

# Teshuva – The Great Turning: Its Moral and Mystical History

Rabbi Daniel Landes, Pardes

## 1. Rav Kook: Teshuva Comes

Teshuvah Comes  
Rav Kook

Teshuvah, she comes  
and on my doorstep stands  
She knocks upon my door  
And here I am scared to open up to her  
wide the gates of my heart  
O - Lord save me, now.

הַתְּשׁוּבָה בָּאָה

הַתְּשׁוּבָה, הִיא בָּאָה  
וְעַל פֶּתַח עוֹמְדָה,  
דּוֹפְקָה הִיא אֶת דְּלֶתִי,  
וְהִנְי חֵשׁ לְפָתַח לְפָנֶיהָ  
לְרוֹחָה אֶת שַׁעְרֵי לִבִּי,  
אֲנִי ד' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא.

(translation D. Landes)

## 2. Talmud Yerushalmi, Makkot 2:6

- [A] Said R. Phineas: “ ‘Good and upright [is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way]’ (Ps. 25:8).
- [B] “Why is he good? Because he is upright.
- [C] “And why is he upright? Because he is good.
- [D] “ ‘Therefore he instructs sinners in the way’—that is, he teaches them the way to repentance.”
- [E] They asked wisdom, “As to a sinner, what is his punishment?”
- [F] She said to them, “Evil pursues the evil” (Prov. 13:21).
- [G] They asked prophecy, “As to a sinner, what is his punishment?”
- [H] She said to them, “The soul that sins shall die” (Ez. 18:20).
- [I] They asked the Holy One, blessed be he, “As to a sinner, what is his punishment?”
- [J] He said to them, “Let the sinner repent, and his sin will be forgiven for him.”
- [K] This is in line with the following verse of Scripture: “Therefore he instructs sinners in the way” (Ps. 25:8).

## 17. Rav Kook: Orot HaTeshuvah, The Lights of Penitence

Orot HaTeshuva  
THE LIGHTS OF PENITENCE  
Rav Kook

### Chapter One

#### *Penitence According to Nature, Faith and Reason*

We encounter the phenomenon of penitence on three levels: penitence according to nature, penitence according to faith and penitence according to reason. Penitence according to nature may be divided into two parts: the physical and the spiritual.

Physical penitence is related to all transgressions against the laws of nature, and such laws of morals and the Torah as are linked to the laws of nature. Every act of wrongdoing must in the end engender illness and pain, and the individual as well as society is exposed to much suffering as a result of this. After it becomes clear that the person himself, as a result of his misbehavior, is responsible for his distress, he necessarily gives thought to correcting his condition, to conforming to the laws of life, to becoming obedient to the laws of nature, of morality and of the Torah, that he may be renewed in life's vitality.

The science of medicine concerns itself a good deal with this, but this important phenomenon has not yet been fully clarified. We have not yet found the answer to all questions pertaining to physical penitence, to clarify how far it is possible within the delimitations of existence to restore to a person all the losses he sustained as a result of those offenses that damage the body and its functions. It appears that this phase of penitence is linked in a profound way with other forms of penitence—the spiritual phase of natural penitence, and penitence according to faith and penitence according to reason.

The spiritual dimension of natural penitence is more

inward. It embraces the role of what is called the "reprimand of the conscience." It is a requisite of human nature to pursue the righteous path, and when a person strays from the right course, when he lapses into sin, then, if he has not suffered a total spiritual degeneration, his sensitivity will cause him disquiet, and he will suffer pain. He will become zealous to repent, to redress his wrongdoing, until he can feel that his sin has been purged away. This dimension of penitence is very complicated. It is dependent on many subjective and objective conditions, and it is open to many possibilities of misjudgment that one must guard against. This is, however, one of the foundations on which the essence of penitence depends.

After the natural phase of penitence comes penitence inspired by religious faith. This phase of penitence is operative as a result of religious tradition, which frequently concerns itself with penitence. The Torah promises the penitent forgiveness. The sins of individuals and of the community are purged away through penitence. The prophets abound with exalted utterances on the subject of penitence. In a general way all the admonitions of the Torah deal with penitence from the perspective of religious faith. From its conceptual depth flow endless details. A clarification of their basic principles alone calls for considerable discussion and many explanations.

Penitence according to reason comes after penitence according to nature and religious faith have already taken place. It represents the peak of penitential expression. This level of penitence is inspired not only by a natural malaise, physical or spiritual, or by the influence of religious tradition, whether it has induced in the person a fear of retribution or conditioned him to the acceptance of some law or precept. It is also inspired by a comprehensive outlook on life that came to crystallization after the natural and religious phases of penitence had registered their influence. This phase of penitence, in which the previous are included, abounds in endless delight. It

transforms all the past sins into spiritual assets. From every error it derives noble lessons, and from every lowly fall it derives the inspiration for the climb to splendid heights. This is the type of penitence toward which all aspire, which must come and which is bound to come. )

## Chapter Two

### *Sudden and Gradual Penitence*

In terms of time, penitence may be divided into two parts: sudden penitence and gradual penitence.

Sudden penitence comes about as a result of a certain spiritual flash that enters the soul. At once the person senses all the evil and the ugliness of sin and he is converted into a new being: already he experiences inside himself a complete transformation for the better. This form of penitence dawns on a person through the grace of some inner spiritual force, whose traces point to the depths of the mysterious.

There is also a gradual form of penitence. No sudden flash of illumination dawns upon the person to make him change from the depth of evil to the good, but he feels that he must mend his way of life, his will, his pattern of thought. By heeding this impulse he gradually acquires the ways of equity, he corrects his morals, he improves his actions, and he conditions himself increasingly to becoming a good person, until he reaches a high level of purity and perfection.

The higher expression of penitence comes about as a result of a flash of illumination of the all-good, the divine, the light of Him who abides in eternity. The universal soul, the spiritual essence, is revealed to us in all its majesty and holiness, to the extent that the human heart can absorb it. Indeed, is not the all of existence so good and so noble, and is not the good and the nobility in ourselves but an expression of our

relatedness to the all? How then can we allow ourselves to become severed from the all, a strange fragment, detached like tiny grains of sand that are of no value? As a result of this perception, which is truly a divinely inspired perception, comes about penitence out of love, in the life of the individual and in the life of society.

7. The whole world is pervaded by harmony. The unifying congruence penetrates all branches of existence. The inner moral sense and its mighty claims represent an echo of the unitary voice of all parts of existence, all of which interpenetrate, and the self is permeated with them and united with all. Every moral severance in thought or deed, in character or disposition, creates many wounds that inflict many inner pains in all aspects of the soul. The basis of these spiritual pains is the disturbing force of withdrawing the light of life emanating from the general order of existence from the life channels of the sinning soul. The purer a soul is the more it will experience the disturbance of its pains, until it will still the pain in the life-stream of penitence, which flows from the divine source, which mends all the torn parts, and sends forth a life-restoring dew flowing directly from all realms of existence. There will be a reunion, the life-restoring flow will reach the soul that has been restored to its higher life in great mercy and abiding joy.

1. The revival of the nation is the foundation of the great penitence, the higher penitence of the Jewish people, and the penitence of the world that will follow it.

2. When one desires truly to repent, he may be held back by many impediments, such as mental confusion, or weakness, or the inability to mend some misdeed in the area of human relations. The hindrance may be very great, and he will necessarily suffer heartbreak because he knows the great obligation facing a person to mend his defects, in the best and most complete manner possible. However, since his desire to repent is firm, even if he cannot as yet overcome all the impediments, he must accept the reality of illumination of the will to penitence as the force that purifies and sanctifies, and not allow himself to be swayed by obstructions that have not allowed him to complete the process of penitence. He should reach out to every type of spiritual elevation appropriate for him, on the basis of the holiness of his soul and its holy desire. And as this is true in the case of the individual, it is also true in the case of the community as a whole. There is at work an illumination of penitence in the Jewish people. The renewal of the desire in the people as a whole to return to its land, to its essence, to its spirit and way of life—in truth, there is a

light of penitence in all this. Truly this comes to expression in the Torah: "And you shall return to the Lord your God" (Deut. 30:2); "When you return to the Lord your God" (Deut. 30:10).<sup>25</sup> The penitence spoken of is always an inner penitence, but it is covered over by many screens. No impediments or lack of completion can keep the higher light from reaching us.

← Chapter 8