

Waking Up from Modernity: *Teshuvah* as Self-Awareness and Realism

Waking Up From Sin: *Teshuvah* and Remorse

1. Rav Soloveitchik, "Thou Shouldst Enter the Covenant of the Lord," *On Repentance*, 119

As in sickness of the body, so, also, in sickness of the soul which is sin, man tries to deny, to minimize and to distance himself from the pain. Often, out of fear, whether covert or overt, when we are attacked by pains, we put off the visit to the doctor and console ourselves by saying that they are a figment of the imagination, that very soon they will pass of their own accord. So do we behave, as well, regarding spiritual suffering which comes to make us aware of sin.

2. "Thou Shouldst Enter the Covenant of the Lord," 121

In the bereavement of sin there is also a clear masochistic element. The sinner begins to sense a feeling of contempt and disgust toward himself; he experiences masochistic self-hatred. The sin is seen as an abomination, an object of revulsion, something utterly nauseating. The feeling generated by sin is not a moral sensation; the moral sense in man is not such a powerful force. The feeling of sin which drags a person to repentance is an aesthetic sensation, or, more correctly, a negative aesthetic reaction. The sinner feels disgust at the defilement of sin. The suffering of sin lies in the feeling of nausea toward the defiling, disgusting uncleanliness of the sin... Thus, when God seeks to draw man to repentance, He arouses not only his moral awareness, which is usually not sufficiently strong to awaken him from his sin, but, more so his aesthetic consciousness which has a better chance of effecting the repulsion of the despised and loathsome sin.

3. "Thou Shouldst Enter the Covenant of the Lord," 123

In addition to the sense of bereavement, remorse is related to another emotion: the sense of shame - the sense of shame a person can feel for himself. "We are astonished at ourselves" - meaning, also, that we are ashamed of ourselves. "I was ashamed and confounded": the feeling of disgust mingles with the feeling of shame. The awful monstrosity of the act of sin plagues the sinner and leads him to feel remorse. This remorse comes as a result of emotions, not from reasoning; a person's intellect plays a negligible part in it... These emotions which came as an instinctive emotional reaction to the sin brought about this transformation. They are the natural reactions of revulsion and shame and not processes of reason, understanding and knowledge.

4. "Thou Shouldst Enter the Covenant of the Lord," 124–125

It is, of course, understood that wherever there is an emotional reaction to sin, when the sin is rejected not for intellectual reasons, but in an emotional and instinctive manner, through the natural feelings of shame and disgust which overwhelm the sinner causing unbearable torment to his soul, then the sinner is no longer required to make a resolution regarding the future. It becomes superfluous in such a case. The essence of repentance lies in remorse, in the feeling of shame toward himself, in "we are astonished at ourselves, how could such an abomination have been committed" ... The instinctive feeling that causes remorse is thus the central motif of repentance. The sinner reacts to his sin, just as the sick man reacts to his pains. He will restrain himself from repeating those things which bring him so much suffering. Resolve for the future – for this, there is no apparent need. Remorse and shame – these are what restrain him from sinning again.

Modernity's Foundational Sin

5. Rav Soloveitchik "The Golden Calf and the Roots of Idolatry," *Vision and Leadership: Essays on Joseph and Moses*, 136–137, 139

Who, then, is the perennial idol that man worships, the deity whom man adores, the god to whom man is unqualifiedly committed? It is man himself! The most horrible, repulsive, and menacing idolatrous worship is the deification and absolutization of man. Man may be great; but if we forget even for a fraction of a second that he is also very small, we commit the sin of idolatry. Man is divine, yet when he is not always aware of his satanic nature, he errs and is guilty of a grave offense. Absolutization of man's worth, hypostatization of his capabilities and accomplishments, idealization of his nature—these are tantamount to the most barbarous form of idolatry. The world will be rehabilitated and redeemed only when man has adopted with regard to himself a dual value judgment and looks at himself not only with admiration but with suspicion as well.

Paganism preached naivete, Judaism a critical and often skeptical approach to man and his attainments. Judaism relativizes all human finite values and aptitudes, denying them unconditional commitment... There are only two choices—the true God or an idol. When a man revolts against God, he thinks he is being flexible and free, but soon he builds himself his own idol and worships himself.

6. "The Golden Calf and the Roots of Idolatry," 129–130

When Adam sinned, there was nobody to pray and intercede with the Almighty on his behalf; he had no Moses. He did not know the secret of prayer and the great mystery of repentance. He considered sin as absolute, with no performance capable of erasing it. He did not know that repentance is effective, that the tear of contrition and regret washes away any sin. He did not

know that the courage to admit an error is cathartic and that the admission of guilt is the finest sacrifice one may offer to the Almighty...

Adam wanted to compete, as it were, with the Almighty. His sin was a result of pride and vanity. Apparently, he was aware that he was created in the image of the Holy One; otherwise, it never would have occurred to him to try to be like God. He knew that he was endowed with a great charisma and great ability, and he felt as if compliance with the divine norm would stymie his growth and development. On the contrary, he thought that he would become greater, more prominent, more powerful and wiser if he violated the prohibition addressed to him by the Almighty.

7. Rav Soloveitchik, "The Crisis of Human Finitude," *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning and Emotions*, 151

Judaism has always insisted that man recognize not only his great God-given abilities and his capacity for self-transcendence, but also the tragic fact of his own finitude and the consequent incompleteness of his existential experience. Not everyone, however, is willing to confront these truths. For example, **the philistine personality** (so common in bourgeois society) leads a narrow, shut-in existence, focusing all his efforts on a single object: self-preservation. He recognizes no value beyond this, and is animated by the belief that, with sufficient effort, the attainment of this goal is within his grasp. When faced with evidence of his own inadequacy and vulnerability, instead of revising his philosophy, he is driven to invent new means of safeguarding and protecting himself against defeat (v. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, pp. 22-23). The philistine must always be successful, the first to attain and the last to lose, or, better yet, the one who need not relinquish anything at all. This drive for conquest and security is the motivating force of our civilized effort.

8. "The Crisis of Human Finitude," 155

The daemonic existence is graced with beauty and fantastic sweep, while the philistine way of living is dull and unimaginative. The daemonic personality indulges in adventures, risks and spectacular things; he dreams of vastness and unlimited expanses. In contradistinction to the philistine, he is never satisfied with his accomplishments. His imagination is stimulated and inspired by success, and his appetite is never stilled. Regardless of the territory over which he roams in his incessant quest for daring projects, conquest and triumph—be it warfare (Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Communist Russia), be it finance (the robber barons, the financial wizards and manipulators), be it science (man's technological aspirations, his unquenchable thirst for knowledge, his insatiable curiosity, e.g. Faust), be it hedonic pursuits (Don Juan, Cleopatra)—the driving force is the same: self-glorification, reaching out for the impossible, the desire for an endless existence, for infinity. When he sinned, **paradisiacal man** became involved with **the serpent, the daemon**. There is a daemonic origin to his arrogant

quest to equal God, to be greater and bigger than He is, to transcend finitude and plunge into infinity. "And you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5).

Teshuvah as Realistic Self-Awareness

9. Rav Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 17, No. 2 (1978), 50–52

Judaism insisted upon the redeeming of the logos... When I say there is an unredeemed cognitive gesture, I do not refer to mythical thinking, which is not guided by scientific method and precision, but to the most modern system of scientific inquiry. The latter may be considered unredeemed if the scientist does not subject his cognitive act to an extraneous catharsis... Cognitive catharsis consists in discovering the unknowability of being. Commitment to knowledge, to scientific inquiry, implies, *ipso facto*, the recognition of the eternal mystery, which grows with the advance of knowledge, which deepens with the triumphant march of the human mind, and which becomes, with every cognitive breakthrough, more baffling, perplexing and challenging... If the scholar, simultaneously with the ecstasy of knowing, experiences also the agony of confusion, and together with the sweetness of triumph over Being, feels the pain and despair of defeat by Being, then his cognitive gesture is purged and redeemed... Then, and only then, is the scientific experience a humble and not an arrogant one... The moral law can never be legislated in ultimate terms by the human mind. Any attempt on the part of scientific research, no matter how progressive, to replace the moral law engraved by the Divine hand on the two stone tablets of Sinai with man-made rules of behavior is illegitimate. **Adam tried to legislate the moral norm; he was driven from Paradise.** In our day, modern man is engaged in a similar undertaking, which demonstrates pride and arrogance, and is doomed to failure.

10. "Catharsis," 52–54

Man must be ready to accept defeat not only in the carnal, aesthetic, emotional, or intellectual world but also in the moral religious world, in his relationship with God. Man must be capable of recognizing that he is subject, willy-nilly, to the dialectical movement even in his encounter with God, even when he is certain that God is close to him and all he has to do is to make the final leap into—the embrace of his Maker. There is an unredeemed moral and religious experience, as there is an unredeemed body and an unredeemed logos. Let us be candid: if one has not redeemed his religious life, he may become self-righteous, insensitive, or even destructive. The story of the Crusades, the Inquisition and other outbursts of religious fanaticism bear out this thesis...

Catharsis of religious life consists exactly in the awareness of the long interludes during which man finds himself at an infinite distance from God: the periodic states of ecstasy engendered by the feeling of closeness to God alternate with the states of black despair, which even the prophet

encounters during moments of exile from the presence of the Almighty. Those long periods of black despair (הסתר פנים) contain the cathartic element which cleanses and redeems religious life...

Sin is a reality, not just a potential threat. Perfect man has never been created. If a man is not conscious of the contradiction inherent in the very core of his personality, he lives in the world of illusion and leads an unredeemed existence. It matters not what we call such a complacent state of mind—self-righteousness, pride, haughtiness, stupidity - it is all a manifestation of a brutish and raw state of mind. At this point the idea of תשובה emerges and conveys to man the message of catharsis. In what does this catharsis express itself? In the aptitude of man to take a critical look at himself and to admit failure, in the courage to confess, to plead guilty, in the readiness to accept defeat.