



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 14: Jewish Views of Sin and Guilt

While Jewish people often joke about their proclivity if not predisposition toward guilt for all manner of occurrence, sociologists have confirmed that there is nothing particularly Jewish about subsuming guilt. Yet, as Judaism is a behavior-based theology, our actions when we do wrong, lead us toward assuming responsibility for those actions.

In contrast to Christianity, Judaism holds that we are neither born with sin, nor do we place responsibility for our sin within the realm of divine forces. To be clear, there is no concept of original sin in Jewish theology. As with Adam and Eve, God creates us as innocent human beings. In exercising our God-given free will, we choose to make the wrong choices when we do wrong in the world.

As Jews, we do not expect a deity to carry responsibility for our bad choices. Nor do we attribute the temptation to do wrong to some evil character. The notion of a devil--an adversary to God who tempts us to sin--does not fit into the central Jewish tenet of personal responsibility for our actions. The oft repeated cycle beginning with the Torah - our sacred text - is one of wrongdoing, punishment or consequences for that wrong behavior, atoning for the behavior, and forgiveness.

As to what constitutes sin within Judaism, it is important to note that sin is generally related to actions rather than thoughts and beliefs. The foundational source for sin in the Jewish tradition is the Written Torah, the Five Books of Moses. As traditionally understood, the Torah contains 613 commandments--both negative commandments or commandments describing prohibitive acts, and positive commandments requiring action on our part.¹ In addition to the commandments, subsequent *halakhah*--Jewish law--goes further in providing the parameters of what constitutes good behavior versus what is considered wrongdoing.

¹ To learn more about the Jewish system of commandments, or *mitzvot*, please refer to “What is a Mitzvah?,” another episode in the “Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic” series.

Another way Judaism categorizes the commandments and *halakhah* is by differentiating between actions considered to be between humans and God on the one hand, and interpersonal behavior, behavior amongst human beings, on the other. This distinction is important in that we can be forgiven by God for our misdeeds toward God through the liturgy, which replaced the sacrificial cult of sin and guilt offerings. However, for sins committed against another human being, we must apologize and make it right with that person. Otherwise, we receive no forgiveness from God.

Historically the idea of personal responsibility is deeply embedded as an explanation for any disaster that befell the Jewish people. One prime example is the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE² by the Babylonians. There is ample historical evidence that attributes the destruction of the First Temple and subsequent exile of the Jewish people to Babylonian imperialism. Jerusalem was just one of many city-states that were attacked and conquered by the Babylonians.

Yet, the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament, lays the blame firmly on the callous behavior and sinful ways of the people. Jewish scholar Dr. Ronald Brauner references this dynamic by citing the Prophet Jeremiah: "...[T]he Lord constantly sent all [God's] servants the prophets to you, but you would not listen...**Because you would not listen to My words**, I am going to send all the peoples of the north -declares the Lord-and for My servant, King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon and bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all those nations roundabout...This whole land shall be a desolate ruin."³ In other words, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

As Jews, we assume that blame is not a fixed position without a way to move beyond and forward to a better state of being. That would leave us mired in that place of acute Jewish guilt. There are certainly consequences for sin, and we accept that there are such consequences, including a feeling of guilt for those we have hurt. After experiencing these consequences, Judaism provides a process of atonement to move forward. Atonement or repentance for sin/wrongdoing is a pathway to forgiveness.

Jewish tradition affirms that true repentance requires tangible actions in order to receive Divine forgiveness. In Hebrew the word for repentance is *teshuvah*, from the Hebrew root *shuv*, which means to turn or return. In Judaism the process of repentance begins with the acknowledgement of having committed a sin that comes with an apology. However, full repentance and subsequent forgiveness is not attained with just an apology. Until we have made a 180-degree turn—turning from wrong behavior to right action—we have not achieved repentance. In other words, when faced with the same situation, would we act in the same wrongful way, or would we have realized the need to change and act with comity?

With all of our human imperfection we always have the opportunity for repentance and thereby God's benevolent power of redemption. In that way, we always have the incentive to improve our behavior and live with hope for a brighter future.

² BCE: Before the Common Era, nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians in place of B.C.

³ Jeremiah 25:3, 8-9, 11

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