
כִּי־עִמְּךָ הַסְּלִיחָה לְמַעַן תִּוָּרֵא׃
קִוִּיתִי יְהוָה קִוְּתָה נַפְשִׁי וְלִדְבָרוֹ הוֹחָלְתִּי׃
נַפְשִׁי לַאדֹנָי מִשֹּׁמְרִים לַבֹּקֶר שֹׁמְרִים לַבֹּקֶר׃
יַחֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה כִּי־עִם־יְהוָה הַחֶסֶד וְהַרְבֵּה עִמּוֹ פְדוּת׃
וְהוּא יִפְדֶּה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכֹּל עֲוֹנֹתָיו׃

Song of Ascents: Out of the depths I call to You, O Lord.
O Lord, listen to my cry; let Your ears be attentive to my plea for mercy.
If You keep account of sins, O Lord, Lord, who will survive?
Yours is the power to forgive so that You may be held in awe.
I look to the Lord; I look to Him; I await his word.
I am more eager for the Lord than watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning.
O Israel, wait for the Lord; for with the Lord is steadfast love and great power to redeem.
It is He who will redeem Israel from all their iniquities. [1]

Though psychology is a discipline new in the modern era, a sense of the psychological world is not absent from the Tanach. In the flowing narratives, lyrical poetry, and even legal directives, there is a sense of humanity embedded in the words of God through Moses. Because the Tanach addresses the inner world of the biblical characters, whether explicitly or implicitly, it should not come as a surprise that the psychological natures of these people can be investigated, explicated, and understood

[1] All biblical citations, Hebrew and English, are taken from: *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999).

from within the context of modern social sciences. The above psalm is a perfect example. From the words of this poem, with but eight lines, the psalmist opens us to an entire emotional world of pain and hope.

The psalmist opens Psalm 130 with his acknowledgement of his emotional state. He is in the metaphorical depths of his soul; he is completely despondent. Quickly, it becomes apparent that the psalmist is in this emotional state because of his having sinned. He is begging God for mercy. He is praying that God will absolve him of his transgression. Implicit in the psalmist's plea is an acknowledgement that he transgressed against God. Despite that sin, the psalmist still approaches God and waits for his exoneration. At the end, we are presented with a picture of the psalmist in a position of humbleness before God.

This psalm presents an image of contrition that resonates over time and still rings true for humanity in the present. The psalmist is hoping that God is able to forgive all his sins and, really, all humanity's sins, almost as if otherwise everyone would be eternally guilty. The psalmist, as each of us does, awaits God's forgiveness. With the feelings engendered by transgression and the problems of sinning, humans still find themselves in the psychological state described by Psalm 130. People continue to feel that they are trapped in the deepest depths of their souls and feel in need of divine expiation for their transgressions.

* * *

**The Book of Jonah**

*Teshuvah* is not just pleading to God with hopes of lessening guilt. Real repentance is marked by a departure from past problem behavior. Looking at the story of Jonah, the Bible presents the reader with a paradigmatic example of *teshuvah*. In this powerful story, God chooses Jonah as a prophet, a mouthpiece of God, to deliver a message of change to the people of Nineveh.

The Book of Jonah opens with these two verses:

וַיְהִי דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה בֶּן־אֲמִתַּי לֵאמֹר׃
קוּם לֵךְ אֶל־נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וּקְרָא עָלֶיהָ כִּי־עָלְתָה רָעָתָם לְפָנָי׃

> The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai:
> "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before me." (Jon. 1:1-2)

With the message of divine judgment and the modern-day connection to the Yom Kippur *Minchah* Service, the assumption by the reader is that the story will be about the repentance of the people of Nineveh. However, that is just partially true. Immediately after getting his call, Jonah flees from his home, Tarshish, and boards a ship to take him far away from his task. Aboard, the sea becomes increasingly rough and, through divination, the crew determines that Jonah is the reason for the storm. When Jonah is thrown from his ship and is swallowed by the large fish, he engages in prayer. He appeals to God, pleading for his safety. He wants to be taken from the depths of the fish's belly and promises, if God forgives him, to act in a more pious way.

God does allow Jonah to live and, immediately after Jonah's rescue at the beginning of chapter 3, there are three verses, parallel to those at the beginning of the book:

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה שֵׁנִית לֵאמֹר׃
קוּם לֵךְ אֶל־נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וּקְרָא אֵלֶיהָ אֶת־הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר
אָנֹכִי דֹּבֵר אֵלֶיךָ׃
וַיָּקָם יוֹנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־נִינְוֵה כִּדְבַר יְהוָה...

> The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time:
> "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you."
> Jonah went at once to Nineveh in accordance with the Lord's command. (Jon. $3:1\text{-}3_a$)

Jonah finds himself in exactly the same situation as the one he had encountered in the first chapter, but this time he goes on to follow a different course of action. Not only does Jonah pray and express his feelings of remorse while in the belly of the fish, Jonah changes his behavior when given this new opportunity. It is because of the experiences that he encountered during his first interaction with God that Jonah makes a different choice the second time around. After his acknowledgement that he had not heeded God's word, the text explicitly says that Jonah acts in accordance with God's command the second time. What Jonah demonstrates through his series of actions, which is then echoed by the entire city of Nineveh, is *teshuvah*. From the Book of Jonah it is apparent that feelings of guilt, forgiveness, and expiation of guilt do not comprise the entire picture of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is change.

* * *

**Overview**

This paper will focus on the psychology of *teshuvah*, this process of expiation of guilt and real change. This topic, as seen above and in depth in Chapter 1, has its roots in the Tanach. With references to the need for repentance and prescriptions for its achievement, this topic is one that has been central to the practice of Judaism from the time of the Exodus from Egypt until today.[2] The Tanach does not give one, monolithic understanding of the impact of *teshuvah* on the inner world of the Jew, however within the dominant biblical foci of sacrifice, confession, restitution, and turning, a complex picture of the psychological aspects of repentance emerges.

Discussed in depth in Chapter 2, this paper will address the fact that people have an inherent psychological need for the expiation of guilt. This need for making amends for past misbehavior can be explained from various schools of psychological thought: social, behavioral, and neuropsychological. Using these schools of thought, the means for making amends are also addressed. It will be shown that from within the psychological understandings of human group dynamics, personal actions, and even within brain structures, repentance is not only understandable, it is, moreover, achievable and real personal change is possible.

After looking at the theory of *teshuvah* in the psychological and Jewish worlds, Chapter 3 will address how Moses Maimonides combined these two aspects. Through

---

[2] Although there are instances of *teshuvah* located throughout the entire Bible, including Genesis, the rules about performing *teshuvah* are not established until receiving the Law on Mount Sinai and the construction of the Tabernacle. With the establishment of the Tabernacle and the sacrificial system, the practice of *teshuvah* becomes fixed and institutionalized. More discussion on this can be found in Chapter 1, below.

the development of Rabbinic Judaism, the theory and praxis of *teshuvah* are laid out as one of the central concepts of Jewish religious practice. However, Maimonides uses millennia of Jewish thought and his observations of the human condition to synthesize the components of *teshuvah* with the realities of the psychological approach.

* * *

**Definitions**

The inherent challenge with this study will be to use language from different disciplines and blend them in a way that is authentic to the research and accessible to the reader. Because psychological study is often done without considering religion, the use of theological language is often missing in the research and, thus, could complicate the discussion. This variation in language often reflects assumptions of a certain world-view held by adherents of a specific field of study. However, by addressing the disparity in language in advance, it is hoped that this challenge can be met.

*Repentance.* In secular parlance, the verb *to repent* is defined as "to feel remorse, contrition, or self-reproach for what one has done or failed to do," "to feel such regret for past conduct as to change one's mind regarding it," or "to make a change for the better as a result of remorse or contrition for one's sins."[3] These three definitions each carry important aspects about the nature of repentance. The Hebrew word for repentance is תשובה (*teshuvah*), from the root ש.ו.ב, to turn or return. *Teshuvah* brings with it many more layers of nuance than does the secular term repentance. First, with the commonly understood concept of repentance, there is no mention of the one sinned against. As

[3] *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. "Repent."

ordinarily understood, repentance is entirely contained within the self-consciousness of the sinner. Not true with *teshuvah*. Within the Jewish concept of *teshuvah*, the entire process, though centered inside the self, is conducted in relation to the victim. As Rabbi Elliot Dorff points out, "a victim is obligated to forgive only when the transgressor goes through the process of *teshuvah*, return."[4] Complete *teshuvah*, as defined by Maimonides, requires seven steps, many of which are focused on the victim or the community and all with an awareness of the sinner's relationship to the victim.[5] For the remainder of this paper, which primarily has a Jewish focus, the term *teshuvah* – and its translation repentance – will be used interchangeably with the Jewish meaning of *teshuvah*.

*Transgression*. This term, along with sin and error can be understood in a secular context as making a mistake. The mistake can be a deviation from a legal, communal, social, moral, ethical, or interpersonal rule or norm. In the broadest sense, these terms imply a violation of some contract. Within Judaism, these words carry with them much more divine significance. The violations come from a transgression of God's law, whether Torah law or Jewish communal law derived from it. Though the crime might be identical, and the secular and Jewish versions of transgression might look the same from an outside perspective, the understanding of the fundamental origin of the law is the core difference. In this paper, the words transgression and sin will be used exclusively in a

---

[4] Mark S. Rye and others, "Religious Perspectives on Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. McCullough, Michael E., Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen (New York: Guilford, 2000), 32.

[5] Maimonides' steps of *teshuvah* and his concept of complete *teshuvah* will be further explored in Chapter 3.

religious context while infraction, error, misbehavior, and the like will be used for secular understandings of deviation from the norm.

*Forgiveness.* To discuss forgiveness, there is an entirely different set of psychological processes that must be understood. As the concern of this paper is repentance, an extensive discussion of forgiveness would distract from the focus on the sinner. However, the concepts of repentance and forgiveness are considered together in Jewish and often in non-Jewish sources as well. The aspect of forgiveness that is germane to this paper is that after real *teshuvah*, the victim is obligated to forgive. Conversely, if the process of *teshuvah* is not carried out, the victim has the right to refuse to forgive the sinner. This is important as an incentive for the sinner to follow the process of complete *teshuvah*

*Guilt.* In common usage, this term carries two different meanings. Though both are connected to the idea of wrongdoing, one is psychological, "remorseful awareness of having done something wrong," while the other is more legal "the fact of being responsible for the commission of an offense."[6] The psychological term does not exist in the Hebrew meaning of the word. There are terms for being guilty of committing transgressions that differ depending on the type of sin, but none that explicitly deals with the psychological state of the sinner. As a result, when the term guilt is used in this paper, it will be in the English context, to explain the psychological state of the sinner, while "legal guilt" will be used when discussing the non-psychological counterpart from either the English or the Hebrew.

---

[6] *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. "Guilt."

*God.* Implicit in the religious understanding of sin and repentance is the notion of God. Though the belief in God is not addressed directly in this paper, the Jewish conceptualization of sin comes from the deviation from either a commandment or *halachah*, both of which come to humans from God.[7] Although not necessarily the case in the modern (or post-modern) age, throughout the history of Judaism, action, belief, and law were always understood in relation to God. The judges, priests, rabbis, and Israelites understood even the most mundane Jewish law as coming from God. As a result, sin, even in the seemingly most banal cases, was both an infraction against humans and a sin against God.

Though psychology does not deny God's role in the lives of Jews, the non-Judaic sources will be missing this extremely crucial component in their analysis. God as the central force in understanding the moral, ethical, and legal world of the Jew cannot be overstated. It is hoped that, after substantial analyses, the idea of God will be harmonized with the psychological understanding of the topics to create a fuller and more accurate picture of the phenomenon of repentance.

* * *

**Limitations to Interdisciplinary Study**

What are the inherent psychological needs that humans have for the alleviation of guilt? Can people change? Does Judaism address this in its texts? How does Judaism address this in its rituals? The central questions of this paper extend beyond the narrow

[7] A commandment, or *mitzvah*, is understood as a directive given by God in the Torah. *Halachah*, however, is the interpretation of Jewish law, by humans, using the divine sources and classic hermeneutics. Though one is "man-made" and the other is "direct from God," both are understood as coming, directly or not, from God.

focus of the Jewish academic world. This is a line of questioning and a stream of research that could not happen if the paper were limited to one academic discipline.

This study attempts to find insights into the concept of *teshuvah* from different academic disciplines, at the intersection of the psychological and Jewish worlds. In so doing, it is hoped that a better understanding of the concept of *teshuvah* will emerge. However, because of the importance of the topic to Judaism and the depth of thought it has engendered, and given the breadth of the research in this field among the branches of psychology, the discussion here will be necessarily limited in order to optimally address the topic.

The weakness of this paper is also one of its strengths. Using a variety of disciplines to study *teshuvah* allows the study to benefit from the different experts in the fields of psychology and Judaism. As a result, what could be a narrowly focused treatise will hopefully become a work broader in scope that can be accessible to a variety of scholarly disciplines.

## Chapter 1

## Jewish Background

*Teshuvah* is a central concept in Jewish life. However, it would be naïve to think that, because of its import, *teshuvah* is easy to define. "Repentance is not a function of a single, decisive act, but grows and gains in size slowly and gradually, until the penitent undergoes a complete metamorphosis, and then, after becoming a new person, and only then, does repentance take place."[8] In this chapter, we will look at the steps in this transformation. In the Bible, *teshuvah* clearly consists of four separate components: sacrifice, confession, restitution, and turning. Through the investigation of these facets of *teshuvah*, a sense of process will emerge.

* * *

### Sacrifice

The first component of the biblical notion of *teshuvah*, sacrifice, provides an important framework for the rest of the components. Since the inception of the sacrificial system in the desert, sacrifice was the central means of religious and personal expression. Among the types of sacrifices that were accepted at the Tabernacle (and eventually the Temple) was the חטאת, *chatat*, the sin offering. The reasons for and method of sacrificing a sin offering are outlined in the fourth chapter of the Book of Leviticus.

The heading of the entire chapter shows a great deal about the sin offering:

---

[8] Pinchas H. Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 75.

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר נֶפֶשׁ כִּי־תֶחֱטָא בִשְׁגָגָה מִכֹּל
מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא תֵעָשֶׂינָה וְעָשָׂה מֵאַחַת מֵהֵנָּה׃

> Speak to the Israelite people thus: When a person unwittingly incurs guilt in regard to any of the LORD's commandments about things not to be done, and does one of them. (Lev. 4:2)

The sin offering mentioned in Leviticus comes from the transgression of one of God's commands. There are some interesting conditions placed upon the sacrifice, however. First, the word שגגה, *shgagah*, means that the sin was committed without malice. Therefore, the sin offering can be offered only when the transgression is not deliberate. Second, the conditions placed upon the sacrifice are only for transgressions in acting against a proscription. This means that, in this instance, legal guilt, incurred by not doing something that one ought (i.e., a sin of omission), could not be expiated by a sin offering.[9]

In Leviticus 4, there are three scenarios of sin offerings that are mentioned. They are: if a priest transgresses,[10] if the entire community transgresses,[11] or if any individual transgresses in the above manner.[12] In each of these scenarios, though the actual animal for sacrifice might differ, the process is same. When the offending party realizes that a sin was committed, or if it is brought to the party's attention that they have incurred legal guilt, the offending party must bring a pure animal to the Tent of Meeting. About the procedure after the slaughter, Leviticus 4:30-31 says:

---

[9] This is only in the case of the sacrifice as mentioned in Leviticus 4. For the rest of this paper the definition of sin is much broader, encompassing sins of omission and commission.
[10] Lev. 4:3-5.
[11] Lev. 4:13-15.
[12] Lev. 4:27-28.

וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן מִדָּמָהּ בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ וְנָתַן עַל־קַרְנֹת מִזְבַּח הָעֹלָה
וְאֶת־כָּל־דָּמָהּ יִשְׁפֹּךְ אֶל־יְסוֹד הַמִּזְבֵּחַ׃
וְאֶת־כָּל־חֶלְבָּהּ יָסִיר כַּאֲשֶׁר הוּסַר חֵלֶב מֵעַל־זֶבַח הַשְּׁלָמִים
וְהִקְטִיר הַכֹּהֵן הַמִּזְבֵּחָה לְרֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה וְכִפֶּר עָלָיו הַכֹּהֵן
וְנִסְלַח לוֹ׃

The priest shall take with his finger some of its blood and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering; and all the rest of its blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar.
He shall remove all its fat, just as the fat is removed from the sacrifice of well-being; and the priest shall turn it into smoke on the altar, for a pleasing odor to the LORD. Thus the priest shall make expiation for him, and he shall be forgiven.

Other than the fact that expiation is made, very little is introduced here about the results of the sacrifice. However, detail about the effects of the sacrifice is offered in Leviticus 6:17-23:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר׃
דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַחַטָּאת בִּמְקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר תִּשָּׁחֵט הָעֹלָה תִּשָּׁחֵט הַחַטָּאת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה קֹדֶשׁ
קָדָשִׁים הִוא׃
הַכֹּהֵן הַמְחַטֵּא אֹתָהּ יֹאכְלֶנָּה בְּמָקוֹם קָדֹשׁ תֵּאָכֵל בַּחֲצַר
אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד׃
כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־יִגַּע בִּבְשָׂרָהּ יִקְדָּשׁ וַאֲשֶׁר יִזֶּה מִדָּמָהּ עַל־הַבֶּגֶד אֲשֶׁר
יִזֶּה עָלָיִהָ תְּכַבֵּס בְּמָקוֹם קָדֹשׁ׃
וּכְלִי־חֶרֶשׂ אֲשֶׁר תְּבֻשַּׁל־בּוֹ יִשָּׁבֵר וְאִם־בִּכְלִי נְחֹשֶׁת בֻּשָּׁלָה
וּמֹרַק וְשֻׁטַּף בַּמָּיִם׃
כָּל־זָכָר בַּכֹּהֲנִים יֹאכַל אֹתָהּ קֹדֶשׁ קָדָשִׁים הִוא׃
וְכָל־חַטָּאת אֲשֶׁר יוּבָא מִדָּמָהּ אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לְכַפֵּר בַּקֹּדֶשׁ
לֹא תֵאָכֵל בָּאֵשׁ תִּשָּׂרֵף׃

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

> Speak to Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the sin offering: the sin offering shall be slaughtered before the LORD, at the spot where the burnt offering is slaughtered: it is most holy.
> The priest who offers it as a sin offering shall eat of it; it shall be eaten in the sacred precinct, in the enclosure of the Tent of Meeting.
> Anything that touches its flesh shall become holy; and if any of its blood is spattered upon a garment, you shall wash the bespattered part in the sacred precinct.
> An earthen vessel in which it was boiled shall be broken; if it was boiled in a copper vessel, the vessel shall be scoured and rinsed with water.
> Only the males in the priestly line may eat of it: it is most holy.
> But no sin offering may be eaten from which any blood is brought into the Tent of Meeting for expiation in the sanctuary; any such shall be consumed in fire.

The sacrifice not only removes legal guilt from the penitent, but also makes the priests in contact with the sacrifice more holy and purifies the Tabernacle.

With the sin offering, it is important to note, the blood purges only the sanctuary; it does not purge the perpetrator. Regarding the blood of the sacrifice, in his commentary on Leviticus 4, Jacob Milgrom explains, "by daubing the altar with the [sin offering's] blood or by bringing it inside the sanctuary, the priest purges the most sacred objects and areas of the sanctuary on behalf of the person who caused their contamination by his... inadvertent offense."[13] Sin brings impurity to the Tabernacle and, thus, to the entire community. Within this system, making a sacrifice for a transgression, the perpetrator is able to alleviate his legal guilt and also able to address the needs of the entire community.

Having addressed the legal guilt of the perpetrator, Milgrom also mentions the psychological guilt. "Spiritual impurity, conversely, which is caused by inadvertent violation of prohibitive commandments, requires no purificatory rite. The fact that his

---

[13] Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 3, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 256.

sin is inadvertent and that he feels guilt means that he has undergone inner purification."[14] This sacrifice, addressing the legal guilt incurred by the unintentional sin, and his guilt are enough to remove the perpetrator's sin on both the legal and psychological levels.

The expiation of guilt, both legal and psychological, as established in the sacrificial system leaves many questions unanswered and many gaps in an understanding of *teshuvah*. There is little insight into the humanity of the perpetrator. Other than the financial burden of providing a clean animal, there are few negatives associated with sinning unwittingly. Obviously, in a perfect world, the sacrificial system would be a way to cleanse the individual of sin. However, the system is very vulnerable to being abused by people looking "to get away with" sins. The sacrificial system does not conform to the realities of humanity. Though unrealistic and narrow in focus if it were to stand on its own, sacrifice is an important building block in the understanding of the other dimension of biblical *teshuvah*.

* * *

**Confession**

The second component of *teshuvah* in the Bible, confession, is another crucial facet of understanding the whole of complete *teshuvah*. The act of confession can be found throughout the Bible. In the instances where confession is mentioned, it is always coupled with the realization that the individual has sinned. In Leviticus 5, the chapter immediately following the sin offering chapter, four examples of reasons to bring a sin

[14] Ibid., 254.

offering are mentioned. After the enumeration of how one could incur legal guilt, the text says:

וְהָיָה כִּי־יֶאְשַׁם לְאַחַת מֵאֵלֶּה וְהִתְוַדָּה אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עָלֶיהָ׃
וְהֵבִיא אֶת־אֲשָׁמוֹ לַיהוָה עַל חַטָּאתוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָטָא נְקֵבָה
מִן־הַצֹּאן כִּשְׂבָּה אוֹ־שְׂעִירַת עִזִּים לְחַטָּאת וְכִפֶּר עָלָיו
הַכֹּהֵן מֵחַטָּאתוֹ׃

> When he realizes his guilt in any of these matters, he shall confess that wherein he has sinned.
> And he shall bring as his penalty to the LORD, for the sin of which he is guilty, a female from the flock, sheep or goat, as a sin offering; and the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for his sin. (Lev. 5:5-6)

This text introduces the obligation of confession in the context of repentance. This idea of confession seems to supplement the basic sacrifice that is outlined in Leviticus chapters 4 and 6. The confession makes explicit that which was implicit in Leviticus 4. There, one must sacrifice when he realizes that he has incurred legal guilt. Bringing a sacrifice means that the sin has been acknowledged publicly, but the notion of mandating confession forces the perpetrator to take personal responsibility for his actions.

Taking responsibility is the key to confession. In other instances of confession in the Bible, the one confessing is doing so before God. Since the Jewish world presupposes an omniscient God, confession would be unnecessary if it were for the purpose of informing God of the sinner's intentions. Rather, the confession is for the sake of the penitent. Confession forces the perpetrator, as is said, to "own" his action because only then, psychologically and religiously, is the person able to evolve. This is best seen in the Daniel 9:3-6:

וָאֶתְּנָה אֶת־פָּנַי אֶל־אֲדֹנָי הָאֱלֹהִים לְבַקֵּשׁ תְּפִלָּה וְתַחֲנוּנִים
בְּצוֹם וְשַׂק וָאֵפֶר׃
וָאֶתְפַּלְלָה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהַי וָאֶתְוַדֶּה וָאֹמְרָה אָנָּא אֲדֹנָי הָאֵל
הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא שֹׁמֵר הַבְּרִית וְהַחֶסֶד לְאֹהֲבָיו וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוֹתָיו׃
חָטָאנוּ וְעָוִינוּ (והרשענו) [וְהִרְשַׁעְנוּ][15] וּמָרָדְנוּ וְסוֹר מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ
וּמִמִּשְׁפָּטֶיךָ׃
וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ אֶל־עֲבָדֶיךָ הַנְּבִיאִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבְּרוּ בְּשִׁמְךָ
אֶל־מְלָכֵינוּ שָׂרֵינוּ וַאֲבֹתֵינוּ וְאֶל כָּל־עַם הָאָרֶץ׃

> I turned my face to the Lord God, devoting myself to prayer and supplication, in fasting, in sackcloth and ashes.
> I prayed to the LORD my God, making confession thus: "O Lord, great and awesome God, who stays faithful to His covenant with those who love Him and keep His commandments!
> We have sinned; we have gone astray; we have acted wickedly; we have been rebellious and have deviated from Your commandments and Your rules,
> and have not obeyed Your servants the prophets who spoke in Your name to our kings, our officers, our fathers, and all the people of the land."

This passage is very helpful in understanding the role of confession. Confession, like accepting responsibility, removes a significant amount of power from the individual. The penitent must admit to all the transgressions that he has committed. The penitent must willingly accept all the burden of the legal and psychological guilt that he earned. The fasting, supplication, and sackcloth are all physical afflictions to parallel the psychological affliction that he is assumed to feel.[16]

Daniel is praying for God to return both the Jews and glory to Jerusalem. Daniel's confession was not in direct reaction to any specific sin that he or his people

---

[15] This verse has a *ketiv/keri* variance – a difference from the printed text and the accepted reading of the content. The written text is located in the parentheses while the accepted reading is in the square brackets.

[16] More discussion on the ritual of Yom Kippur can be found in the discussion in Chapter 4, below.

committed. Rather, the list of problematic behaviors perpetrated by the Jews is long. Asking for assistance from God necessitates acknowledgment of all of the transgressions that they had done. In his confession, Daniel is forced to confront the reality that God might not want to offer assistance because of the transgressions. However, in the mere fact of that realization, Daniel is able to change by accepting his faults and changing his behavior.

The interplay between confession and prayer is evident in this passage from the Book of Daniel as well as in those sections cited above, Psalm 130 and the Book of Jonah. This can be understood in two ways. First, the confession that one makes before God implicitly has the plea for forgiveness therein. As a result, confession is itself almost a type of prayer. Thus, there are appropriate formulations of confessional prayer and a reverence in language and demeanor with which one must approach the act of confession. For a penitent looking to attain forgiveness from God, he will want to adhere to these confessional formulae as much as possible for fear that deviating from the set invocation will somehow invalidate his plea.[17]

Second, there is a theological implication of prayer coming with confession.

> It is not enough for a man to come and say, "I have sinned." God is not, so to say, compelled thereby to keep the gates [of repentance] open for him. That is not what repentance is. He must sense and realize that the gates are locked, for the sins have already been committed; and now if he

[17] This notion of needing to stay as close to the correct wording of a prayer, lest it be invalid, can be found in the discourse on prayer in rabbinic literature (e.g. throughout the tractate of *Berachot* in the Babylonian Talmud). For some confessional formulae see Chapter 3, *halachah* 8 below and the *Ashamnu* in Chapter 4 below.

> wishes to repent of his ways he must cry out and beat incessantly at the gates so that they allow him and his confession to enter within.[18]

The confession of the penitent is the actual petition for forgiveness, but prayer is the vehicle for that appeal to reach God. Prayer is a natural companion of confession and is often found when confession is ritualized in the Jewish world.[19]

Confession addresses both the legal and psychological guilt of the penitent. First, confession addresses his legal guilt by making him acknowledge that a wrong was committed. Second, it starts to better address psychological guilt by enabling an individual to take responsibility for his actions. "The sinner is suffering, which induces him to cry out to God in his pain, a natural response of a religious person who believes in divine providence. He is also aware of his sin and feels alienated from God."[20] Confession is a concrete action signifying the completion of an internal process moving toward complete *teshuvah*.

* * *

**Restitution**

The next facet of *teshuvah* in the Bible is that of restitution. It is not just enough to sacrifice or admit fault. Rather, it is crucial that if any wrong was committed it be made right. With the notion of restitution (which comes from the same Hebrew root as *teshuvah*) the tradition addresses the psychological guilt and relational disparity connected with transgressions against other humans.

---

[18] Peli, 78.
[19] E.g. The *slichah* blessing of the *amidah*, the *tachanun* section of the traditional *siddur*, and much of the Yom Kippur service (see Chapter 4 below).
[20] Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed By Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 143.

The basis of this is described in Numbers 5:6-7 when the Tanach lays out the rules for restitution. The text plainly states:

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אוֹ־אִשָּׁה כִּי יַעֲשׂוּ מִכָּל־חַטֹּאת
הָאָדָם לִמְעֹל מַעַל בַּיהוָה וְאָשְׁמָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא׃
וְהִתְוַדּוּ אֶת־חַטָּאתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ וְהֵשִׁיב אֶת־אֲשָׁמוֹ בְּרֹאשׁוֹ
וַחֲמִישִׁתוֹ יֹסֵף עָלָיו וְנָתַן לַאֲשֶׁר אָשַׁם לוֹ׃

> Speak to the Israelites: When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the LORD, and that person realizes his guilt,
> he shall confess the wrong that he has done. He shall make restitution in the principal amount and add one-fifth to it, giving it to him whom he has wronged.

Here, with the same type of set-up as in Leviticus 4 (except in direct relation to humans and only secondarily to God), when someone recognizes that he has sinned, the text shows that the perpetrator must confess. The difference here is that the penitent must also make restitution for the material goods damaged in the offense. In addition, the perpetrator must add a percentage of the damage in order to try to right the wrong that was committed.

Restitution, like sacrifice, addresses the personal guilt incurred by committing a transgression and comes at a personal cost. However, with restitution, the penitent must try to repay the injured party with a penalty. Penalties are not necessarily bad. As Karl Menninger says, "there are penalties which tend toward mending the harm done. Restitution, for example, is both a penalty and a constructive move toward reparation."[21] Both sacrifice and restitution function in the same way in that they make the perpetrator

[21] Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 182.

diminish his personal stature (through confession) and wealth (through the money or offering). This diminishment of self is powerful. In transgression against God or infraction against another human, the respect and honor due to the other is lessened. Thus, restitution is put in place to try to balance the scales by negating the material losses (with a benefit to the victim) and equalizing the personal losses.

* * *

**Turning**

Building on the previous steps, after sacrifice, confession, and restitution, the next and most important part of *teshuvah* is turning. Inherent in the biblical notion of *teshuvah*, turning refers to a real change of a person's behaviors. The meaning of the word is clear; to turn is to separate oneself from the transgressions that one commits and dedicate oneself to acting in an upright way. "Allowing evil to go unchecked, including or especially one's own evil, allows evil to be compounded. Indeed, one sin will often lead to another, since the more one does evil the more mired it in one becomes."[22] *Teshuvah* allows the penitent to derail his path of sin, turn, and reroute his direction toward God.

The topic of turning appears often in the Bible. One specific passage from the Deuteronomy 30:1-3 shows the way turning functions earlier in the Tanach:[23]

וְהָיָה כִּי־יָבֹאוּ עָלֶיךָ כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה

[22] Schimmel, 151.

[23] In this section, the Hebrew words coming from ש.ו.ב, the root of *teshuvah*, will be highlighted with bold typeface. This is because the translations of the words are often idiomatic renderings with the sense of turning, returning, or change, but not the actual word "turn."

אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ **וַהֲשֵׁבֹתָ** אֶל־לְבָבְךָ בְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הִדִּיחֲךָ
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה׃
**וְשַׁבְתָּ** עַד־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְקֹלוֹ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־אָנֹכִי
מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם אַתָּה וּבָנֶיךָ בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשֶׁךָ׃
**וְשָׁב** יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־**שְׁבוּתְךָ** וְרִחֲמֶךָ **וְשָׁב** וְקִבֶּצְךָ
מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הֱפִיצְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה׃

> When all these things befall you -- the blessing and the curse that I have set before you -- and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which the LORD your God has banished you,
> and you return to the LORD your God, and you and your children heed His command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day,
> then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.

In this text, there are multiple layers of turning taking place that emphasize the import of this concept. The phrase "take them to heart," when not rendered idiomatically, can be translated as "cause them to return to your heart." The first half of the if-then clause is set up with two notions of turning, one emotional and one legal. The emotional turn is if the real notion of God's blessings is turned to; the legal turn is if the Children of Israel turn back to God (worshipping God and following God's commandments). If both of these conditions are followed, then the second half of the if-then statement will be carried out, also with two mentions of turning, one emotional and one physical. The emotional is that God will return to the people. The other turn is that God will return the people (along with their fortunes) to Israel, to end the separation from their land.

The root of *teshuvah*, ש.ו.ב, is the central concept here appearing over and over in the chapter. If there were any doubt, only five verses later the topic is directly addressed again:

וְאַתָּה **תָּשׁוּב** וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹל יְהוָה וְעָשִׂיתָ אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר
אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם׃

You, however, will again heed the LORD and obey all His commandments that I enjoin upon you this day. (Deut. 30:8)

The Hebrew root is again repeated with an emphasis on turning away from other behavior and turning toward acting according to God's rules. Deuteronomy 30 shows that turning away from negative behavior and turning toward positive behavior is the divine vision of *teshuvah.*

The prophets pick up the theme of turning in later books of the Tanach and constantly preach on this topic. The prophets, for the most part, focus on changing negative, inappropriate behavior that is seen among the kings, Jews and even non-Jews. In Hosea 14, verses 2, 3, and 5, there is one of the most famous calls for turning:

**שׁוּבָה** יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בַּעֲוֹנֶךָ׃
קְחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים **וְשׁוּבוּ** אֶל־יְהוָה אִמְרוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־תִּשָּׂא עָוֹן
וְקַח־טוֹב וּנְשַׁלְּמָה פָרִים שְׂפָתֵינוּ...
אֶרְפָּא **מְשׁוּבָתָם** אֹהֲבֵם נְדָבָה כִּי **שָׁב** אַפִּי מִמֶּנּוּ׃

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have fallen because of your sin.
Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to Him: "Forgive all guilt and accept what is good; Instead of bulls we will pay the offering of our lips..."
I will heal their affliction, generously will I take them back in love; For My anger has turned away from them.

Again, these lines contain different iterations of the Hebrew root for turn. As a result, the understanding of the concept of turning, and thereby *teshuvah* in general, becomes much richer. In this text, the Israelites are first asked to turn back to God because they deviated

from God's path on account of sin. Because of this sinfulness, God turned away from them in anger. Then, they are told to bring words of confession and supplication and turn to God. Finally, God stipulates that if this turning happens on the part of Israel, God will turn back to them ending their spiritual isolation.

Through the lens of turning, this text brings up two important nuances about *teshuvah*. First, it seems as though confessions, supplications, and "offerings of our lips" are more important to God than sacrifice, that confession and turning are more efficacious than sacrifice in achieving forgiveness from God. Second, God too professes that He will turn back to Israel because God turned away from the people. God does not have to perform His own *teshuvah*, but God's return is contingent on the Israelites' return.[24]

* * *

The entire function of *teshuvah* is to induce real lasting behavioral change in individuals. The facets of *teshuvah* established in the Tanach show this. In fact, from the components mentioned above, there is a clear sense of process that comes out of this study of biblical *teshuvah*. Up until the destruction of the Temple, throughout Jewish history sinners had to offer sacrifices in order to atone for their sins. This highly ritualized pattern of behavior depended on the type of sin committed and the type of

[24] Arguably, God does not have to perform acts of *teshuvah*, although in the example of the Flood, an argument could be made that God, in fact does. After the floodwaters recede, God doesn't admit that what He did was wrong, but God does promise not to act in a way that is so hurtful, as God says, "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). Because God is able to maintain this behavior change, it is arguable that from a biblical notion, to whatever extent He had to, God achieves *teshuvah*.

resources available to the individual. Yet, though the text does not explicitly address the problems with the sacrificial system, it is evident that during the time of the prophets, while the Temple was still standing, the system did not adequately address the *teshuvah* of the people (as demonstrated in Hosea 14).

Concomitant with the sacrificial system, a more complete process of *teshuvah* developed in the Bible. The first part of the process, which takes place immediately after the transgression, is for the penitent to acknowledge that he sinned. This acknowledgement can either come from external sources (like in Leviticus 4 when another person points out the transgression) or from a personal realization of fault.

The perpetrator has to admit to the wrong he did and confess his fault. Confession requires the penitent to approach both the victim and God with deference, implicitly requiring that there be remorse on the part of the perpetrator. When approaching God, the penitent offers praise and supplications in the form of prayer. When approaching a fellow human being, the penitent must offer restitution in order to balance the debt created by the transgression.

The final step in this process is the process of turning. By going through the process of accepting the wrong he committed and confessing it, the penitent must resolve to change his ways. In the abstract, that means he must act in a more pious way. Concretely, he must not repeat the transgression that initiated this *teshuvah* process in the first place. Through the words of God and the prophets in the Tanach, the Jewish people are commanded to engage in this process of *teshuvah*.

## Chapter 2

## Psychology Background

William James, considered the father of the psychology of religion, defined psychology as:

> the Science of Mental Life, both of its phenomena and of their conditions. The phenomena are such things as we call feelings, desires, cognitions, reasonings, decisions, and the like; and, superficially considered, their variety and complexity is such as to leave a chaotic impression on the observer.[25]

James' book, *The Principles of Psychology*, originally published in 1890, was one of the earliest works in the organized scientific study of psychology. In the past century, the study of psychology has grown in momentum and scope. A product of the modern era, scientific study, and empiricism, psychology has always tried to study the entirety of the domain of the mind. Psychology looks at how information, processed through the brain, yields the behavior, emotions, and social interactions in which everybody participates.

In this chapter, first a broad overview of some components of repentance will be understood from within a psychological framework. Then, the topic of repentance will be investigated from three important fields of psychological research. The social psychological perspective will help show the interpersonal and intrapsychic benefits of repentance. Then, with the help of behavioral psychology, lapse and maintenance of behavioral change will be investigated. Finally, the neuropsychological studies of the brain will show how change happens and when change is most likely to occur. The intent

---

[25] William James, *The Principles of Psychology,* vol. 1 (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1950), 1.

of this chapter is to show that at the most basic level, there is a need for humans to address the psychological dissonance of error and the ability for it to produce real personal change.

* * *

**Psychological Components of Repentance**

Unlike a religious understanding of repentance alone, psychology can look qualitatively at internal factors through which our experience of misbehavior and resolution of the guilt can be understood. Thus, to understand repentance from the psychological perspective, it is first necessary to discuss the various components that come into play with repentance.

The research on repentance in the psychological community is often coupled with research of forgiveness. This makes sense when looking at forgiveness and repentance as interpersonal issues. Though these topics could be seen in a purely intrapsychic light (e.g. how being wronged hurts you or how transgressing makes you feel) when examined interpersonally, the topics become inextricably linked. As a result, much of the research on repentance is subsumed under that of forgiveness, the topic with a much larger focus in psychology research.

The major components that comprise forgiveness and repentance in the psychological realm are delineated in a chapter by Newberg et al. entitled "The Neuropsychological Correlates of Forgiveness." [26] Though this chapter focuses on the

[26] Andrew B. Newberg and others, "Neuropsychological Correlates of Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. McCullough, Michael E., Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen (New York: Guilford, 2000), 92.

location of these components in the brain, for the sake of this paper, just knowing the components will suffice. The components outlined are: a sense of self, conspecific congruence, and memory of the event.

The sense of self is a crucial attribute for the individual's psyche. There is a sense of worth that comes with this sense of self and the ability to be self-reflective.

> The sense of self... tends to be associated with positive affect at the very least and often with some degree of hypomania.[27] This partially explains why patients in serious depressions usually have a significant struggle with their sense of self and, most certainly, asserting their selves.[28]

The sense of self also is necessary in one's affective, that is, emotional, interaction with the self and for protecting oneself. Furthermore, the sense of self "must perceive, analyze, and evaluate all input regarding the self."[29] According to the research, the sense of self is connected to mood, worth, protection, and how information is processed. In this way, the sense of self is crucial to forgiveness and repentance. For the perpetrator, a transgression can intrapsychically affect the sense of self by making the his mood and worth falter, potentially affecting self-protection and the way in which additional situational information is processed.[30] The same could be said about the victim and the intrapsychic ramifications that injured sense of self can have.

---

[27] Hypomania is an elevated mood that is classified as purely positive but not so severe as to contain any type of psychopathology.
[28] Ibid., 93.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Because of the nature of the psychological research, the use of terms such as perpetrator, client, subject, participant, etc. will all be used to refer to the penitent person. The attempt to harmonize the language between the studies would prove more confusing than helpful.

In the interpersonal realm, it is important to understand that relationships are based on balance and homeostasis. A case in point: Patrick and Madeline are 5-year-old friends who are playing together with a stuffed animal. After a short while, Patrick starts monopolizing the toy, not sharing with Madeline. Though, technically, Patrick owns the toy, they frequently play together and have always shared their toys regardless of the rightful owner. Here, the action carries a negative valence – an adverse emotional response. Madeline feels hurt; she feels left out and even betrayed. Madeline starts to cry. She stops only when Patrick is willing to "play fair" and share "like a big boy." With that, the relationship regains balance. The sense of correctness returns and again homeostasis is achieved. Though this example is quite simple, the relational model shown is powerful.

Conspecific congruence is a very fancy term for interpersonal social harmony. In a social context, conspecifics are peers – individuals who have the same status within a certain group. Therefore, conspecific congruence deals with non-hierarchal relationships and whether the behavior between individuals is harmonious and beneficial (congruous) or discordant and injurious (incongruous). The harmony among conspecifics begs for equilibrium so a positive action, which has a positive valence, deserves a reward. However, as in the example with Patrick and Madeline, a negative action leaves a deficit in the congruence.

> A change in congruence, with the subject positively valanced, is perceived by the subject as a favor or kindness, with the consequent obligation to return it in some way in order to balance the incongruence. A change in the congruence that is negatively valenced is perceived by the subject as

> an injury, an attack on the self, with the likely consequent desire for revenge to restore the congruence.[31]

For the victim, revenge will restore the imbalance and is usually the first desire of the individual, but forgiveness also restores the balance. For the perpetrator, an imbalance in congruence is identified and in order to try to restore the balance, the perpetrator engages in repentance, a surrender of the self for the sake of restoring congruence.

Finally, long-term memory of injurious events is crucial to the understanding of repentance and forgiveness. "Obviously, an individual who cannot carry the injury in memory for any significant time cannot get revenge[32] on the perpetrator of the injury."[33] The same is true for forgiveness or repentance. "Forgiveness requires memory of the causal framework within which the injury to the self occurred, so that the offender and the events are remembered."[34] In order to protect the self, the victim needs to have memory of the events beyond the forgiving. Additionally, in order to effectively change the behavior and achieve repentance, the perpetrator needs to have a memory of the events.

Long-term memory of painful events and conspecific congruence are both important factors in the understanding of repentance. Interestingly enough, both memory and conspecific congruence have a large bearing on the sense of self. It is not difficult, therefore, to see how central the sense of self is to the psychology of repentance. When it

---

[31] Ibid., 95.
[32] Revenge is a natural, though unfortunate, reaction to injurious events on the part of the victim. Though not addressed again in this paper, this article by Newberg et al. focuses on the revenge as an option for the victim instead of forgiveness.
[33] Ibid., 96.
[34] Ibid.

is damaged we need to heal it, or else we could suffer detrimental and potentially long-lasting consequences from having a damaged sense of self.

Now having investigated these three psychological components of repentance and understanding how they create a psychology of repentance, the stage is set to more deeply investigate repentance from three fields of psychological research.

* * *

**Social Psychological Perspective**

The social psychological perspective analyzes how intrapsychic phenomena affect the individual as a social being and how interpersonal phenomena affect people's interactions. After a transgression, the victim and the perpetrator are both faced with a complex matrix of options for their behavior. For the perpetrator, the most important of these is the choice of whether to seek repentance or not. For the victim, the choice is whether or not to grant forgiveness. However, before this choice is made there are a variety of barriers and benefits inherent in their choices which will affect the individuals (the perpetrator and victim each intrapsychically and within the relationship interpersonally). In their paper, Exline and Baumeister outline the benefits and barriers associated with forgiveness and repentance.[35]

The potential benefits of expressing forgiveness and repentance break down into three major sub-categories: relationship benefits, personal benefits, and self-protective benefits. In the first category, though the findings seem intuitive, it is important to

[35] Julie Juola Exline and Roy F. Baumeister, "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. McCullough, Michael E., Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen (New York: Guilford, 2000), 133.

acknowledge the potential relationship benefits of repentance. The study shows "victims are much more likely to forgive perpetrators who respond in repentant ways."[36] It is clear that a victim would be more willing to forgive if the perpetrator repented. However, the study does not end there. Beyond mere forgiveness, victims were more forgiving of perpetrators who engaged in specific repentant behaviors: "acknowledged that they committed the offense, offered sincere apologies, asked for forgiveness, expressed feelings of guilt or sadness, did something positive to 'make up' for the offense, or forgave the participant for some other offense."[37] One other factor that significantly led to forgiveness was "a perpetrator's efforts to maintain contact with the victim."[38] Though there is little research demonstrating the converse, the authors posit that expressions of forgiveness might also promote repentance. In looking at relationships, it is in the mutual interest of the perpetrator and victim to seek repentance and forgiveness, reestablish an equitable relationship, and restore congruence.

The next concern is the intrapsychic realm. Repentance and forgiveness have been shown to positively affect the individuals' minds and, therefore, seeking would be preferable to avoiding repentance or forgiveness. "Friendly overtures by both victims and perpetrators should decrease feelings of guilt while increasing feelings of confidence and well-being."[39] More specific to repentance, the study goes on to say, "to the extent that the perpetrator role carries malign associations of cruelty or carelessness, acts of

---

[36] Ibid., 136.
[37] Ibid., 137.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 138.

repentance are likely to mitigate these as well."[40] Regarding guilt and confidence, repentance will likely lessen these while also changing the label of "perpetrator." Through repentance, the perpetrator will likely see himself as less cruel and more considerate, thereby changing the negative way he thinks about himself.

The personal benefits do not stop with guilt and confidence. "Expressions of forgiveness or repentance – at least those that involve writing – might bring mental and physical health benefits."[41] The paper goes on to state, "although the mechanisms behind these physiological changes are not entirely clear, the benefit of disclosure might stem from an ability to find meaning in the incident or release from the burdens of inhibition."[42] Whatever the causes of personal benefits, if there are any that are detected by the perpetrator in his repenting, he is more likely to repeat the act of repentance when the opportunity presents itself again. This is particularly likely to be true if repentance lessens the guilt or mental stress of the perpetrator.

The self-protective benefits of repentance may also occur after incomplete or insincere repentance. "A perpetrator could avoid retaliation through the strategic use of empty apologies, insincere promises, or superficial attempts at restitution. Such benefits, while not laudable, may be powerful motivators when self-protective concerns predominate."[43] Though, from the perspective of true repentance, this benefit seems morally questionable, Karl Menninger points out that this is part of the very basic nature of humans. "Self-preservation is everybody's motive every minute, all the time, but so is

---

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 139.

a trend toward self-destruction. These two drives are in constant operation and opposition."[44] If the perpetrator is anxious to really humble himself before the victim or is unwilling to fully accept fault, he could "go through the motions" and use repentance as a defensive shield, protecting himself from vulnerability.

All of these benefits, whether relational, personal, or self-protective, are motivating factors for the perpetrator to seek repentance. The list of benefits is long, showing the many positive results that arise from the process of repentance and forgiveness. However, with these nurturing and self-affirming benefits comes a list of barriers to expressing repentance. Among these risks, disagreement with the charge, fear of punishment, and shame are primary.

The first barrier to repentance is disagreement with the charge. Because the roles of victim and perpetrator are laden with emotional, societal, and religious baggage, one might be reluctant to accept the mantle of perpetrator. If he is willing to accept the blame, the next question that arises is whether he is willing to admit fault. Exline and Baumeister show that people often are not. "Perpetrators tend to perceive their transgressions as less harmful and serious than victims do, creating... the magnitude gap. The magnitude gap appears to reflect self-serving distortions on the part of both victims and perpetrators."[45] Seldom is a perpetrator able to look at his own actions with the objectivity necessary to understand how the victim might feel. As a result, "people may be reluctant to repent because they do not want to accept the guilt that is implied by

---

[44] Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 92.
[45] Exline and Baumeister, 140-1.

repentance."[46] Furthermore, "even perpetrators who acknowledge some wrongdoing... may be reluctant to accept the full load of guilt that victims assign to them." Though repentance has been shown to abate guilt, perpetrators might not ever want to shoulder what, for them, feels like a disproportionate amount of guilt.

Fear of punishment is the next barrier to repentance. Punishment here refers to any consequences that could arise from transgression, whether relational, social, or legal. If repenting for a transgression might cause strained interpersonal relations, like in the case of marital infidelity, the likelihood of repentance diminishes. As a result, "perpetrators who fear punishment might be tempted to avoid confession if there is a chance that others will never learn of their transgression."[47] Further, if the behavior that requires repentance is one that causes positive physical feeling, like a drug addiction, acknowledging both that there is an infraction and the loss of the physical rewards of the behavior will be a lot for the perpetrator to handle, again diminishing the likelihood of repentance. Menninger points out the paradox inherent in pleasurable transgressions. "The fact that guilt and fear hang over the sinner may also detract from the pleasure. But some individuals seem to hate their sins rather than enjoy them, even at the moment of commission."[48] This seems to abate only with a full acknowledgement of the ramifications of the detrimental act. "When people admit that they have committed an act and concede that it is hurtful or wrong, such an acknowledgement will make it

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 142.
[48] Menninger, 184.

difficult to justify repeating the behavior in the future."[49] Fear of punishment, whether overt negative reaction to the repentance or lack of future positive reactions because of the repentance, is a significant barrier to repentance.

Finally, shame, "a perception of the entire self as bad and a sense of being exposed, often accompanied by a desire to hide,"[50] is an emotional toll that is daunting and often too much for the sense of self to handle. In order to lessen the potential for the severe distress that can come from shame, a perpetrator might avoid repentance.

> Thus, whereas feelings of guilt often press a person toward confession and resolution, feelings of shame are more likely to prompt self-protective responses designed to hide the offense, to deflect responsibility, or to make the perpetrator appear innocent, competent, or powerful.[51]

Because shame is such a profoundly negative emotion, it often arises during confession at the point where the self must be humbled the most. In fact, "shame might be especially likely to arise when a perpetrator must publicly take the stance of supplicant, such as by apologizing, asking for forgiveness, or making reparations."[52]

Despite the benefits that come from repentance, the barriers are real and often much more salient to the perpetrator's deciding whether or not to engage in repentance. The fear and ramifications of the barriers often offset the way that the benefits help the perpetrator's sense of self. Now having a better understanding of the nature of repentance from the social psychological point of view, the discussion will move to behavioral psychology and behavior change.

---

[49] Exline and Baumeister, 142.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 143.
[52] Ibid.

* * *

**Behavioral Psychology**

Through the lens of behavioral psychology, every action that any organism performs can be seen as a basic behavior. This is obviously true for physical acts like walking and eating. However, the discipline also believes that there is no break between internal processes (like feeling and thinking) and external behavioral manifestation.[53] This school of psychological thought is particularly interesting in the study of repentance because most of the issues discussed so far have been located in the realm of feelings. However, looking at the behaviors that are derived from intrapsychic processes reveals one of the most important attributes of *teshuvah*. It is not enough to feel guilt. Rather, one must admit fault and try to change his behavior.

In order to best understand this section, it will be helpful to consider repentance in a behavioral framework. Because behavioral psychology focuses on demonstrable actions, repentance can be looked at in two different parts: transgression and change. Behaviorally, transgression might be understood either as an example of classical conditioning[54] (some positive stimulus, like food, or a negative one, like pain, that causes a person to act in a manner that causes an infraction), or as an example of operant

---

[53] Lawrence E. Fraley, "Strategic Interdisciplinary Relations Between a Natural Science Community and a Psychology Community." *Behavior Analyst Today* 2, no.4 (2002): 292.
[54] Classical conditioning, or Pavlovian conditioning, is the focus on the relation between external signals and significant events. The textbook example is that of Pavlov's dogs which were fed after hearing some aural or visual stimulus. After the conditioning, the dogs had a conditioned response, they salivated and showed signs of hunger after encountering the same stimulus.

conditioning[55] (a transgression elicits a response, positive or negative, internally or externally, which either reinforces or deters the behavior). Regardless of the psychological paradigm, there is a complex sequence of conditioning that occurs with transgression. Thus, in order to change the behavior, there has to be a process of either extinction (eradicating the behavior) or counterconditioning (essentially "overwriting" the behavior).

In his article focusing on lapse and maintenance of behavioral change, Mark Bouton discusses attempts using classical conditioning to eradicate problem behaviors. When investigating behavioral change, Bouton acknowledges, "extinction and counterconditioning are probably the most ubiquitous, and they are probably both involved in almost any method used to change risk behavior."[56] In the eradication of problematic behaviors, it is necessary for the subject to break the associative conditioned link between the behavior and the various stimuli. However, the author points out that with extinction and counterconditioning, "neither really involves destruction of the original learning."[57] About the reprogramming of behavior and the stimuli associated with them, he goes on to say, "the signal winds up with two available 'meanings.' It is ambiguous, like an ambiguous word, its current meaning – or the behavior it currently evokes – is determined by the current context."[58]

---

[55] Operant conditioning is the administration of stimuli to either increase a behavior (reinforcement) or decrease a behavior (punishment). B. F. Skinner is famous for his work in operant conditioning.
[56] Mark E. Bouton, "A Learning Theory Perspective on Lapse, Relapse, and the Maintenance of Behavior Change." *Health Psychology* 19, no.1 (2000): S57.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

For Bouton, context is extremely important in understanding behavior change. First, regarding specific conditioning and context, he shows, "the context switch from A to B often causes no decrement in the behavior evoked by the [stimulus]; conditioning generalizes remarkably well across contexts."[59] He shows that over time, though training for extinction or counterconditioning can be effective for eliminating the initial response, "simple presentation of the signal again in the original context leads to a robust recovery of the original performance."[60] He also points out that the nature of context is extremely broad. It can be exteroceptive (like room, place, or environment) but can also be interoceptive (drug state, hormonal state, mood state, deprivation state, recent events, expectation of events, or passage of time). Bouton shows that the initial behavior can be generalized over many contexts while behavior change tends to be context specific.

To further complicate matters, Bouton mentions, "behavior change results in a new performance that seems highly dependent on the current context. It may not be unreasonable to suppose that the same may be true when we change a belief, attitude, schema, or emotion."[61] With the variance that comes from broadening the definition of context and expanding what types of change it applies to, the idea that any behavioral change could occur and be maintained seems dubious. Bouton points out, "the successful client learns something new but does not necessarily erase the old. This, coupled with the fact that the new learning may be more context dependent, makes lapses seem inevitable

[59] Ibid., 58.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 59.

and understandable."[62] A realistic client does not expect perfection and acknowledges that lapse is a normative part of the change process. Because of the fragility of the process and the vulnerability of the client:[63]

> Behavior change methods should, therefore, recognize the possible influence of contextual cues, identify the cues that might be involved, and help the client avoid the contexts that were connected with the original risk behavior, whether they are places, friends, or a negative affect.[64]

Once the behavior is changed and the distance between lapses increase, there has to be work in order to maintain the changed behavior, lest relapse occur. "Successful behavior maintenance may depend on finding ways of increasing the generalization between the new learning context and future contexts."[65] It is important to reinforce the behavioral change in various contexts and practice the new behavior in various exteroceptive and interoceptive contexts, realizing that "generalizability of the new learning may often be difficult because the new learning often seems to generalize less across contexts than the original learning."[66] Through counterconditioning, new behavior might be learned, but that new conduct will never be as strong as the original behavior unless the perpetrator practices in many different contexts.

The applicability of this theory to repentance is clear. After a transgression has happened, in the hopes of actually changing his behavior, the perpetrator must practice

---

[62] Ibid., 61.
[63] Again, because of the use of psychological literature, the terminology referring to the person seeking repentance seems crass when viewed from a religious point of view. However, harmonizing the language would prove more confusing than useful in this interdisciplinary study.
[64] Ibid., 61-2.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

extinction or counterconditioning. If the infraction is theft, the perpetrator must not only admit to the problem and apologize for his actions, but he must also identify the situational contexts that permitted him to steal. Beyond avoiding that context during his extinction training, he must also work on reinforcing positive non-stealing behavior in as many other contexts as possible so that his learning becomes strengthened and hopefully stronger than his inclination to steal. Though this is not full repentance, it shows how behavioral change in repentance looks.

* * *

**Neuropsychology**

Though the behavioral psychological world allowed for some insight into how people are able to change their negative behaviors, recent research in the realm of neuroscience has also opened the field of study of understanding psychological change. For years, to psychologists the brain was treated like a black box; all information was synthesized in it but the contents and processes therein were an inexplicable mystery. However, with advances in science technology, the black box has been opened and the brain is now being investigated.

It is not news that the brain is an ever-evolving mechanism. Anyone who has been a student knows about the brain's amazing ability to incorporate, analyze, and adapt to new information.

> The human brain is an 'organ of adaptation' to the physical and social worlds; it is stimulated to grow and learn through positive and negative interactions. The quality and nature of our relationships are translated into codes within neural networks that serve as infrastructure for both brain

> and mind. Through this translation of experience into neurobiological structures, nature and nurture become one.[67]

Through the development of the brain, the individual literally becomes a new person.

The idea of neural networks mentioned above is crucial to the understanding of behavioral growth and change. Neural networks are best understood as a matrix of brain information that is programmed to react in a certain way. The best non-neuroscientific method of showing this phenomenon is by paralleling the brain process of neural networks to an observable behavioral chain. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall addresses sequences of behavior that, when started, it is nearly impossible to stop the action mid-process. He calls these action chains. Hall writes:

> An action chain is a set sequence of events in which usually two or more individuals participate. It is reminiscent of a dance that is used as a means of reaching a common goal that can be reached only after, and not before, each link in the chain has been forged. Like frames, action chains can be simple, complex, or derived. Every action within a frame has a beginning, a climax, and an end, and comprises a number of intermediate stages. If any of the basic acts are left out or are too greatly distorted, the action must be started all over again.[68]

Neural networks are essentially action chains on the neurological level, the major difference is that the neural networks function on a much smaller scale and are harder to interrupt during the chain.

Neural networks are always subject to feedback and growth during their execution. In fact:

---

[67] Louis J. Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain* (New York: Norton, 2002,) 16.
[68] Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989,) 141.

> the growth and connectivity of neurons is the basic mechanism of all learning and adaptation. Learning can be reflected in neural changes in a number of ways, including the growth of new neurons, the expansion of existing neurons, and changes in connectivity between existing neurons. All of these changes are expressions of plasticity, or the ability of the nervous system to change.[69]

Neural networks are the actual structures in the brain through which information travels. These neuronal networks are not static. There is constantly the process of neural growth creating new neural networks all the time. Unlike that which was previously thought, the brain does not only acquire new material but also physically changes with learning. The plasticity mentioned by Cozolino thus creates new neural pathways and new neural networks, thereby creating new neural action chains. These neural action chains essentially recalibrate normative behavior for the individual. This shows that, on the neurobiological level, real behavioral change is possible.

In order for the change to happen, Cozolino makes it quite clear that learning has to occur. Cozolino addresses this by showing that learning best takes place in what he call enriched environments, a type of exteroceptive or interoceptive context that fosters learning.

> The brain continually changes to reflect aspects of its environment. In other words, its neural architecture comes to reflect the environment that shapes it. An enriched environment is one that is characterized by a level of stimulation and complexity that enhances learning and growth; an impoverished environment presents little stimulation, novelty, or challenge.[70]

---

[69] Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, 20.
[70] Ibid., 22.

There are many possible venues for enriched environments. For the exteroceptive ones, Cozolino focuses on psychotherapy (as it is the focus of his entire study), but other examples are university, book groups, and synagogue.

As for interoceptive enriched environments, one of the best for learning and creating new neural networks is a stressful environment.

> Although extreme stress inhibits new learning and brain growth, mild to moderate stress stimulates neural growth hormones and leads to increased production of cells in brain areas involved in learning. These and other studies suggest that stress may be utilized to enlist naturally occurring neurobiological processes involved in the growth and connectivity of neurons and neural circuits.[71]

Stress is found during a person's everyday interactions. In environments of education, often there is some stress associated with the methodology (especially in the implementation of the Socratic method in a law school). Stress that comes with a near-miss traffic accident will more likely make the driver pay attention and learn in that context. And, as Cozolino shows, a good psychotherapist utilizes stress to trigger neural plasticity in order to help the patient grow.

Finally, in the context of psychotherapy, Cozolino addresses six interoceptive elements that enhance neural growth and integration. They are:

> (1) the establishment of a safe and trusting relationship [with the therapist]; (2) gaining new information and experiences across the domains of cognition, emotion, sensation, and behavior; (3) the simultaneous or alternating activation of neural networks that are inadequately integrated or dissociated; (4) moderate levels of stress or emotional arousal alternating with periods of calm and safety; (5) the integration of conceptual knowledge with emotional and bodily experience

[71] Ibid., 23-4.

> through narratives that are co-constructed with the therapist; and (6) developing a method of processing and organizing new experiences so as to continue ongoing growth and integration outside of therapy.[72]

Though some of these seem to be relevant only in the context of psychotherapy, in fact these six elements can be seen in any enriched environment. e.g., support-groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, a family meal, a close-knit workplace, or even a place of worship.

If we look at repentance in the context of neuropsychology and neural plasticity, it is obvious that neural change can happen and that the important part of this process is the learning context. Thus, like the behavioral approach, guilt and confession are not enough to induce change in an individual seeking repentance. It is absolutely crucial that learning happens in an enriched environment where the brain has more plasticity and where there is stress and emotional arousal. At the same time, however, there needs to be a feeling of trust and safety for the perpetrator or else neural plasticity and a change in the neural networks of his brain are less likely.

* * *

From the broad investigation in this chapter a process of repentance becomes clear. Not too dissimilar to the process established in Chapter 1, the psychological process of repentance functions in a progression in order to alleviate the guilt of the perpetrator, protect the needs of the victim, and promote change. The entire process is predicated on a functioning, normal psychological system with a healthy sense of self and the ability to remember hurtful events.

---

[72] Ibid., 27.

When it comes to the attention of the perpetrator that he committed an infraction, it is likely that he will feel guilt for this error. Thus, he is likely to want to alleviate the guilt and seek repentance because of the psychological benefit of repentance. Among its very powerful benefits are restoring the relationship with the victim and receiving forgiveness. However, depending on the individual and the nature of the transgression, the barriers to repentance, such as shame or fear of punishment, might be significant enough to prevent him from proceeding further down the path of repentance.

If he acknowledges his error and seeks repentance, the next step in the process detailed above is to identify the exteroceptive and interoceptive contexts of the infraction and try to avoid that context. Not doing so would make the perpetrator extremely vulnerable to repetition of the original offense. Then, the perpetrator would have to engage in the act of counterconditioning in order to retrain himself to avoid the problem behavior and practice the new sanctioned behavior.

Finally, through the process of acknowledgment, asking for forgiveness, and distancing himself from the context of his sin, the perpetrator is able to affect the existing neural networks in his brain and create new ones. Through moderate stress and enriched environments, he is able to increase neural plasticity and stimulate new neural pathways. Through this entire process, the perpetrator is able to make amends with the person he wronged, assuage his guilt, train for new behavior, and actually achieve a change on the level of the brain. Thus, by following the pathway of repentance laid out in the psychological research, a perpetrator is able to carry out full repentance and change his behavior.

## Chapter 3

### *Hilchot Teshuvah*

Now that we have a sense of the process of repentance from the points of view of the Bible and psychology, it is possible to look deeper into a system of *teshuvah* where both processes are implemented. In *Hilchot Teshuvah* (the Laws of Repentance) of his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides synthesizes of all of the biblical facets listed in Chapter 1 and, additionally, about one thousand years of rabbinic discussion on the topic. He fully develops the concept of *teshuvah* in an accessible and psychologically sound model. The second chapter of *Hilchot Teshuvah* begins with the rhetorical question, "What is complete *teshuvah*?" Maimonides then spends the entire chapter addressing the question with theoretical and practical answers.

For the sake of this paper, I have translated the chapter[73], *halachah* by *halachah*, and provided an analysis of the law from the biblical themes of *teshuvah* from Chapter 1. In addition, each *halachah* will be viewed in light of the psychological theory from Chapter 2. In pre-modern Jewish scholarship, this chapter of the *Mishneh Torah* does the best job of harmonizing the praxis of *teshuvah* with the psychological underpinnings.

* * *

[73] The translation of this chapter is solely my work. I make an attempt to remain as close to the original text as possible. I try not to put in too many idiomatic expressions with the attempt to preserve the nature of the original Hebrew words. The proof texts that are given come directly from the original Hebrew text and I do not explicate or extend them within the context of the translation. If a deeper discourse of the proof texts is necessary, I address them in the analysis.

***Halachah* 1**

> What is complete *teshuvah*? It is when one has the opportunity to repeat the action that he transgressed and one is capable of performing thus but abstains because of *teshuvah*, not because of fear or lack of physical ability. For example, a man who had illicit sexual relations with a woman. After some time, he finds himself alone with her with love for her, with physical ability, and in the same country in which they transgressed, but he abstains and does not sin. That is one who has achieved complete *teshuvah*. As Solomon said, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (Ecc. 12:1).
> If he does not repent until his old age, at a time when he can no longer repeat the sin, even though it is not ideal *teshuvah*, it is ideal for him and he has achieved complete *teshuvah*. Even if one sins every day of his life if he does *teshuvah* on the day of his death and dies in repentance, all of his sins are forgiven, as it says, "Before the sun, light, moon, and stars no longer shine, and the clouds return after the rain" (Ecc. 12:2), and this refers to the day of one's death. The general rule is that if one remembers his Creator and repents before his death, he is forgiven.[74]

As Maimonides makes quite clear at the introduction of the text, this *halachah* is the general theoretical definition of *teshuvah*. At this early stage of the chapter, Maimonides discusses the demonstrable outcomes of the *teshuvah* process and turning, as mentioned above, which marks the paradigmatic result of complete *teshuvah*. The other facets of *teshuvah* are not yet mentioned. It is preferred for an individual to do *teshuvah* as soon as possible after the transgression, which is what is meant by the pericope "in the days of your youth" from Ecclesiastes. However, Maimonides shows that there is not a statute of limitations on the expression of repentance.

The psychological mark of complete *teshuvah* is a total extinction of the transgressive behavior. With the discussion of context above, usually presentation of the

---

[74] *Mishneh Torah leHaRambam: Hilchot Teshuvah* (Jerusalem: Mechon Mamre, 2007), 2:1.

original context makes a person lapse into their old, problematic behavior. In Maimonides' ideal, exteroceptive and interoceptive contexts are not different from the time of the original transgression. Knowing that this is, in fact, the hardest way to be tested in matters of behavioral change, the ideal that Maimonides establishes would be a true mark of real, deep-seated behavioral change.

That people are able to do *teshuvah* up until their dying day shows another psychological understanding of *teshuvah*. First, though the contexts might not be as replicable for a person who has so obviously changed (from youth to old age), there is still the base level of behavior that has changed. As a result, though the behavioral change might not be able to be tested in the original context, it does not lessen the work the individual did in addressing the behavioral change. Second, the personal and relationship benefits of *teshuvah* are powerful enough that forbidding *teshuvah* after a certain point would surely prove detrimental to the individual and his relationship with the victim.

* * *

***Halachah* 2**

> And what is *teshuvah*? It is when the sinner abandons his sin and removes it from his mind and resolves in his heart that he won't do it again, as it says, "The wicked will abandon his path..." (Isa. 55:7). Also, he must regret what he has done, as it says, "After my return, I regretted" (Jer. 31:18). He must testify that God knows that he will never repeat this sin, as it says, "We will no longer say to the work of our hands, 'You are our gods'" (Hos. 14:4). And he must confess verbally and say these matters which he resolved in his heart.[75]

[75] Ibid., 2:2.

Maimonides establishes a flowchart of repentance. In defining *teshuvah*, he states that the perpetrator first must acknowledge that what he did was wrong, in that he promises that he ought to change his behavior. There has to be a level of remorse involved in this mental resolution. Though not explicitly stated in the biblical facets of *teshuvah*, remorse is a crucial piece of *teshuvah* as it is an emotion that initiates and drives the process. He must publicly (and officially) resolve to change his behavior and then confess. The layers of confession and planning to change his ways are important steps both for Maimonides and in the biblical process of *teshuvah*.

This *halachah* of Maimonides' *Hilchot Teshuvah* encompasses all of the barriers to repentance mentioned in Chapter 1. The perpetrator has to be willing to accept full responsibility of the transgression, and in public no less. Through this acknowledgement, the perpetrator could also be limited by the fear of punishment, socially, legally, and by God. Lastly, through the public vulnerability and the reinforcement from his community, the perpetrator could easily experience shame. With all that being said, this scenario also has a very high likelihood of increasing the plasticity of the neural networks creating neural change. There are undoubtedly significant levels of stress associated with this step. Counterbalancing this, though, is the safe environment of the community, allowing him to gain new information emotionally and behaviorally from the experience, and the integration of new knowledge emotionally and bodily that comes out of the living and processing the experience. Therefore, the scene of public confession is an enriched environment, enhancing the potential for neural growth.

* * *

***Halachah 3***

> All who confess verbally but do not resolve in their hearts to abandon their sins, this is similar to one who immerses (in a *mikveh*) with a vermin in his hand; the immersion is ineffective until he casts away the vermin. Thus it says, "He who confesses and abandons (their sins) will be given mercy" (Prov. 28:13). And he must detail his specific sins, as it says, "Oh, this people transgressed with the great sin of making themselves a god of gold" (Ex. 32:31).[76]

This *halachah* warns against engaging in the process of *teshuvah* without sincerity. This is unacceptable within every facet of biblical *teshuvah*. Most importantly, in Deuteronomy 30 (as cited above) one of God's stipulations for return was that the Israelites had to heed the commandments with all their heart and soul. Going through the *teshuvah* process in anything but a whole-hearted manner inherently violates the process of *teshuvah*. The enumeration of the sins just goes to support the biblical notion of confession where the transgressions of the individuals and community are spelled out.[77]

One of the benefits of repentance, albeit an ulterior one, is self-protection. By only going through the motions of *teshuvah*, the perpetrator does not have to become vulnerable to realizations that could disturb his sense of self. Furthermore, without actually engaging with the problematic behavior, counterconditioning is not likely to change the behavior, as there would be little internal reinforcement or punishment making operant conditioning ineffective.

* * *

[76] Ibid., 2:3.
[77] As is the case in Daniel 9, cited above.

***Halachah* 4**

> Among the paths of *teshuvah*, the penitent can: constantly call out before God with cries and supplications; perform *tzedakah* according to his ability; distance himself far from the object of his sin; change his name as if to say, "I am an other and I am not the same person who did those deeds;" change all his actions to good and the upright path; and exile himself from his locale. Exile atones sin because it causes him to be submissive, humble, and meek.[78]

Here, Maimonides explains some elements in the practice of *teshuvah*. Now, having explored the psychological and biblical notions of *teshuvah*, these paths all make sense. Cries and supplications, along with prayer and confession, are part of the necessary steps of *teshuvah*, as it forces the individual to grapple, accept, acknowledge, and apologize to God for the transgression. Though the sacrificial system had been destroyed along with the Temple nearly one millennium prior to his writing the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides maintains the spirit of the system by putting *tzedakah* as a possibility for repentance. The function of *tzedakah*, in this context, is identical to that of sacrifice. It makes the perpetrator monetarily burdened, supports the community, and again forces the perpetrator to humble himself for the sake of his *teshuvah*.

Having the perpetrator distance himself from "the object of his sin," change his name, change other behaviors, and change his place of residence becomes confused when seen solely through the Jewish lens. These could all be viewed as different nuances of *teshuvah*, though their origins in the Tanach are dubious. However, with the assistance of the psychological theory, their merit becomes clear. Though negative behavior is not context specific, lapse is particularly likely when the perpetrator is in the same

[78] Ibid., 2:4.

exteroceptive and interoceptive contexts. As a result, Maimonides' suggestion of change is behaviorally sound. With the exteroceptive contextual changes of locale and distance from the object of his desire, and the interoceptive contextual changes of name (which is really identity) and manner of behavior, the perpetrator gives himself the opportunity to learn in a context that is as far removed as possible from the one in which he sinned.

* * *

***Halachah* 5**

> It is very praiseworthy for the penitent to confess in public and make his sins known to them. He should reveal to others the sins made against his peers, saying, "Truly, I sinned against so and so and I did thus and thus, but behold, today I repent and regret (my actions)." All who are arrogant and do not make (their sins) known but rather hide their sins, theirs is not complete *teshuvah*, as it says, "He who hides his sins will not succeed" (Pro. 28:13). These words address sins between humans.
> In sins that are between man and God, one does not need to publicize them; it is arrogant if one reveals them. Rather, he should repent before God and detail his sins before God. He should confess about them in public in a general manner. It is good for him not to reveal his sins, as it says, "Happy is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps. 32:1).[79]

This *halachah* is divided into two sections. In the first, regarding sins between two humans, the perpetrator should publicly and verbally enumerate the list of sins that he has committed. This lengthy confession is important as it allows the perpetrator to take full responsibility for his actions and ensure that he has adequately addressed all his guilt in order to be able to continue with the *teshuvah* process. Were one of his sins deliberately left out of the list, the perpetrator would not be approaching return with a full heart and soul and thus, as this *halachah* states, it does not constitute complete *teshuvah*.

---

[79] Ibid., 2:5.

In the latter section, in sins between man and God, for the same reason that one should enumerate the sins between humans, one needs to detail the sins that he committed against God. However, because the parties involved are just God and the perpetrator, Maimonides deems that anything beyond a general public confession is arrogant.

In looking at the question of arrogance first, if one were truly repentant for his actions, there would be a significant infringement on his sense of self. Therefore, by being willing to almost boast about the transgressions one has done before God, especially when it is not the suggested manner of approaching the apology, the motivations are not with a full heart and soul and thus could not be seen as being for the purpose of complete *teshuvah*. Moreover, confession is supposed to demonstrate humility, not reflect its opposite, arrogance. However, with the public confessions between peers, there are the personal benefits of making that confession. In addition, by confessing all the sins in a public manner, there are relationship benefits because the victim would be more likely to forgive the perpetrator and the conspecific congruence would be reestablished.

* * *

***Halachah* 6**

> Even though *teshuvah* and crying out are always desirable, on the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it is more desirable and is received immediately, as it says, "Seek out God when He is found" (Isa. 55:6). These words address repentance of an individual. In repentance of a community, any time that they do *teshuvah* and cry out with a complete heart, they will be answered, as it says, "...as the Eternal, our God, is whenever we call on Him" (Deut. 4:7).[80]

[80] Ibid., 2:6.

Though up to this point there has been little mention of the ten days of repentance that fall between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, this is an important time of the year for Jews with regard to *teshuvah*. For a fuller discussion of the psychological and Jewish implications of *teshuvah* and Yom Kippur, see Chapter 4, below.

In this *halachah*, it is important to see that, though the ten days of repentance are special regarding *teshuvah*, their import does not outweigh the obligation or desire to seek and reach complete *teshuvah* during the rest of the year. This is evident with all of the above psychological and Jewish theory. None of it was mentioned within the context of the High Holidays because none of it is has temporal limitations. In fact, one should seek *teshuvah* when he is ready to commit to a change, lest there be repentance without a full heart and soul or behavior lapses. In either of the aforementioned cases, the repentance would not be considered complete *teshuvah* jewishly or psychologically.

* * *

***Halachah* 7**

> Yom Kippur is the time of *teshuvah* for each individual and the community; it is the conclusion of forgiveness and pardon for Israel. Because of that, everyone must do *teshuvah* and confess on Yom Kippur. It is a command to begin the confession on the eve of Yom Kippur prior to eating lest one chokes on food prior to confessing. Even though one confesses prior to eating, one returns and confesses during all of the Yom Kippur services. Where does one confess (during the service)? An individual confesses after his praying the Amidah. The service leader confesses during the middle of his praying the Amidah in the fourth blessing.[81]

Again, I am going to hold the discussion of Yom Kippur in abeyance until Chapter 4. One interesting point to note in this *halachah* is that the confessions that one says on

[81] Ibid., 2:7.

Yom Kippur must be said multiple times throughout the day. In the Jewish realm, there is little reason for this. In all of the facets of biblical *teshuvah*, there was no need to repeat a step if it were done correctly. This Mmaimonidean model, however, is psychologically sound. By requiring repeated confession during Yom Kippur, Maimonides incorporates behavioral training into his system of *teshuvah*. The perpetrator repeats his confession with the stimuli of fasting and self-affliction in order to decrease his behavior. With operant conditioning at work during the twenty-four hours of confession, the perpetrator has the opportunity to positively reinforce desirable behavior in the synagogue while repeatedly punishing sinful behavior. This all builds to the greater possibility that the behavioral change will be maintained after the sun sets after the concluding service of Yom Kippur.

* * *

***Halachah* 8**

> The confession customarily recited by all Israel begins, "For we all have sinned...." This is the crux of the confession. Transgressions that he has confessed on one Yom Kippur, he must return and confess for them on future Yom Kippurs even though he has done *teshuvah*, as it says, "For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sins are always before me" (Ps. 51:5).[82]

Not only does one have to repeat the confession during the day on Yom Kippur, but one has to repeat the confessions on following Yom Kippurs. As mentioned in the analysis of *Halachah* 7 above, this serves to further reinforce, maintain, and generalize the change beyond the synagogue and the learning context, into future contexts.

---

[82] Ibid., 2:8.

The formula for the confession is helpful for people in that it allows them to approach the step of confession in their process of *teshuvah* without having to worry about how to state their confession. With this model, the individual does not have to fear that the confession is stated in an inappropriate manner (lest it be invalid). Nor does the individual have to feel alone. Stated in the first person plural, the individual does not feel isolated and also is more willing to breach the step of confession.

This sense of being included as part of the group is extremely powerful. Though beyond the scope of this paper, the sense of belonging that comes with saying this confession in the first person plural is significant. There is less of a blow to the sense of self and less of a likelihood of shame that comes with a confessional formula that includes everyone in the community. The individual will less likely feel like a deviant and more likely feel like his transgression, though sinful, is not so far out of the normative realm of human experience.

* * *

***Halachah* 9**

> *Teshuvah* and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between man and God; for example, one who ate forbidden food or engaged in illicit sexual relations, and the like. But, transgressions that are between humans; for example, one who injured another, cursed another, or stole, and the like, he is never forgiven until he gives the victim what he owes him and placates him. Even though he returns money that he owed, the penitent must placate him and ask for forgiveness from the victim. Even if he only teased the victim verbally, he must appease the victim and continue to approach him until he is forgiven. If the victim does not want to forgive him, the penitent should bring a group of three people from among his neighbors, approach the victim, and ask for forgiveness from him. If the victim is not placated, he must bring the neighbors a second and third time. If the victim is still not placated, he can leave the victim alone and carry on (with his life). The one who does not forgive is the sinner. If the victim is his teacher, he

> should continue to request forgiveness, even one thousand times, until he is forgiven.[83]

As we saw in the biblical facets of *teshuvah*, acknowledgement and confession only do so much. Restitution is a crucial part of *teshuvah* with sins between two humans. If there is a way to restore the debt of the victim, the perpetrator must do so. *Teshuvah* is not complete until the perpetrator has confessed, made restitution, and received forgiveness from the victim. If forgiveness is not achieved, the perpetrator must seek out the victim three times. Between peers, those are the necessary steps for restitution. However, restitution is not made between a student and his teacher until his teacher forgives him, regardless of the number of times the perpetrator must confront him.

Acknowledging that there is a disparity in the relationship, Maimonides' rule for trying to restore the relationship is psychologically sound. A victim is more likely to forgive if the perpetrator offers restitution, offers a sincere apology, and makes an effort to maintain contact with the victim. If restitution is achieved, the victim is placated, forgiveness is granted and *teshuvah* is complete; the relationship between the two peers benefits (as it is allowed to proceed). With a restored relationship, the personal benefits and the benefits to the sense of self are quite clear. In addition, Maimonides addresses conspecific congruence. Between peers (conspecifics), the perpetrator need make restitution only three times. Beyond that, the victim (now a sinner) is being unreasonable. However, a teacher and student are not conspecifics. There is a clear hierarchal disparity in their relationship and, as a result, the student cannot just ask three

---

[83] Ibid., 2:9.

times. In order to restore the former balance between them, the student must be willing to be more deferential to the teacher than he would to a peer.[84]

* * *

***Halachah* 10**

> It is forbidden for a person to be merciless and not be appeased. Rather, he should be easy to be placated and difficult to anger and at the moment when the sinner asks for forgiveness from him, he should forgive with a full heart and a willing soul. Even if he was aggravated and wronged many times, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge. This is the path of the seed of Israel and their proper hearts. However, the idolaters with uncircumcised hearts do not act this way, rather "their wrath is preserved forever" (Amos 1:11). Thus, scripture says about the Gibeonites who did not forgive and were not appeased, "The Gibeonites are not of the Children of Israel" (II Sam. 21:2).[85]

This *halachah*, focusing on the victim and forgiveness instead of the perpetrator and *teshuvah*, is beyond the immediate scope of this paper. Maimonides includes this *halachah* in this chapter because of its connection to the process of *teshuvah* on the whole. Implicit in the process of restitution is the notion of having to placate the victim who, in turn, offers forgiveness to the perpetrator. Without that forgiveness, it is less likely that the perpetrator's guilt would be assuaged, lessening the likelihood that the perpetrator would find solace in the *teshuvah* process.

* * *

***Halachah* 11**

> The one who sins against another, and the victim dies before he is able to ask for forgiveness, he brings ten people and stands by the victim's grave and says before them, "I sinned before God, the God of Israel, and this person, by doing thus and thus to him." If he owed the victim money, he

---

[84] This does not even acknowledge the Jewish tradition's profound respect for the teacher/student relationship. With that taken into account, Maimonides' ruling that the perpetrator must approach his teacher even one thousand time makes even more sense.
[85] Ibid., 2:10.

> would return it to the victim's heirs. If he did not know who the heirs were, he would leave the money with the court and confess.[86]

Though only the victim can grant forgiveness, Maimonides addresses the real problem of what happens if the victim is not able to grant it to the perpetrator. In this case, the perpetrator still confesses his transgression verbally and publicly and makes restitution through the appropriate means. In this way, the perpetrator is able to fulfill his path of repentance and achieve complete *teshuvah* despite the victim's absence.

If there were any questions about the purpose of *teshuvah*, this *halachah* addresses them. Though it is important for there to be restitution, confession, and turning, there is also a significant need on the part of the perpetrator to have his guilt alleviated and be able to grow and learn and change from his sin. Though it would be myopic to say that *teshuvah* is all about the perpetrator, the psychological benefits for the perpetrator are clearly a significant component; otherwise, there would be little emotional motivation for the perpetrator to seek it out. This *halachah* addresses the sense of self and the personal benefits that arise from *teshuvah*. Though congruence cannot be restored within the original relationship, congruence within relationships with the victim's extended family members is possible with the restitution. Because of the enriched environment fostered by the group of ten at the victim's grave (fulfilling the ritual of *teshuvah* with the verbal confession), neural plasticity is more likely, meaning that the perpetrator is more likely to change from the experience.

* * *

[86] Ibid., 2:11.

Similar to the findings of Chapters 1 and 2, the study of this chapter of *Hilchot Teshuvah* reveals Maimonides' process of *teshuvah*. This system is introduced in the *halachot* above but can be better understood in a seven-step process of complete *teshuvah*. These seven steps are: (1) acknowledgement, (2) remorse, (3) resolve, (4) confession, (5) restitution, (6) request for forgiveness, and (7) behavioral change. By outlining these seven steps, the similarities between the psychological process of repentance and the biblical process of *teshuvah* become apparent.

Acknowledgement is the first step of this process and a prerequisite for engaging in the process of complete *teshuvah* in the first place. Without the perpetrator's awareness of the transgression that he has committed, not only would he be unable to affect the personal change that *teshuvah* demands, but he is also unlikely to even think that *teshuvah* is necessary. As a result, this first step of acknowledgement is essential for the perpetrator.

After acknowledgement, the penitent must feel remorse for the transgression he committed. This step is next logically. It is imperative for the perpetrator to be sorry for his transgression or else, again, he would be unlikely to pursue *teshuvah*. As mentioned in *halachah* 2, remorse is one of the crucial early steps in the *teshuvah* process.

From there, having acknowledged his sin and felt guilt, the penitent has to resolve in his mind and his heart that he will not repeat the transgression again. Resolve is an important step for Maimonides because it functions as a bridge between the internal and the external realms. Resolve allows for internal feelings to be concretized in actions. *Halachah* 2 mentions how this step functions as part of the process, but *halachah* 3

stresses how important it is as a bridge concept. Without resolve, the rest of the steps are meaningless, which, as Maimonides points out, is like trying to purify oneself while grasping tightly to something that is inherently unclean.

The next step and probably the step that gets the most focus in this chapter is confession. With the guidelines and rationale outlined in *halachot* 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8, the import of confession is pervasive in this chapter. Confession bridges the process of *teshuvah* from the realm of emotion to action. Confession is a prescribed step that forces the penitent to take agency in his own life and act on his feelings of guilt and resolve. Confession is public in nature and is laid out in order to allow the penitent the opportunity to address and express his feelings of guilt.

Now having admitted and confessed his transgression, the penitent has to make restitution. Explicit in *halachah* 9, Maimonides points out that the victim does not have to grant forgiveness until he has been placated. This placating is remuneration for the damages of the transgression as well as whatever is necessary in order for the victim to feel appeased. The restitution is not just for the sake of the victim. Restitution allows the penitent to rid himself of the misappropriated gains of the transgression thereby allowing himself to get rid of the guilt that came along with them.

After confession and restitution, the penitent is then allowed to make a request for forgiveness from the victim. The penitent is only allowed to ask for pardon from the victim after the victim has been appeased. This forces the perpetrator to address the pain of the victim first. Then, and only then, are the needs of the perpetrator met. As Maimonides addresses in halachot 9 and 10, there should be a balance. The perpetrator

should not be reluctant to approach his victim time and time again to ask for forgiveness. However, the victim also must not be difficult to appease or reluctant to forgive.

The seventh step and hallmark of the *teshuvah* process is behavioral change. This step takes two forms discussed in *halachah* 4. First, the penitent must keep away from the problematic behavior of his transgression avoiding the context and conduct of its perpetration. Then, the penitent must change his past behavior and never repeat it again. If he is able to reach this final step and see the process through to its fruition, the penitent is able to reach the ideal of complete *teshuvah* as defined in *halachah* 1. The penitent is able to find himself in the exact same situation with the exact same internal and external contexts and refrain from transgression.

Though Maimonides' process of complete *teshuvah* has seven steps, the progression described is very similar to those identified in the ends of Chapters 1 and 2. In fact, where there were deficiencies in the other lists, Maimonides presents a more complete homogenization of the other two processes. All three processes of repentance tacitly addressed acknowledgement, but remorse and resolve were not so universal. Neither remorse nor resolve is mentioned explicitly in the Bible and the two concepts are assumed in the psychological literature, but Maimonides actually mandates these internal processes as steps of *teshuvah*. Confession and restitution are both explicitly commanded in the Bible. However, in the psychological material, these two steps are merely mentioned as ways to increase the likelihood of forgiveness.[87] Requesting forgiveness is

[87] The implication being that these two steps are not for the sake of addressing the victim's hurt but rather the penitent's expiation of guilt, something Maimonides, and truly the Jewish tradition, would reject.

the most intuitive step of this process and, as a result, is not commanded in the Bible. In the psychological literature, requesting and receiving forgiveness is well studied, as it is easily quantifiable and analyzed. Finally, behavioral change is mandated in all three systems.

* * *

From the meager beginnings of sacrifice at the Tabernacle to the complex system described by Maimonides, *teshuvah* addresses many facets of the intrapsychic world of the penitent, the interpersonal world of perpetrators and victims, and the spiritual health of the community. In *Hilchot Teshuvah* of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides synthesizes nearly two millennia of Jewish precedent into a practical and practicable guide for *teshuvah*. Beyond directing the perpetrators and victims toward Jewish actions, the chapter also shows that Maimonides' system nurtures the psychological realities of the parties involved. Thus, beyond guarding them from defensiveness, shame, and psychological trauma, Maimonides' procedure fosters learning, behavioral change, and real growth on the part of the perpetrator.

## Chapter 4

## Ritualization

Throughout the course of this paper, there have been investigations into different facets of repentance. In Chapter 1, we discovered the basis of *teshuvah* as delineated by the Tanach. In Chapter 2, we examined the basic psychological theory of repentance. In Chapter 3, we saw how Maimonides synthesized these two different theories into a practical step-by-step system of *teshuvah*. However, any discussion of *teshuvah* would be less than complete without a discussion of Yom Kippur.

* * *

### Yom Kippur Liturgy

In looking at the ritual of Yom Kippur, albeit briefly, the convergence of the psychological and Jewish theories becomes evident. In fact, in the analysis of Yom Kippur, as the sacred day is an intricate network of individual rituals, it becomes apparent how all of the above theories intersect in a complex rite. The discussion of Yom Kippur was held aside until this section of the paper because it represents a ritualized manifestation of the above theories. However, now with the knowledge of *teshuvah*, psychological theory, and Maimonides' synthesis of the two, the discussion of Yom Kippur ritual will be fruitful and beneficial to the reader.

Though ritual studies is its own discipline of study, one important theoretical element explaining ritual comes from Victor Turner, an anthropologist focusing mainly on ritual. He introduces the theory of liminality. In simplest terms, liminality describes

transitional periods – the time of a lack of position during a status change. In the context of transitions experienced by the individual in their spiritual growth, liminality is "the transitional period or phase of a rite of passage, during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility, and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc."[88] Having studied *teshuvah*, it is clear that the perpetrator is in a liminal state. His status in relation to God and humans is in question; he is inherently humbled, has to follow prescribed forms of conduct, and only emerges from this state when he has completed his process of *teshuvah*.

In his research, Turner identifies two categories to his concept of liminality:

> I wish to distinguish two main types of liminality – though many others will undoubtedly be discovered – first, the liminality that characterizes *rituals of status elevation*, in which the ritual subject or novice is being conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position in an institutionalized system of such positions. Secondly, the liminality frequently found in cyclical and calendrical ritual, usually of a collective kind, in which, at certain culturally defined points in the seasonal cycle, groups or categories of persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors; and they, in their turn, must accept with good will their ritual degradation. Such rites may be described as *rituals of status reversal*.[89]

This distinction is important to the study of *teshuvah*. The process of *teshuvah* that we have been investigating is predominantly what Turner would consider a ritual of status elevation. Through the process, the perpetrator moves from having to humble himself, a position of little social status, to being reinstated as a full member of the community. The

---

[88] *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Liminality."
[89] Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1976), 167.

fact that the community is so involved in most steps of his process only goes to reinforce the institutionalized nature of this ritual.

Though not exactly as defined by Turner, the other type of liminality is the focus of this discussion on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur, as it is a cyclical seasonal ritual, allows people to go through the ritual of communal descent into guilt. Jews participate in this ritual because, at the end of the grappling with guilt and humility, they will return to their status of blameless at the completion of its performance. Thus, there is safety involved. However, from the beginning of the month of *Elul*, Jews begin to embark on a journey into liminality. Like the guilt that is removed by *teshuvah*. Yom Kippur provides the cathartic end to the period of liminality restoring order and status among the entire community.

In order to show how embedded the notions of biblical *teshuvah* and theories of psychology are in the Yom Kippur ritual, it is necessary only to look at three representative parts of the liturgy.[90] Granted, the *machzor* is often many hundreds of pages long, but, using a traditional rabbinic hermeneutic,[91] if in three pieces of the service these themes are found, how much the more so in the rest of the Yom Kippur ritual.

---

[90] With one caveat. The notion of restitution, conspecific congruence, and relationship benefits are not as cleanly or clearly addressed in the liturgy. However, the topics are definitely embedded in the Jewish mentality around Yom Kippur. Though implicit, this phrase from *Yoma* 8:9 addresses these components: "For transgressions between man and God, Yom Kippur atones, but for transgression between a man and his peer, Yom Kippur does not atone until he [the perpetrator] placates the other." The notion of placating the victim addresses restitution from Chapter 1, as addressed in *Halachah* 9 in Chapter 3. With the restitution of money and making sure the victim is appeased enough to forgive, the relationship benefits and, if done right, will restore congruence between the conspecifics.

[91] Attributed to Rabbi Ishmael in the Introduction to the *Sifra*.

These three service components, exemplary of all that has been discussed so far, all occurring in *Musaf* service, are the *Unetaneh Tokef*, *Ashamnu*, and the *Avodah* service.

Though literal sacrifice does not occur in the Yom Kippur ritual, the *Avodah* service of Yom Kippur recalls the sacrificial service that took place on Yom Kippur during the existence of the Temple. The sacrificial system is first midrashically located in the flow of Jewish history from creation; in the poetry of the *Avodah* service it is as if the entirety of creation and the Genesis narrative occurred so that the Temple could be built.[92] Then, once the Temple's establishment is clear, the order of the service is laid out, which includes the procedure of the priests slaughtering and spreading the blood of the various offerings that come to the Temple on Yom Kippur.

The Temple service of Yom Kippur is far outside the realm of this paper. However, there are a few interesting points to note in the order of this rite. Again, as noted in Chapter 1, the blood of sacrificial offerings was not used to purify individuals. In order to purify himself, the High Priest had to immerse five times, wash his hands and feet ten times, and change his garments five times – a special procedure because of the holiness of the day. What purifies the individuals is the release of the scapegoat. Though rooted in Ancient Near-East civilizations, this practice was important in symbolically banishing evil from amidst the people as a way to correct a significant imbalance.

> Exorcism of impurity is not enough; its power must be removed. An attested method is to banish it to its place of origin or to some place where its malefic powers could work in interest of the sender. Thus the

---

[92] See Philip Birnbaum ed. *Machzor HaShalem* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1988).

scapegoat was sent off to the wilderness, which was considered inhabited by the satyr-demon Azazel.[93]

Through confession, the scapegoat was given all of the sins of the Israelite community and then sent away in order to cancel out the deficiencies of the people and balance the evil in the world.

By recalling the Yom Kippur Temple service, Jews are able to acknowledge the presence of this important facet of *teshuvah*. Though sacrifice is not practiced today, the framework that sacrifice once provided for *teshuvah* is undeniable and central to the biblical expression of *teshuvah*.[94]

The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer is central to the High Holiday liturgy. Within the awe-inspiring and fear-inducing lines of the liturgy discussing the magnitude of the period of the High Holidays, we encounter a paragraph discussing the major theme of the season:

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכָּתֵבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כִּפּוּר יֵחָתֵמוּן,
כַּמָּה יַעַבְרוּן, וְכַמָּה יִבָּרֵאוּן:
מִי יִחְיֶה, וּמִי יָמוּת:[95]

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed;
How many will pass on and how many will be created;
Who will live and who will die;

---

[93] Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 3, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1045.

[94] The other insight we get into Yom Kippur ritual from Leviticus 16 comes in verse 29 where there is the command for individuals to practice self-denial. Along with the themes of sacrifice and confession, this can be seen as a way to humble the self and act with deference to God by inconveniencing the self for the purpose of eliciting guilt, remorse, and eventually, *teshuvah*.

[95] All Hebrew liturgical citations are taken from: Philip Birnbaum ed. *Machzor HaShalem* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1988). All liturgical translations are my own.

The liturgy continues listing a litany of fates possible for individuals during the upcoming year. Implied in this liturgy is that by transgressing, one becomes more susceptible to the negative consequences mentioned. In the end of the prayer, the caveat to the terrifying liturgy is:

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וּצְדָקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רֹעַ הַגְּזֵרָה.

But *teshuvah*, prayer, and *tzedakah* remove the wicked decree.

For the purposes of this paper, this line is crucial. By pursuing complete *teshuvah* and changing behaviors, Jews are able to take control of their lives at a time when they feel like they have little to none.

Through the harsh words of the prayer and difficult themes mentioned therein it is clear how this relates to the topic of this paper. In acknowledging that one has sinned, one makes himself vulnerable to the fates described in the *Unetaneh Tokef*. This is a significant barrier to admitting responsibility. If given a choice, few would want to admit fault and thus bring themselves into this system. However, if he were able to see himself as inextricably tied into the system, there would be self-protective benefits of "going through the motions" of *teshuvah*. By doing that, the perpetrator does not take the severity of the situation to heart (necessarily) and also looks as though he has repented so that he could try to remove the decree.

However, if taken seriously and approached honestly, the prayer offers an enriched environment for the perpetrator that would absolutely lend itself to neural plasticity. The levels of stress and fear in this environment are blatant. At the same time,

there is the perpetrator's community surrounding him, ten days to process his behavior, and the opportunity to take that information processing out of the synagogue to help integrate and continue growth outside of the synagogue walls.

The final piece of Yom Kippur liturgy is the *Ashamnu*. This is one poem of the liturgy of confession. The liturgy is set up as an acrostic with a litany of sins.

אָשַׁמְנוּ, בָּגַדְנוּ, גָּזַלְנוּ, דִּבַּרְנוּ דֹפִי.
הֶעֱוִינוּ, וְהִרְשַׁעְנוּ, זַדְנוּ, חָמַסְנוּ, טָפַלְנוּ שָׁקֶר.
יָעַצְנוּ רָע, כִּזַּבְנוּ, לַצְנוּ, מָרַדְנוּ, נִאַצְנוּ, סָרַרְנוּ, עָוִינוּ,
פָּשַׁעְנוּ, צָרַרְנוּ, קִשִּׁינוּ עֹרֶף.
רָשַׁעְנוּ, שִׁחַתְנוּ, תִּעַבְנוּ, תָּעִינוּ, תִּעְתָּעְנוּ.

> We are guilty, we have betrayed, we have stolen, we have spoken slander.
> We have caused others to sin, we have caused wickedness, we have acted maliciously, we have been violent, we have spread falsehood.
> We have advised for evil, we have deceived, we have mocked, we have rebelled, we have blasphemed, we have turned away, we have sinned, we have transgressed, we have caused grief, we have been stiff-necked.
> We have been wicked, we have been corrupt, we have done abominable things, we have gone astray, we have caused others to go astray.

Of note in this liturgy is the breadth of sins mentioned and the fact that the sins are all mentioned in the first person plural. The choreography of this prayer is such that the service leader sings each phrase and beats on his chest. The congregation repeats every phrase and also beats on their chests, once for every sin mentioned.

This prayer is the quintessential confession. Like we saw above in Chapter 1, confession is an integral part of the *teshuvah* process. Confession is the act of taking responsibility for your action, acknowledging your mistakes, and starting the process of

moving toward a change. If one is able and willing to say this poem, he has symbolically admitted fault for all of the sins he has committed. This prayer is an alphabetical acrostic encompassing all sins from *aleph* to *tav*. By extension, by saying these words, the penitent is admitting fault for all sins that he has committed whether knowingly or not. And, as confession is a crucial step in the process of *teshuvah*, by admitting error in this confessional arena and by addressing his problematic behavior, one has already started on the process of turning.

Two obvious barriers to *teshuvah* can be seen in this prayer. First, with such a detailed and painful list, the acceptance of guilt might be too much for the individual to take on. Because of the specifics (especially if taken too literally), the individual might feel as though the sins to which he is confessing are unreasonable and not ones in which he is culpable. Furthermore, with the admission of guilt in these twenty-four sins, the barrier of shame is real. Truly, with the magnitude of admission and sheer quantity of confession during Yom Kippur, shame is an understandable barrier to participation in *teshuvah* and the Yom Kippur rituals.

However, the benefits that come from this confession are immense. By confessing, he allows for the personal guilt-alleviating benefits associated with repentance. Furthermore, the abatement of guilt will surely positively impact the perpetrator's sense of self. Both of these benefits make participation in true confession a real incentive. Like the confession mentioned in *Halachah* 8 in Chapter 3, the incentive of group confession adds to the enriched environment and powerful sense of belonging (versus the potential sense of alienation).

Furthermore, in the new context of the synagogue, the perpetrator is able to directly address his behavioral change. In the *Ashamnu*, counterconditioning is actively taking place. With the confession, the party addresses the negative behavior. In addition, there is a positive punishment (beating your chest) associated with the negative behavior thereby lessening the likelihood that the behavior will be repeated.

Through the examination of the liturgy of Yom Kippur, the psychological and Jewish processes of *teshuvah* are visible. Though the ritual developed over centuries, the central purpose was to ensure significant change for the participants. The liminality of the participants in the Yom Kippur ritual is important as it strips each individual of status leaving an entire community exposed. By the end of Yom Kippur, the status has been restored and people are able to leave synagogue with a real sense of transformation. This transformation is not from one ritual rather from a complex group of actions each geared at addressing the *teshuvah* of the individual and helping him along in his process of repentance.

**Conclusion**

This paper has shown the interplay of the Jewish definition of *teshuvah*, some of the rules for its praxis, and the psychological underpinnings of *teshuvah*.

In the Jewish realm, *teshuvah* is defined by a quadripartite process. Sacrifice was the first basic frame of *teshuvah* in the Bible and though its practice ended with the destruction of the Temple, its framework still holds. Confession, the act of acknowledging ones faults and admitting them publicly, is a crucial step in the process of *teshuvah*. If the sin is done between two humans, restitution is also necessary in order to try to restore the debt that was created by the initial transgression. Lastly, and truly the hallmark of *teshuvah*, is turning; the perpetrator makes a permanent change of negative behaviors.

In the psychological approach, it was first important to understand repentance the psychological world-view. In order for repentance to be possible, there has to be a sense of self, the notion of conspecific congruence, and long-term memory of negative events. Then, repentance was investigated from three psychological schools of thought. The social psychological research showed benefits for and barriers to repentance: relationship, personal, and self-protective benefits as well as disagreement, fear of punishment, and shame as barriers. Behavioral psychology showed that counterconditioning, though heavily dependent on the context and prone to lapse, is possible to achieve and maintain. The neuropsychology research showed that nurturing environments that have mild to moderate stress increase neural plasticity leaving the brain more malleable to change.

The second chapter of Maimonides' *Hilchot Teshuvah* showed some of the specific guidelines for pursuing the process of *teshuvah*. Maimonides spent the chapter answering the question of what *teshuvah* is. In his answer, there are mentions of the biblical facets of *teshuvah* as well as elements heading in additional directions that closely addressed the same psychological processes as we studied. As a result, Maimonides presented a guide to *teshuvah* that encouraged and allowed for change in behavior while being sensitive to the emotional world of the perpetrator.

Finally, in a practical study of how these theories look in a real world ritual, we looked at the intersection of the Jewish and psychological world around the liturgy of Yom Kippur. In particular, looking at three pieces of the Yom Kippur *musaf* service, all of the Jewish and psychological elements were evident. Once again, by using a rabbinic hermeneutic, if three pieces of liturgy yield insight into these themes, how much the more so in the rest of the Yom Kippur ritual.

From all of this, we can see that *teshuvah* is the result of a multi-step process incorporating the inner and interpersonal worlds of the penitent. At the end of the process, if followed with full heart and soul, the penitent can achieve real change. This procedure, though difficult, addresses the legal and psychological guilt of the penitent and the needs of the victim. Each step in the course leads to and supports the next phase. If the method is followed, knowing that it is difficult to stay on course during the process of repentance, achievement of complete *teshuvah* is emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically fulfilling. Because of this, Judaism has ritualized a system of *teshuvah* with the intention of alleviating guilt. As long as one is willing to put in the difficult

work necessary to reach this goal, anyone is able to achieve complete *teshuvah* and change.

* * *

Jonah was a prophet who was chosen personally by God. In the face of a direct commandment, Jonah decided to turn from his responsibility and flee. At first, Jonah was unwilling to acknowledge his guilt. He was unwilling to accept the fact that he was wrong. In his darkest days, in the depths of the stomach of a fish, Jonah needed to turn to God and apologize. Jonah admitted that what he did was arrogant and foolish. He acknowledged that he did not listen to God's word. Jonah confessed his fault and vowed to change his behavior. Immediately, Jonah was lifted out of his darkness. He was safe and secure on the shores.

Jonah again was called by God and was given the same command. He was in the same situation. His first inclination was probably to turn and flee, but through his trials, stressful as they were, Jonah grew as a human. Jonah turned back to save the lives of the people of Nineveh.

Though Jonah is challenging as a biblical character, he is a wonderful model of *teshuvah*. Like Jonah, every individual finds himself faced with life's challenges. We are all confronted with the shoulds and oughts in our life. We are all faced with choices and, as a result of free will, we must deal with the consequences of our decisions. When we err, we can allow ourselves to feel guilty but we also can act.

Through the process of *teshuvah*, we have the power to alleviate our guilt. We need to acknowledge our errors. We have to make it right through restitution. We have

to take responsibility for our mistakes and confess them to those we injured. We need to expect ourselves to change. We need this all personally because guilt is painful and repeated transgressions are detrimental to the self. We engage in *teshuvah* because, though it is difficult, change is attainable and the alleviation of guilt is one of the greatest things we can do for ourselves.

אַשְׁרֵי נְשׂוּי־פֶשַׁע כְּסוּי חֲטָאָה׃
אַשְׁרֵי־אָדָם לֹא יַחְשֹׁב יְהוָה לוֹ עָוֹן וְאֵין בְּרוּחוֹ רְמִיָּה׃
כִּי הֶחֱרַשְׁתִּי בָּלוּ עֲצָמַי בְּשַׁאֲגָתִי כָּל־הַיּוֹם׃
כִּי | יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה | תִּכְבַּד עָלַי יָדֶךָ נֶהְפַּךְ לְשַׁדִּי בְּחַרְבֹנֵי
קַיִץ סֶלָה׃
חַטָּאתִי אוֹדִיעֲךָ וַעֲוֹנִי לֹא־כִסִּיתִי אָמַרְתִּי אוֹדֶה עֲלֵי פְשָׁעַי
לַיהוָה וְאַתָּה נָשָׂאתָ עֲוֹן חַטָּאתִי סֶלָה׃
עַל־זֹאת יִתְפַּלֵּל כָּל־חָסִיד | אֵלֶיךָ לְעֵת מְצֹא רַק לְשֵׁטֶף
מַיִם רַבִּים אֵלָיו לֹא יַגִּיעוּ׃
אַתָּה | סֵתֶר לִי מִצַּר תִּצְּרֵנִי רָנֵּי פַלֵּט תְּסוֹבְבֵנִי סֶלָה׃

Happy is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered over.
Happy the man whom the LORD does not hold guilty, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
As long as I said nothing, my limbs wasted away from my anguished roaring all day long.
For night and day Your hand lay heavy on me; my vigor waned as in the summer drought. *Selah.*
Then I acknowledged my sin to You; I did not cover up my guilt; I resolved, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and You forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah.*
Therefore let every faithful man pray to You upon discovering his sin, that the rushing mighty waters not overtake him.
You are my shelter; You preserve me from distress; You surround me with the joyous shouts of deliverance. *Selah.* (Ps. 32:1-7)

**Bibliography**

**Primary Sources**

*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999.

*Mishneh Torah leHaRambam: Hilchot Teshuvah*. Jerusalem: Mechon Mamre, 2007.

Birnbaum, Philip ed. *Machzor HaShalem*. New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1988.

**Secondary Sources**

Bouton, Mark E. "A Learning Theory Perspective on Lapse, Relapse, and the Maintenance of Behavior Change." *Health Psychology* 19, no.1 (2000): S57-63.

Cozolino, Louis J. *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain*. New York: Norton, 2002.

Exline, Julie Juola and Roy F. Baumeister. "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers." In McCullough et al., *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 133-55.

Fraley, Lawrence E. "Strategic Interdisciplinary Relations Between a Natural Science Community and a Psychology Community." *Behavior Analyst Today* 2, no.4 (2002): 290-324.

Hall, Edward T. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Books, 1989.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1950.

McCullough, Michael E., Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen, eds. *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Guilford, 2000.

Menninger, Karl. *Whatever Became of Sin?* New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973.

Milgrom, Jacob. *The Anchor Bible*. Vol. 3, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Newberg, Andrew B., Eugene G. d'Aquili, Stephanie K. Newberg, and Verushka deMarici. "The Neuropsychological Correlates of Forgiveness." In McCullough et al., *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 91-110.

Peli, Pinchas H. *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

Rye, Mark S., Kenneth I. Pargament, M. Amir Ali, Guy L. Beck, Elliot N. Dorff, Charles Hallisey, Vasudha Narayanan, and James G. Williams. "Religious Perspectives on Forgiveness." In McCullough et al., *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 17-40.

Schimmel, Solomon. *Wounds Not Healed By Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process*. Chicago: Aldine, 1976.