

The Concept of Forgiveness in Judaism

In the Bible

The Biblical concept of Divine Forgiveness reveals the view of a compassionate Deity who responds accordingly to human contrition and moral rehabilitation.

In contrast to the prevailing religious mindset of the societies surrounding the people of Israel, the Hebrew Bible does not view rituals as inherently efficacious. This point is underscored by the sacrificial formula of forgiveness. Whereas the required ritual is carried out by the priest, its desired end – forgiveness - is granted solely by God, e.g., “the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin and he shall be forgiven,” i.e., by God (Lev. 4:26). Another limitation placed upon sacrificial means of obtaining forgiveness is that it can only apply to inadvertent errors (Num. 15:22-29). Blatant contempt of God cannot be expiated by sacrifice (Num. 15:30-31 ; I Sam. 3:14) or any other means (Ex. 23:21 ; Josh. 24:19). Above all, contrition and compassion are the indispensable coefficients of all rituals of forgiveness, whether they be expiatory sacrifices (Lev. 5:5-6 ; 16:21 ; Num. 5:6-7) or litanies for fasting (Joel 2:12-14 ; I Sam. 7:5-6).

Indeed, man’s involvement both in conscience and deed is a *sine qua non* for securing divine forgiveness. It is not enough to hope and pray for pardon: man must humble himself, acknowledge his wrong, and resolve to depart from sin (e.g. II Sam. 12:13ff. ; 1 Kings 21:27-29). The psalms provide ample evidence that penitence and confession are integral components of all prayers for forgiveness (Ps. 32:5 ; 38:19 ; 41:5 ; Lam. 3:40ff.). The many synonyms for contrition testify to its primacy in the human effort to restore the desired relationship with God, e.g. seek the Lord (II Sam. 12:16 ; 21:1), search for Him (Amos 5:4), humble oneself before Him (Lev. 26:41), direct the heart to Him (I Sam. 7:3), and lay to heart (II King 22:19). The rituals of penitence, such as weeping, fasting, rending clothes, and donning sackcloth and ashes (II Sam. 12:16 ; Joel 1:13 ; Ezra 9:3ff. ; 10:1, 6) are unqualifiedly condemned by the prophets if they do not correspond with, and give expression to the involvement of the heart (Isa. 1:10ff. ; 29:13 ; Hos. 7:14 ; Joel 2:13).

At the same time, inner contrition must be followed by outward acts; remorse must be translated into deeds. Two stages are involved in this process: first, the negative one of ceasing to do evil (Isa. 33:15 ; Ps. 15 ; 24:4) and then, the positive step of doing good (Isa. 1:17 ; 58:5ff. ; Jer. 7:3 ; 26:13 ; Amos 5:14-15 ; Ps. 34:15-16 ; 37:27). Again, the richness of the biblical language used to describe man’s active role in the process testifies to its centrality, e.g., incline the heart to the Lord (Josh. 24:23), make oneself a new heart (Ezek. 18:31), circumcise the heart (Jer. 4:4), wash the heart (Jer. 4:14), and break one’s fallow ground (Hos. 10:12). However, all these expressions are subsumed and summarized by one verb which dominates the penitential literature of the Bible, *shuv*, “to turn, to return” which develops ultimately into the rabbinic doctrine of *teshuvah* (“repentance”). This doctrine implies that man has been endowed by God with the power of “turning”. He can turn from evil to the good, and the very act of turning will activate God’s response and lead to forgiveness.

What is the source of the biblical optimism that man's turning will generate divine movement to pardon him? This confidence resides in a number of assumptions concerning the nature of God, as presumed by the unique concept of Covenant. Covenant implies mutuality of obligation; in the case of Israel that the people's fidelity to God's demands will be matched by God's response to Israel's needs, particularly in his attitude of forgiveness (e.g., II Sam. 24:14, 17 ; cf. Ps. 25:10-11 ; 80 ; 103:17-18 ; 106:45). That is why Moses can continue to plead with God despite the lapses of his people, because of his certainty that God's forgiveness is a constant of His nature (Num. 14:18-20; Ex. 32:11ff. ; 34:6ff.). Again, the profusion of idioms expressing Divine forgiveness e.g., overlook sin (Micah 7:18), not reckon it (Ps. 32:2), not remember it (Ps 25:7), hide His face from it (Ps. 51:11), suppress it, remove it (Ps. 103:12), throw it behind his back (Isa. 38:17) or into the sea (Micah 7:19), points to the centrality of this concept.

Another Covenant image which invokes God's attitude of forgiveness is His role of Father and Shepherd. A father's love for his children (Ex. 4:22 ; Num. 11:12 ; Deut. 32:6, 19 ; Isa. 64:7) can lead them to hope that their sins will be forgiven (Jer. 3:19 ; 31:19 ; Hos. 11:1ff.). Furthermore, this parental relationship shows that Israel's suffering is not inflicted as retribution for their sins but as corrective discipline – "afflictions of love" so that Israel may correct its way (Deut. 8:5 ; Prov. 3:12).

Another component of the Covenant is that God responds to the mediation of an intercessor. He is not bound to comply – in contradistinction to the coercive claims of the pagan magician – for God will reject even the mediation of the most righteous when Israel's sins have exceeded the limit of His forbearance (Jer. 15:1 ; Ezek. 14:13-20). Intercession is, first and foremost, the function of Israel's prophets. Indeed, the only time Abraham is called a prophet is at the precise moment when his intercessory powers are invoked (Gen. 20:7). A principle concern is to intervene on behalf of the people (e.g. Ex. 9:27ff. ; 10:16ff. ; 34:8-9 ; Num. 12:11ff. ; 21:7ff. ; Deut. 9:16 ; 10:10 ; Jer. 15:1). The Psalmist singles this out in his eulogy of Moses: "(God) said He would have destroyed them, had not Moses, the chosen one, stood in the breach before Him" (Ps. 106:23). To "stand in the breach" is for Ezekiel the main function of the prophet (Ezek. 13:5 ; 22:30).

An equally significant concomitant of God's Covenant is His promise to the forefathers that the people of Israel will exist forever and of the eternal inheritance of the Land of Israel. This aspect of the Covenant is constantly invoked in pleas for forgiveness (Ex. 2:24 ; 3:6 ; 15-16 ; 4:5 ; 6:3-5 ; Lev. 26:42 ; Deut. 4:31, 37 ; 7:8, 12 ; 8:18 ; 9:5, 27 ; 13:18 ; 29:12 ; Josh. 18:3 ; 21:44 ; I Kings 18:36ff. ; II Kings 13:23 ; Isa. 41:8 ; 51:2 ; Micah 7:20 ; Ps. 105-9 ; Neh. 9:7 ; II Chron. 30:6).

This promise to the forefathers bears a final corollary. Because of the Covenant, God's honor is at stake in the world. Israel's woes will not be comprehended by the nations as divine punishment for its Covenant violations but as God's inability to fulfill His covenant obligations. This argument features prominently in Moses' intercession (Ex. 32:12 ; Num. 14:13-16) and is mentioned repeatedly in subsequent prayers for Israel's pardon (Josh. 7:9 ; Ps. 74:10, 18 ; 83:3, 19 ; 92:9-10 ; 109:27 ; 143:11-12). Conversely, the argument continues, it is important for God to redeem Israel for the glorification and sanctification of His name throughout the world (Ps. 79:6 ; 102:16 ; 115:1 ; 138:3-5) even if Israel itself is undeserving of forgiveness (Isa. 48:9-11 ; Ezek. 36:22ff.).

DIVINE FORGIVENESS

The theme of God's forgiveness for man's sins is recurrent in Talmudic and Midrashic literature and reappears in later rabbinic writings and the synagogue liturgy. Its main theological purport is to counterbalance, and indeed outweigh, the strongly entrenched rabbinic belief in the inevitable punishment of sin. The rabbinic outlook on the subject may be most simply expressed as "God is just": "He rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked" (Principle number 11 of Maimonides' 13 principles of the Jewish faith). Only the unrepentant sinner incurs His wrath: the sinner who repents is always forgiven. Thus the Talmud states, "He who sins and regrets his act is at once forgiven" (Hag. 5a ; Ber. 12b) and the Midrash states, "Says the Holy One, even if they (your sins) should reach to Heaven, if you repent I will forgive" (Pes. Rab. 44:185a ; see Yal. Ps. 835). The Tosefta even gives a statistical figure to the matter, basing itself on Exodus 34:6-7, and says that God's quality of forgiveness is five hundred fold that of His wrath (Tosef., Sot. 4:1).

The idea is more picturesquely expressed in the Talmudic image of God praying to Himself that His mercy should prevail over His anger and that He should forgive them even though strict justice would demand their punishment (Ber. 7a). The whole of Jewish thought on the subject stems from the forgiving character of God depicted in the 13 Divine attributes as revealed to Moses (Ex. 34:6-7). The rabbinic mind embroiders the fundamental biblical idea in a homiletic way, thus giving encouragement and hope to the sinner who would turn to God but is troubled by the burden of his past deeds. The liturgy of the Day of Atonement, and indeed its very role, bears eminent testimony to the central role that the idea of God's forgiveness plays within Jewish religious practice.

Maimonides formulates the breadth of the Jewish attitude on Divine forgiveness thus: "Even if a man has sinned his whole life and repents on the day of his death, all his sins are forgiven him" (Yad. Teshuvah 2:1). Though this forgiveness is always ultimately forthcoming, for various categories of sin it only comes into effect when the Day of Atonement, or the sinner's death, or both, have finalized the atonement (Yoma 85b ff. ; Yad. Loc.cit., 1:4).

In later rabbinic literature, ideas about God's forgiveness are variations on the original theme outlined above, though now and again, the emphasis is changed. In Hasidic writings, for example, where the dominant notion of God is that of a merciful father, there is a tendency to overstress His quality of forgiveness at the expense of His quality of justice. Nahman of Bratslav, one of the early Hasidic leaders, writes: "There is no sin that will not be forgiven by sincere repentance. Every saying to the contrary in the Talmud and the Zohar is not to be understood literally." (*Likkutei Etzot ha-Shalem* (1913), 119). R. Nahman is adverting here to certain categories of sinners who, it is claimed, will never be forgiven because of the nature of their crimes, however genuine their repentance. Among those said to be excluded from God's grace are those whose sins involved a desecration of God's name or caused an evil repute to fall on their fellow, or even those who indulged in evil language in general (TJ, BK 8:10, 6c ; ARN 39, 116 ; Zohar, Num. 161a). But R. Nahman's interpretation is according to the tradition that no sinner was ever absolutely excluded from the sphere of God's forgiveness (see Yad, Teshuvah, 1:4 ; RH 18a ; S. Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, ch. 18 and references cited). The

intention of those texts that do seem to exclude certain classes of sinner can be interpreted as a way of emphasizing the gravity of the sins involved.

There are two further general points. Rabbinic literature is on the whole concerned with God's forgiveness for the individual sinner, rather than for Israel as a nation (the latter is more characteristic of the prophetic ethos than the rabbinic, for during most of the creative period of rabbinic thought, Israel had ceased to exist as a cohesive national entity). Forgiveness is always and only consequent on repentance (the idea of an arbitrary grace is almost totally absent).

HUMAN FORGIVENESS

God's forgiveness, however extensive, only encompasses those sins which man commits directly against Him, "*bein adam la-Makom*"; those in which an injury is caused to one's fellow man, "*bein adam le-havero*", are not forgiven until the injured party has himself forgiven the perpetrator. Hence the custom of seeking forgiveness from those one may have wronged on the eve of the Day of Atonement, without which proper atonement cannot be made (Yoma 8:9, basing itself on Lev. 16:30 "...all your sins before the Lord," i.e., and not to man: Yad. Loc. Cit., 2:9 ; Sh. Ar., OH, 605:1 ; see also RH 17b ; Sifra, Aharei Mot, *Perek* 8).

The law regarding physical injury, for example, is explicit in that even after the various compensatory payments have been made, the inflictor of the damage must seek the forgiveness of the injured party for the suffering caused (BK 92a ; Yad, Hovel u-Mazzik 5:9 ; Sh. Ar., HM, 422). Not only must he who sins against his fellow seek forgiveness from him, but the one sinned against is duty bound to forgive. "Man should be pliant as a reed, not hard like the cedar" in granting forgiveness (Ta'an. 20a). The Talmud also states: "All who act mercifully (i.e. forgivingly) toward their fellow creatures will be treated mercifully by Heaven, and all who do not act mercifully toward their fellow creatures will not be treated mercifully by Heaven" (Shab. 151b ; see also RH, 17a ; Meg. 28a). If the injured party refuses to forgive even when the sinner has come before him three times in the presence of others and asked for forgiveness, then he is in turn deemed to have sinned (see Mid. Tanh. Hukkat 19). He is called *akhzari* ("cruel"). The unforgiving man is not truly of the seed of Abraham (Bez. 32b), since one of the distinguishing marks of all of Abraham's true descendants is that they are forgiving. The quality of forgiveness was one of the gifts God bestowed on Abraham and his seed (Yer. 79a ; Num R. 8:4 ; Yad, Teshuvah 2:10).

The rabbis go even further in the ethical demands made upon the injured party, for not only must he be ready to forgive his injurer, he should also pray that God forgive the sinner before he has come to beg forgiveness (Yad, loc. cit. ; Tosef., BK 9:29 ; *Sefer Hasidim* ed. Margalioth 1957, 267 no. 360). This demand is based on the example of Abraham, who prayed to God to forgive Abimelech (Gen. 20:17). The reasons the injured party should be ready to forgive the injurer are mixed. On the one hand is the self-regarding consideration, already mentioned, that forgiveness to one's fellow wins forgiveness from Heaven. As Philo states: "If you ask pardon for your sins, must you also forgive those who have trespassed against you? For remission is granted for remission" (Works of Philo ed. Mangey, 2 (1742), 670 ; see also Yoma 23a). On the other hand there is the purer motive of *imitatio dei*. Just as it is in the nature of God to be merciful to His creatures, so man in attempting to imitate the ways of God should be forgiving toward those who have injured him (Shab. 133b). In the words of the sage Abba Shaul "Just as He is compassionate

and merciful so you be compassionate and merciful” (Mekh. Canticles, 3). R. Nahman combines both motives when he says: “Imitate God by being compassionate and forgiving. He will in turn have compassion on you, and pardon your offenses” (op. cit. 81-91).