

The Metaphors of Sin and the Meaning of Mechila

Forgiveness & Atonement in Jewish Tradition: Philological & Philosophical Perspectives, Part II

Shlomo Zuckier

Drisha Institute

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Mechila in Liturgy

1. שמונה עשרה, סידור אשכנז

סלח לנו אבינו כי חטאנו **מוחל** לנו מלכנו כי פשענו כי **מוחל** וסולח אתה. ברוך אתה ה' חנון המרבה לסלוח.

1. Shemoneh Esrei, Ashkenazic Liturgy

“Forgive us father, for we have sinned... for you are well-forgiving... Blessed are you Lord, gracious one who forgives greatly,”

2. מסכתות קטנות מסכת סופרים פרק יט הלכה ד

ביום הכיפורים... והותם, **מוחל** וסולח לעוונותינו ולעונות עמו ישראל ברחמים ומכפר על פשעיהם מלך על כל הארץ מקדש ישראל ויום צום הכיפורים והזמנים ומקראי קודש

2. Tractate Soferim 19:4

On the Day of Atonement... one closes [the fourth blessing as follows: Blessed are you, O Lord, our God] forgoing and forgiving for our sins and for the sins of His nation Israel with mercy, and atoning for their violations, king of the whole earth, sanctifier of Israel and the day of the fast of atonement and the times and holy convocations.

3. סדר רב עמרם גאון (הרפנס) תפילת ערבית של ליל יום הכיפורים

כי אתה סולחן לישראל ו**מוחל** לשבטי ישורון ודברך אמת וקים לעד, ומבלעדיך אין לנו מלך **מוחל** וסולח אלא אתה. בא"י מלך **מוחל** וסולח לעוונותינו ולעונות עמו בית ישראל ומעביר אשמותינו בכל שנה ושנה, מלך על כל הארץ מקדש ישראל ויום הכפורים

3. Siddur Rav Amram Gaon (9th century), Evening Prayer for Yom Kippur

For you are a forgiver to Israel and a forgoer for the tribes of Jeshurun, and your word is truth and everlasting, and without You we have no forgoing and forgiving king, only You. Blessed are you, O Lord, a King forgoing and forgiving our sins and the sins of His nation the House of Israel, who passes on our guilt every year, king of the whole earth, sanctifier of Israel and the day of atonement.

The Metaphors of Sin and Its Resolution

4. Gary Anderson, Sin: A History, p. 5

In his seminal work *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur takes this point one step further. In his view, philosophers have no direct and unmediated access to the semantic content of ideas such as fault, sin, error, and their consequent rectification (that is, what we call “forgiveness”). All that stands at our disposal are metaphors that serve as building blocks for larger narrative complexes. To understand what a sin is, one must begin with the terminology deployed by a particular writer. Once one grasps the concrete nature of these metaphors, one can see how they are deployed in narratives.

Sin as a Stain

5. ירמיהו פרק ב

(כא) וְאַנְכִּי נְטַעְתִּיךָ שִׁרְיָק כְּלֵה גֵרַע אָמַת וְאִיֶּךָ נִהְפַּכְתָּ לִּי סוּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן וְנִכְרִיָּה:
(כב) כִּי אִם־תְּכַבְּסֵי בַּחֲמֶר וְתַרְבִּי־לֶךְ בְּרִית נִכְתָּם עֲוֹנֶךָ לְפָנָי גַּאֲם אֲדַגֵּי יִקְוֶה:
(כג) אִיֶּךָ תֹאמְרֵי לֹא נִטְמַאתִי אַחֲרֵי הַבְּעָלִים לֹא הִלַּכְתִּי רָאִי נִרְפָּד בְּאֵיָא דְעֵי מָה עֲשִׂית בְּכֶרֶה קִלְה מִשְׁרַכַּת דְּרַכִּיָּה:

5. Jeremiah 2:21-23

I planted you with noble vines, All with choicest seed; Alas, I find you changed Into a base, an alien vine!

Though you wash with natron And use much lye, Your guilt is ingrained before Me —declares the Lord God.

How can you say, “I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baalim”? Look at your deeds in the Valley, Consider what you have done! Like a lustful she-camel, Restlessly running about,

6. תלמוד בבלי מסכת יבמות דף קה עמוד א

אמר רב שמואל בר אבונא אמר רב: מנין לגזר דין של צבור שאינו נחתם? אינו נחתם? והא כתיב כי אם תכבסי בנתר ותרבי לך בורית נחתם עונך לפני! אלא, מנין שאפי' נחתם מתקרע? שנאמר: מי כה' אלהינו בכל קראנו אליו.

6. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot, 105a

Rav Shmuel bar Onia said in the name of Rav: How do we know that a communal decree is not sealed? It's not sealed? But it says “even if you wash with natron and use much lye, your guilt is ingrained before me” (Jer. 2:22) ?! Rather, how do we know that even if it is sealed that it can be ripped up? As it says, “Who is like the Lord our God every time we call Him?” (Deut. 4:7).

Cleansing or Wiping Away Sin

7. תהלים פרק נא

(ג) תַּגְנִי אֱלֹהִים כְּחֶסֶדְךָ כָּרֵב רַחֲמֶיךָ מִתְּהַ מִפְּשָׁעַי:
(ד) הַרְבֵּה הָרַב כְּפָסְגִי מֵעֲוֹנֵי וּמִחַטָּאתַי טְהַרְנִי:

7. Psalms 51:3-4

Have mercy upon me, O God, as befits Your faithfulness; in keeping with Your abundant compassion, blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify me of my sin;

8. ירמיהו פרק יח

(כג) וְאַתָּה יְיָ קִנְוֶה נִרְעַת אֶת־כָּל־עֲצָתָם עָלַי לְמִנְת אֶל־תִּכְפֹּר עַל־עֲוֹנָם וְחַטָּאתָם מִלִּפְנֵיךָ אֵל־תִּמְחֵי וְהָיוּ וְיִהְיוּ מְכַשְׁלִים לְפָנֶיךָ בְּעַת אַפְּךָ עֲשֵׂה כְהֵם:

8. Jeremiah 18:23

O Lord, You know All their plots to kill me. Do not pardon their iniquity, Do not blot out their guilt from Your presence. Let them be made to stumble before You— Act against them in Your hour of wrath!

9. Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus, I.1098

"Atoned" or "expiated" is the customary translation for kipper, but in most cases this is incorrect. In biblical poetry its parallel synonym is usually *maha* 'wipe' (Jer 18:23) or *hesir* 'remove' (Isa

27:9), suggesting that kipper means "purge." Ritual texts also support this meaning, for they regularly couple kipper with *tihar* 'purify' and *hitte* 'decontaminate' (Lev 14:48, 52, 58).

10. שמואל ב פרק יב

(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־נָתָן חַטָּאתִי לִיקָנָה ס וַיֹּאמֶר נָתָן אֶל־דָּוִד גַּם־יִקָּנָה הַעֲבִיר חַטָּאתְךָ לֹא תָמוּת:

10.2 Samuel 12:13

David said to Nathan, "I stand guilty before the Lord!" And Nathan replied to David, "The Lord has removed your sin; you shall not die.

11. זכריה פרק ג

(א) וַיֵּרְאֵנִי אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי מַלְאָךְ יְקֹנָה וְהַשֹּׁטֵן עֹמֵד עַל־יְמִינוֹ לְשֹׁטְנוֹ:
(ב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹנָה אֶל־הַשֹּׁטֵן יַגְעֹר יְקֹנָה בָּךְ הַשֹּׁטֵן וַיַּגְעֹר יְקֹנָה בָּךְ הַבַּחַר בִּירוּשָׁלַם הַלֹּא נָגַה אוֹד מִצַּל מֵאִשׁ:
(ג) וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ הִגִּיה לְבָשׁ בְּגָדִים צוּאִים וְעֹמֵד לִפְנֵי הַמַּלְאָךְ:
(ד) וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הַעֲמֻדִים לִפְנֵי לֹאמֵר הִסְרִוּ הַבְּגָדִים הַצּוּאִים מֵעַלְיֹו וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו רְאֵה הַעֲבָרְתִּי מֵעַלְיֹו עֹנֵה וְהַלְבַּשׁ אֹתָךְ מִתְּלָצוֹת:
(ה) וַיֹּאמֶר יְשִׁימוּ צִנְיָף טָהוֹר עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ וַיְשִׁימוּ הַצִּנְיָף הַטָּהוֹר עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ וַיַּלְבִּשֻׁהוּ בְּגָדִים וּמַלְאָךְ יְקֹנָה עֹמֵד:

11. Zecharia 3:1-5

He further showed me Joshua, the high priest, standing before the angel of the Lord, and the Satan standing at his right to accuse him. But [the angel of] the Lord said to the Accuser, "The Lord rebuke you, O Accuser; may the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! For this is a brand plucked from the fire. Now Joshua was clothed in filthy garments when he stood before the angel. The latter spoke up and said to his attendants, "Take the filthy garments off him!" And he said to him, "See, I have removed your guilt from you, and you shall be clothed in [priestly] robes." Then he (lit., I) gave the order, "Let a pure diadem be placed on his head." And they placed the pure diadem on his head and clothed him in [priestly] garments, as the angel of the Lord stood by.

12. ישעיהו פרק מד

(כא) זָכַר־אֱלֹהִים יַעֲלֵב וַיִּשְׁרָאֵל כִּי עֲבַד־יִי־אֶתְּהָ וַיִּצְרַתִּיךָ עֲבָד־לִי אֶתְּהָ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא תִנְשָׁנִי:
(כב) מִחִיתִי כַעֲב פִּשְׁעֶיךָ וְכַעֲנָן חַטָּאוֹתֶיךָ שׁוֹבֵה אֵלַי כִּי גֹאֲלֶתֶיךָ:

12. Isaiah 44:21-22

Remember these things, O Jacob For you, O Israel, are My servant: I fashioned you, you are My servant— O Israel, never forget Me. I wipe away your sins like a cloud, Your transgressions like mist— Come back to Me, for I redeem you.

Sin as a Burden

13. ויקרא פרק ה פסוק א

(א) וַיִּגְפַשׂ כִּי־תִחַטָּא וְשָׁמַעְהָ קוֹל אֱלֹהִים וְהוּא לֹד אוֹ רָאָה אוֹ יָדַע אִם־לֹא יִגִּיד וְנִשָּׂא עֹנֵהוּ:

13. Leviticus 5:1

If a person sins, as he has heard a public imprecation, and—although able to testify as one who has either seen or learned of the matter—if he does not give information, he bears his sin.

14. ויקרא פרק יז

(ט) וְכֹל־נֶפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכַל נְבֵלָה וְיִטְרְפָהּ בְּאֲזָרָהּ וּבְגָדָהּ וּכְבֹס וּבְגָדָיו וְרִתֵּץ בְּמַיִם וְטָמְא עַד־הָעֶרֶב וְטָהַר:
(טז) וְאִם לֹא יִכְבֹּס וּבִשְׂרוֹ לֹא יִרְחֹץ וּנְשָׂא עֲוֹנוֹ:

14. Leviticus 17:15-16

Any person, whether citizen or stranger, who eats what has died or has been torn by beasts shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he shall be clean. But if he does not wash [his clothes] and bathe his body, he shall bear his sin.

15. ישעיהו פרק א

(ב) שָׁמְעוּ שָׁמַיִם וְהִאֲזִינִי אָרֶץ כִּי יִקְרָא דְבַר בְּנִיִּים גְּדֹלְתִי וְרוֹמְמֹתִי וְהֵם פָּשְׁעוּ בִּי:
(ג) גִּדְעוּ שׁוֹר קִנְיָהּ וְחִמְרוּ אֲבוֹס בְּעַלְיוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַע עַמִּי לֹא הִתְבוּנָה:
(ד) הֲוִינָה גְוִי חֹטֵא עִם כְּבֹד עֲוֹן וְרַע מְרַעִים בְּנִיִּים מִשְׁחִיתִים עֲוֹבוֹ אֶת־יְקִיָּהּ וְאַצּוֹ אֶת־קִדּוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל נִזְרוּ אֲחֹזֵר:

15. Isaiah 2:2-4

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, For the Lord has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up— And they have rebelled against Me!

An ox knows its owner, An ass its master’s crib: Israel does not know, My people takes no thought.”

Ah, sinful nation! **People heavily burdened with iniquity!** Brood of evildoers! Depraved children! They have forsaken the Lord, Spurned the Holy One of Israel, Turned their backs [on Him].

16. בראשית פרק ז

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר קִינוּ אֶל־הַבָּיִת אֲחִיו וַיְהִי בִּהְיוֹתָם בְּשׂוֹדָהּ וַיִּקַּם קִינוּ אֶל־הַבָּיִת אֲחִיו וַיְהַרְגֵהוּ:
(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר יְקִיָּהוּ אֶל־קִינוּ אִי הַבָּיִת אֲחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הַשֹּׁמֵר אֲחִי אֲנִכִּי:
(י) וַיֹּאמֶר מַה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אֲחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן־הָאֲדָמָה:
(יא) וַעֲתָה אֲרוּר אַתָּה מִן־הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת־פִּיהָ לְקַחַת אֶת־דַּמִּי אֲחִיךָ מִיָּדְךָ:
(יב) כִּי תַעֲבֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה לֹא־תִסְרַף תִּת־פִּתְיָהּ לָךְ גֵּעַ וְגַד תִּהְיֶה בְּאָרְצְךָ:
(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר קִינוּ אֶל־יְקִיָּהוּ גְדוֹל עֲוֹנֵי מִנְּשָׂא:
(יד) הֵן גְּרִשְׁתָּ אֹתִי הַיּוֹם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וּמִפְּנֵיךָ אֶסְתַּר וְהָיִיתִי גֵעַ וְגַד בְּאָרְצְךָ וְהָיָה כָּל־מִצְאֵי יַהֲרֹגֵנִי:

16. Genesis 4:8-14

Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.

The Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Then He said, “What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!

Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.

If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.”

Cain said to the Lord, “**My punishment is too great to bear!**

Since You have banished me this day from the soil, and I must avoid Your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth—anyone who meets me may kill me!”

Unloading the Burden of Sin

17. שמות פרק י

(ט) וַיִּמְהַר פַּרְעֹה לְקַרְאֵה לְמֹשֶׁה וְלֵאמֹר וְיָאמֶר הֲטָאֵתִי לִיקְנוֹךְ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְלָכֶם:
(יז) וַעֲתָה שָׂא נָא חַטָּאתִי אֵץ הַפֶּעַם וְהַעֲתִירוּ לִיקְנוֹךְ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וַיִּסַּר מֵעָלַי רַק אֶת־הַמָּוֶת הַזֶּה:

17. Exodus 10:16-17

Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “I stand guilty before the Lord your God and before you.

Lift my sin just this once, and plead with the Lord your God that He but remove this death from me.”

18. שמות פרק כה

(לו) וַעֲשִׂיתָ צִיץ זָהָב טְהוֹר וּפְתִיחַתָּ עָלָיו פְּתִיחַתִּי חֹתָם קָדֵשׁ לִיקְנוֹךְ:
(לז) וְשָׂמֶתָ אֹתוֹ עַל־פִּתְיֵל תְּכֵלֶת וְהָיָה עַל־הַמְצַנְנֹת אֶל־מוֹל פְּגִי־הַמְצַנְנֹת יְהִיָּה:
(לח) וְהָיָה עַל־מִצְחֹ אַהֲרֹן וְנִשְׂא אַהֲרֹן אֶת־עֲוֹן הַקְּדוֹשִׁים אֲשֶׁר יִקְדִּישׁוּ בְּגִי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכָל־מִתְנַת קִדְשֵׁיהֶם וְהָיָה עַל־מִצְחוֹ תָמִיד לְרַצּוֹן לָהֶם לִפְנֵי יְקֻנוֹךְ:

18. Exodus 28:36-38

You shall make a frontlet of pure gold and engrave on it the seal inscription: “Holy to the Lord.” Suspend it on a cord of blue, so that it may remain on the headdress; it shall remain on the front of the headdress.

It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, that Aaron may take away any sin arising from the holy things that the Israelites consecrate, from any of their sacred donations; it shall be on his forehead at all times, to win acceptance for them before the Lord.

19. Gary Anderson, Sin: A History, p. 18

In a context of mercy, *nas’a* takes on the extended meaning of “forgive,” whereas *a’won* retains its primary meaning of “sin.” But in the context of punishment (nos. 1 and 2) the verb retains its original meaning “to bear, carry,” whereas the noun *a’won* assumes its secondary meaning of “punishment.” The mixture of primary and secondary meanings in each idiom appears arbitrary. It is an odd way to explain the growth of an idiom. Schwartz’s solution to these inconcinnities is as brilliant as it is ordinary. In his opinion everything depends on attention to how the verb *nas’a* functions in conventional discourse. A casual inspection of a Hebrew lexicon shows that the verb can mean both [A] “to carry [a burden]” and [B] “to remove [a burden].”

Sending Away Sin

20. מיכה פרק ז

(יה) מִי־אֵל כְּמוֹךָ נִשְׂא עוֹן וְעָבַר עַל־פְּשָׁע לְשֹׂאֲרֵית נִחַלְתּוֹ לֹא־הִתְזַיֵּק לְעַד אָפוּ כִּי־תִפְצַח תְּסֻד הוּא:
(יט) יָשׁוּב יִרְחַמְנוּ וְיִכַּבֵּשׁ עוֹנֵתֵינוּ וְתִשְׁלִיךְ בַּמַּצְלוֹת יָם פְּלִי־חַטָּאוֹתָם:
(כ) תִּתֵּן אָמַת לְיַעֲקֹב תְּסֻד לְאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׂבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתָּינוּ מִיְמֵי קְדָם:

20. Micah 7:18-19

Who is a God like You, Forgiving iniquity And remitting transgression; Who has not maintained His wrath forever Against the remnant of His own people, Because He loves graciousness!

He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, **You will hurl all our [lit. their] sins Into the depths of the sea.**

You will keep faith with Jacob, Loyalty to Abraham, As You promised on oath to our fathers
In days gone by.

21. ויקרא פרק טז

- (כ) וכלה מפפר את-הקדש ואת-אהל מועד ואת-המזבח והקריב את-השעיר הקי:
(כא) וסמך אהרן את-שתי ידו על ראש השעיר החי והתנדב עליו את-כל-עונת בני ישראל ואת-כל-פשעיהם לכל-
חטאתם ונתן אתם על-ראש השעיר ושלח ביד-איש עתי המדבר:
(כב) ונשא השעיר עליו את-כל-עונתם אל-ארץ גזרה ושלח את-השעיר במדבר:

21. Leviticus 16:20-22

When he has finished purging the Shrine, the Tent of Meeting, and the altar, the live goat shall be brought forward.

Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man.

Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

Sin as Debt and Paying for Sin

22. ישעיהו פרק מ

- (א) נחמו נחמו עמי יאמר אליהם:
(ב) דברו על-לב ירושלם וקראו אליה כי מלאה צבאה כי נרצה עונתה כי לקחה מינד יקנה כפלים בכל-חטאתיה:

22. Isaiah 40:1-2

Comfort, oh comfort My people, Says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and declare to her that her term of service is over, That her iniquity is expiated; For she has received at the hand of the Lord double for all her sins.

23. ויקרא פרק כו

- (לב) ונהשמתי אני את-הארץ ושממו עליה איביכם הישבים בה:
(לג) ואתכם אגזרה בגוים וקריאתי אתריכם תרוב והיתה ארצכם שממה ועריכם יהיו חרבה:
(לד) אז תרצה הארץ את-שבתיה כל ימי השמה ואתם בארץ איביכם אז תשבת הארץ והרצת את-שבתיה:
(לה) כל-ימי השמה תשבת את אשר לא-שבתה בשבתתיכם בשבתתם עליה:
(לו) והנשארים בכם והבאתי מרחו בלבכם בארצת איביהם ורצה אתם קול עליה נדף ונסו מגסת-חרב ונפלו ואין רצה:
(לז) וכשלו איש-באטתי כמפני-חרב ורצה אין ולא-תהיה לכם תקומה לפני איביכם:
(לח) ובאדתם בגוים ואכלה אתכם ארץ איביכם:
(לט) והנשארים בכם ימלו בעונם בארצת איביכם ואף בעונת אבתם אתם ימקו:
(מ) והתנדו את-עונם ואת-עון אבתם במעלם אשר מעלוי-כי ולא אשר-הקלו עמי בקרי:
(מא) אף-אני אלו עמם בקרי והבאתי אתם בארץ איביהם או-אז יכנע לבכם הערל ואז ירצו את-עונם:
(מב) ונכרתתי את-בריתי יעקוב ואף את-בריתי יצחק ואף את-בריתי אברהם אזכר והארץ אזכר:
(מג) והארץ תעזב מהם ותריץ את-שבתיה בהשמה מהם והם ירצו את-עונם יעזו ויכנעו במשפט מאסו ואת-חקתי געלה נפשם:
(מד) ואף-גם-זאת בהיותם בארץ איביהם לא-מאסתים ולא-געלתים לכלתם להפר בריתי אתם כי אני יקנה אליהם:

23. Leviticus 26

I will make the land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled by it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheath the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin.

Then shall the land make up for its sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years.

Throughout the time that it is desolate, it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your sabbath years while you were dwelling upon it.

As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues.

With no one pursuing, they shall stumble over one another as before the sword. You shall not be able to stand your ground before your enemies,

but shall perish among the nations; and the land of your enemies shall consume you.

Those of you who survive shall be heartsick over their iniquity in the land of your enemies;

more, they shall be heartsick over the iniquities of their fathers;

and they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, in that they trespassed against Me, yea, were hostile to Me.

When I, in turn, have been hostile to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their obdurate heart humble itself, and they shall atone for their iniquity.

Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land.

For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws.

Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God.

24. Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History*, p. 8-9

As Baruch Schwartz has noted in rabbinic texts, “The sinner is called *h`ayyab*, or ‘obligated,’ because he must repay his debt [*h`ob*]. The one who owes [*h`ayyab*] a sin-offering or a reparation offering must pay with the respective form of sacrifice; the one who owes a beating must pay with a lashing of his body; the one who owes death must pay with his life; and the one who owes the penalty of extirpation [*karet*] must pay after his death.”...

Once it becomes a commonplace to think of sin as debt, the idea that virtuous activity generates a credit appears. The very idiom of rabbinic Hebrew supports this, because the antonym for the term *h`ob* (debt) is *zekut* (credit).

25. דניאל פרק ד

(כד) לָהֶן מִלְפָּא מִלְכֵי יִשְׁפָר עֲלֵיךְ וְחִטִּיךְ נִחְטָאָךְ בְּצַדִּיקָה פְּרִיק וְעִוְוֹתֵךְ בְּמִתָּן עֲגִינֵן הֵן תִּתְּנָא אַרְכָּה לְשִׁלְחֵךְ:

25. Daniel 4:24

Therefore, O king, may my advice be acceptable to you: Redeem your sins by charity and your iniquities by generosity to the poor; then your serenity may be extended.”

Mixing metaphors

26. במדבר פרק ה

(לא) וְנָקָה הָאִישׁ מֵעֲוֹנוֹ וְהָאִשָּׁה הִיא תִשָּׂא אֶת-עֲוֹנָהּ:

26. Numbers 5:31

The man shall be clean of violation; but that woman shall bear her sin.

27. הושע פרק יד

(ב) שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד יִקְנֶה אֱלֹהִים כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְעֲוֹנֶךָ:
(ג) קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֶל-יְקֻנֶּה אֱמָרוּ אֵלָיו כִּלְ-תִשָּׂא עֲוֹן וְקַח-טוֹב וְנִשְׁלַמְתָּ פְרִים שְׁפִתֵינוּ:
(ד) אֲשׁוּרוּ לֹא יוֹשִׁיעֵנו עַל-סוֹס לֹא נִרְכָּב וְלֹא-נֶאֱמַר עוֹד אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר-בָּהּ יִרְתָּם יְהוָה:
(ה) אֲרַפָּא מִשׁוֹבְתָם אֲהַבֵּם נִדְבָה כִּי יָשָׁב אִפִּי מִמֶּנּוּ:
(ו) אֲהַיָּה כַטֵּל לְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִפְרַח פְּשׁוּשָׁה וְגַד שָׁרְשֵׁי פִלְבָּנוּ:
(ז) יִלְכֹּד יְנַקּוּתָיו וַיְהִי כַזֵּית הַדֶּדֶי וְגֵיתָ לּוֹ פִלְבָּנוּ:
(ח) יִשָּׁבוּ יִשְׁבֵי בְצֵלוֹ יִסְוֵי דָגָו וַיִּפְרְתּוּ כַגִּפְזוֹ זָכְרוּ כִינּוּ לְבָנוּ:

27. Hosea 14:2-8

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, For you have fallen because of your sin.

Take words with you And return to the Lord. Say to Him: “Remove all sin And accept what is good; Instead of bulls we will pay [The offering of] our lips.

Assyria shall not save us, No more will we ride on steeds; Nor ever again will we call Our handiwork our god, Since in You alone orphans find pity!”

I will heal their backsliding, Generously will I take them back in love; For My anger has turned away from them (lit., him).

I will be to Israel like dew; He shall blossom like the lily, He shall strike root like a Lebanon tree.

His boughs shall spread out far, His beauty shall be like the olive tree’s, His fragrance like that of Lebanon.

They who sit in his shade shall be revived: They shall bring to life new grain, They shall blossom like the vine; His scent shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

28. תהלים פרק לב

(א) לְדָוִד מִשְׁכִּיל אֲשֶׁרִי נִשְׁוִי-פִשְׁעֵי כִסְוֵי תַטְאָה:
(ב) אֲשֶׁרִי אֲדָם לֹא יִחַשֵׁב יִקְנֶה לּוֹ עֲוֹן וְאִין בְּרוּחַו רַמְיָהּ:

28. Psalms 32:1-2

Of David, a maskil.

Happy is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered over.

Happy the man whom the Lord does not hold guilty, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

The Meaning of Mechila

29. Gary Anderson, Sin: A History, p. 27-8

In Aramaic the word for a debt that one owes a lender, *h'oba*, is the standard term for denoting sin. This term comes into Second Temple Hebrew and has the same double meaning. The idea of sin as a weight is rarely found in rabbinic Hebrew, having been replaced by the idea of sin as a

debt. One can clearly see this transformation by examining how the various Aramaic translations of the biblical text (Targums) treat the phrase *nas'a a'won*. In almost every instance where *nas'a a'won* means “to bear the weight of a sin,” we find the Aramaic idiom *qabbal h'oba*, “to assume a debt.”

30. Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History*, p. 28

Conversely, everywhere we find *nas'a a'won* with the meaning “to bear away a sin,” we find the Aramaic idiom *s'baq h'oba*, “to remit a debt.” Like its English equivalent, the Aramaic verb denotes an individual who refrains from collecting on an obligation or payment that is due him. As such it connotes a gracious deed in that a right holder graciously waives his right to collect what is due.

31. ויקרא פרק ה פסוק א

(א) וּנְגַשׁ כִּי־תִטָּא וְשָׁמְעָה קוֹל אֱלֹהִים וְהוּא לֹד אוֹ רָאָה אוֹ יָדַע אִם־לֹא יִגִּיד וְנִשְׂא עוֹנָו:

31. Leviticus 5:1

If a person sins, as he has heard a public imprecation, *namely, against one who withholds testimony*. and—although able to testify as one who has either seen or learned of the matter—if he does not give information, he bears his sin

32. תרגום אונקלוס ויקרא פרק ה פסוק א

(א) ואנש ארי יחוב וישמע קל מומי והוא סהיד או חזא או ידע אם לא יחוי ויקביל חוביה:

32. Translation of Onqelos, Leviticus 5:1

If a person is guilty, as he has heard a public imprecation, and—although able to testify as one who has either seen or learned of the matter—if he does not give information, he receives his guilt.

33. בראשית פרק נ

(יז) כִּהְתְּאֲמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנָא שָׂא נָא פִּשְׁעֵי אַחֵיךָ וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי־רָעָה גַמְלוּךָ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לְפִשְׁעֵי עַבְדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ בְּיַד יוֹסֵף כְּדַבְּרָם אֵלָיו:

33. Genesis 50:17

So shall you say to Joseph, ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and sin of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

34. תרגום אונקלוס בראשית פרק נ פסוק יז

(יז) כדין תימרון ליוסף בבעו שבוק כען לחובי אחך ולחטאיהון ארי בשתא גמלוך וכען שבוק כען לחובי עבדי אלהא דאבוך ובכא יוסף במללתהון עמיה:

34. Translation of Onqelos, Genesis 50:17

So shall you say to Joseph, ‘Please forgive, the guilt and sin of your brothers who treated you harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the guilt of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

35. Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History*, p. 28

This linguistic move is not simply that of the Aramaic Targum; it is equally well grounded in rabbinic Hebrew. In the Mishnah one who is at fault is said to be *h'ayyab*, that is, in possession of a particular *h'ob*, or debt, that must be repaid.

36. Gary Anderson, Sin: A History, p 29-31

Let us consider four representative examples: (1) the payment of a bill [*para hov, puranut*], (2) the act of collecting payment [*gavah*], (3) the state of being indebted [*hayyav*], (4) and the act of releasing someone from the obligation to repay a debt....

(4) The act of releasing someone from the obligation to repay a debt: The verb *mah`al* means “to cancel a bond of indebtedness” in its literal sense (*s`baq* is its equivalent in Aramaic) and “to forgive a sin” in a metaphoric sense.

37. תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות דף פה עמוד א

דאמר רב אסי אמר ר' יוחנן: שטר שלוה בו ופרעו - אינו חוזר ולוה בו, שכבר נמחל שיעבודו

37. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot, 85a

“If a man provides a bond for a loan then pays it off, he cannot provide this bond again because the security which it contains has been cancelled.”

38. תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף ז עמוד ב

אמר רבי תנחום בר חנילאי: אין הגשמים יורדים אלא אם כן נמחלו עונותיהן של ישראל, שנאמר רצית ה' ארצך שבת שבות יעקב נשאת עון עמך כסית כל הטאתם סלה.

38. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanit, 7b

“R. Tanhum b. Hanilai said: ‘No rain shall fall unless the sins of Israel are forgiven for scripture says, *O Lord, You have favored Your land, restored Jacob’s fortune; You have borne away Your people’s iniquity, and covered all their sins; You have withdrawn all your anger, and turned away from your rage*’ ” (Ps 85:2–4).

39. Gary Anderson, Sin: A History, p. 96

Eliezer Diamond summarizes this well: “A market place model was . . . used by the sages to portray the calculation of one’s spiritual merits and debits. The word generally used by the sages for reward, *sakhar*, has the primary meaning of wages or payment. *Puranut*, a common rabbinic term for punishment (literally: retribution), derives from the root *pra*, to pay off a debt.’ The notion of *puranut* is connected to viewing one who sins as having incurred a *h`oba*, an obligation towards God. As George Foot Moore puts it, ‘Man owes God obedience, and every sin, whether of commission or of omission, is a defaulted obligation, a debt.’ That obligation is satisfied through God’s retribution; God allows one to pay off one’s debt by undergoing punishment.” The significance of this system, Diamond argues, is to assure that there be “some degree of proportionality between righteousness and sinfulness on the one hand and reward and punishment on the other.” It is not the case, however, that “God is obligated a priori to reward the righteous nor does God need for his own sake to punish the wicked.” Rather, God “has created a system of debits, credits, rewards and punishments” and has chosen, for the most part, to operate within its confines. As the two epigraphs indicate, God’s capacity to show mercy does not always follow the rules of a strict monetary accounting.