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THE LAW OF RETURN: EXPLORATIONS OF REPENTANCE IN THE HOMILETICAL MIDRASHIM

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The Law of Return: Explorations of Repentance in the Homiletical Midrashim

Sarah Wolf

This thesis explores the theological implications of the rabbinic treatment of repentance in the major collections of homiletical midrashim (Pesikta Rabbati, Pesikta deRav Kahana, Midrash Tanhuma-Yelamdenu, Shemot Rabbah, Bemidbar Rabbah, and Devarim Rabbah). Through analysis of representative texts through close reading, I have uncovered some of the rabbis' notions about repentance and how those notions shaped their concept of God and God's relationship with the world. I have divided this thesis into five chapters including the introduction and conclusion. In Chapter One, I discuss the main theological assumptions on which the concept of teshuvah is based, namely, that human beings have free will and God rewards and punishes *middah keneged middah*, but that teshuvah is the process by which people can avoid divine punishment. In Chapter Two, I explore the greatness of the power of repentance to supersede God's laws and subvert the natural order of the world. In Chapter Three, I discuss the limits to teshuvah and the relationship between God's attributes of justice and mercy. I then conclude with some final thoughts and lingering questions on the subject.

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Many thanks to Dr. Wendy Zierler for her insight, compassion, and for always challenging me to dig deeper. Thank you to Dr. Norman Cohen for introducing me to this material and to Dr. Eugene Borowitz for being Dr. Eugene Borowitz. Many, many thanks to my mom and dad for their encouragement, support, and wordsmithery (both intentional and not).

Table of Contents

Introduction

ר' יודן בשם ר' לעזר: שלשה הן שמבטלין את הגזירה. ואילו הן, התפיל' והצדקה והתשובה. ושלשתן בפסוק אחד, "ויכנעו עמי אשר נקרא שמי עליהם ויתפללו ויבקשו פני וישבו מדרכיהם הרעים ואני אשמע מן השמים ואסלח לחטאתם וארפא את ארצם" (דה"ב ז: יד). ויתפללו, זו תפילה. ויבקשו פני, זו צדקה, דכת' אני בצדק אחזה פניך (תהלים יז: טו). וישובו מדרכיהם הרעים (ד"ה שם /דברי הימים ב' ז'/), זו תשובה. מה כת' תמן? "ואני אשמע מן השמים ואסלח לחטאתם" (שם /דברי הימים ב' ז'/).

Rabbi Yudan in the name of Rabbi Lazar [said]: There are three things that annul the decree, and they are these: *tefillah*, *tzedakah*, and *teshuvah*. All three of them are in one biblical verse, "And My people, upon whom My name is called, shall humble themselves and pray, seek My face and turn back from their evil ways, and I shall hear from the heavens and I shall pardon their sins and I shall heal their land" (II Chron. 7:14). "And they shall pray," this is *tefillah*. "And they shall seek My face," this is *tzedakah*, as it is written, "I, in righteousness [*b'tzedek*], shall behold Your face" (Ps. 17:15). "And they shall turn back from their evil ways," this is *teshuvah*. What is written there? "And I shall hear from the heavens and I shall pardon their sins" (Pesikta deRav Kahana 28:3).[1]

A simple assertion, a simple prooftext. From a single biblical verse, the midrashist creates an entire theology of repentance. It is so natural, so seamless that it looks like it is the only possible interpretation of the verse. And yet, the message is so outrageous that by the time the rabbinic adage makes it into our High Holy Day liturgy, it has been toned down. God makes decrees of punishment that can be annulled by human behavior? Well, perhaps these three acts do not "מבטלין," nullify the decree, but just "מעבירין את רע הגזירה," cause to pass the severity of the decree. The interpretation of the verse has been changed. The path between biblical verse and midrashic message is not fixed, but it is deliberate. Michael Fishbane explains that *poesis* is a fundamental

1. All translations and punctuation in the Hebrew text are mine.

characteristic of rabbinic midrash, by which he means "the fact that rabbinic exegesis is always 'made,' that in every exegetical act is a conscious construction of meaning through the verbal conditions of Scripture. Indeed, for rabbinic culture, the sense of Scripture is never predetermined; rather, everything depends on creative readings of the inherent, God-given possibilities."[2] One layer of midrash is, as Fishbane suggests, to interpret the biblical text. At the same time, however, the rabbis have particular lessons to impart and ideas to get across that they artfully support with Scriptural prooftexts. The interplay of the rabbinic agenda, the *eisegesis*, and the desire to uncover God's message in the text, the *exegesis*, reveals as much about the rabbinic mind as it does about the meaning of a biblical text. This paper seeks to explore the theological ideas that underpin the rabbis' process and product of midrash by taking a single subject, teshuvah, and studying its treatment in one class of midrashim, the homiletical midrashim.

The concept of teshuvah is ripe for this sort of discussion. Although its roots are in the Bible, the model of repentance that we have today is very much a product of the rabbis, so we can see how the meanings of biblical texts are shaped and transformed by midrash. As one of the primary vehicles of communication between God and people, it is also a rich topic theologically. Some of the primary assumptions about God and His[3] relationship with people, particularly in His role as Creator and Judge, hinge on what teshuvah is and how it functions.

I chose the homiletical midrashim both as a way to limit the scope of this paper,

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2. Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 2.
3. Although a plurality of gendered and gender-neutral ways of referring to God would be preferable, in the rabbinic imagination God was almost always He. Therefore, this paper will refer to God with masculine pronouns.

but also because many of the most important and interesting discussions of repentance are found in these collections. The homiletical midrashim are not tied to explicating a section of Torah line by line like halakhic (or exegetical) midrashim; instead, they often use the opening line of a *sidra* and then sermonize on the subject. The major collections are Pesikta deRav Kahana and Pesikta Rabbati, which include homilies for the festivals and special Sabbaths; Midrash Tanhuma-Yelamdenu,[4] which covers the whole Torah; and Shemot Rabbah, Vayikra Rabbah, Bemidbar Rabbah, and Devarim Rabbah. These collections were all composed in Eretz Yisrael between 400 and 1000, with Vayikra Rabbah as the earliest and Bemidbar Rabbah as the latest. Because several of these collections contain parallel material and circulated in various forms for centuries, it is difficult to say with any certainty what the dates of composition are.[5]

In the world of midrash, almost every possible answer can be found, and any number of contradictory interpretations suggested. Nevertheless, the rabbis did have a coherent theology that can be detected when analyzing a range of texts. As Jacob Neusner argues, "An encompassing intellectual system governs and animates, a structure functions and imparts coherence to the details... a cogent analytical program governs, actively and affectively shaping data that it chooses into compelling demonstrations of fundamental propositions about God and what he wants and does."[6] I have chosen

4. Midrash Tanhuma-Yelamdenu exists in several different forms. In this paper, "Midrash Tanhuma" refers to the Buber edition, and "Yelamdenu" refers to Tanhuma B, the material that is no longer extant but appears in Yalkut Shim'oni and was identified by J. Mann. See H.L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 303-304.
5. Ibid. 288-311.
6. Jacob Neusner, *The Theological Foundations of Rabbinic Midrash* (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 2006) *xxi*.

midrashim that are representative of the major themes and propositions found in this body of literature. I have attempted to draw from all of the major homiletical collections and have chosen specific texts that not only demonstrate the common theological issues that are found throughout the midrashim, but also exhibit particularly interesting methods of interpretation and composition. A careful analysis of the midrash's form as well as its content also reveals rabbinic theology. The act of creating midrash, as an "elongation of scriptural speech through the exegetical imagination[,] renews the world and gives it divine meaning. With this attitude Judaism elevates the creative act of interpretation to a type of *imitatio dei*."[7] Appropriately, teshuvah itself is an act of creation in partnership with God. As the process by which human beings restore the balance of divine and human will and reconcile with God, repentance "marks the recovery of the world as God wanted it to be."[8] Thus by composing midrashim about teshuvah, the rabbis not only exhort the people to engage in this act of reparation and (re)creation through the message of the homily, but also through the medium, a prime example of creative communion with God.

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7. Michael Fishbane 2.
8. Jacob Neusner 106.

Chapter One: Laying the Groundwork

The rabbinic notion of teshuvah, like the rabbinic creation of midrash, is firmly rooted in the biblical text. Jakob Petuchowski suggests that although "teshuvah" is a rabbinic term, the rabbis "did not originate the concept. Perhaps they did not even significantly 'deepen' it. I fail to see that anything the Rabbis said on the subject of *teshuvah* was not already contained, if only in germinal form, in Hosea's loving and impassioned plea, 'Return, O Israel, unto the Lord thy God, for thou hast stumbled in thine iniquity' (*Hosea* 14:2)."[9] This famous exhortation is, according to Petuchowski, the foundation of the concept of teshuvah and the basis of numerous midrashim on the subject. It is also misleading. From this verse we might assume that the rabbis are primarily concerned with understanding how Israel (or individuals) are to return to God. What does it mean to "repent?" How does one achieve it? Certainly, the rabbis outline certain acts that constitute teshuvah, from confession to restitution of property, but, for the most part, the midrashim are not instructions but exaltations. Their subjects are not people, but HaKadosh Barukh Hu. The main agent of repentance, however paradoxical, is God. The homiletical midrashim, then, are the rabbis' attempts to understand God's reasons and methods for creating, allowing, and accepting teshuvah. In searching out the mysteries and intricacies of teshuvah, the rabbis actually enact their own sort of teshuvah, a turning towards and appreciation of the God who makes repentance possible.

Petuchowski lays out several fundamental assumptions about teshuvah. First, by definition, "*teshuvah* presupposes both man's capacity to sin and his ability to right the

9. Jakob Petuchowski, "The Concept of 'Teshuvah' in the Bible and the Talmud," *Judaism* 17 (1968), 175.

wrong."[10] In other words, human beings have free will, as well as the inclination to do evil and the inclination to do good. This assumption is no surprise to us, as it was no surprise to the biblical and rabbinic authors. Petuchowski defines sin as "rebellion against God"[11] and the ability to right a such a wrong against God as the "daring presupposition of *teshuvah*."[12] Sin also results in an estrangement from God, so teshuvah is, literally, a "turning back" towards God.

Jacob Neusner notices the parallelism in the rabbis' conception of sin and repentance. "Sin forms an act of willful rebellion against God, so repentance, the opposite, forms an act of willful contrition, balancing the act of rebellion with one of regret and resolve to atone."[13] In another parallel, this time between a human act and a divine act, the rabbis believe in *middah keneged middah*, measure for measure, or the doctrine of reward and punishment.[14] This notion is clearly exhibited in the book of Deuteronomy, for instance, in chapter 11: "If then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving Adonai your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late" (Deut. 11:13-14). To a certain extent, the rabbis accept this biblical concept as part of their own theology. Thus, in Vayikra Rabbah, we read

> ד"א "וכי ימוך אחיך," הה"ד (תהלים קו) "פעמים רבות יצילם והמה ימרו בעצתם וימכו בעונם." בימי שפוט השופטים היו ישראל עובדים עבודת

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10. Ibid.
11. Ibid. 176.
12. Ibid. 177.
13. Jacob Neusner 91.
14. Steven T. Katz, "Man, Sin, and Redemption in Rabbinic Judaism" in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume IV. The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 933.

כוכבים, ומשתעבדים במלכות, ועושין תשובה, ונגאלים. חוזרים ועובדים עבודת כוכבים, ומשתעבדים במלכות, ועושין תשובה, ונגאלין. עד היכן? תרין אמוראין: חד אמר עד שדלו מן המצות ואוחרינא אמר עד (שידלדלו) [שנדלדלו] מן הנכסים עד שלא היתה ספיקא בידו של אחד מהן להביא אפי' קרבן עני כד"א (ויקרא יד) "ואם דל הוא ואין ידו משגת." שמנה שמות נקראו לעני: עני אביון מסכן רש דל דך מך הלך. עני, כמשמעו אביון שמתאב לכל. מסכן, שהוא בזוי לכל, שנאמר (קהלת ט) "וחכמת המסכן בזויה." רש, מן הנכסים. דל, מדולדל מן הנכסים. דך, מדוכדך רואה דבר ואינו אוכל, רואה דבר ואינו טועם, ואינו שותה. מך, שהוא מך לפני כל עשוי כמין סקופה התחתונה. לפיכך משה מזהיר לישראל "וכי ימוך אחיך."

> Another interpretation: "If your brother has sunk low" (Lev. 25:25): Thus it is written, "Many times He saved them, but they were rebellious in their counsel, and so they sank low because of their iniquity" (Ps. 106:43). In the days when the judges judged, Israel served idols and were enslaved by [foreign] kingdoms, and they repented and were redeemed, and again served idols and were enslaved by foreign kingdoms and repented and were redeemed. How far [did Israel sink]? Two Amoraim [disagree]. One said, "Until they were impoverished of mitzvot," and the other said, "Until they were stripped of their property, until not one of them had sufficient means in his hand to bring even a poor person's offering, as it says, "And if one is poor [*dal*] and his means are not sufficient..." (Lev. 14:21). There are eight names for the poor: *ani*, *evyon*, *misken*, *rash*, *dal*, *dach*, *mach*, *helekh*. "*Ani*" is as the meaning of "*evyon*," who longs for everything. "*Misken*," that he is despised by everyone, as it says, "A poor man's wisdom is scorned" (Ecc. 9:26). "*Rash*," [dispossessed] of property, "*dal*," stripped [*m'duldal*] of property, "*dach*" [because] he is crushed—he sees a thing and cannot eat it, he sees a thing and cannot taste it, he sees a thing and cannot drink it; "*mach*," [because he is] low before everyone like a kind of low threshold. Accordingly, Moses warned Israel "If your brother is in straits (*yamuch*)...." (Vayikra Rabbah 34:6)

Here, the rabbis explicitly link each human act with a divine response: Israel's idol worship and their subsequent subjugation to foreign nations, Israel's repentance and God's subsequent redemption. It is also possible to read it as one continuous "action-chain:" Israel's punishment brings them to repentance, which then leads to God's redemption. As Neusner puts it, "Sin precipitates punishment, whether personal for

individuals or historical for nations, punishment brings about repentance for sin, which, in turn, leads to atonement for sin and, it follows, reconciliation with God."[15] The biblical counterpart to this system is described in Deuteronomy, chapter 30. "When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which Adonai your God has banished you, and you return (*v'shavta*) to Adonai your God... then Adonai your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love" (Deut. 30:1-3). Thus it is implied that Israel will sin, be punished through curses including dispersion, and then will repent and be taken back by God.

The midrash from Vayikra Rabbah also hints at two more possible theological suppositions. First, by comparing the Israelite individual's poverty with the people Israel's punishment, the author implies that a person becomes poor because of his sins. Although the verse from Leviticus does not mention sin, it is linked by the word "ימוך" to the phrase from Psalm 106, which clearly attributes Israel's lowliness to its iniquity. In this reading, the midrash is brought to answer the question we might ask of the biblical text: why do God's laws include the expectation of poor Israelites? God has not yet brought His chosen people to the Promised Land and already the Torah lists rules about how to deal with future social ills. Ultimately, the midrashist is asking why God would allow such misfortune to befall His people. The list of eight words for "poor" emphasizes God's apparent neglect or, even worse, cruelty. With each definition, we see another image of poverty, from a lack of property, to the isolation of the poor, to

15. Neusner 99.

complete misery, and finally, to the climax of the list, the term in question, "מָךְ," the lowest of thresholds. The one who is "*yamuch*" is the one lying on the ground, with everyone else stepping over him. How can this be? The midrashist offers one answer, that God sends misfortune as punishment for sin.

There is, however, another possible interpretation. The whole verse from Leviticus is, "If your kinsman has sunk low and has to sell part of his holding, his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his kinsman has sold" (Lev. 25:25). There are two parallel acts described in the commandment: the Israelite's sinking into poverty and his kinsman's raising him back up by buying his property. Similarly, Psalm 106 is a retelling of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, emphasizing the many times Israel disobeys God but is then saved from total destruction. The verse cited in our midrash states the theme of the psalm: "Many times [God] saved them, but they were rebellious in their counsel, so they were brought low because of their iniquity" (106:43). Nevertheless, the psalmist quickly raises the people up again, saying, "When [God] saw they were in distress, He heard their cry. And He remembered His covenant with them, and relented in His great kindness" (Ps. 106:44-45). The midrashist then takes this psalm's historical view of Israel and God's rollercoaster relationship and extends it through the period of the judges, another example of Israel's sinking low and being redeemed time and time again. The original quotation from Leviticus is cast in a new light; now the commandment to redeem a kinsman's land when he has fallen into poverty is equated with God's redemption of Israel after they have sunk low because of their idol worship. If Israel is commanded to redeem a kinsman who has been brought low, then perhaps

God too is obligated to redeem one who is in straits because of his or her transgressions. Ironically, the midrash portrays God as both the agent of a person's poverty as punishment for sin, and as the One responsible for alleviating the person's misfortune. This interpretation, of course, begs the question about whether God is doing His duty. If God is supposed to save His people from distress, why are there so many words for "poor," why are there so many poor people? The only possible answer the midrash gives us is that God has designated human beings to be the agents of each other's redemption. But would such a "hands-off" image of God have satisfied the rabbis? Does it satisfy us?

The examples given in our midrash clearly belie this sort of non-interfering God. Over and over, God is described as saving Israel from annihilation, no matter how terribly they stray. It seems that teshuvah and reconciliation are built into the divine-human relationship. The famous midrashic statement that teshuvah is one of the seven things created before the world attests to repentance's integral place in God's plan.[16] As C.G. Montefiore writes, "As God chose to create man frail and liable to sin, the only thing for God to do was to aid him to repentance and to be ever ready to forgive him."[17] In some sense, the cycle of reward and punishment is fixed, even for God. This issue of God's "playing by the rules" will come up again and again in the midrashim, as we shall see.

In many midrashim like the ones discussed above, repentance is the consequence of punishment. While it is still the human beings' choice to repent, God makes it an

16. See, for example, Bereishit Rabbah 1:4, Midrash Tanhuma *Parashat Naso, Siman* 19.

17. C.G. Montefiore, "Rabbinic Conceptions of Repentance," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. XVI, January, 1904: 229-230.

"offer they can't refuse." The people are made to regret their transgressions, if for no other reason than because they are now being made to suffer for them, and the only way to end their suffering is to do teshuvah. The rabbis, however, also conceive of other possible configurations of the cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and redemption or reconciliation. In particular, while the common Deuteronomic system of reward and punishment is found in the homiletical midrashim, the rabbis also offer a more lenient version of God's retribution. Punishment can be delayed and, most radically, avoided completely.

One recurring theme in the homiletical midrashim is the notion of God's delaying actions, especially divine retribution, in the hope that the transgressor will repent. For instance, God gives the Torah to Israel in the third month after leaving Egypt (Ex. 19:1)

> שלא ליתן לאומות העולם פתחון פה לומר אילו נתן אף לנו את התורה היינו עושים אותה. אמ' להם הקב"ה, ראו באיזה חודש נתתי את התורה, בחדש השלישי, במזל תאומים, שאם ביקש עשו הרשע להתגייר ולעשות תשובה ולבוא וללמוד תורה יבוא וילמד ומקבלו אני, לפיכך נתנה בחדש השלישי.
>
> So as not to give the nations of the world an opening to say, "If God had also given the Torah to us, we would have done it." God said to them, "See in which month I gave the Torah, in the third month, under the constellation of twins, so that if Esau the wicked had wanted to convert and repent and come learn Torah, he could have come and learned and I would have accepted him. Accordingly, it was given in the third month..." (Pesikta deRav Kahana 12:20).

Here the rabbis ask of the biblical text, why was the Torah given in the third month after *y'tziat mitzrayim*? A simple answer might be that the number three is commonly used in folklore and myth, as the three little pigs, the genie's three wishes, and the three magi will attest. In the scientific world, too, three is a stable, complete number, just as the

triangle is the two-dimensional shape that can be made with the fewest number of sides and three legs are needed to hold up a table. In biblical Judaism, the number three is associated with the patriarchs, the age of maturity, at which an animal may be sacrificed and a tree's fruit is no longer forbidden, and the number of pilgrimage festivals, among others. The rabbis too use the number three to denote completeness, for instance, the famous sayings from Pirke Avot declaring that "על שלושה דברים העולם עומד." Thus perhaps three is the appropriate number of months to wait before the Israelites have matured, like the sacrificial animal, to receive the Torah.

The rabbis, however, are not content to leave this detail as a mere literary device, but also imbue it with theological significance. The three months are a symbol of God's mercy, in that God waits a significant amount of time after the exodus to give Esau time to repent so that they can receive the Torah along with Israel. And why three months? Because God further encourages Esau to repent by choosing to give the Torah in the third month, under the "constellation of twins," which would surely be an auspicious time for both Esau's and Jacob's descendants to receive the Torah. It is telling, and a bit ironic, that God is portrayed as using astrology to try to guide Esau to repentance, as if God Himself would or could not influence Esau, but that the influence of the constellations might be used. (Of course, the fact that Esau does not repent demonstrates the limited power of the stars to control or affect events.) The rabbis here seem to be a bit ambivalent about the implications of God's intervention in Esau's teshuvah. God does not overtly compromise the people's free will, but the reference to the constellation hints that perhaps human decisions can be influenced by heavenly guides. At the very least,

God makes it not only possible, but relatively easy, for Esau to repent.

More commonly, the postponed action is destruction or calamity. The rabbis, clearly uncomfortable with biblical portrayals of God as wrathful and merciless, attempt to mitigate God's destructive acts by introducing this notion of the postponement of punishment.

"עשה לך תיבת עצי גופר." אמ' רב הונא בשם ר' יוסי מאה ועשרים שנה עכב הב"ה לדור המבול שמא יעשו תשובה, ולא עשו. וכיון שאמ' לנח, "עשה לך תיבת עצי גופר," עמד נח ונטע ארזים. והיו או' לו: נח, ארזים הללו למה, א"ל: כך אמר לי הב"ה שהוא מביא מבול לעולם, ואמ' לי לעשות תיבה כדי שאמלט אני ובני. והיו שוחקים עליו. כשגדלו הארזים וקצצן, א"ל: ארזים הללו שקצצת למה, והיה משיב להם כענין הזה. התחיל לעשות התיבה, והיו או' לו: תיבה זו למה, והיה משיב להם כענין הזה. וכל כך למה, אמר הב"ה: שמא יעשו תשובה, כשיראו נטיעת הארזים ועשיית התיבה אולי ישבר לבם. ולא שבו והיו משחקים ומלעיגים עליו. כיון שלא עשו תשובה, אמ' הב"ה לנח, "בא אתה וכל ביתך אל התיבה" (שם, ז', א'). מיד "וימח את כל היקום" (שם, כ"ג).

"Make for yourself an ark of *gopher* wood" (Gen. 6:14). Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Yose, "God waited one hundred twenty years for the generation of the flood to repent, but they did not. When God told Noah, "Make for yourself an ark of *gopher* wood," Noah went and planted cedars. And they [the people] would say to him, "Noah, what are these cedars for?" Noah would say to them, "Thus has God told me [to do] because He is bringing a flood to the world, and He told me to make an ark so that I and my children will be saved." But they would laugh at him. When the cedars grew and he cut them down, they said to him, "Why did you cut down those cedars?" and he would answer them as with this matter [as before]. He began to make the ark, and they would say to him, "What is this ark for?" and he would answer them as before. Why all this? God said, "Perhaps they will repent; when they see the planting of the cedars and the making of the ark, maybe it will break their hearts." But they did not repent, and they would laugh and mock him. Since they did not repent, God said to Noah, "Go, you and your household, to the ark" (Gen. 7:1). Immediately He "wiped out everything that existed" (Gen. 7:23). (Midrash Yelamdenu, *Yalkut Talmud Torah, Bereishit Ot* 31)

Again, the number mentioned is significant. One hundred twenty is most commonly known in the Torah as the span of Moses's life. It is also mentioned right before the story of the flood, when God sees the *b'nei Elohim* take human wives and declares, "My breath shall not abide in humankind forever, since he too is flesh. Let his days be one hundred twenty years" (Gen. 6:3). Even today it is considered the symbolic age of a full life, as we wish people on their birthdays "*ad meah v'esrim*." In addition, one hundred twenty is three (already a special number) times forty, the number associated with the time it takes for an entire generation, like the generation of the wilderness, to die. Thus, paradoxically, God waits both one lifetime and three generations for the people to repent. At face value, the author of this midrash is praising God's patience and forbearance in waiting such a long time before sending the flood. However, both Moses and *dor hamidbar* die before they are granted the redemption of entering the Promised Land. Perhaps, then, the midrashist's use of the number one hundred twenty is a foreshadowing of the ultimate doom of *dor hamabul* and *dor hamidbar*.

The time span is also necessary for Noah's role in this midrash. Unlike the biblical version, in which God tells Noah to build an ark and he immediately does as he is instructed (Gen. 6:22), the midrashic Noah tries to save his fellow human beings from the flood. Like the biblical account, Noah does not say anything in response to God's command. Instead, "וכיון שאמ' לנח, 'עשה לך תיבת עצי גופר,' עמד נח ונטע ארזים." Curiously, it appears as though Noah ignores God's instructions to build the ark and instead begins planting cedar trees. It it not clear why Noah plants cedars, since they are not mentioned in the biblical text, although perhaps *gopher* wood has some

connection to cedars that is lost to us now. In any case, the choice is appropriate since cedars are symbols of strength, height, goodliness, and purification in the Bible. For instance, cedar wood is used in the purification sacrifices for the leper and for the ritual of the red heifer (Lev. 14 and 19). The midrash explains further that cedar is used because it is the tallest of trees, representing the leper's haughtiness (B'midbar Rabbah 19:3). Cedar wood's beauty and fineness is demonstrated by its use in the building of both the First and Second Temples (I Kings 5 and Ezra 3). Cedars also have a special relationship with God, as several poetic passages in the Tanakh call them "God's trees" or describe God Himself planting them (Isa. 41:19, Ps. 80:11, Ps. 104:16). It is possible, then, that the midrash implies that when Noah plants the cedars, he is responding to God's wishes, even though the text does not explicitly say so.

Noah plants "God's trees," which take a long time to grow, not only to prolong the building process, but to give the people a hint of what is to come. Noah, who in the biblical text seems to make no effort to save his fellow human beings, is now portrayed as a sort of prophet who warns the people of their destruction. The people react with three questions, "Why are you planting these cedars?," "Why did you cut them down?," and "Why are you building an ark?" but each time, the people fail to heed Noah's explanation. Finally, the author asks a fourth question, "Why all this?" and this time God answers, saying, "כשיראו נטיעת הארזים ועשיית התיבה אולי ישבר לבם." God's answer is enigmatic; why would seeing the planting and the building in themselves, without the accompanying explanation of Noah's actions, break the people's hearts and lead them to repentance? It is possible that God means that Noah's planting of the trees

and using them to build the ark will elicit the proper questions and thus lead the people to fear God's punishment and repent. It is also possible, however, that God's explanation is again a reference to the symbolism of the cedar. The tall, haughty cedar is cut down and made into an ark, just as the unrepentant people need to be "cut down to size." If the people do not heed the warning, "קול יהוה שובר ארזים." Perhaps God is hoping that the people will "ישברו את לבם" so that God will not have to break it for them in punishment. Unfortunately, in contrast to the long period of God's patience, the people do not repent and are "*immediately* wiped out."

In the cases cited above, those who have transgressed do not do teshuvah in time to escape God's wrath. But what happens when one repents before her opportunity to do so is lost? The following midrash demonstrates this component of the rabbinic treatment of the way teshuvah can operate:

> דבר אחר: "שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך." לבן מלך שאמר לו אוהבו אביך עתיד להכותך, ולחובשך בבית האסורין, ולמוסרך ביד העבדים, ולהמיתך ברעב, ובאחרונה אתה חוזר ומבקש הימנו והוא מקבלך. אלא, אם תשמע לי, עשה את (האחרונים) [האחרונית] ראשונית ולך אצלו ובקש הימנו והוא מקבלך ונשתכרת המכות. כך אמר הושע לישראל היו יודעים עתיד להכותכם (א"כ) [שנאמר] "עליהם אשפוך כמים (חמתי) עברתי" (הושע ה' י'), (ומונ') [ולמסור] אתכם למלכות שנא' "יפלו בחרב שריהם מזעם לשונם" (שם /הושע/ ז' ט"ז), [ולהמיתכם ברעב שנאמר] "ולקחתי דגני בעתו ותירושי במועדו" (שם /הושע/ ב' י"א), ואחר כך סוף שאתם באים ומבקשים הימנו, הוי שמעו לי וקראו ועשו תשובה עד שלא תלקו ונשתכרתם המכות, "שובה ישראל."

> Another interpretation of "Return, Israel, unto Adonai your God." [It can be compared] to a prince whose friend said to him, "In the future, your father is going to punish you and put you in prison, and deliver you into the hand of slaves, and kill you with famine, and at last, you will return and plead with him, and he

> will accept you. Rather, if you listen to me, do the last thing first and go to him and plead with him; he will accept you and you will be rewarded [by exemption from] the punishments. Thus Hosea said to Israel, know that God is going to punish you, as it is said, "On them I will pour out My wrath like water" (Hos. 5:10); and deliver you to the government, as it is said, "Their officers shall fall by the sword because of the stammering of their tongues" (Hos. 7:16); and [kill you with famine, as it says] "and I shall take My new grain in its time and My new wine in its season" (Hos. 2:11); and afterwards, after you come and plead with him, listen to me, call out and repent so that you will not be smitten and you will be rewarded [by exemption from] the punishments—Return, O Israel (Pesikta Rabbati 44).

Here the cycle of transgression, punishment, repentance, and reconciliation is still assumed to be operating, except now, the prince's clever friend has found a way to skip the most unpleasant stage. The prince's friend assumes, rightly, that teshuvah is the key to gaining God's pardon. Furthermore, it appears that punishment is only exacted in order to motivate the sinner to repent and not as a measure of justice or to deter the sinner from further transgression, as we might consider judicial punishment today. If this is so, then if one can repent before being punished, there is no need for any retribution at all.

This midrash also hints at a more extreme benefit of teshuvah. The prince's friend uses a strange term to describe what will happen if the prince repents before he is punished. He says, "והוא מקבלך ונשתכרת המכות," "He will receive you and you will be rewarded [by exemption from] the plagues." While the phrase is difficult to translate, the use of the word "נשתכרת" may allude to the rabbinic notion that teshuvah is so powerful, it actually makes God count your sins as merits (BT Yoma 86b). Thus, the penitent prince not only avoids punishment, but is also rewarded with merit.

The notion of God's "boundedness" to a fixed system of repentance and forgiveness is problematized in a humorous example of Balaam and the ass:

"ויגל ה' את עיני בלעם." וכי סומאי היה להודיע שאף העין ברשותו. "ויקד וישתחו לאפיו" שדבר עמו, "ויאמר אליו מלאך ה' על מה הכית?" וכי דקיון של אתון בא מלאך לבקש מידו? אלא א"ל מה האתון שאין לה זכות ולא ברית אבות נצטויתי לתבוע עלבונה מידך אומה שלימה שאתה מבקש לעוקרה שיש לה זכות וברית אבות על אחת כמה וכמה, "הנה אנכי יצאתי לשטן כי ירט הדרך." ירא"ה ראת"ה נטת"ה. ד"א: ירט בא"ת ב"ש מגן. "ותראני האתון גם אותך הרגתי ואותה החייתי." מיכן את למד שהרג את האתון? ויאמר בלעם אל מלאך ה', "חטאתי" שהיה רשע ערום ויודע שאין עומד מפני הפורעניות אלא תשובה, שכל מי שחוטא ואומר "חטאתי" אין רשות למלאך ליגע בו. "כי לא ידעתי ועתה אם רע בעיניך אשובה לי." אמר לו אני לא הלכתי עד שאמר לי הקב"ה "קום לך אתם" ואתה אומר שאחזור. כך אומנתו. לא כך אמר לאברהם להקריב את בנו ואח"כ (בראשית כב) "ויקרא מלאך ה' ויאמר אל תשלח ידך"? למוד הוא לומר דבר ומלאך מחזירו ועכשיו הוא אומר לי "לך אתם" ועכשיו "אם רע בעיניך אשובה לי." ויאמר מלאך ה' אל בלעם "לך עם האנשים שחלקך עמהם" וסופך ליאבד מן העולם, "וילך בלעם עם שרי בלק" מלמד שכשם שהם שמחים לקלל כך הוא שמח.

"Then Adonai uncovered Balaam's eyes [and he saw the angel of Adonai standing in the way]" (Num. 22:31). Had he been blind? [No], it was to inform [him] that the eye too is under [God's] control. "And he bowed and prostrated himself to his nose" (ibid.) because [the angel] spoke with him, "And the angel of Adonai said to him, 'Why have you beaten [your ass these three times]?'" (22:32). And was it for the ass's satisfaction [of wrongs done to it] that the angel had come to ask from his hand? Rather, he said to him, "If for the ass, which has neither merit nor the covenant of the Patriarchs, I was commanded to ask for [satisfaction] from your hand for her humiliation, how much more so [am I commanded] for a whole nation that you seek to uproot, which has merit and the covenant of the Patriarchs." "It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious [to me]" (ibid.). "*Yarat*" ("obnoxious") stands for "*yar'ah, ra'atah, nat'tah*" ("she feared, she saw, she shied away"). Another interpretation of "*yarat*:" using *atbash*, "shield." "And when the ass saw me [she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me,] you are the one I should have killed, while sparing her" (22:33). From this, you learn that [the angel] killed the ass. Balaam said to the angel of Adonai, "I have sinned" (22:34) because he was a cunning wicked person who knew that nothing stops divine retribution except for teshuvah, and that anyone who sins and then says "I have sinned," the angel has no authority to touch him. "[I have sinned] because I did not know [that you were standing in my way.] If you still disapprove, I will turn back" (ibid.). [Balaam] said to him, "I did not go until God told me, 'Rise up

> and go with them' (22:20) but you say that I should go back!" Thus is [God's] practice. Did He not thus tell Abraham to sacrifice his son, and then afterwards, "An angel of Adonai called out and said, "Do not send out your hand [against the boy]"? (Gen. 22:12). He is accustomed to say something and have the angel reverse it. Now He says to me, "Go with them" but now [I say], "If you disapprove, I will turn back." The angel of Adonai said to Balaam, "'Go with the men' (22:35) since your portion is with them and your end is to perish from the earth." "So Balaam went on with Balak's dignitaries" (ibid.) teaches that just as they were happy to curse [Israel], so was he happy [to curse Israel] (Bemidbar Rabbah 20:15).

At first, it seems as though Balaam has managed to take advantage of the "fixedness" of teshuvah to avoid punishment. Balaam's scheme is juxtaposed with the opening discussion of uncovering Balaam's eyes. If God has control even over a person's sight, then surely God cannot be tricked into pardoning a wicked person who insincerely repents. The rabbis seem to be arguing against the idea that teshuvah is an outward act, an "*opus operatum*"[18] that does not require inner transformation. In the end, Balaam will be rightfully punished in spite of his confession of sin.

The introduction of the angel, however, complicates the relationship between the power of divine and human acts. This midrash asserts the unusual notion that, to Balaam's advantage, the angel is powerless to harm a person who has repented. Even more outrageous, the angel also has the power to overturn God's decisions. This assertion serves to explain God's apparent inconsistency in first allowing Balaam to go to Balak and then getting angry at him for going. God tells Balaam to go with Balak's officers, but the angel stops him from going. Nevertheless, in the end, the angel does not completely reverse God's decree, but harmonizes the two instructions by telling Balaam to go with the men because he will share their punishment. In other words, Balaam is

18. C.G. Montefiore 226.

ordered to go with them as punishment for having gone in the first place. Ultimately, the angel's role in this midrash is parallel to the role of teshuvah: it is an extra factor mediating between human transgression and God's response. Yet in both cases, the rabbis cast these elements as fixed according to certain rules of operation that are ultimately under God's control. Balaam may be right that teshuvah can avert punishment, but it must be true repentance. The angel may have first reversed God's instructions, but in the end serves God's purpose.

The rabbis appear to be trying not only to explain apparent theological problems, for instance, how God can change God's mind, but also to understand God's various and sometimes contradictory aspects. God who patiently waits for one hundred twenty years for the world to repent then immediately sends the flood to destroy the earth. God who metes out reward and punishment *middah keneged middah* also forgives and does not exact retribution for sins. This second paradox of God's superseding justice with almost absolute mercy is, along with the threat of punishment for sin, the rabbis' major argument for people to do teshuvah. For instance, we read in Pesikta deRav Kahana:

> ר' לוי ור' יצח'. ר' לוי אמר, א' הקב"ה לירמיה לך אמור לישראל עשו תשובה. בא ואמ' להם, אמרו לו רבינו ירמיה היאך אנו עושין תשובה, באילו פנים אנו באין לפני המקום, לא הכעסנו אותו ולא הקנינו אותו, אותם ההרים והגבעות שהיינו שם עובדים ע"ז אינן קיימים, "על ראשי ההרים יזבחו וג'" (הושע ד: יג), "נשכבה בבשתינו ותכסינו כלימתינו וג'" (ירמיה ג: כה). בא לפני הקב"ה ואמ' כן, א' לו לך אמור להם לא כך הכתבתי לכם בתורתי, "ונתתי פני באיש והכרתי אותו מקרב עמו" (ויקרא כ: ו)? שמא עשיתי לכם כן? אלא, "לא אפיל פני בכם כי חסיד אני נאם י"י ולא אטור לעולם" (ירמיה ג: יב). ר' יצחק א', א' הקב"ה לירמיה לך אמור לישר' עשו תשובה, בא ואמ' להם, אמרו לו רבינו ירמיה היאך אנו עושין תשובה, באילו פנים אנו באים לפני הק', לא הכעסנו ולא הקנינו אותו,

אותם ההרי' והגבעות שהיינו עובדים ע"ז אינן קיימין, "על ראשי ההרים יזבחו וג'" (הושע ד: יג), "נשכבה בבשתינו וג'" (ירמיה ג: כה). בא וא' לפני הקב"ה כן, א' לו לך אמור להם אם באים אתם לא אצל אביכם שבשמים אתם באים, "כי הייתי לישראל לאב ואפרים בכורי הוא" (שם /ירמיהו/ לא: ח).

R. Levi and R. Yitzhak. R. Levi said: God said to Jeremiah, "Go, tell Israel to repent." He went and told them and they said to him, "Our rabbi, Jeremiah, how are we to repent, how are we to face God [lit. "with which face shall we come before God?"]? Have we not angered Him and provoked Him? Do not the same mountains and hills where we worshiped idols endure? "On the mountaintops they sacrifice, etc." (Hos. 4:13). "Let us lie down in our shame, let our disgrace cover us, etc." (Jer. 3:25). He [Jeremiah] came before God and told him thus, and He said to him, Go and say to them, 'Did I not cause to be written thus for you in My Torah, "And I will set My face against that person and I shall cut him off from among his people" (Lev. 20:6). Have I ever done so to you? Rather, "I will not let My face fall on you [be angry at you], for I am compassionate, says God; I do not bear a grudge forever" (Jer. 3:12). R. Yitzhak said: God said to Jeremiah, "Go and tell Israel to repent." He went and told them, and they said to him, "Our rabbi Jeremiah, how are we to repent, how are we to face God? Have we not angered Him and provoked Him? Do not the same mountains and hills where we worshiped idols endure? "On the mountaintops they sacrifice, etc." (Hos. 4:13). "Let us lie down in our shame, etc." (Jer. 3:25). He went and told God thus, and God said to him, "Go and say to them, 'If you come, is it not to your father in heaven that you come? For "I am a Father to Israel, Ephraim is My firstborn'" (Jer. 31:9) (Pesikta deRav Kahana 24:16).

The characteristics of this midrash that are immediately apparent are the length, detail, and repetition of the language. Jeremiah's every move, every coming and going, is recorded. The fact that there are two versions of virtually the same story in a row compounds the feeling of extending the story. This drawing out mirrors one of the themes of the text, the role of time. In both versions of the story, the people point to the mountains and hills, symbols of longevity if not eternality, as reminders of their sin. If the mountains still stand, then so does the memory of their idolatry. Yet God, who is truly eternal, tells them, "ולא אטור לעולם," "I may be eternal, but my anger is not."

Both God's grudge and the mountains (טורים) are not as enduring as God's mercy. As we read this detailed account, God is patiently waiting for the people to repent.

The protracted style of the language is also parallel to the sense of height evoked in the midrash. The people want to "lie down" in shame next to the high mountains of their disgrace. They are afraid to face God, but God reassures them that God will not allow His face to "fall" on them. Likewise, in R. Yitzhak's version of the story, God replies to the people's request to lie down and be covered over, as if in a grave, with "לא אצל אביכם שבשמים אתם באים?" Instead of being buried in the earth, God tells the people that if they repent, they will actually be going up to their Father in the heavens. Finally, the repetition in the story also suggests how difficult it is for God and the prophets to convince people to repent; the prophets need multiple attempts and multiple arguments to coax the people to turn back to God. Yet when they do, God is certainly going to accept them.

Similarly, also in Pesikta deRav Kahana, there is a series of examples of God's pardon, each ending with the rhetorical question "תשובתו של פלוני קיבלתי ותשובתכם איני מקבל?" (24:11). The list includes the most notorious sinners of the Bible, from Ahab to Menasseh to the Ninevites, and proves how each were given a harsh decree of punishment that was not carried out because of their repentance. The overriding message is, of course, that if these terribly wicked people can be pardoned because of their teshuvah, so can Israel. There should be no doubt that God will accept us too.

God's mercy reaches even further than giving sinners the opportunity to do teshuvah and avoid punishment. God actually teaches people how to repent. We read:

"טוב וישר י"י על כן יורה חטאים בדרך וג'" (תהלים כה: ח). שאלו לחכמה החוטא מהו עונשו, אמרה להם, "וחטאים תרדף רעה" (משלי יג: כא). שאלו לנבואה החוטא מהו עונשו, אמרה להם "הנפש החוטאת היא תמות" (יחזקאל יח: ד). שאלו לתורה חוטא מה עונשו, אמרה להם "יביא אשם ויתכפר לו." שאלו להקב"ה החוטא מהו עונשו, א' להם יעשה תשובה ויתכפר לו, הדא היא דכת' "טוב וישר י"י וגו'" (תהלים כה: ח). א"ר פינחס למה הוא טוב שהוא ישר, למה הוא ישר שהוא טוב. על כן "יורה חטאים בדרך" (שם /תהלים כ"ה/), שהוא מורה לחטאים דרך שיעשו תשובה. לפיכך הושע מזהיר את ישראל ואו' להם, "שובה ישראל" (הושע שם /י"ד/).

"Good and upright is Adonai; therefore He teaches sinners the way" (Ps. 25:8). They asked Wisdom, "The sinner, what is his punishment?" She said to them, "Evil pursues sinners" (Prov. 13:21). They asked Prophecy, "The sinner, what is his punishment?" She said to them, "The person who sins, she will die" (Ezek. 18:4). They asked Torah, "The sinner, what is his punishment?" She said to them, "He shall bring a guilt offering and it shall make expiation for him." They asked God, "The sinner, what is his punishment?" He said to them, "He shall repent and it shall make expiation for him," as it is written, "Good and upright is Adonai, etc." (Ps. 25:8). R. Pinhas said: Why is [God] good? Because He is upright. Why is He upright? Because He is good. Therefore, "He teaches sinners the way" (Ps. 25:8), that is, he teaches sinners the way to do teshuvah. Accordingly, Hosea warns Israel and says to them, "Return, O Israel" (Hos. 14:2) (Pesikta deRav Kahana 24:7).

In this famous conversation between these major characters of Scripture, God radically overrides the opinions of His own sources, Wisdom, Prophecy, and Torah, and unequivocally declares the power of teshuvah to wipe out a person's wrongdoing. Curiously, although the question is "what is the sinner's punishment," halfway through, the midrash answers a slightly different question. Wisdom and Prophecy actually name punishments, but Torah and God name acts that will bring about expiation. It could be

that the midrashist is likening sacrifice and repentance to punishment, alluding to the fact that true repentance is not only difficult, but often painful. Otherwise, the punishments of misfortune and death may be considered expiatory just as sacrifice and teshuvah are. Teshuvah thus replaces punishment, as we saw in several of the midrashim above. God is "good and upright" because He shows sinners how to repent and thus avoid suffering and death. Paradoxically, the way that God teaches is through the prophet Hosea, who warns Israel to repent, even though Prophecy herself declares death as the punishment for sin. Incidentally, the fact that each of the authorities that God overrules, Wisdom, Prophecy, and Torah, are all personified as female should not be overlooked. These first three female characters are superseded by the last three male characters, God, R. Pinhas, and Hosea, who has the last word. It is perhaps ironic that these feminine characters represent *din* while the men represent *rahamim*, but even these powerful feminine voices are overshadowed by their male counterparts.

God has created this process of teshuvah to allow people to avoid punishment and become reconciled to God after having transgressed. God teaches the people how to repent. God is sure to accept anyone's sincere repentance and forgive her. And finally, the homiletical midrashim assume that God *must* do so in order to maintain the integrity of the teshuvah system. When Menasseh, the sinner par excellence, is under attack and prays to his idols for help and receives none, he finally recognizes God's existence and prays

> רבש"ע הרי קראתי לכל אלהות שבעולם וידעתי שאין בהן ממש. רבש"ע את הוא אלוה על כל אלהים ואם אי אתה עונה אותי אני אומר שמא ח"ו כל הפנים שוות. אמר לו הקב"ה הא רשע בדין הוא שלא אענה אותך שהכנסת (שהכעסת?) אותי אלא שלא לנעול דלת לפני השבים שלא יהו

אומרים הרי מנשה ביקש לעשות תשובה ולא נתקבל לפיכך הריני עונה אותך.

> Master of the world, I have called out to all of the gods of the world and I know that there is nothing to them. Master of the world, You are the God of all Gods and if you do not answer me, I will say, perhaps, God forbid, all Beings are alike. God said to him, "This wicked person by right I should not answer for you have angered me; however, so as not to lock the door to penitents, so that they may not say, 'Behold, Menasseh asked to do teshuvah but was not accepted,' accordingly, I will answer you...." (Devarim Rabbah 2:20; similar version found in Pesikta deRav Kahana 24:11).

Here God explicitly recognizes the tension between justice and mercy, saying, in effect, "If I were to follow what justice dictates, I would not answer you, but for the sake of compassion for future penitents, I will have mercy and answer you." It is important to note that God's compassion is not necessarily for Menasseh, but for future sinners. God is accepting Menasseh's teshuvah so that in the future, people will not be discouraged from seeking reconciliation with God. It is also interesting that the people are pictured to say, "Menasseh *asked to do teshuvah* but was not accepted" rather than "Menasseh *did teshuvah* but was not accepted." This wording suggests that if God makes it His duty to always accept repentance, perhaps God still has some freedom in determining whether a person can repent at all. We will discuss this in greater depth later, but suffice it to say that in this case, the implication is that once a person successfully does teshuvah, God must accept it.

Thus far, we have seen that the rabbis assume that people have free will and can choose to do good or evil and can choose to repent when they have sinned. God generally rewards and punishes according to human acts, and the punishments or the threat of punishment serve as motivators for people to do teshuvah. By including the

threat of punishment rather than actual punishment as a stimulus for repentance, the rabbis find one explanation for why all sinners are not immediately punished for their transgressions. We are still left, however, with questions about the relationship between retribution and teshuvah. Do people do teshuvah without the aid of fear of punishment? Does punishment have functions or reasons other than inspiring repentance? In other words, if God is just, then is punishment not only a means to an end, but an end in itself as the natural, fair consequence of human sin?

On the other hand, once people successfully do teshuvah, God will almost certainly accept it and be reconciled to them. God has an interest in preserving the possibility of teshuvah for future generations, even if it means putting aside justice and allowing the most wicked to repent as well. If teshuvah allows God to favor *rahamim* over *din*, then what is the value of justice? We shall see in the upcoming chapters if justice provides any limits to the access to teshuvah and pardon.

Finally, the rabbinic treatment of teshuvah in the homiletical midrashim seems to assume that God is in some way bound by a fixed system of repentance. This, of course, raises the question of how an omnipotent God can be limited in any way. It also suggests that we must take a closer look at the relationship between God and God's laws or principles. If God can set aside strict judgment in favor of accepting one's teshuvah, then to what extent does God set aside other values or even specific laws for the sake of another competing value? Does teshuvah trump all?

Chapter Two: "גדול כחה של תשובה"
"So Great is the Power of Repentance"

In Chapter One, we saw how the rabbis conceived of the cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and reconciliation as a fixed system by which even God is bound. In this way, God's acceptance of teshuvah is taken for granted as a necessary and regular step in the process. Now we move to another conflicting rabbinic supposition, the uniqueness of teshuvah and the unique way in which God responds to teshuvah.

The first major theme we encounter in the homiletical midrashim is the contrast between how people behave and how God behaves in response to sin and repentance. God, the ultimate Judge, metes out a different sort of justice than human courts do:

"כי לא מחשבותי מחשבותיכם ולא וג'" (ישעיה נה: ח), לליסטים שהוא נידון לפני הקוסטינר, בתחילה הוא קורא אנלגין שלו, ואחר כך הוא מכה אותו, ואחר כך הוא נותן לו כמס, ואחר כך נותן לו פרקולה, ואחר כך יוצא ליהרג. אבל הקב"ה אינו כן. אלא בתחילה קורא אנלגין של שבטים, "ועתה יוסיף לחטוא ויעשו להם מסכה וג'" (הושע יג: ב), ואחר כך הוא מכה אותן, "הוכה אפרים שרשם יבש וג'" (שם /הושע/ ט: טז), ואחר כך הוא נותן להם כמס, "צרור עון אפרים וג'" (שם /הושע/ יג: יב), ואחר כך הוא נותן להם פרקולה, "תאשם שמרון כי מרתה וגו'" (שם /הושע/ יד: א), ואחר כך הוא מחזירן בתשובה, "שובה ישראל" (הושע יד: ב).

"For My plans are not your plans and [My ways are not your ways]" (Is. 55:8), for the robber who is judged before the executioner, in the beginning he reads his charge and then he strikes him and then he puts him in prison and then he places the *furcilla* [a torture device] on him, and then he is taken out to be put to death, but God is not so; rather, in the beginning [God] reads the charge of the tribes: "And now they go on sinning and make for themselves molten images" (Hos. 13:2). And then [God] strikes them: "Ephraim is stricken, their stock is withered" (Hos. 9:16). And then He puts them in prison, "Ephraim's wrongdoing is bound up, [his sin is stored away]" (Hos. 13:12). And then [God] places the *furcilla* on them: "Samaria must bear her guilt [or "be laid waste"], for she has defied [her God]" (Hos. 14:1), and then [God] causes them to return in repentance, "Return, O Israel" (Hos. 14:2) (Pesikta deRav Kahana 24:10).

We begin with the human judge and executioner and see what the rabbis imagine the "normal" process of putting a criminal to death to be: the defendant is read his charge, struck, put into prison, tortured, and finally put to death. The punishments leading up to the execution may be part of the person's sentence, or each affliction may be administered to try to force a confession from the convicted person or to prevent him from recanting a confession. Jacob Neusner translates "ואחר כך נותן לו פרקולה" as "then he puts a bit in his mouth [so that he cannot retract his confession]...."[19] A parallel midrash from Yalkut Shim'oni offers a different explanation of the relationship between confession and the *furcilla*, saying,

"כל זמן שהוא מתריס הוא לוקה, הודה הוא נוטל פרקולא.. אבל הקב"ה אינו כן, אלא עד שלא הודה הוא נוטל פרקולא, משהודה הוא נוטל דימוס."

"During the time that he resists, he is smitten. When he confesses, he gets the *furcilla*. But God is not so; rather, until he confesses, he gets the *furcilla*, [but] he who confesses receives pardon" (Yalkut Shim'oni, Mishlei, Remez 961). Thus, both the executioner and God want the criminal to confess, but for very different reasons. The executioner uses the confession to justify further afflicting the person and then putting him to death. God does the opposite, using the physical punishment to motivate the criminal into confessing so that God can pardon him. While repentance per se is not mentioned, confession is a major component of teshuvah, so we can conclude that this midrash is another example of God's use of punishment as a way to bring sinners to repentance.

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19. Jacob Neusner, *Pesiqta deRab Kahana: An Analytical Translation. Volume II. Piskaot Fifteen Through Twenty-Eight and An Introduction to Pesiqta deRab Kahana* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 103.

We might have assumed from the opening quotation from Isaiah that the description of human judgment and execution would be juxtaposed with a quite different divine sentencing. Instead, by depicting God as following the same procedure as the executioner, the midrashist heightens the drama; what appears to be exactly the same procedure will have a radically different outcome. The prooftexts from Hosea liken God's punishment of Israel to the executioner's punishment of the criminal. The author cleverly uses the verse "צרור עון אפרים" to prove Ephraim's being "imprisoned" by God. The correlation of torture with "תאשם שמרון" is more difficult to understand. The *furcilla* is described as a device placed on a person's shoulders,[20] in which case the translation "Samaria shall bear her guilt" is appropriate, given the image of Samaria literally "bearing" her punishment. This wordplay, of course, does not occur in the Hebrew. The phrase might also mean "Samaria shall be laid waste," which might be considered a punishment akin to torture. In any case, the tension builds as God follows the executioner's steps exactly until it is time for the people to be put to death.

Here we have the dramatic twist: God does not kill Israel, but "מחזירן בתשובה", causes or allows them to repent instead. We see that God uses the sentencing system not to punish the sinner, but to encourage him to do teshuvah. We get the sense that at every step of the way, if the person had repented, the rest of the steps would not have occurred. Repentance, not death, is the whole purpose of the process. Punishment leads to teshuvah, as we saw in Chapter One, which is really the outcome God desires.

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20. Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1996) 1240.

The use of the phrase "מחזירן בתשובה" is particularly significant. Because the verb is in the causative, God clearly has an active role in Israel's teshuvah. The use of the *hifil* here is appropriate, since the formula of the midrash is to list what the judge does to the person on trial. Thus, describing God as the agent who causes Israel to do teshuvah fits the structure of the analogy. Surprisingly, the final prooftext for God's "מחזירן בתשובה," "Return, O Israel," is an exhortation to the people, not a prophecy of what God will do to them. Even though God controls the process of punishment and pardon, the people must do their part. As Jacob Neusner suggests, "God forgives sinners who atone and repent and asks of humanity that same act of grace—but no greater. For forgiveness without a prior act of repentance violates the rule of justice but also humiliates the law of mercy, cheapening and trivializing the superhuman act of forgiveness by treating as compulsive what is an act of human, and divine, grace."[21] God does not forgive without repentance, but He does help the people to repent.

In addition to punishing the people to move them to repent, God imbues teshuvah with great power to make it easier for people to repent.

> ר' יודה נשייה בשם ר' יודה בר' סימון: במנהגו שבעולם אדם יורה חץ כמה תהלך בית כור אי בית כורים, גדול כחה של תשובה שמגעת עד כסא הכבוד. א"ר יוסה כת' "פתחי לי" (שה"ש ה: ב), אמ' הקב"ה פתחי לי פתח כחרירה של מחט ואני פותח לכם פתח שיהיו אהליות וכצוצריות נכנסים בו. ר' תנחומה בשם ר' חנינה ר' אייבו בשם ריש לקיש: עשה תשובה כהרף עין "ודעו כי אני י"י" (תהלים מו: יא). א"ר לוי: אילו היו ישר' עושין תשובה יום אחד היו נגאלין. מה טעמ'? "היום אם בקולו תשמעו" (שם /תהלים/ צה: ז). א"ר יודה בר' סימון: "שובה ישראל עד י"י אלהיך" (הושע יד: ב), אפילו כפרתה בעיקר. א"ר לעזר: בנוהג שבעולם אדם עומד מבזה את

21. Jacob Neusner *Theological Foundations* 102.

חבירו ברבים, ולאחר זמן הוא מבקש לרצות לו והוא או' לו, את מבזה אותי ברבים ומתרצה אותי ביני ובינך? לך והבא אותן האנשים שבזית אותי לפניהם ואני מתרצה לך. אבל הקב"ה אינו כן. אלא אדם עומד ומחרף ומגדף בשוק והק' או' לו לעשות תשובה ביני ובינך ואני מקבלך.

Rabbi Yudah N'siah [Yehudah haNasi] in the name of R. Yudah bar R. Simon: It is the way of the world that when a person shoots an arrow, it goes one *beit-cor* or [two] *beit-corim*, [but] so great is the power of teshuvah that it reaches all the way to the Throne of Glory. R. Yose said: It is written, "Open for me [my sister]" (S.S. 5:2). God said, "Open for Me an opening the size of a needle's eye and I will open for you an opening [large enough] that encampments and siege engines can enter through." R. Tanhuma in the name of R. Hanina, [in the name of] R. Aibu in the name of Resh Lakish [said]: Make teshuvah [for the time of] the blink of an eye and "Know that I am God" (Ps. 46:11). R. Levi said: If Israel were to repent for one day, they would be redeemed. What is the reason for [Scriptural proof of] this? "[For He is our God and we are the people He tends, the flock in His care,] Today, if you would hearken to His voice" (Ps. 95:7). R. Yudah bar Simon said: "Return, Israel, unto Adonai your God" (Hosea 14:2), even if you have denied the principle [of God's existence]. R. Lazar said: It is the way of the world that when a person stands and degrades his fellow in public, and after some time comes to appease him, he says to him, "You have degraded me in public and [now] you appease me between me and you? Go and bring the people in front of whom you degraded me, and then I will be reconciled to you." But, God is not this way; rather, when a person stands and blasphemes and reviles [God] in the marketplace, God tells him to repent "[even] between Me and you and I will accept you" (Pesikta deRav Kahana 24:12).

The theme of the greatness of teshuvah is expressed here with examples on all planes: the spatial, the temporal, and what we might call the qualitative. No place is too high or too small for teshuvah to enter, whether it be the highest heavens where the Throne of Glory sits or a needle's eye. No moment, not even the amount of time it takes to blink an eye, is too brief for teshuvah to bring redemption. And no sin is too terrible, not even the sin of denying God's existence, for teshuvah to bring a person back in reconciliation with God. The power of teshuvah is so great that it overcomes the limits of time and space to redeem even the worst of sinners.

The end of the midrash moves from the subject of the greatness of teshuvah to focus on the greatness and uniqueness of God. The author compares the human response to repentance with the divine response. A person who has been wronged demands that the sinner's act of teshuvah match the sin, restoring the wronged one's reputation as much as possible by apologizing in public. In contrast, God is not interested in His own reputation or sense of justice being done on His behalf; rather, God is interested in the inner transformation of the sinner, represented by the private return to God that need not be made public. The message is that God's mercy is so great that teshuvah can be made even for a brief moment, even for a terrible sin, and even without full reparation. It is worth noting that people are described here as having a sense of justice that must be satisfied in order to accept another's repentance, while God is portrayed as almost wholly merciful and ready to forgive and not concerned with the justice of requiring that the teshuvah match the crime, so to speak. Justice is depicted as a human, not divine, need.

Even as God's response to teshuvah is distinguished from human ideas of reparation, God is simultaneously cast as a humanlike actor in this relationship. The use of the phrase "open for me" from the Song of Songs is telling. The speaker recounts a dream in which her beloved comes to her at night and asks that she "open" the door for him. The Song of Songs, of course, has long been considered an allegory of the love between God and Israel, but the use of this metaphor here is even more powerful. God, the lover or husband, asks that Israel "Open for Me" a space, not for God to enter, but for teshuvah to pass through. Teshuvah is the link between God and Israel, husband and wife, the mediator that allows the relationship to endure.

The marriage metaphor is even more directly employed in prophetic texts that

liken Israel's idolatry to a wife's infidelity to her husband. The midrash below explores teshuvah's role in the metaphor:

> דבר אחר [שובה ישראל]: תשובה חביבה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהוא מבטל דבריו בשביל התשובה. היאך? כתב בתורה "כי יקח איש אשה ובעלה והיה אם לא תמצא חן בעיניו [וגו'] וכתב לה ספר כריתות [וגו'] ושנאה האיש האחרון וכתב [וגו'] לא יוכל בעלה הראשון אשר שלחה לשוב לקחתה [וגו'] אחרי אשר הוטמאה" (דברים כ"ד א' ועד ד'). אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא אינו כן. אע"פ שעזבו אותו ועבדו לאחר "ויעזבו את ה' ולא עבדוהו" (שופטים י' ו'). אמר להם, עשו תשובה ובואו אצלי ואני מקבל אתכם. ירמיה מפרש לאמר, "הן ישלח איש את אשתו והלכה מאתו והיתה לאיש אחר הישוב אליה עוד? הלא חנף תחנף הארץ ההיא? ואת זנית רעים רבים ושוב אלי- נאם ה'" (ירמיה ג' א'). בואו ואני מקבל אתכם, "שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך."
>
> Another interpretation [of "Return, Israel"]: Teshuvah is so beloved by God that He nullifies His [own] words for teshuvah. How so? He wrote in the Torah, "When a man takes a wife and cohabits with her and she does not please him... and he writes a bill of divorce for her [...she leaves his house and becomes the wife of another man; then the latter man rejects her, writes her a bill of divorce... or the man who married her last dies. Then the first husband who divorced her shall not take her to wife again, since she has been defiled—for that would be abhorrent to Adonai...]" (Deut. 24:1-4). But God does not do so; even though they [Israel] have abandoned Him and served another, [as it is written,] "And they forsook Adonai and did not serve Him" (Judges 10:6), God said to them, "Repent and come back to Me and I will accept you." Jeremiah explained, "[The word of Adonai came to me] saying, 'If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another, can he ever go back to her? Would not such a land be defiled? Now you have whored with many lovers: can you return to Me?—says Adonai" (Jer. 3:1). Come and I will accept you— "Return, O Israel, unto Adonai your God" (Pesikta Rabbati 44).

Again, the relationship between God and Israel is compared to that of a husband and wife. Teshuvah is described as "חביבה" to God, suggesting that teshuvah is beloved to God because it mediates between God and His beloved. Ironically, this humanlike lover-God's actions are contrasted with ideal human behavior, which is, after all, dictated

by God! People who follow the law cited here are obeying God's instruction, but are less godly as a result. God is less godly too, if that is possible, for when God asks Israel in Jeremiah, "Can you return to Me?" He is not the omniscient deity asking a rhetorical question, but is a betrayed husband, truly wondering if repair is possible. Rachel Adler suggests that "the great innovation of the prophetic marriage metaphor is that it presents God as an injurable other enmeshed in a *danse macabre* of reciprocal injury."[22] In other words, God, like an angry husband, responds to Israel's transgressions with retaliation, just as an angry spouse might react to his unfaithful wife. There is, however, another possibility. God can break away from the "terrible symmetry of reciprocal injury" and instead make possible "reciprocal generosity."[23] But in order to do this, God must break the law. "'Can you return to Me?—says Adonai' (Jer. 3:1). Come and I will accept you— 'Return, O Israel, unto Adonai your God.'" It is "the contradiction that tops all contradictions: *the metaphor that preserves the covenant breaks the law*" (italics in original).[24] Teshuvah is both the repair of human transgression and an act of divine transgression.

Ironically, God's transgressive act is not without its own set of governing principles. As we saw in Chapter One, the rabbis viewed God as somehow bound to follow certain rules of teshuvah, particularly in order to promote the likelihood that a person or people will repent. God can ignore His laws, but is compelled to abide by the rules of teshuvah. The following midrash from Shemot Rabbah explores what expectations come with God's acceptance of teshuvah:

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22. Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1998) 160.
23. Ibid. 163.
24. Ibid.

"ויאמר משה אל ה' ראה אתה אומר אלי." הה"ד (ירמיה יח) "רגע אדבר על גוי ועל ממלכה... ונחמתי על הרעה...." מה "רגע אדבר"? כהרף עין אני גוזר על האדם שימות, והוא עושה תשובה ואני מתנחם עליו, שנאמר (שם /ירמיהו יח/) "ושב הגוי ההוא מרעתו." ומי "הם"? אלו אנשי נינוה. מה כתיב בהם? (יונה א) "קום לך אל נינוה העיר הגדולה." למה? "כי עלתה רעתם לפני." ואומר (שם /יונה ג'/) "ויחל יונה לבא בעיר מהלך יום אחד." מה כתיב שם? (שם /יונה/ ג) "ויאמינו אנשי נינוה באלהים וילבשו שקים האדם והבהמה." אמרו לפניו: רבון העולם הבהמה אינה יודעת כלום, ואתה מזכה אותה. אף אנו חשוב אותנו כבהמה? שנא' (שם /יונה ג'/) "האדם והבהמה הבקר והצאן אל יטעמו מאומה." מיד וינחם ה' על הרעה אשר דבר לעשות להם ולא עשה. ורבנן אמרי: "רגע אדבר על גוי." אלו ישראל, שנאמר (ש"ב =שמואל ב'= ז) "ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ." "ועל ממלכה." אלו ישראל שנקראו "ממלכה," שנאמר (שמות יט) "ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים" (ירמיה א) "לנתוש ולנתוץ ולהאביד." לפי שעשו אותו מעשה וביקש להשמידם, שנאמר (דברים ט) "הרף ממני ואשמידם," וכיון שעמד משה וביקש עליהם רחמים מיד וינחם ה'. אמר לפניו: רבש"ע נתמלאת עליהם רחמים, הנהיגם אתה שיעלו לארץ ולא ע"י שליח, הה"ד "ויאמר משה אל ה' ראה אתה אומר אלי."

"And Moses said to Adonai, 'See, You say to me [lead this people forward, but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me]'" (Ex. 33:12). Thus it is written, "At one moment I may say that a nation or a kingdom [shall be uprooted and pulled down and destroyed, but if that nation that I spoke of turns back from its wickedness,] I change My mind about the evil [that I had planned to do]" (Jer. 18:7). What is meant by "at one moment I may say?" In the blink of an eye I decree that a person should die, but if he repents, I change my mind about him, as it says, "But if that nation turns back from its wickedness, [I change My mind concerning the punishment I planned to bring on it]" (Jer. 18:8). And who are 'they'? They are the Ninevites, of whom it is written, "Arise, go to Ninevah, that great city" (Jonah 1:2). Why? "Because their wickedness has come before Me" (ibid.), and it says, "Jonah started out and came into the city one day's distance [and proclaimed, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!]" (3:4). What is written there? "And the Ninevites believed God [and declared a fast]" and both people and animals wore sackcloth, and they said before Him, "Master of the universe, the beast knows nothing, yet you merit it? Are we too considered like beasts, as it is said, 'No man or beast of flock or herd shall taste anything' (Jonah 3:7)?" Immediately, "Adonai regretted the evil that He had declared to do to them and did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). The rabbis say, "At one moment I may decree that a nation," this [refers to] Israel, as it it said, "And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth, [whom God went and

redeemed as His people...]" (II Sam. 7:23). "Or a kingdom" this refers to Israel, which is referred to as "kingdom," as it is said, "And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6). "To uproot and pull down and destroy" (Jer. 18:7), accordingly that they did this deed that [God] sought to destroy them, as it is said, "Let Me alone and I will destroy them" (Deut. 9:14), but because Moses stood and pleaded for mercy upon them, immediately God changed His mind. [Moses] said before Him: Master of the world, You have filled Yourself with mercy for them, You lead them up into the land and not by the hand of a messenger, as it is written, "And Moses said to Adonai, 'See, You say to me...'" (Ex. 33:12) (Shemot Rabbah 45:1).

We begin with the verse from Jeremiah that clearly explains how God operates: if God decrees that a people should be destroyed for their sins, God will change His mind and not carry it out if the people repent. The *makhloket* is over to whom this process applies. First, the anonymous voice of the midrash gives the Ninevites as an example of a people threatened by destruction who avoid it by making teshuvah. The rabbis disagree, arguing that the "*goy*" and "*mamlakhah*" to which Jeremiah refers in the verse "רגע אדבר על גוי ועל ממלכה" is Israel, who, unlike the Ninevites, is explicitly called "גוי אחד בארץ" and "ממלכת כהנים." While the first example of the Ninevites is not rejected outright, the second opinion seems to be the accepted one, not only because it is the position of the majority, presumably, but because it then leads into the explanation of our base-verse from Exodus, "See, You say to me, 'Lead this people forward,' but you have not made known to me whom You will send with me'" (Ex. 33:12). It is important to note that the question of whether teshuvah is possible for the Gentiles is still an open question. The story of Jonah seems to be irrefutable evidence that non-Jews can repent and avoid punishment, but the rabbis are obviously uncomfortable with this idea. It is not clear why the rabbis would be reluctant to believe that God allows other nations to

repent. It is possible that since the rabbis saw teshuvah as a mediating link between people and the divine, they saw teshuvah as too powerful and precious a gift to share with the other nations. Another possibility is that the rabbis saw the oppression by foreign powers as such an egregious sin that their notions of justice could not include God's pardoning the gentile nations. Either way, by applying the concept of God reversing His decrees only to Israel, the rabbis highlight their people's special status as the Chosen People, but also bring attention to Israel's misdeeds.

The prime example of God's repeal of a decree to destroy Israel is, naturally, the creation of the Golden Calf. The midrashist reminds us that God wanted to wipe out Israel, but that Moses pleaded for the people's pardon and God relented. The question for the author of this midrash appears to be about what constitutes acceptance of teshuvah and how God must act accordingly. In the Exodus version of the account, God's response to Moses's first plea for mercy on the people is ambiguous. First, Moses asks God to kill him with the people if God is not going to forgive them (Ex.32:32), and God rejects his request without directly confirming that the people will be forgiven by saying, "He who has sinned against Me, [only] he shall be erased from My record" (Ex. 32:33). God then continues, "Now, go, lead the people to where I told you. Behold, My angel shall go before you, but on the day of my accounting, I will make an account for their sins" (32:34). God then sends a plague upon the people (32:35). So far, it does not look like God has forgiven Israel, but He has not completely destroyed them either. The reason for the angel is made clear in the next chapter when God explains, "I will send before you an angel, and I will drive out the Canaanites.... But I will not go in your midst for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I destroy you on the way" (34:2-3). God is keeping

the promise to the Patriarchs but there is still a danger of the people being destroyed because of their sin. The covenant is still standing, but only just.

This "gray area" between annihilation and reconciliation is not acceptable to Moses or to the midrashist. If God is going to continue to be in relationship with Israel, God cannot stay away and send an angel in His place. Moses points out, "See that this is Your people.... For how shall it be known that Your people and I have gained favor in Your eyes if You do not go with us..." (Ex. 33:13-16). In other words, if You are not present, we cannot make a full return to You, we cannot truly repent. Moses reminds God that He cannot partially pardon Israel; if teshuvah is possible, it must be fully accepted. Jeremiah describes how God can decree a people's destruction but change His mind when they repent. The author of the midrash adds that God *must* nullify the decree, and must do so completely, if the sinners repent. It is interesting to note that the rabbis also see God's very nature as changeable. Moses pleads with God who "נתמלא," has become filled or has filled Himself with mercy for the people, to lead them Himself. Here, God is not by nature "אל מלא רחמים," but has decided to be filled with mercy because of Moses's plea. The rabbis have no trouble depicting a God who changes His mind, but they subvert this very portrayal by laying down rules that require God to do so under particular circumstances.

The rabbis encounter another problem when they accept that God sometimes changes His mind, namely, how to know when God's words will be fulfilled and when they will not. The following excerpt from a midrash in Bemidbar Rabbah takes a problematic phrase from the story of Balaam and Balak and offers a more complicated

exploration of God's promises and their fulfillment.

...״קום בלק ושמע האזינה עדי בנו צפור.״ שניהם היו מנה בן פרס שהיו עושין עצמן גדולים מאבותיהם. ״לא איש אל ויכזב.״ אינו כבשר ודם שבשר ודם קונה אוהבים, מצא אחרים יפים מהם, כופר בראשונים. והוא אינו כן. אי אפשר לו לשוב משבועת האבות הראשונים, ״ההוא אמר ולא יעשה?״ אומר להביא עליהן רעות, אם עשו תשובה הוא מבטלן, את מוצא כתוב בתורה, ״זובח לאלהים יחרם וגו׳״ (שמות כב) ועשו את העגל והיו ראוין לכלייה והייתי סבור לקללן ולהכחידן ומעט עשו תשובה ובטל (שם /שמות/ לב) ״וינחם ה׳ על הרעה,״ וכן במקומות הרבה...

...“Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear unto me, son of Tzippor [lit. ‘his son is Tzippor’]” (Num. 23:18). The two of them were *maneh* son of *paras* [half of a *maneh*], making themselves greater than their fathers. “God is not man, that he lie [or a mortal to change His mind].” (Num. 23:19). [God] is not like flesh and blood, for when flesh and blood acquires friends and then finds others who are more desirable, he rejects the first, but He is not so. It is impossible for him to go back on his promises to the Patriarchs, for, “Does He speak and not act, [promise and not fulfill]?” (ibid.). He says that He will bring evils upon them, but if they repent, he nullifies them, as is found written in the Torah, “Whoever sacrifices to a god [other than Adonai alone] shall be proscribed” (Ex. 22:19). And they made the calf and it was fitting to destroy them, and I would have thought [God] would curse and destroy them, but shortly [after] they repented, God nullified [the punishment], “And Adonai renounced the evil [He had planned to bring upon His people]” (Ex. 22:14). And so it is in many places [in the Tanakh]... (B’midbar Rabbah 20:20, similar version in Midrash Tanhuma, *Parashat Balak*, *Siman* 21).

The author of this midrash notices that in Balaam's second prophecy, he calls Balak "בנו צפור" instead of "בן צפור." The author interprets this textual variation to mean that Balaam calls Balak, who is the son of Tzippor, “Balak, his son is Tzippor,” making Balak the father and Tzippor the son. This is taken to indicate that Balak and Balaam, who gives him this name, are arrogant and see themselves as greater than their forebears, as a full *maneh* compared to the half-*maneh* of their fathers. This strange interpretation seems inconsequential, but it introduces the issue of ancestry, which will be taken up again later

in the midrash.

Balaam declares, "God is not man, that He should lie, nor a mortal to change His mind" (Num. 23:19). The midrash illustrates the point with the comparison of a person's fickleness to God's loyalty to His friends. While people may forget their old friends in favor of new ones, God does not. Again, while the comparison purports to show the difference between God and humans, this example casts God in very humanlike terms. God has "אוהבים," not just people who love and worship Him, but "friends" with whom God chooses to associate. The midrash continues by explaining why God is so loyal; it is because "אי אפשר לו לשוב משבועת האבות הראשונים", it is impossible for God to go back on His promises to the Patriarchs, His old friends. Balaam and Balak are like new people who try to befriend God, but while the current generation of Israelites may not be God's friends either, He is bound to take care of them because of the promise to His אוהבים. Presumably, to fail to fulfill the promises to them would be to go against God's nature, as the verse continues with the rhetorical question, "ההוא אמר ולא יעשה?" (Num. 23:19). Balaam asks, "Does God speak and not act?" and the answer is a resounding "No!" God made a promise to the Patriarchs that He is sure to keep. Furthermore, Balaam's own prophecies are sure to be correct, since God does not say one thing and then change His mind.

Paradoxically, however, the midrashist asks Balaam's question and gives it a different answer: Does God ever speak one thing and do another? Yes! God decrees evil upon people, but if they repent, He nullifies the decree. The prime example is, once

again, the making of the Golden Calf. Israel, who should have been proscribed for such a transgression, is pardoned instead. At this point, it seems that the plain sense of the biblical text and the rabbis' interpretation are completely at odds; how can God be differentiated from human beings by His immutability when He changes His mind time and again in the Tanakh? The midrashist reconciles the two interpretations by revisiting the issue of ancestors. Unlike Balaam and Balak, who have no respect for their fathers, God will not completely destroy Israel because He is still bound by His promises to the Patriarchs. By going back on His words to Israel about their punishment, God is actually fulfilling his words to the Patriarchs. Thus the midrash explains how God can change His mind in spite of Balaam's oracle, affirms the principle that God nullifies harsh decrees when the people repent, and adds another reason, the merit of the Patriarchs, for God's need to do so.

By contrasting God's with humans' reactions to sin and punishment, the rabbis attempt to highlight the radical nature of teshuvah. Teshuvah and the God who created it are so powerful, the regular rules and procedures do not apply. A person who should have been executed by the court is instead pardoned. God who should have divorced his unfaithful wife reconciles with her. God's very nature can be influenced by repentance; normally, we would expect that God is "not like a mortal to change His mind" (Num. 23:19), but in response to teshuvah, "I change My mind about the evil that I had planned to do" (Jer. 18:7). And yet, in spite of the rabbis' depiction of repentance as the "exception that proves the rule" of how the world operates, they also maintain God's boundedness to the internal rules of teshuvah and provide a rationale for that boundedness. By portraying God as compelled to completely reconcile with Israel once

they have repented, as in the midrash from Shemot Rabbah, or as obligated to annul the decree to destroy the people because of His covenant with the Patriarchs, as in the piece from Bemidbar Rabbah, the rabbis suggest that God must accept teshuvah because of His covenantal relationship with Israel. Teshuvah must always be possible and effective if the covenant is to endure.

Although God is eternal and the covenant is, we hope, everlasting, the opportunity for repentance may not be. Sometimes, God does not wait forever for individuals or peoples to do teshuvah. For instance, as we saw in Chapter One, once God realizes that the people of the generation of the flood are not going to repent, He wipes them out immediately. We must ask, how does God decide when the time for repentance is up? We turn next to the question of the limits to teshuvah.

Chapter 3: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
The Limits to Teshuvah

We have seen how the rabbis conceive of teshuvah as the act that interrupts the cycle of sin and punishment and brings about a reconciliation between God and human beings by restoring the balance of divine and human will. In Chapter Two, we encountered midrashim that highlight God's almost absolute mercy and all but ignore God's desire for justice. Yet the system of reward and punishment, in which teshuvah plays a role, depends on a sense of God's ordering the world in a just way. The rabbis respond to this contradiction by outlining the limits to teshuvah, which not only result in surprising restrictions on people's free will, but also on God's.

Perhaps the most well-known example of the limits of teshuvah is that of Pharaoh, whose heart God hardens. This poses a problem for the rabbis, since the possibility of repentance depends on human free will. In Shemot Rabbah, they attempt to reconcile Pharaoh's story with their notion of teshuvah:

> ד"א: "כי אני הכבדתי את לבו" (שמות א). א"ר יוחנן: מכאן פתחון פה למינין לומר לא היתה ממנו שיעשה תשובה! שנא' "כי אני הכבדתי את לבו." א"ל ר"ש בן לקיש: יסתם פיהם של מינים! אלא (משלי ג) "אם ללצים הוא יליץ," שהקב"ה מתרה בו באדם פעם ראשונה שניה ושלישית ואינו חוזר בו, והוא נועל לבו מן התשובה כדי לפרוע ממנו מה שחטא. אף כך פרעה הרשע כיון ששיגר הקב"ה ה' פעמים ולא השגיח על דבריו, אמר לו הקב"ה: אתה הקשית ערפך והכבדת את לבך. הריני מוסיף לך טומאה על טומאתך, הוי "כי אני הכבדתי את לבו." מהו "הכבדתי"? שעשה הקב"ה את לבו ככבד הזה שהיא מתבשלת שניה וארטסים נכנס בתוכה, כך נעשה לבו של פרעה ככבד הזה ולא היה מקבל דבריו של הקב"ה, הוי "כי אני הכבדתי את לבו וגו'."
>
> Another interpretation: "For I have hardened his heart [and the hearts of his servants in order that I may display these My signs among them]" (Ex. 10:1). R.

> Yohanan said, From this aren't heretics given the opening to say, "It is not in our power to do teshuvah?" As it is said, "For I have hardened his heart." Resh Lakish said, The mouths of the heretics shall be closed! Rather, "To the scoffers He scoffs [but to the poor He shows grace]" (Prov. 3:34), for God warns a person a first time, a second, and a third, and if he does not repent, [God] shuts his heart from teshuvah in order to exact retribution from him for his sin. So too for Pharaoh the wicked: when God sent to Pharaoh five times and he did not pay attention to His words, God said to him, "You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart. Behold, I am adding uncleanness to your uncleanness. Alas, 'for I have hardened his heart.'" What is "have hardened?" God made his heart like a liver, which when boiled a second time [no juice enters it[25]]; so too was Pharaoh's heart made like a liver, and it did not receive God's words, alas, "for I have hardened his heart, etc." (Shemot Rabbah 13:3).

This midrash is similar to those discussed in Chapter One regarding God giving sinners multiple chances or an extended period of time to repent before meting out punishment. Here, however, instead of just punishing an unrepentant Pharaoh, God prevents Pharaoh from repenting so that He may punish him. The rabbis declare that God "shuts his heart from teshuvah in order to exact retribution from him for his sin." They ignore the reason the Torah gives for God's hardening Pharaoh's heart, which is "in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that you shall tell in the hearing of your children and children's children how I have toyed with Egypt, and the signs that I have placed among them, and you shall know that I am Adonai" (Ex. 10:1-2). This explanation is quite different from the rabbis'; there is no mention of punishing Pharaoh or the Egyptians, although that is an obvious consequence of Pharaoh's failure to repent. In fact, God "toys" with Egypt, not to teach them a lesson, but to show the Israelites His power. This must have struck the rabbis, as it does us, as an especially cruel way for God to prove His strength, so they interpret God's act differently. It is more palatable to

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25. The meaning of the word "וארטסים" is uncertain. Jastrow suggests it should be read "ואין רוטב" (Jastrow 118).

believe that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to exact the punishment he deserves. The use of the quote from Proverbs further emphasizes the rabbis' belief in measure for measure; since Pharaoh scoffed at God and His power, God will show His power by taking away Pharaoh's ability to repent.

The theme of people's free will is also highlighted by the repeated discussion of body parts and their functioning. At first, the mention of the heretics' "פתחון פה"or "excuse/opening to say" is not particularly significant, since the phrase is a fairly common one in midrash. Resh Lakish's exclamation that their mouths should be stopped up is a further play on the mouth metaphor, but also evokes the image of a person whose power of speech is taken from him, rendering him dumb. This taking away of a person's abilities is then likened to God who "נועל לבו מן התשובה." The anatomical metaphors continue with the use of two more well-known biblical idioms, including the one under discussion here. God accuses Pharaoh, saying, "הקשית ערפך והכבדת את לבך." It is interesting to note that God characterizes Pharaoh as having "stiffened his neck," a description that always refers to the Israelites. When applied to Israel, the phrase often alludes to God's forbearance despite the people's repeated disobedience. Pharaoh, on the other hand, does not enjoy the special relationship God has with Israel, so his "stiff-neckedness" is not overlooked. The rabbis appear to differentiate between Israel's ability to reconcile with God and the Gentiles' ability, as we saw in Chapter Two. On the other hand, the rabbinic use of the phrase here may also be a subtle warning to us, reminding us that we are not so different from Pharaoh.

Next, the author cleverly moves from the discussion of how Pharaoh's

transgressions are reflected in his transformed anatomy by introducing a new rhetoric, the language of טומאה. God's declaration that He will "add uncleanness to your uncleanness" appears to be a non sequitur, but we soon see why the midrashist uses the term. The last anatomical analogy is a play on "והכבדתי," which shares a root with "כבד" or "liver." God made Pharaoh's heart like a liver, which does not absorb juice, so that he would not absorb God's words and repent. The notion that the liver does not absorb is attested to in the Mishnah, which discusses the liver's ability to transmit or be susceptible to טומאה:

> ר' יוחנן בן נורי אומר הכבד אוסרת ואינה נאסרת מפני שהיא פולטת ואינה בולעת: (תרומות י:יא)
>
> R. Yohanan ben Nuri says: The liver makes [other food] prohibited [unclean], but does not become prohibited, because it emits [juice] but does not absorb (Ter. 10:11).

Thus when God says He will add to Pharaoh's "טומאה," the midrashist introduces the next symbol in the text, the liver. It is as if God places an unclean liver in Pharaoh, which then contaminates him but cannot absorb anything *tahor*, like God's words.

Each example of humans using or manipulating their bodies wickedly is paralleled by a divine reaction: the heretics who open their mouths to challenge their responsibility to do teshuvah have their mouths stopped up, and Pharaoh stiffens his neck and hardens his heart, so God makes his heart like a liver, a dense organ that is very difficult to make kosher. Just as God can prevent the normal functioning of a person's body, so too can He take away a person's ability to repent. The implication is that

teshuvah is part of a normal person's makeup, but if she does not make use of it, she risks losing it.

The midrashist does not quite answer the question of how a just (not to mention merciful) God can keep a person from repentance. If Pharaoh had not done teshuvah during the five chances he received, what prevented God from punishing Pharaoh at that point, according to the regular rules of sin and punishment? We must conclude that God knew that Pharaoh would have repented and therefore wanted to stop him from doing so. Ironically, God is imagined as simultaneously all-powerful and not; He can take away Pharaoh's ability to do teshuvah, but He does so because if Pharaoh had repented, God would have had to forgive him. God is willing to take away a person's agency rather than refuse to forgive a penitent sinner. Once again, teshuvah appears to be the one system that God is not permitted, or does not permit Himself, to alter.

The rabbis, who seem to envision God as completely obligated by the rules of repentance, nevertheless also suggest a direct challenge to the absolute accessibility to teshuvah and God's commitment to it. It is a common rabbinic notion that the two primary names for God, the Tetragrammaton and Elohim, refer to two aspects of God, mercy and judgment, respectively.[26] In midrashim related to repentance, the rabbis explore how God's two aspects interact and how they affect a person's ability to repent.

> דרש ר' ישששכר דכפר מנדי: "כי הוא ידע מתי שוא וירא און ולא יתבונן?" (איוב יא: יא). בנוהג שבעולם אדם עושה גדישים גדישים של עבירות ועושה תשובה, כביכול "וירא און ולא יתבונן." תני בשם ר' מאיר: "שובה ישראל," עד שהוא עומד במידת רחמים, ואם לאו אלהיך, עד דלא יתעביד סניגוריה קטיגוריה.

26. See, for example, Bereishit Rabbah 33:3.

> R. Issachar of K'far Mindi expounded: "For He knows deceitful men; When He sees iniquity, does He not discern it?" (Job 11:11). In the way of the world, a person does heaps and heaps of transgressions and does teshuvah, [but] it is as if "He sees iniquity and does not discern it" (ibid.). It was taught in the name of R. Meir, "Return, O Israel" while He is standing in the aspect of mercy, and if not, "[He is] your God [Elohim]." [Repent] before the defense attorney becomes the prosecutor (Pesikta deRav Kahana 24:13).

The midrashist here uses several methods that we have already encountered. First, he takes a biblical verse that includes a rhetorical question, "When He sees iniquity, does He not discern it?" (Job 11:11) and makes it a statement referring to God's mercy, that when a person sins and repents, "When He sees iniquity, He does not discern it." Second, the author uses the formula of the "way of the world," "בנוהג שבעולם" to describe how human beings behave. We would expect, however, the text to then compare the way of the world with the way God acts, showing that "ואינו הקדוש ברוך הוא כן." Instead, God's overlooking of human sin is considered part of the natural order of things rather than an act of radical grace. Now it is God's limits, rather than God's power, that come as a surprise in the second part of the midrash.

The natural way of the world is for a person to commit many transgressions and then do teshuvah and be pardoned. There is no mention of any limits to this process, either time or number of sins. In fact, many midrashim declare that a person can commit many transgressions, but if the person repents, God overlooks all of them.[27] Then R. Meir's statement modifies the process using a play on the word "עד" from the verse, "שובה ישראל עד יהוה אלהיך" (Hos. 14:2). "Return, O Israel, *unto* Adonai your God" becomes "Return, O Israel, *while* Adonai is your God," that is, "while He is

27. See, for example, Pesikta Rabbati 44:7, Shemot Rabbah 31:1.

standing in the aspect of mercy [as Adonai]." If you repent while God is Adonai, your sins will be overlooked as stated above and you will be pardoned. If you wait until God is Elohim, presumably, God will not accept your repentance and will punish you for your iniquity.

This characterization of God's split personality is quite shocking. The rabbis define God's two attributes as being so distinct that God inhabits only one at a time and can only act according to that attribute at that time. God is no longer transcendent Judge, but either defense attorney or prosecutor, either concerned only with mercy or only with justice. The enigmatic warning to "repent before the defense attorney becomes the prosecutor" implies that such a switch of aspects could happen at any time. God's actions are not predictable and teshuvah is no longer assured.

Other midrashim take this theme and limit God even further by implying that God does not even have control over His own transformation or His own actions when they are dictated by *din*.

> ילמדנו [רבינו]: מי שהוא חוטא לומר שתתכפר לו על ידי תשובה [מהו]? כך שנו רבותינו: האומר אחטא ואשוב אחטא ואשוב אין מספיקים על ידיו לעשות תשובה (יומא פ"ח מ"ח). למה? שאם אדם עושה תשובה (וחזר בו) [וחוזר] לעבירותיו, אינה תשובה. (זה) [אם] ירד אדם לטבול והשרץ בידו אין לו (הטהרה) [טהרה]. מה יעשה? ישליך מה שבידו ואח"כ יטבול ויטהר, אמר הכתוב "יעזוב רשע דרכו ואיש און מחשבותיו וישוב אל ה' וירחמהו" (ישעיה נ"ה ז'). שהקב"ה חפץ בתשובה ואינו חפץ להמית ברייה שנאמר, "אם אחפוץ במות הרשע כי אם בשוב רשע מדרכו הרעה וחיה" (יחזקאל ל"ג י"א). והקדוש ברוך הוא קורא אותם בתשובה כביכול שיחיו, וכן הוא אומר לישראל, "שובו בנים שובבים" (ירמיה ג' כ"ב). אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא: עשו תשובה עד שלא נשוב למידת הדין איני יודע מה לעשות אלא עד שאני עומד במדת רחמים עשו תשובה ואני אקבל אתכם. מניין? ממה שקראו בנביא "עד ה' אלהיך."

> Our rabbi taught: Whoever sins and says that he will be expiated through teshuvah [what of him?]. Thus our rabbis taught, the one who says, "I will sin and repent, sin and repent" there is not enough in his hands to do teshuvah (PT Yoma 8:8). Why? Because if a person does teshuvah (and returns) to his transgressions, it is not teshuvah. It is as if a person goes down to immerse [in the mikveh] and a lizard is in his hand, he is not ritually pure. What should he do? He should cast away what is in his hand and afterwards immerse and be purified, as Scripture says, "Let the wicked person abandon his way, a person of iniquity his plans, and return to Adonai, and He will have mercy on him" (Is. 55:7). For God desires teshuvah and does not desire the death of his creation, as it is said, "I do not desire the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn back from his evil ways and live" (Ezek. 33:11). And God calls them in repentance so that they will live; thus He says to Israel, "Return, rebellious children" (Jer. 3:22). God said to them, "Do teshuvah before we return to the aspect of judgment and I do not know what to do [or what I shall do]; rather, while I am standing in the aspect of mercy, do teshuvah and I will accept you." From where [do we learn this?], from the reading in the prophet, "*Ad/Od* [unto/while] Adonai [is] Your God." (Pesikta Rabbati 44).

Rather than emphasizing how easy God makes it for us to repent, this midrash focuses on the difficulties of doing teshuvah. The author recognizes that teshuvah must be sincere and transformative in order for it to be true teshuvah; if the person goes back to her wicked ways, she did not really repent. Furthermore, the repeat offender himself lessens his chances of being able to repent by wasting his energy on sin rather than teshuvah. Because of all of his transgressions, "אין מספיקים על ידיו לעשות תשובה." Teshuvah takes strength. The image of the sinner's hands is carried over in the next example, the person who goes into the mikveh with an unclean animal in his hand. As in the midrash from Shemot Rabbah discussed above, repentance is equated with ritual purification. If it is difficult to make a liver kosher, it is impossible for a person holding a lizard to become so. This time, instead of the emptiness of the sinner's hands precluding teshuvah, it is what is in them that is the obstacle to purification. In both cases, the sinner's own hands are sabotaging his attempts to do teshuvah.

The center of the midrash, the famous quotation from Ezekiel, explains what is at stake: if a person is to escape death, he must repent, and repent sincerely. God is portrayed as compassionate, desiring nothing but repentance and life for His creatures, but is also strangely impotent. He tells the people, "עשו תשובה עד שלא נשוב למידת הדין איני יודע מה לעשות אלא עד שאני עומד במדת רחמים עשו תשובה ואני אקבל אתכם." Here, God urges the people to repent now because, while He will certainly accept their teshuvah as Adonai, He does not know what He will do (or will not know what to do) as Elohim. It appears that God really has two separate, independent personalities. He even refers to Himself in the plural, saying, "עשו תשובה עד שלא*נשוב* למידת הדין" implying that either "we," Adonai and the people, will be returning to the aspect of judgment, or "we," Adonai/Elohim will move to *middat hadin*. By playing on the word "נשוב," the midrashist highlights the parallel between God and Israel; if the people do not "*shav*" in time, God will, but with very different consequences. Even more shocking is that God does not seem to be in control, especially as Elohim. Not only is this a problematic characterization for a supposedly omnipotent and omniscient God, but it also casts the aspect of judgment or justice, even divine justice, as unpredictable or arbitrary in some way. Under such conditions, God's exhortation to repent gains more urgency because even God does not know what the future will bring if the people do not repent in time.

In addition to suggesting that God's behavior changes with the alternation between the attributes of mercy and judgment, the rabbis also depict God's moods and

attitudes as changeable according to the circumstances. The author tackles this and several other difficulties in the following midrash.

["וזאת תורת זבח השלמים"]. כשהיו מקריבין זבח השלמים, היה הקב"ה נושא להם פנים, שנאמר, "ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום" (במדבר ו כו). אפשר שהקב"ה נושא להם פנים לבריות? שני פסוקין מכחישין זה את זה: כתוב אחד אומר (כי לא) "[אם] אחפוץ במות הרשע" (יחזקאל לג יא), וכתוב אחד אומר "כי חפץ ה' להמיתם" (ש"א =שמואל א'= ב כה). היאך לא חפץ במות הרשע? אלא קודם שנתחתם גזר דינם לא חפץ, לאחר שנתחתם גזר דין חפץ ה' להמיתם. וכן דניאל אומר, "אבל אגיד לך את הרשום בכתב אמת" (דניאל י כא). אמרו רבותינו: מעשה היה ברבינו הקדוש שהוא עובר בסימוניא, יצאו כל בני העיר לקראתו, בקשו ממנו זקן אחד שילמדם תורה. נתן להם את ר' לוי בר סיסון. אמרו לו: רבינו מהו שכתיב בדניאל, "אבל אגיד לך את הרשום בכתב אמת," וכי יש דבר שקר בתורה שאומר "אמת?" לא מצא להן תשובה להשיבן, מיד יצא לו [משם ובא] לפני ר'. א"ל: לא יכולתי לעמוד לפניהם, דבר אחד שאלוני ולא מצאתי מה להשיבן. א"ל: מהו הדבר? א"ל: "אבל אגיד לך הרשום בכתב אמת." וכי יש דבר שקר בתורה? אמר לו: תשובה גדולה היה לך להשיבם. א"ל: היה לך לומר להם, האדם חוטא הקב"ה רושם עליו מיתה, עשה תשובה הכתב מתבטל, לא עשה תשובה הרשום בכתב אמת. אף [כאן] כתוב אחד אומר "ישא ה' פניו וגו'" (במדבר ו כו), וכתוב אחד אומר "אשר לא ישא פנים" (דברים י יז). אם ישא למה לא ישא? אלא לאומות העולם "אשר לא ישא פנים" אבל לישראל "ישא ה' פניו אליך." אמר הקב"ה: כשם שישראל נושאים לי פנים, כך אשא להם פנים. והיאך נושאים לי פנים? אדם מישראל עני יש לו ד' בנים, הוא נוטל ככר אחד, הם יושבים ואוכלים כל אותו ככר, ואינן שבעין ממה שיש בו, ומברכין ואומרין "ואכלת ושבעת [וברכת]." אף אני אשא להם פנים, "ישא ה' פניו אליך," לכך נאמר "וזאת תורת זבח השלמים."

"And this is the instruction for the sacrifice of well-being" (Lev. 7:11). When they would offer the sacrifice of well-being, God would lift up His face to them, as it is said, "May Adonai lift up His face to you and grant you peace" (Num. 6:26). Is it possible that God lifts up his face to [His] creatures? Two verses contradict one another: it is written in one place, "[It is not] the death of the wicked I desire [but that the wicked one turns from his ways and lives]" (Ezek. 33:11). It is written in another place, "For Adonai desired their deaths" (I Sam.

2:25). How is it that He does not desire the death of the wicked? Rather, before the decree for their judgment is sealed, He does not desire [their deaths], but after the decree of judgment is sealed, Adonai desires their death. And so Daniel says, "But I will tell you what is recorded in the book of truth" (Dan. 10:21). Our rabbis said: there was a deed of our holy rabbi [Yehudah haNasi] that as he passed by Simonia, all of the city's inhabitants came out to greet him and asked from him an elder to teach [them] Torah. He gave to them R. Levi bar Simon [corrected from "Sison"]. They said to him, "Our rabbi, why is it written in Daniel, 'But I will tell you what is recorded in the book of truth?' Is there a false word in the Torah that he says [here specifically] 'truth?'" He [R. Levi bar Simon] could not find an answer for them. Immediately he went out [from there and came] before Rabbi and said to him, "I could not stand before them. They asked me one thing and I didn't know what to answer them." He said to him, "What was the thing?" He said to him, "'But I will tell you what is recorded in the book of truth.' Is there then a false word in the Torah?" He said to him, "You had a great answer to give them. You could have said to them, 'Man sins and God records him for death, [but when] he repents, the record is annulled; [if] he does not repent, it is recorded in the book of truth." Here, too, in one place it is written, "Adonai lifts up His face, etc." (Num. 6:26), and in another place it is written, "who does not lift up His face" (Deut. 10:17). If He lifts up why does He not lift up? Rather, to the nations of the world "He does not lift up His face," but to Israel, "Adonai lifts up His face unto you." God said, "Just as Israel lifts up their faces to Me, so too do I lift up My face to them." And how do they lift up their faces to Me? A poor Israelite has four sons and one loaf of bread. They sit and all eat that loaf and they are not satisfied with what they have, but they bless and say, "And you shall eat and be sated [and bless]." I too lift up My face to them, "Adonai lifts up His face unto you." And thus it is said, "This is the instruction for the sacrifice of well-being" (Midrash Tanhuma, *Parashat Tzav*, *Siman* 7).

The first difficulty we encounter is what it means for God to "lift up His face" to His creatures. In this case it is clearly a positive act, since it is in response to the sacrifice of well-being and the prooftext is from the Priestly Blessing. On the other hand, in Deuteronomy, God is described as He "who does not lift up [His] face," which is paralleled with "or take any bribe" (10:17); thus "נשא פנים" is usually translated as "show favor," which can be both positive and negative depending on the context.

It is interesting to note that the discussion of whether and when God lifts up His face comes much later in the midrash. The author asks, "Is it possible for God to lift up

His face to His creatures?" but the two contradictory prooftexts do not answer the question. Instead, they address the issue of whether God desires the death of the wicked or not. The solution to the apparent contradiction is similar to the Adonai/Elohim dichotomy: before the judgment of death is sealed, God still hopes the sinner will repent and avoid death, but after the judgment is sealed, teshuvah is no longer an option. Furthermore, God is not saddened by the punishment He must inflict on the sinner, but actually desires, or delights in, the sinner's death. One might argue that God is pleased to be upholding justice by killing the unrepentant, but this image of God is still quite troubling.

Stranger still, the midrash continues to digress even further from its starting point. The distinguishing between before and after the sealing of judgment leads to an obscure verse from Daniel, "But I will tell you what is recorded in the book of truth" (Dan. 10:21). The related story of Rabbi and R. Levi bar Simon leads us into more familiar territory. When R. Levi bar Simon returns to Rabbi and tells him of his failure to answer the people's question, Rabbi says, "You had a great answer," a "תשובה גדולה" to give to them. This play on the word "teshuvah" as "response" hints at Rabbi's interpretation of the verse as referring to repentance. His word choice also alludes to the greatness of repentance, a common rabbinic trope, as we have seen. Thus R. Levi bar Simon could have told the people that so great is the power of teshuvah, it can actually make some of God's words false, like the overturned decree after repentance, and others true, like the death sentence for the unrepentant. R. Levi bar Simon has missed an opportunity, just as a sinner who does not repent before the decree is sealed has.

The midrash now returns to the original topic of God lifting up His face to His creation, which has been made analogous to annulling a decree of judgment. The contradictory verses are reconciled by the explanation that God lifts up His face to Israel, but not to the other nations. As we have seen before, the rabbis continue to grapple with the question of whether repentance is possible for everyone or just for Israel. It is worth noting that this interpretation of the two verses is not supported by any other evidence or prooftexts, but appears to be the statement of a common rabbinic notion that needs no proof. The assertion is not proved, but it is not refuted either. Instead, we hear God's own explanation, that He lifts up his face to Israel because Israel lifts up its face to God. This may be a further explanation of the previous opinion, that God only shows favor to Israel because Israel is the only nation to show favor to God. Now we see that the ambiguous connotation of lifting up one's face is quite appropriate. When God accepts teshuvah and annuls the death decree, He is like a judge who shows favor to one side over the other, disrupting the justice system. The analogy is even more fitting when God Himself explains that He lifts up His face in response to people lifting up their faces to Him. The story of the poor, hungry family who nevertheless bless God by reciting Birkat HaMazon demonstrate the reciprocal act. The people lift up their faces away from their empty plates and stomachs and pretend that God has fed and sated them; likewise, God lifts up His face to His creatures. At the beginning of the midrash, God lifts up His face in response to the Israelites' sacrifice of well-being. By the end, the poor family sits at a table, a symbolic substitute for the altar after the Temple is destroyed, and eat their small meal, just as the *shelamim* sacrifice would have been eaten at a communal meal after giving the priest his portion (Lev. 7:15, Deut. 12:18). Ironically, the poor family's

insufficient meal is anything but a symbol of well-being or a celebration of God's providing for them. Nevertheless, the family acts as if God has provided enough for them by reciting the Grace after Meals. Presumably, this act of grace (literally) moves God to reciprocate. God shows favor and, in a sense, takes bribes, among them repentance, blessings, and sacrifices.

Throughout the midrash, the assumption is that God should be an impartial upholder of justice and fairness. The author asks incredulously, "Is it possible that God lifts up His face to his creatures?" and "How is it that He does not desire the death of the wicked?" Even though these are rhetorical questions meant to highlight how extraordinary God's mercy is, the midrashist maintains that it is not absolute. In addition to time limits, whether it be before the judgment has been sealed or before God has taken on the aspect of Elohim, God also expects certain human behavior before He will pardon. Like the blessings and sacrifices from His people, repentance is the "bribe" that prompts God to show favor and forgive. The notion that God might also need people to show Him favor, particularly by overlooking His apparent failings, is quite radical. As in the midrashim discussed above, the rabbis do not shy away from picturing a God who does not have complete control over the process of teshuvah or over even His own attitude. God can be affected by human behavior.

Until this point, the homiletical midrashim have laid out how teshuvah works by a balance between divine and human action. God may cajole, threaten, or punish people into repenting, but they must still make the turn towards God. God is ever-ready to pardon, accepting even the briefest thought of teshuvah. In this chapter, however, we saw how the rabbis expressed their discomfort with the concept of a system that is all

mercy and no justice. As we might have anticipated, the rabbis restrict teshuvah through time limits or numbers of chances. What is more surprising are the ways in which the rabbis further check the great strength of teshuvah by blurring the lines between human and divine will. God infringes on Pharaoh's free will to prevent him from doing teshuvah because God would be bound to accept it. On the other hand, the rabbis urge people to repent while God is operating under the attribute of mercy because He will not be able to accept their teshuvah when He moves to the attribute of judgment. And finally, human beings' actions influence not only God's judgment of them, but also God's attitude toward them. Even in its limitations, teshuvah is the bridge that connects God and people and allows them to change and be changed by each other.

Conclusions

One of the most striking characteristics of the rabbis' treatment of teshuvah is the ubiquity of contradiction. Even considering the number of centuries over which these midrashim were composed and the number of different authors who wrote them, this literature demonstrates the rabbinic mind's great capacity for cognitive dissonance. God is both Adonai and Elohim, infinitely merciful and absolutely just. God is transcendent and omnipotent, but can be swayed by a human being's mere intention. Teshuvah is both an integral part of God's ordered world and a complete disruption of it. And, paradox of paradoxes, God is obligated to bestow His grace on us by accepting our teshuvah.

And yet, in spite of the rabbis' certainty that because of the power of teshuvah, reconciliation with God is all but assured, the depth and breadth of their discourse about the process reveal their concern and perhaps anxiety about whether such a turning back will take place. It must be harder than it looks. It is interesting to consider what the rabbis did not discuss, most significantly, teshuvah between one person and another. The rabbis clearly believed that repentance should be undertaken and that pardons should be exchanged between people; all of the comparisons of how a person reacts to repentance and how God reacts testify to that fact. Nevertheless, by only treating the subject tacitly, the rabbis seem to take it for granted that people know how and are able to reconcile with each other. The primary issue at stake for them is the human-divine relationship. This covenant is not marred just by idolatry or ritual "sins against God." As Petuchowski explains,

> man sins against God not only when he transgresses the 'commandments between man and God' but also when he transgresses the 'commandments between man

> and his neighbor.' When I steal the apples in my neighbor's orchard, I have not only wronged my neighbor, but I have also rebelled against Him who said, 'Thou shalt not steal!' That is why, even after I have made restitution to my neighbor, I still have to clear my account with the Creator of the world.[28]

In other words, there is no such thing as a transgression that is only against another person. All sins are sins against God. The reconciliation between people will take care of itself; the neighbor whose apples I stole can demand compensation. Therefore, the rabbis focus their attention on the part that cannot be settled in a human court, the inner transformation necessary to do teshuvah before God.

Today, we often put the emphasis on the opposite piece of repentance. The adage, "For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another" is becoming, if it has not already become, a cliche. Naturally, we need this reminder at least once a year because confessing and apologizing for wrongs we have done to others can be quite painful and we might be glad to avoid it entirely. But the question of how and for what we, as liberal Jews today, should do teshuvah before God is less clear. I have been asked several times by friends and congregants what a "sin against God" is, and I have felt almost foolish when I have replied by giving the example of ritual obligations or when I have given an answer like Petuchowski's. Few Reform Jews believe that God cares whether we light Shabbat candles or not. As for transgressions against people, because of the influence of the prophetic ideal and, perhaps, Martin Buber, many people would say that apologizing to another person is the equivalent of repenting before God. I can hear these people saying,

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28. Petuchowski 176.

"What's God got to do with it?"

Return to God was so crucial to the rabbis because they believed in a God who rewards and punishes, either in this world or the next. The fear of punishment, of death or harsh judgment, appears in so many midrashim that it must have been seen as a powerful motivation for repentance. I wonder if these post-exilic writers saw themselves as currently being punished, even though they still lived in Eretz Yisrael, and therefore pleaded with their people to repent so that God could restore the Jews to their land. The dearth of midrashim that mention exile and the common focus on death rather than dispersion as punishment for wickedness do not support the notion that the midrashists saw themselves as such. However, we might still wonder why fear of divine punishment was so prevalent in these texts. Few Reform Jews today would admit to believing that God is intimately involved in rewarding and punishing us for our every good and bad deed, at least in the literal, obvious way represented in the Bible and midrash. I wonder what the urgency is for us, then, in the notion of repentance to God without direct reward and punishment.

I confess that I am not sure whether God cares if we light Shabbat candles or go to synagogue. These rituals have enough personal benefits for me to merit their continuation. Yet I am reminded of something my teacher Rachel Adler said once. She said, "I go to services because I hope to be touched by God. But also, because I have the sense that if I were not there, God would miss me." This lovely image is a powerful example to me of how I can both reject the idea that God punishes me for every mistake and still retain the idea that my behavior matters to God.

God misses us when we are not there, and sin is one way we take ourselves away.

My favorite midrash on the subject is the story of the prince who is a hundred days' journey from home. His father sends a message to him, saying,

"הלך מה שאתה יכול לפי כחך [ואני] בא אצלך [בשאר] הדרך."

"Walk as far as you can according to your strength, and I will come to you the rest of the way" (Pesikta Rabbati 44). The idea of God as a parent who misses Her children when they are not there is not only a moving metaphor for the relationship between God and humankind, but it also speaks to the issue of teshuvah today quite well.

The rabbis were clearly troubled by the consequence of having an all-merciful God, namely, the question of what happens to justice. Again, this may be a reflection of their post-exilic perspective; perhaps it was just too unbearable to think that God would never punish the nations for oppressing Israel, especially if they believed that God had already punished them by allowing the *hurban* to occur in the first place. The rabbis' solution, the separation of God's aspects of judgment and compassion into independent forces, does not satisfy me. I cannot believe in a God who is Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The midrashim, however, do point me toward another possibility. The texts that compare God to human beings often portray the people as more concerned with proportional retribution or restitution. God, unlike humans, is satisfied by repentance in private, by mere words as opposed to great gifts, by true remorse and little else. To be sure, these midrashim show humans to be petty and unforgiving while God is generous and tolerant. But they also tell us that if we demand justice for ourselves and for each other, God does not have to. No sinner need be punished by God if we make sure that we build a world in which righteousness is valued and injustice not tolerated. As for God, repenting actually

is an act of justice, in that it is an acknowledgment of what is right and wrong and restores the balance between human and divine will. And with regard to the unrepentant sinner, there is still no need for a time limit, no moment when the decree is sealed and God must inflict punishment, because the separation from God resulting from transgression is punishment enough. This may be cold comfort to those who suffer at the hands of people who still seem to prosper, but I find it more convincing than the notion that every illness or accident or trauma is divine retribution for our sins. It is enough for me to know that God cares what we do. Teshuvah, then, is what we do when it matters to us that God cares.

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