HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
NEW YORK SCHOOL

INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESES

AUTHOR John R. Moskowitz

TITLE FROM SIN TO RECONCILATION:
THE RABBINIC PERSPECTIVE ON TESHUVAH

TYPE OF THESIS: D.H.L. ( ) Rabbinic (✓)

Master's ( )

1. May circulate (✓)

2. Is restricted ( ) for ____ years.

Note: The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses for a period of no more than ten years.

I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.

3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis. ___ yes ✓ no

March 17, 1982
Date

John R. Moskowitz
Signature of Author

Library Record

Microfilmed _____
Date

Signature of Library Staff Member

FROM SIN TO RECONCILIATION:

THE RABBINIC PERSPECTIVE ON TESHUVAH

JOHN R. MOSCOWITZ

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
New York, N.Y.

Date March 17, 1982

Referee: Professor Norman Cohen

Acknowledgements

The writing of a Rabbinic Thesis is more than an academic piece of work; it is also a rite of passage signifying the culmination of my five years in Rabbinical School. This thesis, then, is as much a reflection of my first four years at Hebrew Union College as it is of this past year.

Therefore, I would begin by thanking all those who have taught and challenged me, the HUC Faculty at both the Los Angeles and New York Schools. And I would thank, too, those who have also taught me, but more, have laughed and listened at the right times, and have provided some lasting and invaluable friendship: my classmates.

Finally, I would like to specifically acknowledge and thank my advisor, Dr. Norman Cohen. Dr. Cohen's enthusiasm, insight, warmth and occasional nudgings were appreciated with fondness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I chose to work in the area of Midrash for several reasons. First, Midrash, focused on the aggadic content of Rabbinic Literature, is primarily concerned with ideas, values and even the emotional life of the individual.

As post-Holocaust Jews, our central concern is the values by which we should live. And, therefore, three questions follow: From which resources shall we draw these values? To what extent shall we draw our values from the Western secular world around us? And to what extent shall our values reflect a particularly Jewish view of the world? I do not have firm answers to any of these questions, but I do believe that each demands an inquiry into some aspect of the rabbinic mind.

Therefore I decided to immerse myself in the world of the Rabbis, not just because I thought they have much to teach me about an important topic, but also because their worldview is essentially coherent and cohesive.

Jacob Neusner has pointed out that for the rabbis, the Torah is "the organizing principle of reality."[1] Implicit in all my studies in rabbinical school has been the question of the extent to which the rabbinic view of a given matter can inform my thinking. By studying the aggadic view of one idea, with all the limitations of this process, I hoped to begin to know to what extent the rabbinic perspective was important to

me, to what extent it reflects my values, and how I might want to incorporate the rabbis' thinking into my own. Finally, I knew that any foray into rabbinic thinking would be enriching and would yield much.

So why a thesis on teshuvah? Like all other relationships of importance, I can only partially understand my interest in teshuvah. Teshuvah has been important to me as a Jewish concept for the past several years for a few reasons. First, I see teshuvah as reflective of an optimistic and yet realistic view of humankind. Second, many important relationships depend on the ability of one or both parties to engage in the process of reconciliation, which I identify with teshuvah. And finally teshuvah as a return to God is a way to understand God and what our relationship to Him demands.

For these reasons I concentrated on the broader view of teshuvah, rather than the more particular understanding of the concept within the context of 'Aseret Yemei Teshuvah. I also was concerned with the broad perspective on teshuvah as found in the Aggadah, rather than a more detailed analysis of particular midrashic works and their relationship to teshuvah.

The first step in the process then was to gather all the aggadic resources to teshuvah. I was helped especially by 'Ozar ha-Aggadah (Moshe Gross), 'Ozar Ma'amarei Hazal (J. D. Eisenstein), and Judah Slotki's index volume

to Soncino, Midrash Rabbah. I was also aided by a number of other works, including William Braude's indexes to Pesikta Rabbati, Pesikta de Rav Kahana and Midrash Psalms; and Boaz Cohen's index to Louis Ginsberg's Legends of the Jews. I also used several anthologies, including Sefer ha-Aggadah (Bialik and Ravnitsky) and A Rabbinic Anthology (Montefiore and Loewe). Background reading in other works such as Aspects of Rabbinic Theology (Solomon Schechter); Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era (George Foot Moore) and The Rabbinic Mind (Max Kiddushin), as well as a number of articles listed in the Bibliography helped to fill in much of the concept of teshuvah in the minds of the rabbis.

Although I began the thesis being primarily interested in teshuvah as a response to national catastrophe and teshuvah as an agent of personal change, I soon found that the rabbis thought in other categories. Consequently, my chapter organization is far more representative of their agenda than my original focus. Still, to a large extent, their agenda became my interest. In Chapter One, I concentrate on the individual's part in the process of teshuvah. I describe teshuvah, in the minds of the rabbis, as a process which comprises at least several steps, beginning with the recognition of a sin and concluding with reconciliation of some kind. Concern for the collective of Israel often is subsumed within the focus on the individual in this Chapter. Chapter Two discusses God's involvement

in the process of teshuvah. By focusing on God's response to the teshuvah of Israel, and upon his forbearance with respect to the wicked, I hope to demonstrate that, for the rabbis, teshuvah is as important to God as it is to the people. Finally, in Chapter Three I broaden the perspective and discuss teshuvah in relationship to other aspects of the human condition: sin, reconciliation, healing and redemption. I also examine the consequences of not performing teshuvah, especially the matter of teshuvah and death.

One final word about language. I chose to use the word "teshuvah" almost entirely throughout because, as I show in defining the word in Chapter One, neither "repentance" nor "return" is entirely adequate to express the full meaning of "teshuvah" as the rabbis intended.

CHAPTER ONE

The Individual and the Process of Teshuvah

The discussion of teshuvah in the Aggadah underscores it as a basic concept in Rabbinic Judaism. Teshuvah, as the concept and as the process which the rabbis spell out, reveals their thinking on the nature of humankind, in general, Israel, in particular, and God. More specifically, the rabbinic references to teshuvah convey their understanding of the relationship between God and Israel; its expectations, tensions, limitations, and ultimate purpose.

We will first concern ourselves with the notion of teshuvah as it applies to the individual. For although teshuvah is integral to the relationship between God and His people, we must begin by understanding why the rabbis think teshuvah exists, and why they consider it a crucial element in the makeup of the world. The focus, here, then, will be the individual's need for teshuvah. Once having established the necessity of teshuvah for the individual, we will be ready to examine the aggadic portrayal of God's involvement in teshuvah.

An understanding of the importance of teshuvah for the individual begins with a baraitha in B.T. Pesahim: "Seven things were created before the world was created, and they are: the Torah, Repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah."[1] The categorization of these seven things includes, in the words of Jakob Petuchowski, "...the supreme values without which the world itself could not

exist."[2] The entire rabbinic understanding of teshuvah emphasizes that it is one of those life-sustaining values.

A. The Universal Importance of Teshuvah

Beyond this, any insight into the rabbinic view of teshuvah must be derived from the essential recognition of the universal nature and application of teshuvah. For although the vast bulk of comments are concerned with Israel, the rabbis are not particularistic in their definition of teshuvah or in their discussion of for whom it is intended. Even though, as in the case of most of Rabbinic Literature, their attention is primarily given over to the issues which concern Israel, nevertheless, they are explicit in their assertion that teshuvah is not the possession nor the obligation of Israel alone. It is one of those supreme values without which life could not sustain itself in the fashion in which God intended. The first assertion--that teshuvah is a universal value--can be inferred from the several rabbinic comments to follow; the second assertion--that this is a prime life-sustaining value--is woven into the fabric of the entire body of rabbinic discussion in this paper.

The universal thrust of teshuvah in the Midrash is quite clear. The first person to be given the opportunity to perform teshuvah was not a Jew, but rather, Adam--not only a non-Jew, but the first person created by God. Commenting on two biblical verses just prior to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden ("And the Lord God said:

"Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever./ Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken."-- Genesis 3:22-23) and noting the parallel use of the phrase "And now" (Ve'atah) which signals repentance in a later verse, Bereshit Rabbah 21:6 reads:

> 'And now, lest he put forth His hand.' R. Abba b. Kahana said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, provided him with an opportunity for repentance. 'And now' can only refer to repentance, as you read, 'And now, Israel, what doth the Lord God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God etc.' (Deut. 10:12).

What is important here is not simply that Adam is the first person given the opportunity to do teshuvah, but it is also noteworthy that, as far as the rabbis understand it, God held out His hand to Adam in hope of reconciliation soon after he had disobeyed Him.

But the rabbis do not stop with Adam to dramatically underscore their point that all of humankind has the chance to repent. Various other midrashim highlight the opportunities given to the generation of the Flood and to the wicked at Sodom and Gommorah to repudiate their sins and return to God. For instance, the above comment in which the phrase "And now" (Ve'atah) signals that God is granting an opening is utilized again when the same phrase comes up with regard to God looking into the affairs of the generation of the Flood and into the matters of the wicked

at Sodom and Gommorah.[3] And Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, Beshallach 15 maintains that with regard to the generation of the Flood, God has stretched out His right hand to receive these sinners:

> ...because You have given an extention (presumably, we might read, in terms of time and Himself) in order for them to perform repentance, as it says, 'My spirit will not abide in man forever' (Gen. 6:3).[4]

It should also be noted that God provides occasions for teshuvah, not just in moments of high drama but at all times. Sifrei BaMidbar, piska 132 reminds us that, "...the right hand of the Lord is stretched forth to all of mankind (in hopes of receiving all who need to do teshuvah)."[5] Each of these comments serves to emphasize the rabbinic assumption that God's concern was not exclusive to Israel, but took in all who strayed from Him, and who, accordingly, would need a chance and a way to return to Him.

And, finally, so universal and so essential is teshuva that the first person who actually performed teshuvah according to the rabbis was not simply a non-Jew; more significantly, perhaps, he was a murderer. Cain's teshuvah is described somewhat differently in various places, but the essence of what the rabbis want to get across is found in two passages. Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 21, attributes the following to Cain after he slew his brother Abel:

> Master of all the worlds! So great is my sin that it cannot bear any kind of atonement. This admission was accounted to him as repetance, as it says, 'And Cain said to God, 'My sin[6] is too great to be borne.'[7]

And Bereshit Rabbah 98:

> Following Cain's murder of his brother and God's curse upon him ("And now cursed art thou from the ground, which hath opened up her mouth to receive thy brother's blood..." (Gen. 4:11)), depicts Cain seeking God's mercy:
>
> He thereupon rose and prostrated himself to beseech mercy of God, as it says, 'Is my sin too great to be forgiven?' (ibid. 4:13)[8] 'Sovereign of the Universe!' he pleaded, 'Surely my sin is not greater than that of the sixty myriads who will provoke Thee in the wilderness, yet immediately he (Moses) exclaimed, 'Forgiving iniquity' (Num. 14:18), Thou didst forgive them', as it says, 'And the Lord said: I have pardoned according to thy word' (ibid. 14:20). In that moment, the Holy One blessed be He, said: 'If I do not forgive Cain, I will shut the door in the face of all penitents.'

Although, as we will note shortly, Cain's teshuvah is not seen as complete, at least in some of the aggadic passages,[9] it does set an important precedent. By not granting Cain teshuvah in the face of his remorse, God Himself acknowledges that He would be foreclosing the possibility of teshuvah for all.

The rabbis, then, however overwhelming is their concern with the teshuvah of Israel, make it patently clear that teshuvah is a universal necessity. Still, an appreciation of teshuvah from a rabbinic perspective cannot end with a universal focus. For, as will become manifest, the concept of teshuvah is not only basic to rabbinic thinking, but is also integral to certain fundamental premises in Rabbinic Judaism. And it is these premises which bring the rabbis to be primarily concerned with the teshuvah of Israel.

First, normative Judaism as defined by the rabbis is redemptive by nature. Redemption, however, is possible not only for the collective, as is evidenced by the paradigm of liberation from slavery in Egypt, but just as importantly, the same model holds true for the individual. Judaism is redemptive because sin does not have to be--in fact, should not be--a permanent state. In this understanding, then, teshuvah is an essential agent in the possibility of redemption.

Related to this is the equally fundamental, if not more implicit notion of covenant. The covenantal relationship between God and Israel is understood by the rabbis to be based on mutual obligations. When these obligations are violated or ignored, the covenant is at least momentarily in danger of a breach. It is teshuvah which comes to help repair the breach and hence restore the relationship between God and Israel. And finally, in a sociological sense, teshuvah was utilized by the rabbis to continue and sustain a reconstituted Judaism after the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial cult was no longer the central and most viable way to concretize and give expression to Israel's relationship with God. It is clear, then, that an understanding of the significance of teshuvah for the rabbis necessarily includes both its universal character as well as its particular focus on Israel and its bond with God.

B. The Nature of Teshuvah

With the importance of teshuvah for the rabbis established, it would be helpful now to begin to examine how the rabbis employed the concept of teshuvah and the meaning with which they infused the word.

It is well known that although the root "shuv" appears in the Bible, teshuvah is a rabbinic concept and idiom. "Shuv" as it is used in the Bible, often implies a return to God and His ways, as in the case of Hosea 14:2: "Return O Israel unto the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity." Here, as in other places in the Bible,[10] the root "shuv" suggests a turn from evil and sinful ways and/or a turn to God. In the Bible, there is no direct call to repentance in the fuller sense as is found in Rabbinic Literature. Starting with the root idea in the Bible, the rabbis filled it in and developed teshuvah as an important concept and integral function in day to day life.

The Hosea verse is crucial to the rabbinic understanding of teshuvah. The import of Hosea's words is clear: Israel has sinned and in so doing has caused a breach in the relationship with God. She must therefore find a way to cleanse herself of the iniquity and to repair the breach. Therefore, teshuvah for the rabbis comes to mean both "repentance," in the sense of recognizing and atoning for sins, as well as "return," in the sense of turning back toward God and away from sin. Hence, teshuvah

is a concept which sheds light on the rabbinic view of human nature, of God, and of the relationship between God and humankind. In addition, teshuvah is a model which enhances our understanding of the process by which this relationship functions.

But what does this mean more specifically? What is it that the rabbis tell us about teshuvah? What can we know about the nature of this concept and process?

First, we have some sense that teshuvah must be full or complete. We know this because, as alluded to earlier in the Bereshit Rabbah passage on Cain's teshuvah, God forgave him--but not entirely, since Cain's teshuvah also was not complete:

> (In that moment the Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'If I do not forgive Cain, I will shut the door in the face of all penitents.') Consequently, God forgave him half.[11] Yet because his repentance was incomplete, he did not forgive him all his sins. And how do we know that God forgave him only partially? Because at first He said to him, 'A fugitive (na) and a wanderer (nad) shalt thou be in the earth" (Gen. 4:12); yet after he repented what is written of him? 'And he dwelt in the land of Nod (Wandering), on the east of Eden' (Ibid. 4:16).

The rabbis are saying that God forgave Cain half, and hence his teshuvah is only half, by evidence of the fact that while he is no longer a fugitive (na), by dwelling in the land of Nod (Wandering), he is still a nad. a wanderer. From this we learn that it is not simply a matter that teshuvah must be full and complete; but more, that fullness will be determined both by the attitude of the penitent and by God's ultimate acceptance.

Other sources also indicate that the degree of teshuvah can be measured by the sincerity of the penitent. For example, B.T. Rosh HaShanah 18a relates the following story:

> R. Meir used to say: Two men take to their bed suffering equally from the same disease, or two men come before a criminal court to be judged for the same offence; yet one gets up and the other does not get up, one escapes death and the other does not escape death. Why does one get up and the other not? Because one prayed and was answered and the other prayed and was not answered. Why was one answered and the other not? One prayed with his whole heart and was therefore answered, the other did not pray with his whole heart and was not answered...

Although the word teshuvah is not mentioned here, the underlying sense that sincerity can affect a final outcome is similar to the case of Cain's incomplete teshuvah. So it is possible that, at least in this case, we might equate teshuvah with "prayer with a full heart." Some kind of full sincerity, or, more accurately in the case of Cain, full humbling before God, will help to insure the fullness of one's teshuvah.

Still other sources link the sincerity of the penitent with his undergoing some kind of physical and emotional suffering. In this view, sincerity and suffering together represent a healing process which is equated with teshuvah. Midrash Psalms 65:2, commenting on Psalm 65:3 ("O Thou that hearest prayer, unto Thee does all flesh come") explains:

> Scripture does not say 'all men' but 'all flesh.' From these words, the Sages inferred that unless a man makes his heart as unyielding as his flesh, his

> prayer will not be heard (mine). Indeed, in repentance, we have made our hearts like flesh; Thou hearest the prayer of all flesh; wilt Thou hear ours?

Midrash Psalms 32:2 speaks with a similar intonation: "R. Jose ben R. Judah said: 'When a man's repentance is so complete that his heart is torn within him, the Holy One, blessed be He, forgives him.'"

Yet, while the above comments base their understanding of teshuvah on reflection, intention or some kind of suffering, other sources place more stress on an action. For example, some rabbis do not believe that teshuvah is complete until one has had the opportunity of committing the same sin but has refrained from doing so. A passage in B.T. Yoma reads:

> How is one proved a repentant sinner? Rab Judah says: 'If the object which caused his original transgression comes before him on two occasions and he keeps away from it.'[12]

In other words, teshuvah is only concretized in the actions of the individual, regardless of the feelings in the heart or the words of the mouth. He has learned from past mistakes. Pesikta Rabbati says the same thing in a different way:

> If one who keeps committing sins, keeps saying that through repentance he will be forgiven, what answer should be made to him? Our Masters taught thus: 'He who keeps saying 'I will sin and then repent' will never have enough strength to repent (Mishnah Yoma 8:8) Why not? Because if a man repents but then goes back to his transgressions, his repentance was not true repentance.'[13]

Another action which not only evidences teshuvah but is an essential feature of the teshuvah process from some

perspectives is that of confession. Midrash Psalms, in an ironic comment, notes the efficacy of confessing one's sins to God:

> 'He that covers his transgressions shall not prosper, but whoso confesses and forsakes them shall obtain mercy.' (Prov. 28:13) R. Simeon said: If a man confesses his sin to a human tribunal, he is punished. But God acts otherwise; if a man does not confess, he is punished; if he confesses, he is acquitted.[14]

And in David's case, after he has mocked God's promise that Israel would be innumerable by taking a census, his teshuvah begins with his tearing of his garments and donning sackcloth and ashes. Yet it is not fully affected until he confesses before God and asks His forgiveness:

> He sought to do repentance before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, 'Master of all the worlds, I am the one who has sinned; forgive me, I beseech Thee, my sin. His repentance was fulfilled.[15]

We learn both from this aggadah in particular, and from the discussion as a whole, that teshuvah in a broad sense is a process which begins with sin and concludes with reconciliation. More specifically, we can discern from the rabbis' thinking four basic stages which an individual must go through in order to perform teshuvah. Each stage builds on the one previous and leads to a further stage.

The first stage after the transgression is the recognition that one has, indeed, transgressed against someone or God.[16] It is certain that without an elemental understanding of sin and transgression, there can be no teshuvah. The implicit rabbinic requirement extends beyond the capacity to understand that one has sinned; more

fundamental is the recognition that humankind, individually and collectively, is bound to transgress occasionally. (As we will see, partner to this recognition is the related assumption that not only can one redeem oneself from sin and transgression, but that teshuvah is the agent in this redemption.)

In this light, then, it is surely no accident that the rabbis openly discuss and hold up for examination the sins of those whom they also hold up as models of Jewish piety and devotion to God. Note the following example in this regard:

> Ben Azzai said: Come and understand the power of teshuvah from (an event involving) Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish. For he and two of his companions were robbing and plundering all who would pass their way along the road. What did he do? He left behind his companions who were plundering on the mountains, and he returned to the God of his fathers with all his heart. (Occupying himself) with fasting and with prayer, he arose early and retired late before the Holy One, blessed be He; and he engaged himself with Torah study all his days, along with (giving) gifts (to the) poor. And he never returned again to his evil deeds, and his repentance was fulfilled.[17]

That David and Rabbi Simeon be Lakish are portrayed as transgressing is a subtle but powerful acknowledgement that humankind is bound to sin. Just as surely, however, it does not have to be bound by its sins, if it avails itself of teshuvah as an agent of redemption. That David and Simeon ben Lakish recognized their sins was just as important, and helps to illustrate the first stage in the process of teshuvah.

Yet, in David's case, the previously cited passage in Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer emphasizes that David's first

actions upon hearing of God's wrath--that of clothing himself in sackcloth and ashes and falling upon the ground in humility before God--reflect not only the first stage of recognition, but the second as well: the necessity to feel remorse for the sin. Why is remorse an important element of teshuvah? As noted earlier, a "torn heart," that is, a remorseful soul, is an essential ingredient in the process. Experiencing pain is seen as a motivation to change oneself, i.e., not committing the same transgression again.

Like the first two stages in the process of teshuvah which are reflective and inward-looking, the third stage--a desire to change and improve oneself--also begins with self-reflection. The desire to improve, however, necessitates a turning outward which is evidenced in the final stage. It is this final stage in the process in which an action--whether it be a confession, an asking of forgiveness, or a changing of one's old ways--concretizes each of the first three stages, those of recognition, remorse, and a desire to improve. This final part of the process of teshuvah is exemplified in the previously cited Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer passage as well. After David has knelt on the ground and has apparently gone through the first three stages of teshuvah, he emerges from his reflective posture and speaks before God: "Master of all the Universe. It is I who have sinned; forgive me, I beseech Thee, my sin.

As the first stage involves an understanding from the rabbinic perspective that sin is part of the human

experience, the final three stages are predicated on the understanding that people can change. And for the rabbis, teshuvah is the agent of that change.[18]

It is also apparent from the descriptions of these stages that teshuvah means both "repentance" and "return," the two translations commonly used in English. However, an awareness and an appreciation of the stages is crucial in order to use either word with confidence. As Jakob Petuchowski has pointed out, the use of the term "repentance" can be problematic, since it essentially limits teshuvah to feeling sorry, which is only part of the process.[19] From the stage of recognition through feeling remorseful, perhaps even up until the desire to improve, "repentance" is an adequate translation. And this is where the translation "return" can pick up and fill in the rest of the sense of what teshuvah conveys: for "return" signifies the action which is involved in turning from sin toward reconciliation. Together these two words can be used to describe the entire process of teshuvah: from the sense of guilt and responsibility for the transgression to the effort to achieve reconciliation.

C. The Power of Teshuvah

Although the rabbis rarely discuss the definition of teshuvah directly, or attempt to outline its specific elements, they reckon at some length with the power of teshuvah. The power of teshuvah is a major thrust in their thinking and takes up long sections in several important

midrashic compilations, as well as being incorporated in stray comments.

In what way is teshuvah powerful? The rabbis are quite specific about this. Teshuvah is powerful enough to save one from death, from great destruction, from a decree of some kind, and even powerful enough to spare one from God's judgement.

Cain's teshuvah is the often cited archetypal example of the power of teshuvah to save from death (and God's judgement as well). If the murderer, Cain, can be saved by the power of teshuvah, anyone can! There are other such examples, including chapters in Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer and Pesikta Rabbati which provide tales of both heroic and unheroic, Jewish and non-Jewish figures who sinned greatly, but were saved from death through the power of teshuvah. In Pesikta Rabbati, piska 50:1, the rabbis quote Isaiah who asks God directly, "Even though a man sins against Thee, but repents, is it not Thy delight to forgive him so that the man lives instead of dying?" In the Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer passage analyzed above, in which the teshuvah of both David and Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish is examined, we have implicitly understood that the power of teshuvah at least reconciles them with God, if not saves them from a tragic fate.[20] There is another story in the same chapter which illustrates the power of teshuvah, and it is worth repeating in full:

> Rabbi Joshua said: Know thou the power of repentance. Come and see from Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, who

> perpetrated all the evil abominations much more than all the nations. He made his son pass through the fire to Baal outside Jerusalem, causing (doves) to fly, and sacrificing to all the host of heaven. The princes of the troops of the king of Babylon came, and they caught him by the hair of his head, and brought him down to Babylon, and they put him in a pan (over) fire, and there he called upon all the other gods to whom he had sacrificed, and not one of them either answered him or saved him. He said: I will call upon the God of my fathers with all my heart; perhaps He will do unto me according to all His wonders which He did unto my father. And he called on the God of his fathers with all his heart, and He was entreated of him, and He heard his supplication, as it is said, 'And he prayed unto Him; and He was entreated of him, and heard his supplication...then Manasseh knew that the Lord, He was God' (2 Chronicles 33:13). In that hour, Manasseh said: There is both judgement as well as a judge.[21]

There are also several instances in which teshuvah is described as being able to annul an oath or a decree. In Bereshit Rabbah 44:12, teshuvah is one of three things which has such power.[22] And in B.T. Rosh HaShanah 17b we learn that teshuvah has the power to "rescind a man's final sentence."

The power of teshuvah is available not just to individuals in trouble, but also to Israel as a whole when she is in distress. In Eicha Rabbati 5:5, after the destruction of the Temple and with exile to Babylon imminent, we have this comment on the verse, "To our very necks we are pursued; we labor and have no rest." (Lamentations 5:1):

> Nebuchadnezzar, the accursed, commanded Nebuzaradan saying, 'The God of this people accepts the penitent and His hand is stretched forth to receive those who repent. When, therefore, you conquer them, do not allow them to pray, lest they should do penance and their God have mercy upon them...'

Even with Israel on her way to exile in the wake of her sins,

so great is the power of teshuvah that not only might she be saved, but even Nebuchadnezzar, himself, could recognize this secret weapon of Israel! And similarly, in a passage in Shemot Rabbah 21:5 it is noted that when the Egyptians are pursuing Israel, she was able to look heavenward to perform teshuvah with God in order to save herself from certain destruction.

The power and efficacy of teshuvah is best summed up in the famous statement in Kohelet Rabbah which notes that "One hour of repentance is better than all life in the world to come." Why? Because the world to come "results from the effects in this world."[23]

D. Possibilities of Performing Teshuvah: Who Can and Cannot Do So

The power of teshuvah is further illustrated in the rabbinic comments on the possibilities of performing teshuvah. Although, as we will discuss, there are certain very clear limitations as to who can and cannot be fulfilled in teshuvah, for the most part, the possibility to repent is considered so great that we find the following assertion repeated a number of times: "Even one who has been wicked all his days always has the possibility to repent before his death."[24] In fact, as in B.T. Kiddushin 40b, if this person does do teshuvah, he is not to be admonished for his previous sins.

Yet, for all the effort made to keep open the possibility of teshuvah even for the most wicked, there are

limitations. The rabbis are quite clear and adamant about the fact that certain individuals cannot do teshuvah. The type of person for whom that option is simply a closed matter is mentioned in R. Johanan's statement in B.T. Sanhedrin 107b: "He who sins and causes the multitude to sin is not afforded the means of repentance."[25] The prime example in rabbinic literature is, of course, Elisha ben Abuyah.

Although Elisha is considered an important and brilliant rabbi, he is also considered a dangerous heretic who might influence others to follow his lead away from Torah to Greek wisdom. In a moving and painful passage in Kohelet Rabbah 7:8, Elisha explains to Rabbi Meir why he himself knew teshuvah was out of the question, apostacy or no apostacy. With Elisha on his horse, and Rabbi Meir on foot, Elisha cautions his friend:

> 'Turn back.' 'Why?' R. Meir asked. 'Because this is the Sabbath boundary.' 'How do you know?' 'By the hoofs of my horse which tell me that he has already gone two thousand cubits.' R. Meir exclaimed, 'You possess all this wisdom and yet you do not repent.' He replied, 'I am unable.' 'Why?' He said to him, 'I was once on my horse riding behind the Temple on the Day of Atonement which occurred on the Sabbath, and I heard a Bat Kol crying out, 'Return ye backsliding children' (Jeremiah 3:22), 'Return unto Me, and I will return unto you' (Mal. 3:7), with the exception of Elisha ben Abuyah who knows My might and yet rebelled against Me!''[26]

As moving as this story is, what is most interesting is the rabbinic explanation for Elisha's straying from the fold, and from the Jewish conception of God and the world, and

being attracted to Greek thought and culture.

> How did this happen to him? He once saw a man climb to the top of a palm-tree on the Sabbath, take the mother bird with the young, and descend in safety. At the termination of the Sabbath, he saw a man climb to the top of a palm-tree and take the young, but let the mother-bird go free, and as he descended, a snake bit him and he died. Elisha exclaimed, 'It is written, 'Thou shalt in any wise let the dam go, but the young thou mayest take unto thyself; that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days.'' (Deut. 22:7) Where is the well-being of this man, and where is the prolonging of his days!'[27]

The comment then continues to explain that Elisha was unaware of Rabbi Akiba's teaching that the phrases, "That it may be well with thee", referred to this world, and "And that thou mayest prolong thy days", is a reference to the world to come--in which, presumably, the snake-bitten man now finds himself. Still, it is evident from the incident itself, without Akiba's gloss, that it must have badly shaken Elisha's understanding of the world, and particularly his faith in the God of his ancestors. A brilliant rabbi, whose faith was shattered, but whose thirst for some kind of ultimate truth remained unquenched and which led him astray was, by definition, a threat to the rabbis of his time. It is no wonder that teshuvah was not open to him.

There is one more type of person for whom teshuvah is not possible. This is the person who has been warned several times to do so but pays no attention. In Shemot Rabbah 13:3, which plays on God's hardening of Pharoah's heart after he did not let the Children of Israel go free despite being given all kinds of signs and warnings, we

see Pharoah portrayed as exactly this kind of recalcitrant sinner:

> ...When God warns a man once, twice and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then does God close his heart against repentance so that He should exact vengeance from him for his sins. Thus it was with the wicked Pharoah. Since God sent five times to him and he took no notice, God then said, 'Thou hast stiffened thy neck and hardened thy heart; well, I will add to thine uncleaness'; hence, 'For I have hardened his heart.'

It is not just that God had warned Pharoah a number of times to repent (by letting Israel go), but He denied him the possibility to perform teshuvah because he contributed to his own stubbornness and disinterest in paying any attention to God.

So although the possibility to perform teshuvah is open to the broad majority of people, there are also clear limits. This is not because teshuvah is unreachable. Rather, it seems that there is something in the nature of the sin, almost an habitual need to continue to transgress without any interest in changing, which forecloses the possibility of teshuvah for such an individual. From this, and previous comments, we can infer that, for the rabbis, teshuvah is personal change in an <u>essential</u> way; anything less will not bring reconciliation, with God or with a fellow human being.

CHAPTER TWO

God's Involvement in the Process of Teshuvah

To more fully grasp the rabbinic view of teshuvah, it is necessary to understand that it is not just Israel who has an investment in this process; God, too, is very involved. He is pictured by the rabbis, in fact, as actively, even anxiously, engaged in Israel's process of teshuvah--from His end and for His purposes. An understanding of God's involvement in this human undertaking, will yield a deeper appreciation of the mutuality in the relationship between God and Israel. So concerned are the rabbis with God's role in this process, that they monitor His responses as Israel vacillates between sin and reconciliation. God's responses at these moments, as He anticipates, prods, judges and embraces, will deepen our insight into the process of teshuvah as seen in Rabbinic Literature.

In this chapter, then, I will explore the following key questions from an aggadic point of view: 1) Why is teshuvah important to God? 2) How does God anticipate and wait for Israel to make teshuvah? 3) What is the extent of God's forbearance with regard to the teshuvah of the wicked? 4) What is God's response when Israel does do teshuvah? 5) Does God Himself perform teshuvah? 6) What is God's response when the wicked do not perform teshuvah?

This chapter is based on two related rabbinic assumptions. First, as emphasized above, teshuvah is a mutual undertaking. The rabbis understand that the process will fail if one of the two parties does not measure up to

its responsibilities. This assertion will be found throughout this chapter, but no more clearly and succinctly than as it is stated in the following comment, which takes as its starting point Lamentations 5:21: "Turn Thou us unto unto Thee, O Lord, And we shall be turned":

> The community of Israel spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: Lord of the Universe, it depends on Thee, so 'Turn Thou us unto Thee.' He said to them, 'It depends upon you, as it is said, 'Return unto Me and I will return unto you, says the Lord of Hosts' (Mal. 3:7). The community spoke before Him: Lord of the Universe, it depends upon Thee, as it is said, 'Restore unto us, O God, our salvation' (Ps. 85:8). Therefore it is said, 'Turn Thou us unto Thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned' (Lamentations 5:21).[1]

As this passage implies, it is not simply a matter of both God and Israel investing themselves in this relationship. There is also the sense--and this is the second rabbinic assumption upon which this chapter is built--that if Israel will do her part in the process of repentance and return to God, He will certainly return to her, meeting her at least halfway. This is reiterated even more empathically in one of the proems in Eicha Rabbati. This passage explains that for three and a half years after the destruction of the First Temple, the Shechinah dwelt on Mount of Olives, in hopes that Israel would return from her sins in teshuvah. When she did not, a Bat Kol issued the following announcement (in effect, a lament and a plea together): "Return O Backsliding children" (Jeremiah 3:14); "Return unto Me and I will return unto you" (Mal. 3:7). It is instructive that the passage continues: "When they did not repent, it

(the Bat Kol) said, "I will go and return to my place." (Hosea 5:15).[2]

The remainder of this chapter's concerns, from God's eagerness as He awaits Israel's return to His pain when they do not return to Him, is, in a sense, an expansion of, and commentary on these two assumptions.

A. Teshuvah's Importance to God

Any understanding of God's role in Israel's teshuvah must be rooted in an appreciation of the importance of teshuvah for God. We know already that there is a mutuality of relationship; however, it is not yet clear what lies at the heart of God's investment in Israel's teshuvah.

Is it a matter that when Israel returns to God, she affirms His authority and praises Him? There is certainly some evidence for this view as we see from the following passage in Pesikta Rabbati 50:1:

> Israel asked...of the Holy One, blessed be He: Even though a man sins against Thee, but repents, is it not Thy delight to forgive him so that the man lives instead of dying? For from the dead there is no praise for Thee, as David said: 'The dead person praises not the Lord' (Ps. 115:17).

This helps us to understand one reason why Israel's teshuvah is important to God, but I believe there is another more compelling possibility: when Israel sins and begins to pay the cost by suffering on account of her actions, it is not just she who feels afflicted. This is dramatized in the following scene involving God and Jeremiah after the destruction of the First Temple:

> The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Ministering Angels, 'Come let us go together and see what the enemy has done in My house.' The Holy One, blessed be He, and the Ministering Angels went on, Jeremiah leading the way. When the Holy One saw the Temple, He said, 'Certainly this is My house and this is My resting place into which enemies have come, and they have done with it whatever they wished.' At that time the Holy One wept and said, 'Woe is Me for My house! My children, where are you? My priests, where are you? My lovers, where are you? What shall I do with you, seeing that I warned you but you did not repent?!' The Holy One said to Jeremiah, 'I am like he who had an only son, for whom he prepared a marriage canopy, but he died under it. Do you feel no anguish for Me and My children?'[3]

Teshuvah, then, is important to God because Israel is dear to Him. It allows Israel to return to God in a relationship which is as important to God as it is to Israel.

B. God Anticipates and Waits for Israel to Do Teshuvah

Despite God's suffering, or perhaps because of it, He fully expects Israel--whatever he sins, whatever the obstacles--to perform teshuvah. A commonly used motif is instructive in this regard: God is pictured waiting for Israel to do teshuvah as a father who is waiting patiently, and yet eagerly, for his errant son to return to him. In short, this is a relationship of expectations and hopes, which does not easily endure a breach. Let us look at this Father-son motif in some depth.

The characterization is especially prominent in Pesikta de Rav Kahana. In one passage, God urges Jeremiah to exhort Israel to do teshuvah; the People of Israel, in turn, are convinced that their sins have so provoked God that He will never receive them back again in His good

graces. They counter Jeremiah's pleadings, saying: "Our master, Jeremiah, how shall we vow repentance? With what countenance may we come into the presence of the Holy One? Have we not provoked Him? Have we not made Him jealous?" Israel goes on to recount her idol worship and her resulting shame before God. Upon Jeremiah's reporting of this reply to God, the Holy One maintains His distance and, yet, moves closer to Israel as a father would in the time of his son's distress. "Go tell them this," God concludes to Jeremiah. If you will come to Me in repentance, will you not be coming to your Father in heaven?"[4]

A similar passage uses the Father-son model to dramatize the rabbinic interpretation that God needs Israel as much as Israel needs God. This comment in Pesikta Rabbati reads:

> Consider the parable of a prince who was far away from his father--a hundred days' journey away. His friends said to him: 'Return to your father.' He replied: 'I cannot. I have not the strength.' Thereupon his father sent word, saying to him: 'Come back as far as you can according to your strength, and I will go the rest of the way to meet you.' So the Holy One, blessed be He, says to Israel: 'Return to Me, and I will return unto you." (Mal. 3:7)[5]

Therefore, a common characterization of God as He waits for Israel to return to Him in teshuvah is as the father who, despite an initial distance between himself and his own son, is ultimately bound to him, and will work to repair and sustain the bond.

Still, as God waits for Israel to return, the rabbis make it clear that the son cannot take undue

advantage of the father. Although God will not, in normal circumstances, judge with the strict authoritarian harshness of a hurt parent neither will He fully indulge Israel. As in the case of other aspects of Israel's sinning, the rabbis maintain that when it comes to Israel's teshuvah, God will judge them both out of His attribute of justice, as well as His attribute of mercy. The Pesikta Rabbati offers the following comment in this regard:

> 'Return, O Israel.' (Hosea 14:2). The way of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not at all like the way of flesh-and-blood. The way of flesh-and-blood is to set down a harsh verdict and then commute it in consideration of receipt of a great sum of money. But the Holy One, blessed be He, sets down a harsh verdict and then commutes it in consideration of receipt of a mere trifle. And what is the trifle? A word, as is said 'Take with you words and turn to the Lord' (Hos. 14:3). For example, of God's way of doing things is it not said in the passage preceding these words '(His verdict on) the iniquity of Ephraim is bound up' (Hos. 13:12); and is it not also said 'Samaria shall bear her guilt, for she hath rebelled against her God' (Hos. 14:1)? Nevertheless, despite all such verdicts, God says to Israel: Turn in repentance, and I shall commute every single one of them.[6]

However, even though God may be balancing His judgement fairly, in this case, at least, the scales are tipped so that if the son makes a move to return in the direction of the father, the father will forgive his son's transgressions in anticipation of reconciliation.

The use of the Father-son motif by the rabbis is very helpful, for it communicates their basic sense that what underlies God's approach to Israel and the possibility of her doing teshuvah is His hope for Israel. This

model emphasizes that God not only anticipates forgiving Israel, but assumes that though Israel (or an individual) may sin, she can change her ways. Perhaps nowhere is this hopeful attitude more apparent than in a passage repeated throughout aggadic literature. Note the following version in Pesikta de Rav Kahanah:

> 'Good and upright is the Lord, because He doth instruct sinners in the way' (Ps. 25:8). When Wisdom is asked, 'The sinner--what is to be his punishment?' Wisdom answers: 'Evil which pursueth sinners' (Prov. 13:21). When Prophecy is asked, 'The sinner--what is to be his punishment?' Prophecy replies: 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die' (Ezek. 18:4). When Torah is asked, 'The sinner--what is to be his punishment?' Torah replies: Let him bring a guilt offering in expiation and his sin shall be forgiven him. When the Holy One is asked, 'The sinner--what is to be his punishment?' the Holy One replies: In penitence let him mend his ways, and his sin shall be forgiven him. Hence it is written, '(At one and the same time) kind and strict in judgment is the Lord' (Ps. 25:8). R. Phinehas commented: How can He who is strict in judgment be called kind? And how can He who is kind be called strict in judgment? 'Because He doth instruct sinners in the way (ibid.)--that is, He teaches sinners the way to act in penitence. Therefore Hosea, admonishing Israel, said to them: 'Return, O Israel' (Hos. 14:2).[7]

Notice that not only is God's response qualitatively different from the other responses, but He assumes the stance of a teacher. In this case, to teach is to believe in the ability of the students--Israel--to grow and to change. And, of course, His is also the hopeful stance of the Father who assumes that his son will soon return to him cleansed, with his past behind him. From these two positions, that of a teacher and a father, God provides endless opportunities for Israel to do teshuvah. "God's

hand is stretched forth to receive the penitent every day," is a theme which runs throughout the literature.[8] So encouraging is God of Israel's teshuvah, and so eager is the father to receive back His son, that God sometimes enthusiastically exaggerates as a father would to get across a point to his son and express affection at the same time. Listen to this promise: "My children, present to Me an opening of repentance no bigger than the eye of a needle, and I will widen it into an opening through which wagons and carriages can pass."[9]

C. The Extent of God's Forbearance with Regard to the Wicked

It is clear that God is concerned with those who are essentially good but might sin on occasion. However, so important is teshuvah to God that the rabbis underscore His forbearance even with regard to those among Israel who are specifically referred to as "wicked." In Pesikta Rabbati 50:1, God speaks about the wicked "who do not repent and provoke Me by following the ways of the heathen nations." Yet God emphasized, "Still I wait for them. Perhaps they will repent."

In fact, so patient is God with the sinner and so sure is He of the power of teshuvah to change the sinner's attitude that one can even speak evil of God, do teshuvah for this sin, and have God consider it as if a sin had never been committed in the first place! Midrash Psalms 5:8 reads in this regard:

> R. Issachar taught: Even if a man stands up and blasphemes God, and heaps up iniquities, the Holy One, blessed be He, says: 'Let him repent, and it will be considered as if he had never done the iniquity.'

And as noted in Chapter One with regard to the possibility that Pharoah might do teshuvah, God is understood by the rabbis to be in the habit of giving a number of warnings before exacting vengeance.[10]

A question still remains: Why does God show so much patience for the wicked? Note the following possibilities:

> For three reasons, said R. Josiah, the Holy One, blessed be He, shows forbearance to the wicked in this world: Perhaps they will repent, perhaps they will perform some precepts for which the Holy One can reward them in this world, and perhaps righteous children will issue forth from them.[11]

Josiah's statement is quite interesting. We assume, as he states at first, that God waits for the wicked out of a hope that they will repent. What is new, however, are the other two reasons. The second reason, the mention of mitzvot in connection with teshuvah, is interesting; this is not a connection often made. What is perhaps more interesting, however, is Josiah's third reason for God waiting for the wicked: Perhaps they shall bear righteous children. What message could be more hopeful than this: The wicked are redeemable because the future is unknown and might be restored for good by the issuance of righteous children.

D. God's Response to Israel's Teshuvah

As we would expect, when Israel, individually or

collectively, is ready to perform teshuvah, God is not only active in helping to bring her back to the fold, but appears to go more than half way in doing so.

The first question on Israel's mind, however, is whether or not God will accept her teshuvah. Bereshit Rabbah speaks to this concern by citing Cain's archetypical teshuvah which was referred to above,[12] and God's response to it: "My children, if I accepted Cain's repentance, will I not accept yours?"[13]

It appears from this and other passages that God has a pattern of setting a precedent with regard to Israel's teshuvah. It is as if He makes Himself constantly available in a predictable fashion so that when Israel is ready to return to Him, they know where to find Him and how He will receive them in repentance. Commenting on Exodus 19:2, "And when they were departed from Rephidim, and were come to the wilderness of Sinai," the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael explains:

> It declares that their coming into the wilderness of Sinai was like their departing from Rephidim. Just as when they departed from Rephidim they provoked God, and yet when after a little while they repented they were again favorably received by Him, so also after they had come to the wilderness of Sinai they provoked God, and yet when after a little while they repented they were again favorably received by Him.[14]

God's favorable acceptance here, as in other cases, is understood to be rooted in His attribute of mercy which He demonstrates to all who perform teshuvah before they die. "My children," explains God, "Return in repentance to Me

and I shall give you mercy while I am seated on the throne of mercy."[15]

However, God's basic stance with regard to Israel's teshuvah is not just one of acceptance and mercy, but of active and eager involvement. The rabbis explain their sense of how God responds by contrasting His acceptance of teshuvah with the parallel human inclination in such a situation:

> When a man engages in a quarrel with a friend and goes by himself to make his peace with his friend, he finds that the other refuses to be reconciled. Not until the man gets together a good number of people (and takes them along to witness his apology) will his friend consent to be reconciled. And even then, though the friend consents to make peace with the man, the friend still feels some resentment toward him. But I (says God), am not like that. When a man commits a transgression against Me and then repudiates it and repents, at once I feel compassion toward him and receive him in his repentance. And once I receive him in his repentance, I choose not to remember even the least part of his transgressions.[16]

In other words, God's acceptance of Israel's teshuvah contains the inherent promise that if she makes the serious change which teshuvah necessitates, God will respond in kind. He will also take that change seriously by forgetting her past transgressions.

E. Does God Perform Teshuvah?

One of the most intriguing questions to arise in this study is that of God performing teshuvah. Does He return to Israel? Does He actually do so in repentance? And if He does, for what reason? The references in this area are infrequent, but of great significance. They not only

answer the above questions, but they also tell us more about Israel's investment in her relationship with God as the rabbis understand it. And perhaps most importantly, we have a clear indication that for the rabbis, God could be a model when it comes to doing teshuvah.

Let us look first at a reference in Pesikta Rabbati. With the Temple in ruins, and Israel exiled and still experiencing the shock and pain of abandonment and punishment, the rabbis raise one basic question which is read into Jeremiah's words in Lamentations[17] in which he anguishes about whether God will ultimately abandon Israel. Pesikta Rabbati 31:3 reads:

> When Jeremiah saw the extraordinary afflictions which the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the people of Jerusalem, he stood aghast, saying: 'Is it possible that from now on the Holy One, blessed be He, could ever again return to them?

Clearly, the rabbis are not quoting Jeremiah as wondering whether or not God will return to Israel in repentance; they, after all, are the ones who have sinned. But it also seems apparent that while using the word "shav" to simply mean return to them in relationship, the underlying tone of "shav" which suggests that God return in "repentance" comes through. The irony seems intended by the rabbis. For although it is clear that it is Israel who must perform teshuvah in order to restore the relationship, their absolute and utter sense of rejection and abhorrence by God leads them to ask out of weakness, "Shall God ever return to us?" The real question, however, was: How might we

ever be able to return to God? By bringing up the question of God's return through the use of the word shav, the rabbis seem to hint that it is up to Israel to "return" and that she can do so through teshuvah. In other words, in psychological terms, this is a classic case of projection: Israel, through the words of Jeremiah, projects onto God what she, herself, must do in order to heal herself and restore the bond between the two partners.

God is also pictured as "returning" in another instance. This is not a return in the sense of repentance and, yet, like the previous passage, it involves repentance. Unlike the previous passage, however, there is no projection, but God's return to Job does teach two important things: first, how God responds when someone else makes teshuvah, and also, how one should respond to someone seeking to make teshuvah. Consider the following in Pesikta Rabbati 38:

> When the Holy One, blessed be He, sees that a man humbles himself, He forgives his sins. As long as a man holds on to his arrogance, no remission will be granted him. And if it is your wish to have proof of this statement, then consider the following: As long as Job stood obdurate against his friends, the measure of God's justice was ready to be discharged against them both, for we find Job saying to them: 'They that are younger than I have me in derision' (Job 30:1), and find them replying: 'With us are both the gray-headed and the very aged men' (Job 15:10). But as soon as Job made peace with them, in that very instant the Holy One, blessed be He, returned to him, as it is said, 'And the Lord returned at the return of Job' (Job 42:10). When? 'When he prayed for his friends' (ibid.).

So far we have seen God's "return" in the context of a wish by Israel as it feels abandoned and as a model

for how to respond when someone performs the necessary steps in the process of teshuvah, as Job finally did by making peace with his friends. Yet, we have not yet seen that God, Himself, might perform teshuvah. The following passage is a hint that He may do so--but not necessarily for the same reasons as Israel:

> 'Return O Israel' (Hosea 14:2). We find that as a consequence of Israel's wickedness, God had no alternative other than to take Himself away, and yet we find Him saying: 'Behold, it is I who will return.' In this connection, consider the parable of a king's son who became ill. The physician said: 'If he eats from something good, he will be healed. But the son was fearful to eat of the food, so the father said to him, 'You want to know that it will not harm you? Behold, I will eat from it (first).' So, too, the Holy One said to Israel, 'You are too ashamed to perform teshuvah? Behold, I shall return first, as it says, 'Thus saith the Lord: Behold, I will turn' (Jeremiah 30:18). Now if He who is without a sin or a fault--God forgive us for using such terms in connection with Him!--said, 'Behold, I will turn,' how much more necessary it is that humankind perform teshuvah and come unto the Holy One, blessed be He! Hence, 'Return O Israel unto the Lord thy God' (Hosea 14:2).[18]

Here, at last, we have an indication from the rabbis that God does perform teshuvah--but not in the way that they understand Israel doing teshuvah. Whereas Israel engages in a process of teshuvah which begins with her sinning and ends in reconciliation, God's teshuvah is different. Rather, acting again as a father and teacher, God does teshuvah simply in the sense of return, not having to go through the early stages involving repentance. The reason for His teshuvah? In order to teach Israel that not only is this not so difficult, but it is, in fact, also curative.

F. God's Response When the Wicked Do Not Perform Teshuvah

For all of God's eagerness to have Israel perform teshuvah, and for all His patience in waiting for the wicked, the rabbis also teach explicitly that there are limitations to His forbearance.

In fact, in the perspective of the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, God's response to a lack of teshuvah, particularly after He has extended the time given to return to Him, can be devastating. Picking up on Exodus 15:6, "Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, Thy right hand, shattering the enemy," the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael offers an explanation as to why the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea:

> You are fair and mighty in power, for You extended the time given to the generation of the flood to do teshuvah; However, they did not do teshuvah, as it is said: 'My spirit shall not abide in man forever' (Gen. 6:3). And You did not ultimately decree destruction upon them until they fully extended their wickedness before You. And one would also find this is the case with regard to the men of the Tower (of Babel)...and the same with regard to the men of Sodom...(And the same can be said with regard to the Egyptians as in our case here:) You brought ten plagues against the Egyptians in Egypt. But You did not ultimately decree destruction until they had extended their destruction before you.[19]

Another midrash also teaches that God gives the wicked the chance to perform teshuvah, but if they prove not only unrepentant, but unabashedly so, God will respond in no uncertain terms. Consider this passage in Bereshit Rabbah 38:9 as God surveys those who would build the Tower of Babel:

> 'And now,' R. Abba b. Kahana said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave an opportunity

> to repent, for 'And now' indicates repentance, as it says, 'And now, Israel, what doth the Lord require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, etc.' (Deut. 10:12). But they said, 'No!'--'Then let all that which they purpose to do be withholden from them (Gen. 11:6), decreed the Lord. When a vineyard does not yield fruit, what does its owner do? He uproots it!

The message indeed is quite clear: God will wait for the wicked to do teshuvah, but if they extend their wickedness past a certain time,[20] and, moreover, if they are insolent and unappreciative toward God, they will pay the cost. Not only is teshuvah now out of the question, but God will unceremoniously uproot them from His garden which He has gone to great length to tend.

God's reaction in the case of the wicked who choose not to return to Him in repentance is indicative of His investment in the teshuvah of Israel. The rabbis convey the understanding that, regardless of the length and breadth of Israel's list of sins, God will sometimes encourage and nudge and at other times wait patiently for Israel to make a move back in His direction. And once she does so, like the father who cannot contain his exhilaration, He will joyfully bound toward Israel. For this is a God who, in His own way, for His own purposes, needs the process of teshuvah as much as Israel does.

CHAPTER THREE

Teshuvah In A Broader Perspective

A full picture of Israel's need for teshuvah and God's investment therein cannot be complete without an examination of the relationship between teshuvah and other aspects of the human condition. For the rabbis, these aspects are not separate from, but rather are intimately connected to the existence and the urgency of teshuvah. In this chapter, then, we will discuss four different aspects of the life of the individual and the relationship of each to teshuvah. The four are: teshuvah and sin; teshuvah and reconciliation; teshuvah and healing; and teshuvah and redemption. Each of these not only is related to the others, but each also helps to fill out the entire picture of teshuvah and its significance in rabbinic thought.

In addition, we will examine in greater depth two areas I have already touched on briefly: the consequences of not performing teshuvah, and the relationship between teshuvah and death. This relationship will both broaden and deepen our understanding of teshuvah, since in the minds of the rabbis, teshuvah is not simply a process by which one turns from sin back to God. More than this, in the midst of the very realities like sin and death, teshuvah is a life affirming force rooted in the urging by God of Israel to "Seek ye Me and live thereby" (Amos 5:4). This is what we must understand in order to fully grasp and appreciate the concept of teshuvah and its paramount importance.

A. Teshuvah and Sin

An understanding of the importance of teshuvah for the rabbis must be rooted in their understanding and acceptance of sin as basic to the human condition. Hosea 14:2, which states, "Return unto the Lord thy God for you have stumbled in your iniquity," is not simply a call to repentance, but also a recognition of the reality and inevitability of sin. Although the rabbis rooted teshuvah in premundane existence, they also strongly suggested that it was created in order to help humankind escape a permanent state of sin. Solomon Schechter quotes the rabbis in this way:

> When He drew the plan of the world He found that it could not endure until He had created repentance, since, as the early commentators explained it, the nature of man is so constituted that he cannot well escape sin. His existence, therefore, would have proved impossible without the remedy of repentance.[1]

As has been noted throughout and is further underscored here by Schechter, teshuvah, by definition, not only suggests but also recognizes the existence and the powerful hold of sin over human beings. At the same time, however, teshuvah also indicates the possibility, indeed the necessity of turning from sin, back toward God. The relationship, then, in the eyes of the rabbis between sin and teshuvah is based not only on a realistic assessment of the nature of humankind, but also on the assertion--woven throughout these texts--that Judaism as a way of life, cannot survive unless the people have the means by which they can redeem themselves of their sins, and a method by

which they can re-establish their bond with God and their fellow human beings.

As important as this is, the rabbis pointed to another aspect of the relationship between sin and teshuvah which may be more significant. It is clear from the rabbinic perspective that teshuvah means more than simply turning from sinful ways back to God, and eradicating the sinful experience. Rather, what ultimately frames the perceptions of the rabbis, and what may be most significant, is that sin can be converted from a shame to be forgotten and tucked away into a redemptive experience through the process of teshuvah. Shemot Rabbah 31:1 makes this point explicitly:

> Whence do you know that if a man repents he converts into pious deeds even the many sins of which he is guilty? Because it is written, 'And when the wicked turneth from his wickedness, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby' (Ezekiel 33:19). 'None of his sins that he hath committed shall be remembered against him' (Ezekiel 33:16).[2]

In B.T. Yoma 86b, Resh Lakish makes essentially the same point, this time about premeditated sins, using the same prooftext from the Torah:

> ... Resh Lakish said that repentance is so great that premeditated sins are accounted as though they were merits, as it is said: 'And when the wicked turneth from his wickedness, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby' (Ezekiel 33:19).

The rabbis recognize, then, that the need for teshuvah suggests the reality of sin and its grasp on human beings. More than this, however, these few brief passages indicate that the rabbis were remarkably confident in the power of

teshuvah. As potent as sin might be, they possessed a more powerful antidote.

B. Teshuvah and Reconciliation

Just as the necessity and reality of teshuvah implies the reality and the power of sin, so, too, the existence of teshuvah indicates the need for and the power of reconciliation. For the final goal of teshuvah is not forgiveness, but rather the restoration of the bond between two people or between human beings and God.

The relationship between teshuvah and reconciliation, like that of teshuvah and sin, has been implicitly drawn in Chapters One and Two. Two further references will help to make explicit the notion that, for the rabbis, there could be no reconciliation without the possibility of teshuvah. First, in the following passage, we have two attempts at reconciliation, one which is ultimately not full reconciliation, the other a model of how God helps to bring about reconciliation:

> When a man engages in a quarrel with a friend and goes by himself to make his peace with his friend, he finds that the other refuses to be reconciled. Not until the man gets together a good number of people (and takes them along to witness his apology) will his friend consent to be reconciled. And even then, though the friend consents to make peace with the man, the friend still feels some resentment toward him. But I (says God) am not like that. When a man commits a transgression against Me and then repudiates it and repents of it, at once I feel compassion toward him and receive him in his repentance. I choose not to remember even the least part of his transgressions.[3]

This passage is not only an example of God's compassion toward Israel, but it teaches us that God's compassion is an expression not just of His forgiveness but also of His move toward reconciliation with Israel. This movement by God comes immediately following Israel's repudiation of its sins and the making of teshuva--which is its part in the process of reconciliation.

And, as is often the case, an example from the everyday world is used by the rabbis to make a point. In B.T. Yoma 87a, R. Zera illustrates a method to expedite repentance, and hence reconciliation: "When R. Zera had a complaint against any man, he would repeatedly pass by him so that he may come forth to (pacify) him."

This example is used by the rabbis to show how one might bring about reconciliation. R. Zera teaches that in order to make the act of teshuvah more possible for someone who has hurt him, he makes himself accessible and open. More than this, however, his example helps to clarify the relationship between teshuvah and reconciliation. Like sin, which necessitates the contemplation of teshuvah, reconciliation is an integral part of this process. It must be achieved in order for the process of teshuvah to be completed. Reconciliation, then, is both part of the process of teshuvah, as well as a beneficiary of it.

C. Teshuvah and Healing

The relationship between teshuvah and healing is one

dynamic of the relationship between teshuvah and reconciliation. Our focus here, however, is not the reconciliation between God and Israel. Rather, we shall begin with the pain which results from a breach in the relationship between God and Israel and then we will be able to see teshuvah as the agent of healing.

The pain, emotional in nature but illustrated by a physical metaphor, appears to be rooted in the afflictions which both God and Israel endure when Israel sins. Teshuvah not only facilitates reconciliation, but as we will see shortly, engenders a healing of the emotional pain as well. B.T. Yoma 86a relates that, "Great is repentance for it brings healing to the world, as it is said, 'I will heal their backsliding' (Hosea 14:5)." In Tanhuma ha-Nidpas we also learn that teshuvah is an agent of healing:

> Come and see that there is no blow in the world which does not contain its own healing. And what would be the healing (agent) of the Yetzer ha-Ra? Teshuvah--as R. Judah ben Rabbi Shalom in the name of Rabbi Elazar said, 'Three things can cancel a harsh decree, and these are they: Repentance, Prayer, and Tzedakah.'[4]

As the rabbis describe God's healing of Israel, one of the basic metaphors they employ is that of a "broken vessel." The Pesikta de Rav Kahana, piska 24:5, reads, for example:

> R. Alexandri said: If an ordinary person makes use of a broken vessel, it is taken as a reflection upon him. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is unconcerned about His use of broken vessels--indeed His entire use is broken vessels: 'The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart' (Ps. 34:19); 'Who healeth the broken in heart' (Ps. 147:3); 'A broken and

> contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise' (Ps. 51:19). Hence, admonishing Israel, Hosea says to them: 'Return O Israel' (Hosea 14:2).

We learn three important things here. First, the use of the physical metaphor of the broken vessel helps to show that the "emotional suffering" inferred from earlier passages is really broader than the psychological, even if the rabbis do not think in these terms exactly. In fact, the entire being is shattered when Israel has sinned. Second, therefore, the use of teshuvah in the healing process must have an effect which can be felt beyond the heart. And finally, this healing is really a two-way street: God heals these broken vessels by urging them to make teshuvah; and Israel, by doing her part in making teshuvah, helps to heal herself.

These comments suggest that God does not mind having "broken vessels" in His charge. For not only does He provide an effective agent of healing, teshuvah, but through the healing of Israel, He will draw close to her once again.

D. Teshuvah and Redemption

One further relationship which has a bearing on the rabbis' understanding of teshuvah merits examination. Unlike the relationship between teshuvah and healing which is focused on the individual's emotional needs, the tie between teshuvah and redemption has as its focus the collective. The rabbis are primarily interested either in the redemption

of Israel, in general, or in the redemption of Israel from Egypt, in particular.

The following comment, which is found in Pesikta Rabbati 44:9, has as its focus the individual. Nevertheless, it can also serve as a paradigm for the whole household of Israel.

> 'Return, O Israel.' Five things bring redemption. A man's dire distress may be the cause of his being redeemed: 'In thy distress, when all these things are come upon thee' (Deut. 4:30). A time already set may be the cause of his being redeemed: 'in the end of days' (ibid.). A man's turning in repentance may be the cause: 'thou wilt return to the Lord thy God' (ibid.). The mercy of God may be the cause: 'for the Lord thy God is a merciful God' (Deut. 4:31). Or the merit of the Fathers may be the cause: 'He will not...forget the covenant with thy fathers' (ibid.). The return to God, in itself a cause of redemption, also draws after it two other causes of redemption, namely the mercy of God and the merit of the Fathers, for Scripture says, 'Thou wilt return to the Lord thy God, and hearken unto His voice,' and follows at once with 'for the Lord thy God is a merciful God...He will not...forget the covenant with they fathers' (ibid.). Therefore, let us return to Him, for we have no God like Him who will receive us whenever we turn from transgression.

This next passage, however, from Ba'Midbar Rabbah, is a variation of the theme of teshuvah and redemption but with a clear collective focus:

> R. Eleazar said: Israel was redeemed from Egypt only because of the following five reasons: 1) Distress; 2) Repentance; 3) The Merits of the Fathers; 4) The Term of their slavery which had come to an end; 5) God's Mercy.[5]

Though the circumstances of "redemption" in each case are not exactly the same, the implication drawn from both passages is explicit enough. Teshuvah is seen as a salvitic

agent--whether it be in the very generalized context of the Rabbati quotation or in the more specific references to being saved from slavery in the second instance.

What is not entirely clear, yet, is the extent to which teshuvah is important in terms of redemption. This question is discussed in at least one passage, even if inconclusively. In a discussion of what constitutes redemption, in which the matter is not settled with a uniformity of opinion, teshuvah, at least for some, is considered to be central. The B.T. Sanhedrin discussion is as follows:

> Rab said: All the predestined dates for creation have passed and the matter (now) depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Samuel maintained: It is sufficient for a mourner to heep his (period) of mourning. This matter if disputed by the Tannaim: R. Eliezer said: If Israel repent they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed ...Another (Baraita) taught: R. Eliezer said: If Israel repent, they will be redeemed, as it is written, 'Return Ye backsliding children and I will heal your backslidings' (Jer. 3:22).[6]

E. The Consequences of Israel Not Performing Teshuvah

A further and deeper understanding of the rabbinic attitude toward teshuvah emerges from an examination of the consequences of not performing teshuvah. In fact, unlike the area we considered in the first two chapters, which were the process of teshuvah and the involvement of the individual and God therein, the results of Israel's not performing teshuvah are literally rooted in life and death matters. "Seek Me and you shall live" (Amos 5:4), is often understood by the rabbis not only as a call to teshuvah, but as a call

to life itself. Pesikta de Rav Kahana, piska 24:1 comments:

> 'Seek ye Me, and live' (Amos 5:4). O people, what do I require of you? Only that you seek Me and thus remain alive. Therefore, Hosea, admonishing Israel, said: 'Return, O Israel, unto the Lord thy God' (Hosea 14:2).

The question, then, of what becomes of the individual or of Israel, the collective, as well, when it does not perform teshuvah is a vital one--both for the redemption of the individual, and for the salvation of the people, Israel.

First, in terms of the collective, there is an overall understanding (post-facto) that God refuses to protect Israel not just on account of her sins as we often read, but also because she did not repent. In other words, at times of national catastrophe, teshuvah is very much an issue--both, prior to the tragedy, when it seems that perhaps Israel still has a chance to repent and save herself, and after the fact when she sits and laments her fate.

There was a sense, an anticipation, the teshuvah might play a role in forestalling what seemed to be an inevitable exile. In the following passage, R. Eleazar interpreted a scriptural verse as teaching this lesson:

> What verse comes immediately to mind before the lesson for the day from the Prophets? 'Samaria shall bear her guilt' (Hos. 14:1). This is at once followed by the words, 'Return O Israel' (Hos. 14:2). R. Eleazar citing R. Samuel bar Nachman, told the parable of a city which rebelled against its king. The king sent a general to lay it waste, but since the general was experienced and cool-headed, he said to the rebels: Take time to consider what you

> are doing lest the king lay waste your city as he laid waste such-and-such a city and its environs. So, too, Hosea said to Israel, 'My children, resolve upon repentance, so that the Holy One does not do to you what He did to Samaria and its environs.' Thereupon, Israel asked the Holy One directly, 'Master of the Universe, if we do not resolve upon repentance, wilt Thou accept us (even though--human nature being what it is--our repentance may be imperfect?)'[7]

And in the following citation, after Israel has sinned, she apparently still has a chance not to be exiled if only she should repent:

> R. Jonathan said: Three and a half years the Shechina abode upon the Mount of Olives hoping that Israel would repent, but they did not; while a Bat Kol declared 'Return, O backsliding children' (Jer. 3:14) 'Return unto Me and I will return unto you' (Mal. 3:7).[8]

In sum, Israel's teshuvah will shape her national fate. Teshuvah may save Israel from destruction, but just as surely, sin without teshuvah may set her on the road to exile and decimation.

In an ironic note, a passage in Pesikta Rabbati illustrates the affect exile has upon Israel's desire to perform acts of teshuvah:

> Who is alluded to in the word 'also' as in the phrase 'we also wept' (Ps. 137:1)? (God). For the Children of Israel caused the Holy One, blessed be He, to weep with them.
>
> R. Isaac expounded the verse 'We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof (Ps. 137:2). Come and see how (longing for) the soil of Israel (stirs) Israel to repentance. While the Children of Israel were in the land of Israel, Jeremiah used to say: Repent before the decree of judgement against you be sealed, but they would not. As soon as they were exiled, however, they began according reverence to the commandments. (Refusing to sing the songs of Zion to the Babylonians), they took their harps and hanged them upon the willows.[9]

The consequences of Israel as a collective not performing teshuvah are rooted in the destruction of the First Temple and the subsequent exile. The consequences of the individual not performing teshuvah, however, appear to be rooted in the Garden of Eden story. Like the first, however, this is expanded upon to fit the rabbis view of the world.

Commenting on the first part of Proverbs 29:23, "A man's pride shall bring him low," in BaMidbar Rabbah 8:3, it is stated that this was:

> ...since he was too proud in the face of the Holy One blessed be He to repent. Therefore He brought him low and drove him from the Garden of Eden.

Tanhuma Ha-Nidpas also illustrates the consequences of "a man's pride bringing him low," while rooting the need for teshuvah in the Garden story. The passage reads:

> And the Lord God said unto the serpent, 'Because thou has done this, cursed act, thou...' (Gen. 3:14). And I will place enmity between thee and the woman... (ibid. 15). And He returned unto the woman and said to her: 'I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy travail...' (ibid. 16). And when He returned unto Adam, He did not obligate him until He had given him a hint that he should perform repentance. And from whence do we know that this was the one?...[from the verse which follows shortly:] 'In the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it thou wast taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (ibid. 19). This reference to 'return' can only refer to 'repentance', as it says 'Return O Israel unto the Lord thy God for you have stumbled in thine iniquity' (Hos. 14:2). And as soon as Adam did not perform repentance, God expelled him from the Garden of Eden, as it says, 'And He drove out the man' (ibid. 24).[10]

There is a direct line from the expulsion of Adam from the Garden for shunning teshuvah when the opportunity presented itself to the anger expressed at the wicked for not

repenting. The depiction of Elisha ben Abuyah in Chapter One is an example;[11] another is found in Pesikta Rabbati, piska 44:8:

> ...When a wicked man dies, a man who did not bring himself to turn in repentance to God, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to him: 'Let thy soul be blasted in despair! How many times did I call upon thee to repent and thou didst not!' 'The eyes of the wicked shall fail, and they shall have no way to flee, and their hope shall end with the blasting of the soul' (Job 11:20).

Other passages suggest that if the Day of Judgement comes and a man has not repented of his sins, he will suffer serious, if somewhat vague, consequences. BaMidbar Rabbah 14:6 reads in this regard:

> (For to every matter there is a time and judgement; for the evil of man is great upon him.) For he knoweth not that which shall come to be; for even when it cometh to pass, who shall declare it unto him?' (Ecclesiastes 8:6-7). The purpose of this passage is to teach that if a man does not repent of a transgression he may have committed and is not afraid of the Day of Judgement, he will receive no favor when the Day does arrive...[12]

In any case, the consequences of an individual not performing teshuvah before a certain time are alluded to and expressed in different ways; each one points in the direction of death. So far, however, we have not mentioned death directly. Yet, the relationship between teshuvah and death--both as a consequence of not performing teshuva, and as something separate--is so important that while we must see it as an extension of the individual not performing teshuvah, it demands a focus all its own. It is here that we will not simply experience the anger of the rabbis (and

apparently of God) over the People of Israel or an individual forsaking teshuvah, but will also come to understand in more depth the very matters of life and death for the rabbis.

Rabbinic thinking with respect to the relationship between teshuvah and death surfaces in several areas. These include: a discussion on the necessity to do teshuvah before death in order for it to be effective; the fact that a lack of teshuva may lead to death; and finally, the point is made that if one sins but does repentance, one is saved from death.

However, in reading the material on teshuvah and death, one begins to sense that the issue extends deeper than the aggadot in each of these areas would suggest by themselves. I have already noted that in the minds of the rabbis, the issue of teshuvah is intimately tied up with matters of life and death. How do we understand this exactly?

We know that one must do teshuvah before one's death from a number of sources. For instance, in Ruth Rabbah we have the following account of two wicked men, one of whom repented of his sins before his death, the other of whom did not,

> with the result that the former stands in the company of the righteous, while his fellow stands in the company of the wicked. And beholding him he says, 'Woe is me, is there then favor shown here? Both of us committed robberies; both of us committed murders together; yet he stands in the company of the righteous and I in the company of the wicked!'

This wicked one then attempts to convince the angels of heaven to allow him to repent, and therefore enjoy the same company as his friend. But they retort:

> 'You fool!' Do you know that this world is like the Sabbath and whence you have come is like the eve of the Sabbath. If a man does not prepare his meal on the eve of the Sabbath, what shall he eat on the Sabbath?'[13]

We understand then from this passage that not only must teshuvah be effected before one's death, but that teshuvah is actually a preparation, if not a condition for the world to come. This notion serves to underscore the importance of teshuvah for, in the world of the rabbis, death was not a matter to be greatly feared if one felt assured of life in the world to come. The rabbinic message was therefore quite clear: if one did not perform teshuvah, one would be denied access to life in the world to come.

The rabbis then effectively picked up on the power of this message in order to expand the importance of teshuvah. In response to the teaching that one should "Repent one day before your death," Rabbi Eliezer was asked an obvious question by one of his students:

> 'Rabbi, does any man know when he will die so that he can repent?' He answered them, 'Should he not all the more repent today lest he die the day after, and then all his days will be lived in repentance.'[14]

However, nowhere is the power of teshuvah more clear than in the explicit statements, both about the collective Israel and the individual, that a lack of repentance actually leads to death or destruction. Although it has been implied

in some of the above statements, it is most explicitly asserted in Pesikta de Rav Kahana 14:2 in a discussion of those who had obeyed God and were rewarded. And yet, there were those who did not obey God. They, too, would see consequences for their actions.

> Finally, there were those who did not hearken and suffered loss therefor--Israel themselves. 'Yet they hearkened not unto Me, nor inclined their ear' (Jeremiah 7:26). And what loss did they suffer (Nothing less than life itself): 'Such as are for death, to death; and such as are for sword, to the sword...' (Jer. 15:2).

And yet, just as a lack of teshuvah may actually bring about one's demise, so, too, it is asserted in one instance at least that the performance of teshuvah might actually save one from death. In a discussion of who might be intended for the fires of Sheol, the rabbis assert that Isaiah asked the following of God:

> Even though a man sin against Thee, but repents, is it not Thy delight to forgive him so that the man lives instead of dying?[15]

It is clear, however, that the performance of teshuvah, in its essence, does not concern itself with saving from death nor does the ultimate meaning of teshuvah have only to do with return to, and reconciliation with, God. For at its root, teshuvah in the minds of the rabbis involves life and how it is meant to be lived. In a variation of a passage we have previously seen,[16] the Pesikta de Rav Kahana sums this up very well:

> Who is like God, a teacher of sinners that they may repent? They asked Wisdom, What shall be the punishment of the sinner? Wisdom answered: 'Evil pursueth

> sinners' (Proverbs 13:21). They asked Prophecy. It replied: 'The soul that sinneth shall die' (Ezekiel 18:4). They asked the Law. It replied: 'Let him bring a sacrifice' (Lev. 1:4). They asked God, and He replied: 'Let him repent and obtain his atonement. My children, what do I ask of you? Seek Me and live.'[17]

So the ultimate meaning of teshuvah has to do with life itself, and how one actually lives. One lives most fully by performing teshuvah as a means of return to God, and therefore, as a means to claim life itself from the wasteland of guilt and lamentation that sin engenders.

CONCLUSIONS

As I wrote in the Introduction, I originally sought to focus on teshuvah as a response to national catastrophe and as an agent of personal change. Although these categories still greatly interest me, I am not disappointed that my interests with regard to teshuvah did not match up with those of the rabbis. In fact, the rabbis expanded my understanding of teshuvah and bridged the gap between their world and my own. Still, I have areas of disagreement with the rabbis. For instance, although I believe in some kind of immortality of the soul, I do not believe that it is dependent upon our doing teshuvah in this world. Nor am I quite sure that we might be saved from death or some kind of judgement through the performance of teshuvah.

On the other hand, there is much in the rabbinic perspective on teshuvah with which I agree, and, in fact, find inspiring. The primary lesson I learned from the rabbis is that teshuvah is redemptive. For I believe that at its root, redemption encourages us to live fully, thereby realizing at many moments the hope and the meaning so inherent, but so often elusive, in the human experience. Teshuvah, the rabbis teach, is a powerful antidote to the guilt, loneliness, and alienation which makes promises of hope and meaning seem like silly, if painful, fantasies.

Redemption, however, does not end with the ability to transcend these human realities. Redemption, as realized through teshuvah, also means that the promise of a life of meaning and a life of partnership--with God, and

with other human beings--is not an empty hope but a very real possibility.

And finally, teshuvah is intimately tied to my own understanding of the essence of Judaism. That essence is hinted at in one biblical verse, for instance, Amos 5:14 which states: "Seek good and not evil that you may live." It seems clear that by seeking (and also doing, as we often learn) good, we may live. However, what does it really mean to live? Although in too many ways the meaning and purpose of life is a mystery, it is also evident that beyond the mystery--even beyond the ups and downs and the monotony of everyday existence--we do sense some kind of ultimate meaning in our lives.

Sigmund Freud explained that the meaning of the evolution of civilization is the struggle--the very human struggle--found not only in collective human endeavors like warfare, but also in each of our lives, between the instinct of life, of preservation, of building bonds, of creating, and the equally human instinct of death and of destruction.

The very essence of Judaism must ultimately be understood not as the struggle to be a good person, or the struggle to find happiness and contentment, or even the struggle to seek out that which we most earnestly crave, love. Rather, the essence of Judaism is to be found in the very struggle for life itself, and all the possibilities it holds for us. At the exact center of this struggle for

life is the recognition that life is eminently worthwhile and inherently holy, and that by actively seeking--and doing--that which is good, we are filling life with holiness. And nothing, it seems to me, is more important to the struggle for life and that which can be holy than teshuvah. For nothing else in life is as powerful a redeemer, nor as close at hand in moments of need. And nothing else allows Israel to so blossom, as the rabbis would say, "as the lily in spring." The children of Israel learned this from God as Midrash Psalms 45:2 recounts in the following passage:

> The children of Israel said to the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Master of the Universe, when wilt Thou redeem us?' And He answered: 'When you have gone down to the very bottom of the pit, in that hour, I shall redeem you, as is said 'The children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together...and shall rise up from the earth' (Hosea 2:2). So, too, the sons of Korah said: We are at the very bottom of the pit, as it is said 'For our soul is sunk deep in the dust' (Ps. 24:26); and what did they go on to say? 'Arise for our help' (ibid. 24:27). The Holy One, blessed be He, answered: 'Your help shall be all your own. As the lily blossoms when its heart is turned upward, so will you when you repent before Me. Let your heart be directed upward like the lily, and in that hour I shall bring the deliverer: 'I shall be as the dew unto Israel, when she blossoms as the lily' - that is, when Israel blossoms as the lily.

As Israel blossoms like a lily when it performs teshuvah, so can we--if we are willing and, perhaps, courageous enough to know the worth of our lives, the possibility of God, and the power of teshuvah.

NOTES

Introduction

[1] Jacob Neusner, Understanding Rabbinic Judaism, New York: KTAV 1974, p. 9.

Chapter One

[1] B.T. Pesahim 54a. See Bereshit Rabbah 1:4 and Midrash Psalms 90:12 for similar texts.

[2] Jakob Petuchowski, "The Concept of Teshuvah in the Bible and the Talmud", Judaism, 1968, p. 178.

[3] In at least two other instances, "And now" (Ve'atah) signals repentance: Bereshit Rabbah 38:9 and 49:6.

[4] My translation.

[5] My translation.

[6] The word "'avon" can be understood as "sin" or "punishment." The biblical text implies "punishment" but the midrashic author reads it as "sin" in order to make his point.

[7] My translation.

[8] Again the midrashist translates the biblical verse, "My punishment is greater than I can bear," as: "Is my sin too great to be forgiven?"

[9] For other renderings of Cain's teshuvah, see: Tanhuma Ha-Nidpas, Bereshit 9; Devarim Rabbah 8:1; and Bereshit Rabbah 22:13.

[10] A number of biblical verses are important to an aggadic understanding of teshuvah. They include: Hosea 14:2; Mal. 3:7; Jer. 3:14; Jer. 3:22 and Lamentations 5:21.

[11] In the Soncino edition of Midrash Rabbah, p. 904, vol. I, the editorial comment is made that God forgave Cain half "(Because) he did not throw himself on God's mercy but argued with God that he had a right to a pardon."

[12] B.T. Yoma 86b.

[13] Pesikta Rabbati 44:1.

[14] Midrash Psalms 100:1.

[15] Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 43. My translation.

[16] For more of a discussion of one human being sinning against another, see below "Teshuvah and Reconciliation," Chapter Three, pp. 40-41.

[17] Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 43. My translation.

[18] In Chapter Three, below, pp. 43-45, we will discuss how teshuvah as an agent of this change is redemptive.

[19] Petuchowski, "The Concept of Teshuvah", p. 180.

[20] See Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 43, for the full text.

[21] Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 43.

[22] See Shir HaShirim Rabbah 8:2 for a parallel text.

[23] Kohelet Rabbah 4:1.

[24] This is a paraphrase of Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:16. The same idea is also expressed in Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 43.

[25] See B.T. Yoma 87a and Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:18 for parallel texts.

[26] See Ruth Rabbah 6:4 for a parallel text. Also see B.T. Hagiggah 15a-16a for another version of the Elisha ben Abuyah story.

[27] Kohelet Rabbah 7:8

Chapter Two

[1] Eicha Rabbati 5:21.

[2] Ibid. 5:5.

[3] Ibid. Proem 24.

[4] Pesikta de Rav Kahana 24:16.

[5] Pesikta Rabbati 44:9.

[6] Ibid. 44:2.

[7] Pesikta de Rav Kahana 24:7.

[8] Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 43.

[9] Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:2.

[10] See Chapter One above, pp. 21-22.

[11] Kohelet Rabbah 7:1.

[12] See Chapter One, above, p. 5.

[13] Pesikta Rabbati 50:5. Also see Pesikta de Rav Kahana 24:11 for a similar text.

[14] Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, BaChodesh 1.

[15] Pesikta Rabbati 50:3.

[16] Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, Chapter Four. My translation.

[17] Jeremiah's words in Lamentations 5:20 are: "Wherefor? Wilt Thou forget us forever, and forsake us for length of days?"

[18] Pesikta Rabbati 44:7. My translation.

[19] Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Shiratah 3. My translation.

[20] For the details of not performing teshuvah before a certain time, see Chapter Three below, pp. 45-53.

Chapter Three

[1] Solomon Schechter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, p. 314.

[2] The editor of the Soncino edition of Midrash Rabbah notes the following: "The emphasis is on the thereby--he shall live through his very misdeeds, because after genuine repentance they rank as virtues."

[3] Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, Chapter Four. My translation.

[4] Tanhuma Ha-Nidpas, Noah 8. My translation.

[5] BaMidbar Rabbah 2:24. For a similar passage see Midrash Psalms 106:9.

[6] B.T. Sanhedrin 97b.

[7] Pesikta de Rav Kahana 24:11.

[8] Eicha Rabbati, Proem 25.

[9] Pesikta Rabbati 28:3.

[10] Tanhuma Ha-Nidpas, Tazria 9. My translation.

[11] Chapter One above, pp. 19-21.

[12] For similar passages see: B.T. Sanhedrin 108a and B.T. Yoma 87a.

[13] Ruth Rabbah 3:3.

[14] Kohelet Rabbah 9:1.

[15] Pesikta Rabbati 50:1.

[16] See Chapter Two above, p. 27.

[17] Pesikta de Rav Kahana 24:11.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Hebrew Sources

Aggadat Bereshit, ed. S. Buber. New York. Menorah Institute for Research and Publication, 1959.

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, ed. H.S. Horowitz. Jerusalem, 1960.

Midrash Hagadol, ed. S. Schechter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902.

Midrash Lekah Tov - Pesikta Zutratha, Rabbi Tobiah Bar Eliezer, ed. S. Buber. Vilna, 1880.

Midrash Rabbah, Vilna, 1878.

Midrash Tanhuma, ed. S. Buber. Vilna, 1885.

Pesikta de Rav Kahana, ed. S. Buber. Lyck: L. Silberman, 1868.

Pesikta Rabbati, ed. M. Friedman. Vienna, 1880.

Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer Hagadol, Warsaw, 1852.

Seder Eliyahu Rabbah v'Seder Eliyahu Zuta, ed. Meir Friedman. Vienna, 1904.

Sefer Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, ed. D. Luria. Warsaw, 1852.

Talmud Bavli. New York: Shulzenger, 1970.

Tanhuma ha-Nidpas: Midrash Tanhuma 'al Hamisha Humshei Torah. Jerusalem: Lewin-Epstein, 1965.

Yalkut Shimoni, ed. R. Yitzhak Shiloni. Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1973.

Secondary Source Materials

Bialik, H. and Ravnitsky, I., Sefer HaAggadah, Tel Aviv, 1910.

Buchler, A., Studies in Sin and Atonement. Klav, 1968.

Eisenstein, J.D., 'Ozar Ma'amarei Hazal, New York, 1922.

Epstein, B., Torah Temimah 'al Hamesh Humshei Torah im Hamesh Megilot, Vilna, 1902.

Ginsberg, L., The Legends of the Jews, trans. by Henrietta Szold. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1910.

Gross, M., 'Ozar HaAggadah, 3 vols. Jerusalem, 1954.

The Hebrew Scriptures, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955.

Hyman, A., Sefer Torah ha'Ketuvah U'Mesorah 'al Torah, Nevi'im U'Ketuvim, Tel Aviv, 1936.

Kasher, M., Torah Shelemah, 25 vols. Jerusalem, 1926.

Loewe, H. and Montefiore, C.G., A Rabbinic Anthology, New York: Schocken Books, 1974.

Mandelkern, S., Concordance on the Bible, Reprinted in New York: Shulzenger Brothers, 1955.

Montefiore, C.G., "The Rabbinic Conception of Repentance", JQR, 1904.

Neuman, D., Motif Index of Talmudic-Midrashic Literature, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1978.

Neusner, J., Understanding Rabbinic Judaism, New York: KTAV, 1974.

Petuchowski, J., "The Concept of Teshuvah in the Bible and Talmud", Judaism, Spring 1968, vol. 17, pp. 175-185.

Schechter, S., Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, Cambridge, 1909.

Urbach, F.E., The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs, trans. by I. Abrahams, Jerusalem, 1975.