

Lesson 12 - Sin, Not in Heaven, Not Beyond the Sea

Sin

In the Torah sin is something more than a transaction in the soul, or even an act of wrongdoing narrowly conceived. It is an act in the wrong place. It disturbs the moral order of the world. The words for sin – *het* and *avera* – both have this significance. *Het* comes from the same verb as “to miss a target.” *Avera*, like the English word “transgression,” means “to cross a boundary, to enter forbidden territory, to be in a place one should not be.”

The deepest punishment for sin in the Torah is exile. Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden. Cain was condemned to be an eternal wanderer. Because a sin is an act in the wrong place, its consequence is that the one who performs it finds himself in the wrong place – in exile, meaning, not at home. Sin alienates; it distances us from God, and the result is that we are distanced from where we ought to be, where we belong. We become aliens, strangers. Repentance means the physical return to the land and the spiritual return to God.

Teshuva (Repentance) has its origin in the Temple and its sacrifices, specifically those brought for transgressions (sin offering, guilt offering, etc.). Part of the rite for such offerings was a verbal confession – *vidui* – on the part of the wrongdoer. The conditions for the sincerity of such confessions were (a) an acknowledgement that one did wrong, (b) remorse or shame, and (c) a determination not to repeat the offense in future. These are the fundamental elements of teshuva.

When an individual or group sinned in biblical times, they brought a sacrifice and, as a token of their contrition, confessed their wrong. The supreme example of this was the service of the high priest on Yom Kippur, when he made atonement “for himself, his household, and the whole community of Israel” (Lev. 16:17).

Sin and repentance are part of the broader sweep of Jewish history. They belong to the world not of the priest but of the prophet (Torat Nevi'im), the figure who heard the voice of God in history, warned the people that public wrongdoing would lead to defeat and exile, and who, when the exile eventually occurred, summoned the people back to their vocation as a prelude to their return to the land.

Teshuva in this sense is less atonement than homecoming – a subtle difference, but a difference nonetheless. It has nothing to do with the Temple and everything to do with a sense of the divine call (“Where are you?”) within the events that happen to us,

For the priest, teshuva is integrally linked with sacrifice. For the prophet, it is associated with behavioural change (teshuva as "returning" to the right way) and leads to healing and restoration. For the priest, atonement relates primarily to individuals, whereas for the prophet the reference is often to the people as a whole. It is individuals who sin and repent; it is the nation that undergoes exile and return.

So teshuva is two things: a religious-metaphysical experience of sin and atonement (Maimonides), and an ethical-historical drama of exile and return (Nahmanides).

Methodist Views on Sin

Methodist theology firstly distinguishes between original sin and actual sin:

Original sin is the sin which corrupts our nature and gives us the tendency to sin. Actual sins are the sins we commit every day before we are saved, such as lying, swearing, stealing.

It further categorizes sin as being "sin proper" and "sin improper". Sins proper are those that are committed freely and willfully, which result in a loss of entire sanctification. Sins improper are those in the "category of benign neglect, fruits of infirmity (forgetfulness, lack of knowledge, etc)". In traditional Methodist theology, these (improper) sins are not classified as sins, as explained by Wesley.

"Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God. Therefore, every voluntary breach of the law of love is sin; and nothing else. There may be ten thousand wandering thoughts, and forgetful intervals, without any breach of love, though not without transgressing the Adamic law. Let love fill your heart, and it is enough!"

Methodist theology teaches:

We believe that sin is the willful transgression of the known law of God, and that such sin condemns a soul to eternal punishment unless **pardoned by God through repentance, confession, restitution, and believing in Jesus Christ.**

Wesleyan-Arminian theology holds to the orthodox Christian doctrine of original sin.

"We believe that original sin, **or depravity**, is that corruption of the nature of all the offspring of Adam by reason of which everyone is very far gone from original righteousness or the pure state of our first parents at the time of their creation, is averse to God, is without spiritual life, and inclined to evil, and that continually. We further believe that original sin continues to exist with the new life of the regenerate, until the heart is fully cleansed by the baptism with the Holy Spirit."

"We believe that entire sanctification is that act of God, subsequent to regeneration, **by which believers are made free from original sin, or depravity, and brought into a state of entire devotement to God**, and the holy obedience of love made perfect. It is wrought by the baptism

with or infilling of the Holy Spirit, and comprehends in one experience the cleansing of the heart from sin and the abiding, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, empowering the believer for life and service."

Jesus On Forgiveness of Sin

Jesus' idea of the forgiveness of sins is best summarized in the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen

Not in Heaven, Not Beyond the Sea

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deut. 30:11–14)

At the simplest level Moses is telling the Israelites: Your religion is unlike the religion of others. It is not esoteric, difficult, beyond the comprehension of ordinary minds. It is not a religion of mysteries that need oracles, adepts, or religious virtuosi to decode. "The Torah speaks in the language of human beings," said the sages. This is fundamental.

Almost every culture has placed a premium on forms of knowledge available only to an elite. However, in Judaism, if something can be said, it can be said simply. God says about Moses: "**With him I speak face-to-face, clearly and not in riddles**" (Num. 12:8). Knowledge must be accessible if it is to be the common property of the people.

Knowledge is power; power confers privilege; therefore those who have knowledge will try to hide it from the masses. They will speak in such a way that they can only be understood by fellow

initiates, professional colleagues, or other members of the elite. Such a view, according to Judaism, must always be challenged. Knowledge – even divine knowledge – is “not in heaven” nor is it “beyond the sea.”

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Here *divine respect for human intelligence* reaches heights never surpassed. God empowers His children. He gives them His greatest gift: His will as encoded in His word. That is enough. The dialectic between *revelation* and *interpretation*, between “Torah from heaven” and “not in heaven,” is the endless conversation between Israel and God.

With this we return to the plain sense of the passage with which we began. The Torah is “not in heaven,” meaning that it is intelligible to all. Each member of the covenantal community has something to contribute to the totality of its meaning. As Maharsha (Rabbi Samuel Eliezer Edels, Moses sensed prophetically that in the future Jews would say that to find inspiration we have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea. It is anywhere but here. So it was for much of Israel’s history

Becoming Baal worshippers did not lead to Israelites being welcomed by the Canaanites. Becoming Hellenised did not endear Jews to either the Greeks or the Romans. Abandoning Judaism in the nineteenth century did not end anti-Semitism; it inflamed it. Hence the power of Moses’ insistence: to find truth, beauty, and spirituality, you do not have to go elsewhere. “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”

The result was that Jews enriched other cultures more than their own. Part of Mahler’s Eighth

The beauty of Jewish spirituality is precisely that in Judaism God is close. You do not need to climb a mountain or enter an ashram to find the Divine Presence. It is there around the table at a Shabbat meal, in the light of the candles and the simple holiness of the Kiddush wine and the *hallel*, in the praise of the *Eshet Hayil* and the blessing of children, in the peace of mind that comes when you leave the world to look after itself for a day while you celebrate the good things that come not from working but resting, not from buying but enjoying – the gifts you have had all along but did not have time to appreciate.

In Judaism, God is close. He is there in the poetry of the psalms, the greatest literature of the soul ever written. He is there listening in to our debates as we study a page of the Talmud or offer new interpretations of ancient texts. He is there in the joy of the festivals, the tears of Tisha B'Av, the echoes of the shofar of Rosh HaShana, and the contrition of Yom Kippur. He is there in the very air of the land of Israel and the stones of Jerusalem, where the oldest of the old and the newest of the new mingle together like close friends.

So thank Him every morning for the gift of life. Say the *Shema* twice daily for the gift of love. Join your voice to others in prayer so that His spirit may flow through you, giving you the strength and courage to change the world. When you cannot see Him, it is because you are looking in the wrong direction. When He seems absent, He is there just behind you, but you have to turn to meet Him.

Do not treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success. To find Him you do not have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life.