

Parashat Vayikra

Polishing the Soul

The Torah requires a person who has unintentionally committed certain sins to bring a *chatat*, a sin-offering, and in a case of doubt a kind of guilt-offering known as an *asham talui*. If the sin was unwitting, though, why is an offering necessary, why must atonement be made?

The Ramban explained that it is because “all iniquities disgrace the soul, and they are a blemish on it, so that it does not merit receiving the countenance of its Creator until it is pure (טהורה) of sin.” That accounts for why of the many possible words to use for “man” (such as אדם or איש) the verse chooses one that also refers to the soul: “When a person/soul (נפש) sins unintentionally” (Leviticus 4:2). Even if forgiveness for unintentional transgression could be granted without a sacrifice, the stain on the soul would still remain. Sin taints us whether we know it or not.¹ This basic insight about the spiritual rot sin causes informs Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s account of sin and its expiation as well.

Sin and Psyche

Every sin we commit, the Rav said, has two consequences: the liability for punishment delineated by the Torah or the Sages, and the detrimental spiritual effect on us. The latter is not a punishment but the reality brought on by sin:

The moment a person sins he lessens his own worth, brings himself down and becomes spiritually defective, thus foregoing his former status. [...] This is not a form of punishment, or a fine, and is not imposed in a spirit of anger, wrath, or vindictiveness. It is a “metaphysical” corruption of the human personality, of the divine image of man.²

This is borne out by two episodes in the Torah.

After Kayin killed his brother Hevel, God said to him: “Why are you distressed, why has your countenance fallen? Surely, if you improve, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve yourself, sin crouches at the door” (Genesis 4:6-7). The Ramban elaborated that his sin was followed by shame, and that God was telling him that if he did not repent his sin would set itself by the door to his house, causing him to stumble in all his endeavors.³ In other words, sin brings psychological distress, disquietingly intrudes on one’s personal space, and impedes spiritual progress.

Much later, as a consequence of the golden calf, God said He Himself would not travel in the midst of the Jewish people. “The people heard this bad news and mourned” (Exodus 33:4). The Rav observed:

¹ Ramban on Leviticus 4:2.

² Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 52.

³ Ramban on Genesis 4:7.

In the wake of sin comes a strong feeling of sorrow. The previous day they had engaged in wild, joyous celebration around the calf, but now they felt the bitter sorrow of mourning. [...]

What does the sinner mourn? He mourns that which he irretrievably lost.⁴ What has he lost? Everything. The sinner has lost his purity, his holiness, his integrity, his spiritual wealth, the joy of life, the spirit of sanctity in man; all that gives meaning to life and content to human existence.⁵

Atonement versus Purification

In line with the dual notion of sin articulated above, the Rav distinguished between atonement (כִּפּוּר) and purification (טְהוּרָה). Such a distinction is in fact reflected in the language used to describe Yom Kippur: “For on this day He shall provide atonement (יְכַפֵּר) for you to purify (לְטַהֵר) you; from all your sins before the Lord shall you be purified (תִּטְהַרְוּ)” (Leviticus 16:30). How do they differ?

The root of the word for atonement (כ-פ-ר) helps to explain its role. The cover (כַּפֹּת) on the ark served to protect what was inside, and in the same way atonement protects us from punishment.⁶ Rashi observed that “whenever the term *kapparah* is used in connection with a matter of trespass and sin... it has the connotation of wiping away and removal.”⁷ Therefore, when a Jew fulfills the requirements of repentance and, if required, brings a sacrifice, he or she is protected from punishment and the liability is removed.⁸

It was Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi’s opinion that Yom Kippur is so inherently powerful that even those who have not repented receive atonement.⁹ The Rav understood this to be due to the proximity of God. One might think that being forgiven requires spiritually cleansing oneself first. But on Yom Kippur God cannot wait any longer, as it were, and he calls out to us, visits our homes, and purifies us Himself. “Who purifies you?” Rabbi Akiva asked rhetorically. “God is the mikveh of Yisrael” (Jeremiah 17:13).¹⁰ God wants us to be close to Him, and so forgives in a fashion far more expedient than usual.¹¹

The Rav was quick to point out, however, that the day’s power, when “the king is in the field,” is limited to atonement. Wiping away cleans and protects a surface, it is not a deep cleansing. Purification is of necessity thoroughgoing and requires much more elbow grease, though of course it remains within reach. It demands “a complete breaking away from the

⁴ Similarly, in his *Aderet Eliyahu*, the Vilna Gaon understood God’s question to Adam in the wake of the sin, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9), to mean, “What has happened to you? Look at what you have lost.” The emphasis is on sin’s disastrous effect on man.

⁵ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:296–297.

⁶ The very first time the root appears is when Noach is told “and cover (וְכִפֵּרְתָּ) [the ark] with pitch” (Genesis 6:14). Here, too, it indicates a protective layer.

⁷ Rashi on Genesis 32:21, quoted and translated in Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 51.

⁸ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 50–51.

⁹ *Yoma* 85b.

¹⁰ Mishnah, *Yoma*, 8:9.

¹¹ Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron*, 242–243.

environment, from the contributing factors, and all the forces which created the atmosphere of sin.”¹² One must embark on sincere soul-searching and really transform into a new person, and this can be the work of a lifetime. For the vast majority of mortals it cannot be achieved in a single day, no matter how close God is and how much we yearn to change.

Purification is what God truly desires of us, for us. A leitmotif in the Torah’s description of sacrifices is that they are a pleasing aroma to God (ריח ניחוח לה'). This appears already when Noach offers his sacrifice (Genesis 8:21) and continues throughout the rest of the Torah. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg commented that what pleases God is not the aroma of the sacrifice wafting to Heaven, so to speak, but the scent of a freshly laundered soul.¹³

The achievement of purification, claimed the Rav, can be felt. God told the Jewish people: “I have erased your sins as a haze and your transgressions as a vanished cloud; return to me for I have redeemed you” (Isaiah 44:22). The Rav elucidated the figurative imagery:

The erasure of sin resembles the dissipation and disappearance of the clouds which obscures the shining sun. When a man achieves repentance of purification, all the clouds above disperse and he feels the pure rays of the sun shining upon him and his entire being is permeated with: “For I have redeemed you.”¹⁴

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

How can we strengthen our inner resolve to successfully refrain from sin? One traditional recommendation is to remind ourselves that the heavenly court keeps tabs on our transgressions: “Reflect on three things and you will avoid transgression... that you will give an account and reckoning...”¹⁵ All of us will ultimately stand in judgment before our Maker. For those with powerful imaginations, picturing this scene in the mind’s eye is effective; for others, it is too removed from reality for its immediacy to be felt.

Perhaps the Rav’s treatment of sin and repentance proves helpful here. To sin is to cause harm to our psyche and emotional wellbeing. Knowing the anguish that will follow, the guilt and the melancholy that become our bedfellows, may help convince us to steer clear of such ruinous conduct. Aside from the reflex of avoiding pain, we also naturally gravitate towards that which brings us pleasure and joy. Frowns turn to smiles when the sun breaks through the clouds and glints on our sparkling, polished souls.

¹² Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 56.

¹³ *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabalah* on Leviticus 1:9, s.v. עולה אשה ריח ניחוח.

¹⁴ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 66.

¹⁵ *Pirkei Avot*, 3:1.