

MEDITATIONS

היכי דמי בעל תשובה אמר רבי יהודה כגון שבאת לידו דבר
עבירה פעם ראשונה ושניה וניצלה הימנה:

How is one proved a repentant sinner? Rav Judah said, "If the object which caused the original transgression comes before the repentant sinner on two occasions and the sinner keeps away from it."

Talmud Yoma 86b



הלא תראה החוט של משי כמה הוא חזק כשיכפיל פעמים רבות
וכבר ידעת כי עיקרו מחלוש שבדברים והוא ריר התולעת ונראה
החבל הגדול של ספינה כשממששין בו זמן ארוך הולך הלוך
וחסור עד אשר יפסק וישוב חלוש מכל חלוש וכמו כן ענין
הקטנות והגדלות בעבירות עם ההתמדה ובקשת המחילה. ועל
כן דמה אותם הכתוב בו כמו שנאמר (ישעיה ה) הוי משכי העון
בחבלי השוא וכעבות העגלה חטאה:

Observe a silken cord. How strong it becomes when it is doubled over many times, though its origin is the weakest of things—a worm's mucus. Note also how a ship's cable, when used for a long time, becomes the weakest of the weak. So it is with the grave and light character of transgressions. They become grave only if one persists in them and light if one beseeches forgiveness for them. Thus it says in Scripture, "Woe to them who draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope." (Isaiah 5:18)

Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Hovot Halevavot*, 7.7



Sin involves a disturbance in the relation between us and God, and atonement implies the poise, solace and encouragement that come with the restoration to a better relationship. From the point of view of ethical religion, the same remains true. If we identify God with that aspect of reality which confers meaning and value on life and elicits from us those ideals that determine the course of human progress, then the failure to live up to the best that is in us means that our souls are not attuned to the divine, that we have betrayed God.

Mordecai M. Kaplan



The sacramental efficacy of the ritual of atonement is nil, and its symbolic power of no value, unless the sense of sin leads us to seek the reconstruction of our personalities in accordance with highest ethical possibilities of human nature; only then can we experience *teshuvah*, the sense of returning to God.

Mordecai M. Kaplan



And you wait, await the one thing
that will infinitely increase your life;
the gigantic, the stupendous,
the awakening of stones,
depths turned round toward you.

The volumes in brown and gold
flicker dimly on the bookshelves;
and you think of lands traveled through,
of paintings, of the garments
of women found and lost.

And then all at once you know: that was it.
You rise, and there stands before you
the fear and prayer and shape
of a vanished year.

Rainer Maria Rilke



Awe is an intuition for the creaturely dignity of all things and their preciousness to God; a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something absolute. Awe is a sense for the transcendent, for the reference everywhere to God, who is beyond all things. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (Adapted)



On this day, let us be like Moses, heavy of tongue, who had to struggle over each sound. On this day when we shall say more words than on any other day in the year, we strive to find one sentence, phrase, word, or letter that will begin here on earth and reach to the heavens.

Michael Strassfeld



אָנִי מִתְפַּלֵּל מִתּוֹךְ הַלֵּב סְדוּר
קְרוּעַ שׁוּלִיִּם וְכָל הַמַּלִּים הַחֲסוּרוֹת אָנִי
רוֹאֵן מִתְעוֹפְפוֹת כְּבָר זִמְן רַב מִתְעוֹפְפוֹת
וּמִבְקָשׁוֹת מְנוּחַ לְכַף הַרְגֵל אֵיךְ
אָבִיא לָהֶן מְזוֹר וְלֵב
סְדוּרֵי אָכּוּל שׁוּלִיִּם
אֲזוּל וְעָרָם

I pray a siddur from my heart,
one with torn edges, and all its missing words
I see have long since vanished, flying away
and seeking a resting-place. How
shall I bring a bandage for them
when my heart's siddur with eaten edges
still goes naked?

Amir Gilboa



Forgiveness opens a series of questions, painful questions, that constitute the central challenge within human life. All of the apparent dilemmas, however, finally meet in a single issue: Will I be in relation to others, or will I refuse that relation?

All religious traditions declare that forgiveness is always a possibility. In the words of one *ḥadīth*: “One who approaches near to me one span, I will approach one cubit; and one who approaches near to me one cubit, I will approach one fathom; and whoever approaches me walking, I will come running, and one who meets me with sins equivalent to the whole world, I will greet with forgiveness equal to it.” (From the *Mishkat al-masabih* quoted in *Islamic Spirituality*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed.) What is the way to that approach? And why does the open door appear to us as shut?

It is the closed door, of course, that brings the need for forgiveness. Estrangement makes us feel the loss of bonds we may hardly have noticed before. The loss of friendship or alienation from a family member—that sense of being cut off from the vital current of life—creates suffering.

This suffering can be the fire that refines, that brings the drives of the ego in contact with a deeper self, that ultimately starts us “walking,” bringing us to the first steps of the exchange that is called forgiveness.

Experiencing the pain of the estrangement without and the fragmentation within is an integral part of forgiveness. This pain must not be avoided. Avoidance of any part of our lives on any level leads away from the unifying grace of forgiveness. Rage and sadness have to be faced in order to forgive, yet people try to live without facing that. Indeed a person cannot find redemption until she/he sees the flaws in her/his soul and tries to efface ↪

them. Nor can a people be redeemed until it sees the flaws in its soul and tries to efface them. But whether it be a person or a people, whoever shuts out the realization of her/his flaws is shutting out redemption.

A person chooses death by not forgiving. There is a sense in which you can destroy yourself by not saying yes to the reality that actually exists. Forgiveness is the great yes. Acting in accordance with the highest ideals of our tradition, I do not have a choice whether or not I should forgive you, I only have a choice whether or not I will. And I must if I want to be alive.

Lorraine Kišly and Martin Buber (Adapted)



“O God, create for me a pure heart, and renew within me a just spirit.”

Psalms 51:12

With the New Year, we have a chance for newness within our hearts, a newness that can change the course of our lives. But change is often frightening, and sometimes we are not sure that we are indeed ready for it. “What will this new heart be like?” we wonder. “How will this purified heart change the persons we are?” “Will the very structure of our lives change as our spirits are renewed?” So much uncertainty comes with change. As we stand at the threshold of a New Year, we pray for the valor to face uncertainty, the courage to truly change what needs to be changed, and the faith to welcome the new spirit that is within us.

Leila Gal Berner



A Reconstructionist Understanding of Sin and Salvation

What are we to do about our sins? In the first place, we must not permit them to lead to self-hate or self-contempt. We must be able to see good in ourselves. We must believe that we have within us something that reflects the goodness that exists in the world. Most of our moral failures are due to a distrust of our capacity for virtue. We, all of us, have ideals of the man or woman we should like to be. Let us see in the very fact that we project that ideal for ourselves the evidence that it must have some affinity with what we really are. This is the image of God in us. Though it may be obscured by our sins, if we can see it at all, we must come to live that ideal so much that we find satisfaction in removing the moral stains which obscure it.

Nothing that we can say or think can really undo what has been done. The past can never be relived and it always conditions the present and future. Therein lies the inexorable reality of sin. Having failed, however, does not mean that we are failures, for the future lies before us with its infinite possibilities.

In our discouragement, many of us brood over our incapacity for good behavior, instead of trying to find out what bad consequences of our acts make them sinful, and how we may put our conduct on the right track so that it will not lead to wreckage of our abiding purposes. If, instead of thinking of our sin as though it were a taint on our ego, we regard it as a form of bad behavior in our relations to the world about us, a disposition to wrong-doing rather than wrong-being, we will not brood about what has already been done, but try to learn from our experience how to do better.

In this way we answer the paradox of sin by a sort of paradox of salvation. We use our experience of sin in order to attain virtue. The power of *teshuvah*, that is turning in the direction of the will to moral achievement, converts what were willful sins into virtues.

Mordecai M. Kaplan



Understand the words of Hillel as a guide for entry into the New Year:

אם אין אני לי מי לי?

“If I am not for myself, who is for me?...” This may refer to *tikun haneshamah*/repair of the soul. If I do not engage in the deeply personal work of inward turning (*teshuvah*), no one else can do it for me.

וכשאני לעצמי מה אני?

“And when I am only for myself, what am I?...” This may refer to *tikun ha'olam*/repair of the world. If each of us is *only* self-focused, then ultimately what are we? What makes us human is our relationship to others; what make us human is our “response-ability,” our understanding of responsibility—to ourselves and to the world.

ואם לא עכשיו אימתי?

“And if not now, when?” What better time than at the birth of a New Year to begin the journey toward self-repair (*tikun haneshamah*) and world-repair (*tikun ha'olam*).

Leila Gal Berner



The theme of the *Yamim Nora'im* is *teshuvah*/turning. This suggests being in motion, in process. Our deepest efforts to redirect our lives require sustained attention and vigilance; how much easier to have a single defining moment of change! But Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the new year, not the year itself. Today we begin to move.

Richard Hirsh



תשובה

Repentance is one of the ultimate spiritual realities at the core of Jewish faith. Its significance goes far beyond the narrow meaning of contrition or regret for sin, and it embraces a number of concepts considered to be fundamental to the very existence of the world.

Certain sages go so far as to include repentance among the entities created before the world itself. The implication of this remarkable statement is that repentance is a universal, primordial phenomenon; in such a context it has two meanings. One is that it is embedded in the root structure of the world; the other, that before we were created, we were given the possibility of changing the course of our lives. In this latter sense repentance is the highest expression of our capacity to choose freely—it is a manifestation of the divine in us. By repenting, we can extricate ourselves from the binding web of our lives, from the chain of causality that otherwise compels us to follow a path of no return.

Repentance also comprises the notion that we have a measure of control over our existence in all dimensions, including time. Time flows in one direction; it is impossible to undo or even to alter an action after it has occurred and become an “event,” an objective fact. However, even though the past is “fixed,” repentance admits of an ascendancy over it, of the possibility of changing its significance in the context of the present and the future. This is why repentance has been presented as something created before the world itself. In a world of the inexorable flow of time, in which all objects and events are interconnected in a relationship of cause and effect, repentance is the exception: it is the potential for something else.

Adin Steinsaltz



The Maggid of Dubno taught his disciples that ritual performance alone was insufficient for *teshuvah*. Specifically, listening to the sound of the shofar is but a means to a higher end. To illustrate this point, he told the following parable:

A man came to a big city for the first time and lodged in an inn overnight. Awakened in the middle of the night by the loud beating of drums, he inquired drowsily, “What is this all about?” Informed that a fire had broken out and that the drum beating was the city’s fire alarm, he turned over and went back to sleep.

He reported the incident to the village authorities on his return home. “They have a wonderful system in the big city. When a fire breaks out, people beat their drums and before long the fire burns out.” Excited, they ordered a supply of drums and distributed them to the population. Several weeks later, when a fire broke out in the village, there was a deafening explosion of beating drums, and while the people waited expectantly for the flames to subside, their homes burned to the ground.

A visitor passing through the village, when told the reason for the ear-splitting din, mocked the simple residents. “Idiots! Do you think that a fire can be put out by beating drums? The drums are no more than an alarm for people to wake up and extinguish the fire themselves.”

The Maggid continued. “So it is with us. We sound the shofar to extinguish the fires of sin and evil that burn within us. But the shofar is merely an alarm to rouse us from our moral slumber. Our task is to search our deeds and turn from our accustomed ways to remake our lives ourselves.”

Alexander A. Steinbach (Adapted)



According to tradition, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are *Yamim Nora'im*, days of awe, solemn days. The Jews who label themselves “secularist” or “agnostic” are baffled by these holidays. The basic trouble is that the very terminology of the Holy Days—sin, repentance, forgiveness, sovereignty of God—sounds alien to the secularist. It is, at best, an echo out of the remote past. And the fact is that for many in the synagogue, too, these words are no longer meaningful and do not correspond to genuine experience. But if there is an ethical-humanist dimension to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, then it should be possible to invest this terminology with contemporary significance and provide a reason for regarding these Holy Days as a common possession of all Jews.

There is a wonderful Hebrew-Yiddish phrase, *heshbon hanefesh*. The phrase connotes a taking stock of one’s soul, an inner accounting, a sitting-in-judgment upon oneself. As we make our *heshbon hanefesh*, we confess our failure to span the gap between conscience and conduct, between the standards we profess and the actions we perform. We remember what we should have done and did not do. This chasm between *believing* and *living* may or may not always be surmountable, but the refusal to try to span it is *sin*, and the will to bridge it, or at least to narrow it, is *atonement* and *redemption*. Sin is the gap between our promise and our conduct, between our standards and our actions.

The Sovereignty of God is symbolic of the oneness of humanity in freedom, righteousness, and dignity. And if God is what is best and highest within us, reaching out to what is best and highest in the universe, then God is not in Heaven, but is a power in the world and in us for transforming ourselves and the world in preparation for the Kingdom.

Israel Knox (Adapted)



פעם אחת אמר רבינו משל. אדם תעה כמה ימים ביער ולא היה יודע איזוהי דרך נכונה. פתאום ראה אדם אחר הולך לקראתו. באה שמחה גדולה בלבו, עתה בוודאי ידע הדרך הנכונה. כיון שפגעו זה בזה שאל אותו אחי אמור לי היכן הדרך הנכונה, זה כמה ימים אני תועה. אמר לו אחי אף אני איני יודע, שאף אני תועה כאן כבר ימים הרבה, אלא אומר לך בדרך שהלכתי אני אל תלך אתה, שבדרך זו תועים. ועכשיו נחפש דרך חדשה. כן אנחנו, דבר זה אני יכול לומר לכם, שבדרך שהלכנו עד עכשיו אין לנו ללכת, שבדרך זו תועים. אלא עכשיו נחפש דרך חדשה.

Rabbi Ḥayim of Zans was wont to tell the following parable:

A sojourner had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly he saw someone approaching him. His heart was filled with anticipation. "Now I will learn which is the right way," he thought. When they neared one another, he asked, "Please, tell me which is the right way out of this forest. I have been wandering about for several days."

Said the other to him, "I do not know the way out either, for I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But *this* I can tell you: do not take the way I have been going, for that will lead you astray. Now let us look for a new way together."

S. Y. Agnon



רשות לכל אדם נתונה, אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק, הרשות בידו: ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע, הרשות בידו: הוא שכתוב בתורה: "הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע": אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות.... צדיק כמשה רבנו או רשע כירבעם או חכם או סכל או רחמן או אכזרי או כילי או שוע... ואין לו מי שיכפהו ולא גוזר עליו ולא מי שמושכו לאחד משני הדרךים.... זה החוטא הוא הפסיד את עצמו:

אסור לאדם להנהיג עצמו בדברי חלקות ופתי ולא יהיה אחד בפה ואחד בלב — אלא תוכו פברו והענין שפילב הוא הדבר שפפה: ואסור לגנב דעת הבריות ואפלו דעת הנכרי: פיצד?... לא יסרהב בחברו שיאכל אצלו והוא יודע שאינו אוכל; ולא ירבה לו בתקרבת והוא יודע שאינו מקבל; ולא יפתח לו חביות שהוא צריך לפתחן למכרן כדי לפתותו שבשביל פבורו פתח וכן כל פיוצא בו:... אלא שפת אמת וריח נכון ולב טהור:

Free will is given to every human being. If we wish to incline ourselves toward goodness and righteousness, we are free to do so; and if we wish to incline ourselves towards evil, we are also free to do that. As the Torah says (Genesis 3:22), "Humanity is unique in knowing good and evil..." We each decide whether to make ourselves...learned or ignorant, compassionate or cruel, generous or miserly....No one forces us, no one decides for us, no one drags us along one path or the other.... Those who err must take responsibility for themselves.

Smooth speech and deception are forbidden to us. Our words must not differ from our thoughts; the inner and outer person must be the same. What is in the heart should be on the lips. We are forbidden to deceive anyone, Jew or non-Jew, about

anything. For example, one must not urge food on another knowing that the other cannot eat it. One must not offer gifts that cannot be accepted. A storekeeper opening a bottle in order to sell its contents must not pretend to be opening it in honor of a particular person, and the like....Honest speech, integrity and a pure heart—that is what is required of us.

Moses Maimonides (Hilhot Teshuvah 5:1-2, Hilhot De'ot 2:6)



כיון דחב בר נש קמי קודשא בריך הוא זמנא חדא, עביד רשימו. וכד חב ביה זמנא תניינא, אתתקף ההוא רשימו יתיר. חב ביה זמנא תליתאה, אתפשט ההוא כתמא.

A sin leaves a mark; repeated, it deepens the mark; when committed a third time, the mark becomes a stain. Zohar



אם משים אדם נגד אור השמש בחלון מחיצות קלות וקלושות לרוב מאד הן מאפילות כמו מחיצה אחת עבה ויותר: וככה ממש הוא בנמשל בכל עונות שאדם דש בעקביו ומכל שכן המפורסמות מדברי רבינו זכרונם לברכה שהן ממש כעבודה זרה וגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים: והמספר בגנות חבירו היא לשון הרע השקולה כעבודה זרה וגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים: וכל הכועס כאילו עובד עבודה זרה וכן מי שיש בו גסות הרוח:

If one places many thin and threadbare sheets in front of the window, they have the same effect in screening the light of the sun as one heavy blanket. Similarly it is not only the serious sins such as idolatry, debauchery, and bloodshed which act as a screen between the Divine Light and the soul, but also the lesser offenses, such as indulging in slanderous talk, flying into a rage, pride, and many such offenses.

Shneur Zalman

אֵל תֹּאמַר שְׂאִין תְּשׁוּבָה אֶלָּא מֵעֲבֻרֹת שְׂיִישׁ בְּהֵן מַעֲשֵׂה פְּגוּן זְנוּת
וְגִזְל וְגִנְבָּה :

אֶלָּא פְּשִׁם שְׂצָרִיף אָדָם לְשׁוּב מֵאֵלוּ כֶּף הוּא צָרִיף לְחִפְשׁ בְּדַעוֹת
רְעוֹת שְׂיִישׁ לוֹ וְלְשׁוּב מִן הַפְּעֵס וּמִן הָאִיבָה וּמִן הַקְּנָאָה וּמִן
הַהַתּוּל וּמִרְדִּיפַת הַמָּמוֹן וְהַכְּבוֹד וּמִרְדִּיפַת הַמֵּאֲכָלוֹת: מִן הַכֹּל
צָרִיף לְחֹזֵר בְּתִשׁוּבָה :

וְאֵלוּ הָעוֹנוֹת קְשִׁים מְאֹדָן שְׂיִישׁ בְּהֵן מַעֲשֵׂה שְׂבוּזְמֵן שְׂאָדָם נִשְׁקַע
בְּאֵלוּ קִשָּׁה הוּא לְפָרֵשׁ מֵהֶם: וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר: "יַעֲזֹב רָשָׁע דְּרָכּוֹ
וְאִישׁ אֶן מַחֲשַׁבְתִּיר":

Do not think that people are obliged to repent only for transgressions involving acts, such as stealing and robbing and promiscuity. Just as individuals must turn in repentance from such acts, so must they personally search out their evil thoughts and turn in repentance from anger, from hatred, from jealousy, from mocking thoughts, from over-concern with money or prestige, and from gluttony. From all these thoughts a person must turn in repentance. They are more serious than transgressions involving acts, for when a person is addicted to them, it is difficult to give them up. Thus it is said: "Let the wicked forsake their way, the unrighteous their thoughts." (Isaiah 55:7)

Moses Maimonides (Hilhot Teshuvah 7:3)



Teshuvah/turning need not be a dramatically large change to be significant. A subtle shift now, of even just a fraction of a degree out of 360, can take one on a vastly different path over the course of a life's trajectory.

Betsy Platkin Teutsch



לעולם יראה אדם עצמו כאילו חציו חייב וחציו זכאי עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע עצמו לכף זכות עבר עבירה אחת אוי לו שהכריע את עצמו לכף חובה.... רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון אומר לפי שהעולם נידון אחר רובו והיחיד נידון אחר רובו עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף זכות עבר עבירה אחת אוי לו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף חובה:

Each one of us should always consider ourselves evenly balanced, that is, half sinful and half righteous. If we perform one mitzvah we should be joyous, for we have tilted the scales towards righteousness. If we commit one sin we should be remorseful, for we have tilted the scale toward sinfulness....

Rabbi Elazar ben Shimon said: "Inasmuch as the world is judged in accordance with the majority of *its* deeds, and we individuals are judged in accordance with *our* deeds, if we perform one mitzvah, happy are we, for we have tipped our own scales and the scales of the world toward merit. If we commit one sin, woe unto us, for we have tipped the scales toward sinfulness for ourselves and for the world."

Talmud Kiddushin 40a,b



מְכַסֶּה פְּשָׁעָיו לֹא יִצְלִיחַ וּמוֹדֶה וְעֹזֵב יִרְחָם:

One who covers up transgressions will not prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them shall obtain mercy.

Proverbs 28:13



רָחֲצוּ הַזְכוֹי הַסִּירוּ רָע מֵעֲלֵיכֶם: ... דְּרֹשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁר־יִחְמוֹץ
שָׁפְטוּ יְתוֹם רִיבוֹ אֶלְמָנָה: ... אִם יִהְיֶה חֲטָאֵיכֶם כַּשָּׁנִים כַּשָּׁלֶג
יִלְבִּינוּ אִם-יֵאדְמוּ כַתּוֹלֵעַ כַּצֶּמֶר יִהְיוּ:

Put away your evil doings.... Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.... Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

Isaiah 1:16-18



שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת....

Return to me, and I will return to you, says the GOD of hosts....

Malachi 3:7



חֲטָאת וְאָשָׁם וְדַאי מְכַפְּרִין מִיָּהּ וְיוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים מְכַפְּרִין עִם
הַתְּשׁוּבָה: הַתְּשׁוּבָה מְכַפֶּרֶת עַל עֲבֵרוֹת הַקְּלוֹת עַל עֲשֵׂה וְעַל לֹא
תַעֲשֵׂה וְעַל הַחֲמוּרוֹת הִיא תּוֹלָה עַד שְׂיָבֵא יוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים וְיִכַּפֵּר:

Repentance accomplishes atonement for lesser transgressions against both positive and negative commands in the Torah, while for graver transgressions it suspends punishment until Yom Kippur comes and accomplishes atonement.

Mishnah Yoma 8:8



הָאָמַר: אָחַטָא וְאָשׁוּב, אָחַטָא וְאָשׁוּב — אֵין מְסַפִּיקִין בְּיָדוֹ
לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה; אָחַטָא, וְיוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר — אֵין יוֹם
הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר: עֲבֵרוֹת שְׁבִין אָדָם לְמָקוֹם — יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים
מְכַפֵּר; עֲבֵרוֹת שְׁבִין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ — אֵין יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר עַד
שְׂרִיצָה אֶת חֵבְרוֹ:

If one says, “I will sin and repent, sin and repent,” there will be no repentance. “I will sin and Yom Kippur will accomplish atonement,” then Yom Kippur will accomplish no atonement. For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur accomplishes atonement, but for transgressions between two people, Yom Kippur accomplishes atonement only if the offender has appeased the offended person...

Mishnah Yoma 8:9



אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֵי פִתְחוֹ לִי פִתַּח אַחַד שֶׁל
תְּשׁוּבָה כְּחֹדֶה שֶׁל מַחַט וְאֲנִי פּוֹתַח לָכֶם פִּתְחִים שְׂיִהְיוּ עֲגָלוֹת
וְקַרְנֵיּוֹת נִכְנָסוֹת בּוֹ:

The *Kadosh Baruch Hu* said to Israel, “My children, show me an opening of repentance no larger than the eye of a needle, and I will widen it into openings through which wagons and carriages can pass.”

Song of Songs Rabbah 5:2.2



Four main reasons are given for the command to fast on Yom Kippur.

Fasting as a penance. By fasting on Yom Kippur, we show contrition for the wrong we have done and good we have failed to do.... When we fast for our sins, we are saying in so many words, we do not want to be let off lightly; we deserve to be punished.

Fasting as self-discipline. Fasting on Yom Kippur serves a potent reminder of the need of the self-discipline which leads to self-improvement.

Fasting as a means of focusing the mind on the spiritual. By fasting on Yom Kippur, the needs of the body are left unattended for twenty-four hours and Jews give all their concentration to the things of the spirit.

Fasting as a means of awakening compassion. By fasting we are moved to think of the needs of others and to alleviate their suffering.

Louis Jacobs



Every time I listen to your pain
instead of telling you how to fix it
I make a sacrifice.
I used to be a magician
who diverted himself from his problems
by focusing on someone else's.
You might have been impressed by my cleverness
but it did not help either of us.
At last I have been reduced to silence.
My silence can be a mirror for you.
May this offering of emptiness
give you room to heal.

Seth D. Riemer



As scholars have often noted, there is a basic difference between the orientation of the biblical *Yom Hakippurim* and Yom Kippur after the destruction of the Temples. In biblical times, Yom Kippur served the function of cleansing the Sanctuary, the abode of God, of any impurity...

Our Yom Kippur focuses on the behavior of the individual in his or her personal life and on the interaction of the community of Jews. Nevertheless, the motivation behind the biblical Yom Kippur is worth holding in mind. We must scrutinize our own lives carefully at least once each year so that we do not allow unwanted behavior to become so rigid that it will be too difficult to undo. We must repair the wounds we have inflicted before they develop into permanent ones. We must recharge our communities with a devotion to that which is godly and holy lest we lose all sight of our purpose.

Edward Greenstein



The Talmud records these words of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi: “One person may acquire eternal life after many years of effort, and another acquires it in a single instant.”

For some of us, the road to reconciliation is incremental: we assign a series of tasks to ourselves, and gradually but steadily accomplish one after another after another, until we reach our goal.

For some of us, years of self-neglect, complacency, and defeat are suddenly overcome in one moment of insight, in one experience of the holy, in one unexpected moment of victory, in one unanticipated moment of anguish.

Each life is a story of moments: a moment in which a chance remark awakens an unexpected insight; a moment of solitude that results in a renewed sense of responsibility; a moment of atonement that yields eternity; and a moment of awareness that yields hope.

Richard Hirsh



When asked the reason for his leniency in permitting the sick to eat during Yom Kippur, Rabbi Ḥayim of Brisk replied, “It’s not that I am lenient when it comes to Yom Kippur, but I am strict when it comes to saving a life.” For those who are physically well, fasting on Yom Kippur is a mitzvah that nourishes our souls. However, for those of us who are physically frail, the mitzvah incumbent upon us is to nourish our bodies, so that we may live. *Teshuvah* (inward turning) can only occur where life allows for the turning.

Leila Gal Berner



Repentance is not just a psychological phenomenon, a storm within a human teacup, but is a process that can effect real change in the world, in all the worlds. Every human action elicits certain inevitable results that extend beyond their immediate context, passing from one level of existence to another, from one aspect of reality to another. The act of repentance is, in the first place, a severance of the chain of cause and effect in which one transgression follows inevitably upon another. Beyond this, it is an attempt to nullify and even to alter the past. This can only be achieved when we subjectively shatter the order of our own existence. The thrust of repentance is to break through the ordinary limits of the self. Obviously this cannot take place within the routine of life; it [must] be an ongoing activity throughout life. Repentance is thus something that persists; it is an ever-renewed extrication from causality and limitation.

Adin Steinsaltz