

Inside Sin and Sacrifice

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What does it mean when we talk about sin? While “for the sins we have sinned before You” is, perhaps, one of the most resonant, haunting of prayers, the term “sin” feels so archaic, so static. And behavior once considered to be fundamentally sinful is now part of the daily life of many Jews who recite those words during the High Holidays. We begin this issue with explorations of the meaning of sin in the writings of four, vastly different modern thinkers (Nachman of Breslov, Rav Kook, Franz Kafka, and Judith Plaskow). We've also asked a number of rabbis and teachers to muse about the role sin plays in their thinking and teaching about guilt and repentance. Elsewhere in the issue, Steve Greenberg explores the changing meaning of sin and what occurs when behavior once deemed an abomination moves outside the realm of moral sin.

In his essay, Leon Morris suggests that we rehabilitate the essence of sacrifice (now understood as prayer and study). Drawing on a verse from the prophet Hosea, we observe – both in collaborative drawing and poetry the language and rites of the Temple transformed, the essence of the sacrificial system reclaimed.

Shana tova—may it be a transformative year, Susan Berrin

**Sin and New Beginnings:
 R. Nachman of Breslov**

Eliezer Shore

The weight of sin has shifted over the last few centuries. There was a time when sin was directed primarily against God, when it meant the throwing off of His yoke, or the betrayal of one’s nation or community. For the mystic, it was the cause of vast, often irreparable, cosmic damage. Sins weighed heavily upon people’s shoulders back then — like the burden of the tradition they had carried for 3,000 years, like the myriad spiritual worlds that rested upon each human deed.

Today, we look at sin somewhat differently, feeling the desecration of our lives more than that of the tradition, the debasement of our homes and families more than that of our

nation. And, of course, we have sinned against the earth, the consequence of which now bears down upon us no less ominously than the supernal worlds once did.

Of all the great Hasidic masters, none felt the burden of sin more acutely than Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Though raised in the traditional, Eastern-European world, he foresaw the rise of the modern era and its problems. His approach to sin is unique and original.

Whereas the entire kabbalistic-Hasidic tradition that preceded him saw sin as a concealment of God’s face, R. Nachman saw it as a moment of revelation — an encounter with the Divine that tells us as much about ourselves and our task in this world as any direct communication. For R. Nachman, the problem of sin is never in the act itself, nor even in the damage it causes, which is always repairable. Rather, it

Sin creates the empty space in our lives that allows for the creation of something new... a hidden treasure.

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Eliezer Shore teaches Hasidism and Jewish thought at the Rothberg International School at Hebrew University, the Overseas Program at Bar-Ilan University, and several colleges and institutions in the Jerusalem area. A collection of his writings will soon appear under the title: The Face of the Waters: Hasidic Teachings and Stories for the Twenty-First Century.

lies solely in the context within which we frame it. If our failures lead us to despair and hopelessness, then we have doubly sinned; if they motivate us to change, then they are redeemed.

The problem is that there is an inherent blind spot in the human psyche that allows us to see only the negative repercussions of our deeds, especially in areas in which we repeatedly fail, to the point where correction seems unlikely, if not impossible. Then it is easy to fall into what R. Nachman considers the greatest sin — the sin of despair.

Yet, as R. Nachman points out, if a person has fallen a thousand times, it means that he or she has also tried rising a thousand times, thus making the fall an indispensable part of each new beginning. Seen this way, precisely that which pushes a person away from his goal is actually propelling him closer. Starting again is so important — R. Nachman would say, the most important thing — because it partakes of God’s own essence as the fountain of life and renewal.

This leads R. Nachman to make an extraordinary statement: “It is to a person’s great advantage that he has an inclination to evil (*yetzer ha-ra*), for he can then serve God with that very inclination, overcoming it in the heat of his passion and channeling it to the service

of God. Without an evil inclination, his service would not be worth anything. To this end, God allows the evil inclination to completely overwhelm a person — especially one who truly longs to come close to Him — to the point that he commits great sins and spiritual damage. But it is all worthwhile to God — for the sake of that small, noble effort a person makes to escape from it, in the midst of being overwhelmed. This is more precious to God than a thousand years of service without the evil inclination.” (*Meshivat Nefesh* 37)

It is as though the whole vast edifice of sin and transgression, of failure, guilt, and despair exist only so that, in the face of repeated transgressions, we learn the meaning of hope and renewal. To God, it is all worthwhile for the sake of that brief moment when we say in our hearts: “Tomorrow, I will be better.”

To R. Nachman, sin creates the empty space in our lives that allows for the creation of something new. This is the hidden treasure that sin carries within it — though it cannot be seen in the moment of the fall, lest the impetus for change be lost. Our sins *should* weigh heavily on us, for they provide the leverage that propels us higher — to live a new life in God’s light. “The main thing is for a person to forget everything that happened, and start again.”

Sin as Corrective: Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook

Shaul Magid

In his three-volume collection of essays, aphorisms, and diary entries published posthumously as *Orot ha-Kodesh (Lights of Holiness)*, Rav Kook (1865–1935) buries what appears to be an incidental comment about sin in a longer discourse on messianism:

“Attachment to God, in its most exalted

Our response to sin should not be enclosure but expansion. Secular culture is not a temptress, nor is our participation in it a concession.

and pristine manner does not stand in opposition, in any way, to the world or life in general. Rather, attach-

ment to God serves to both prepare and expand the world in all its facets. If Israel did not sin they would not have been presented with correctives from the outside [i.e., general culture], all of which are needed in order to perfect themselves in every manner of their existence. However, sin (also) caused the con-

cealment of supernal thought. What remained was only a shadow of its [Israel’s] existence, which does not have the capacity to embrace the absolute nature of divine thought. These outside influences cannot serve to expand [and redeem] the world until they are directed toward accomplishing this attachment to God, a [synthetic] talent which is lacking [in Israel, as a consequence of exile]. Therefore, Israel needs to be scattered in exile (*pizur hagalut*) in order to correct this inherent lack in its own constitution — to absorb the best qualities in all the nations in order to perfect its essential character...”[author’s translation]

In this passage sin is constructed as both a consequence of Israel’s weakness and an opportunity for its healing. I am taking license to translate Kook’s “general culture” (an enigmatic term in Kook’s writing) as secular culture, often viewed by tradition as something to avoid. Yet Kook suggests that exposure to