

Be Your Own Messiah: Teshuvah as Self-Creation and Self-Redemption

Be Your Own Redeemer

1. Rav Soloveitchik, "The Relationship Between Repentance and Free Choice" (1970), *On Repentance*, 65

... In Chapter 5, Maimonides abruptly interrupts his discussion of the problem of repentance and introduces a new theme – that of free will which is accorded to man. The chapter opens with the well-known passage: "Man is given the option, if he so wishes, of taking the path of goodness and of becoming righteous; or, if he so wishes, of taking the path of evil and of becoming wicked." Maimonides then elaborates (Section 3): "And this is a major principle and it is the foundation of the Torah and of the commandments:' He then notes that repentance itself is an outcome of this freedom of choice. In Section 2 he writes: "Because the decision was in our hands, and we deliberately committed transgressions, it is fitting that we repent and abandon our weakness, as the choice now is also up to us; as is stated immediately afterward: 'Let us seek our path, and investigate it, and return unto the Lord.' ...

In Chapter 7 Maimonides returns to the theme of repentance and opens with a passage which seems to be more appropriate as a preamble to Chapter 1: "Since man has been given free choice, as we have explained, he should endeavor to repent and orally confess his sins and turn his back upon his sins." From here on, the whole of Chapter 7 deals with the subject of repentance; and at this point, Maimonides asserts that repentance does not apply only to evil acts; it is also related to bad character traits.

2. "The Relationship Between Repentance and Free Choice," 97

In Chapter 7 ... which is perhaps the finest chapter in the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides speaks of a penitent who is "beloved and desirable," who "stands before his Creator as if he had never sinned and whose reward, moreover, is great" and for whom "premeditated sins are accounted as merits." In it he speaks in one breath of repentance and redemption: "Israel is redeemed only through repentance and Israel will of a certainty repent and immediately be saved, as it is written, 'And you shall return unto the Lord thy God ... then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity.'" ... The repentance described in Chapter 7 is the repentance of redemption. *The sinner who repents in this manner becomes his own redeemer and releases himself from captivity in the pit of sin.* The Messiah's task is not to annihilate evil but to transform evil into goodness, sin into sanctity, hatred into love.

3. **“The Relationship Between Repentance and Free Choice,” 103**

If the penitent utilizes the power of free choice to form a new way of life for himself and establish a new set of rules which will affect all his natural reactions if he succeeds in shaping a radically new personality for himself, then he is not in danger of backsliding to his former sinfulness. And, indeed, why should he revert to the way of sin? After all, the desires and inclinations which nurtured his sinfulness no longer pertain to him; they no longer play a role in the fabric of his newly fashioned personality, which is animated by a different set of laws of cause and effect... the sinner vanishes and is replaced by a new man who essentially has never sinned and is in no need of expiation, of cleansing, of purification. He is in a wholly liberated and redeemed state.

4. **“The Relationship Between Repentance and Free Choice,” 110**

Judaism has always held that it lies within man's power to renew himself, to be reborn and to redirect the course of his life. In this task, man must rely upon himself; no one can help him. He is his own creator and innovator. He is his own redeemer; he is his own messiah who has come to redeem himself from the darkness of his exile to the light of his personal redemption.

Be Your Own Creator

5. **“The Relationship Between Repentance and Free Choice,” 111**

We have already said that there exists a repentance of redemption whose essence is the total transformation of the personality from one state to another. In the course of this type of repentance, **man assumes the role of creator**, insofar as God implanted in him the capacity to create himself anew.

6. **Rav Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (JPS, 1983; originally published in 1944), 109**

Judaism declares that man stands at the crossroads and wonders about the path he shall take... Herein is embodied the entire task of creation and the obligation to participate in the renewal of the cosmos. The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself. It is this idea that Judaism introduced into the world.

7. ***Halakhic Man*, 110**

Repentance, according to the halakhic view, is an act of creation—self-creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous “I,” and the creation of a new “I,” possessor or a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals—this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future.

8. Rav Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (JPS, 1983), 112–113

This creative gesture is precipitated by an absolute decision of the will and intellect together... The desire to be another person, to be different than I am now, is the central motif of repentance. Man cancels the law of identity and continuity which prevails in the “I” awareness by engaging in the wondrous, creative act of repentance. A person is creative; he was endowed with the power to create at his very inception. When he finds himself in a situation of sin, he takes advantage of his creative capacity, returns to God, and becomes a creator and self-fashioner. Man, through repentance, creates himself, his own “I.”

Teshuvah & Time: *Vive La Revolution*

9. *Halakhic Man*, 114–116

There is a living past and there is a dead past. There is a future which has not as yet been “created,” and there is a future already in existence. There is a past and there is a future that are connected with one another and with the present only through the law of causality—the cause found at moment *a* links up with the effect taking place at moment *b*, and so on. However, time itself as past appears only as “no more” and as future appears as “not yet.” From this perspective repentance is an empty and hollow concept. It is impossible to regret a past that is already dead, lost in the abyss of oblivion. Similarly, one cannot make a decision concerning a future that is as yet “unborn.” Therefore, Spinoza [*Ethics* IV, 54] and Nietzsche [in *Genealogy of Morals*—from this perspective—did well to deride the idea of repentance.

However, there is a past that persists in its existence, that does not vanish and disappear but remains firm in its place. Such a past enters into the domain of the present and links up with the future. Similarly, there is a future that is not hidden behind a thick cloud but reveals itself now in all its beauty and majesty. Such a future, drawing upon its own hidden roots, infuses the past with strength and might, vigor and vitality. Both—past and future—are alive; both act and create in the heart of the present and shape the very image of reality. From this perspective we neither perceive the past as “no more” nor the future as “not yet” nor the present as “a fleeting moment.” Rather past, present, future merge and blend together, and this new threefold time structure arises before us adorned with a splendid unity. The past is joined to the future, and both are reflected in the present. The principle of temporal asymmetry, of *b* following *a*, does not always serve as the distinguishing characteristic of time. Rather, a person may, not infrequently, abide in the shadow of a simultaneous past, present, and future. The law of causality, from this perspective, also assumes a new form... The future imprints its stamp on the past and determines its image.

We have here a true symbiotic, synergistic relationship. The cause is interpreted by the effect, moment *a* by moment *b*. The past by itself is indeterminate, a closed book. It is only the present and the future that can pry it open and read its meaning. There are many different paths, according to this perspective, along which the cause can travel. It is the future that determines its direction and points the way. There can be a certain sequence of events that starts out with sin and iniquity but ends up with mitzvot and good deeds, and vice versa. The future transforms the thrust of the past. This is the nature of that causality operating in the realm of the spirit if man, as a spiritual being, opts for this outlook on time, time as grounded in the realm of eternity. However, the person who prefers the simple experience of unidimensional time—time, to use the image of Kant, as a straight line—becomes subject to the law of causality operating in the physical realm. This principle imposes the rule of the cause on the effect, the domination of an earlier point in time upon a later one...

Sin, as a cause and as the beginning of a lengthy causal chain of destructive acts, can be transformed, underneath the guiding hand of the future, into a source of merit and good deeds, into love and fear of God. The cause is located in the past, but the direction of its development is determined by the future. “Great is repentance, for deliberate sins are accounted to him as meritorious deeds” [Yoma 86b], The sin gives birth to mitzvot, the transgression to good deeds. In this outlook we find contained the basic principle of choice and free will. Choice forms the base of creation.

10. *Halakhic Man*, 116–117

Now causality and creation are two irreconcilable antagonists. If a causal lawfulness molds man’s spiritual personality and points the way wherein he must go, then self-creation can have no meaning. But the above applies only if the general law of natural causality which prevails in the physical realm also operates in the world of the spirit—the cause decrees and the effect fulfills, event *a* tyrannizes over event *b*, the past is all powerful and the future must perforce follow in its wake.... Therefore, the creative gesture, of which man is capable, cannot be reconciled with the scientific concept of causality, whether it be prospective or retrospective. But it can be reconciled with the principle of causality that is rooted in the type of time consciousness we described earlier. When the future participates in the clarification and elucidation of the past—points out the way it is to take, defines its goals, and indicates the direction of its development—then man becomes a creator of worlds.

11. Rav Soloveitchik, “Sacred and Profane” (1945), *Jewish Thought* 3:1 (1993)

The individual who measures time in purely quantitative terms is an essentially passive personality. He is a recipient and not a giver, a creature rather than a creator. His prototype is the slave. The slave has no time consciousness of his own, for he has no time of his own. The awareness of *hazman garma*, the full intuition of the qualitative moment, is alien to him.

Absolved by homogenous, changeable time, he lacks affinity for a duty whose execution depends solely on time, on a "now" and "not later"; upon a "today" and "not tomorrow," upon a night whose dawn cancels the opportunity, upon a day whose sunset eliminates the possibility... The basic criterion which distinguishes freeman from slave is the kind of relationship each has with time and its experience. Bondage is identical with passive intuition and reception of an empty, formal time stream...

We may say then that qualitative-time consciousness is comprised of two elements: First, the appreciation of the enormous implications inherent in the fleeting moments of the present. No fraction of time, however infinite, should slip through the fingers, left unexploited; for eternity may depend upon the brief moment...

The ideal of *Ketz*, of the "end of the road," can never be realized if it be sought after in quantitative terms; then the process is snail-paced and the stages demarcated by infinite coulisses of time. The process would be akin to the paradox of Zeno, of the tortoise pursuing Achilles. If time be quantitative, a unidimensional composite of discrete, infinitesimal moments, then the tortoise will never overtake Achilles, and the Jew will never attain salvation...

This was, in effect, the revolutionary message of Rabbi Akiva, who urged his people to revolt against the Romans. The concept of a slow historical process that was so popular among the peoples who lived under the influence of Greek philosophy, the endless morphological evolution from matter into form, from a lower to a higher eidetic stage, carries weight and significance so far as time is lived through quantitatively. Then the forces of history move with an extremely slow pace; years, decades, and centuries are nothing but drops in the sea of eternity. What does a century mean in geological evolution? A nation, not comprehending the Janus face of time or the alternatives that time proffers, may be subject to the same laws and regulations of the cosmic process in nature. **Under the aspect of "quantitative years," any rebellion is *a priori* doomed to a stillbirth.** If man leaves his fate to the principle of blind, mechanical causality and circumstantial determination, he can never attain salvation and redemption. *Ketz* is nonexistent for him as chaos and confusion are precluded in the realm of nature. Time is computed according to man's own creativity and self-determination. All laws of immutable and unalterable causality fail if man participates in the mysterious unfolding of the chronos. **A qualitative time experience enables a nation to span a distance of hundreds and thousands of years in but a few moments. To consider time from the [qualitative] aspect... entails the mystery of *Ketz-Ge'ula*...**