

PART I

The Jewish Device of Repentance: From Individual, Divine-Human to Interhuman, Collective “Turning”

Create in me, O God, a pure heart;
give me a new and steadfast spirit.

PSALM 51:12

I shall give you a new heart
and put a new spirit within you.

EZEKIEL 36:26

“No other tradition has invested as much as Judaism in *tshuvah* [repentance],” proclaimed Rabbi Pesach Schindler to a group of Chinese educators at Yad Vashem learning about how to teach the Holocaust in China.¹ This may sound like a startling claim, considering the existence of similar ideas in other religious traditions.² Yet, when one considers the Holy Scriptures, in which the prophets’ calls for repentance are a constant fixture, in which stories of repentance (David’s, Jacob/Israel’s, Naaman’s, Nineveh’s, etc.) abound, in which expressions of repentance in confessional prayers

1. Remarks delivered at the International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem, 4 Oct. 2010. The author of this book was in the audience.

2. See Amitai Etzioni and David E. Carney, eds., *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

and songs suffuse the entire biblical fabric, not to mention the annual ritual of Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, it would hardly be an overstatement to claim that the idea of “turning,” which the Hebrew word *tshuvah* literally conveys, is central to the Jewish tradition. Indeed, the potency of this theological emphasis can also be felt in its “offshoot.” The litany of “confession literature” in the Christian world has caused Chinese literary scholars to reflect on the almost complete absence of such a genre in the history of Chinese literature.³ The Reformation began when a German monk went public against the church about what repentance (*Buße tun*) should be and should not be.⁴

The richness of this biblical tradition of repentance is also attested by the need to codify and explicate it for the benefit of Jewish communities. Maimonides’s *Doctrine of Repentance* and Rabbeinu Yonah’s *Gates of Repentance*, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries respectively, are among the best-known references. In the historical period around the time of the German plunge into Nazism, the idea of repentance was also prominent in the epoch-defining works of the German-Jewish cultural world, such as Franz Rosenzweig’s *Stern der Erlösung* and Martin Buber’s *Ich und Du*. In the words of Buber, “The event that is called repentance (*Umkehr*) from the side of the world is called from God’s side redemption (*Erlösung*).”⁵ For Rosenzweig, inner repentance (*innere Umkehr*) is that event through which fundamental attitudes toward “nothing” and “something” are reversed by revelation (*Offenbarung*).⁶ The uniqueness of the biblical paradigm is in fact rooted in its point of departure—it does not begin “speculations” with the “good” and the “perfect,” but with the “fallen” and the “broken,” not with the “pure” and the “unblemished,” but with the “messed-up” and the “downtrodden”—hence the need for “turning.”

3. See Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang, 罪與文學：關於文學懺悔意識與靈魂維度的考察 [Confession and Chinese Literature] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002). This bespeaks of course not the Chinese lack of imagination but of different frames of meaning circumscribing imagination.

4. See the first three “propositions” of Luther’s 95 Theses.

5. Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1979), 141.

6. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt a.M.: J. Kauffmann Verlag, 1921), 113–14.

Given this prominence of “repentance” in the Jewish and Christian symbolic universe in general and the German-Jewish one in particular, it is only legitimate to ask how this wealth of conceptualizations might have a bearing on the perceptions of the Shoah and, more precisely for our interest, of its *aftermath*. In other words, how might a repentance-informed perspective change how those affected by the Shoah see catastrophes, human atrocities, the perpetrators, the victims, the bystanders, and the “solutions”? And, if followed through, how might this repentance-informed course of action change the way they relate to each other *after* what is done is done and cannot be undone?

A mere section of a book is obviously not sufficient to provide even an outline of a sketch of the hermeneutical and theological significance of biblical repentance; were it possible, it would not have been really as pivotal as has been touted. What will be attempted here is to merely explore the few potencies that have the clearest relevance, in my view, to our inquiry into how human groups can “turn” after unspeakable atrocities have been done by one on the other. We will attempt to do this by reciting the Bußpsalmen, or the Psalms of Repentance, as keys (especially Psalm 51),⁷ to link up with and shed light on some other biblical passages, which promise together to unravel the cluster of knots (i.e., questions regarding justice and revenge, change and making amends, etc.) engendered by human wrongdoing. The aim is not to “unearth” anything theologically new, but to outline a paradigm that is “usable” in the subsequent historical analysis.

According to Christian tradition, the seven Psalms of Repentance are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143 (following the Hebrew numbering system). The exact origins of this selection are unknown: though as early as in the third century, there were already references to the repentance psalms (without specifying which were included); only from the sixth century do we have a concrete record (by Cassiodorus) of the use of these seven psalms as we know them today. From then on the collection *Psalmi poenitentiales* was often

7. The scriptures cited in this study are not arbitrarily chosen. Most of them stem from the “daily readings” of German Catholics in the period 2009–13. Portions of Psalm 51, for instance, are read regularly during Lent, when repentance is emphasized.

used (collectively and individually) in the liturgy of the church in the Middle Ages, which then was carried forward into Protestantism as “Bußpsalmen” by Luther, who had published an exegesis of these seven psalms even before the Reformation.⁸

It is important to keep in mind, however, that in the Jewish tradition not all of the seven are recognized—either as a group or individually—as particularly relevant to repentance. According to Willy Staerk, only Psalm 51 is explicitly captioned as a “repentance song.”⁹ It is therefore imprudent to assume that the Bußpsalmen represent Jewish understanding of repentance, even as the contents are, no doubt, from the Hebrew Bible. When the texts are used in this book as the starting point of its theorizing, it is by no means an affirmation of this false assumption; rather, this study proceeds again from the anthropological viewpoint: What do these texts—used and continuing to be used by German Christians and Germans in a Christianized culture—offer the perpetrators as “raw materials” for conceiving repentance, which are nonetheless not irrelevant to the victims? After all, the fact that the “Old Testament” is being used by Christians does not mean it stops being the Bible for the Jews. It is precisely this “bridging” characteristic of the Bußpsalmen—and the Psalms in general—that makes them a veritable spiritual resource in the wounded German-Jewish relationship.¹⁰

We’ll now first deal with the God-human relationship, and then turn to the interhuman, when repentance and reconciliation are concerned. We’ll demonstrate that, in the biblical tradition, both concepts are understood in specifically *relational* terms. We’ll further explore the boundaries (and problems) of transference, that is, the seeing of the interhuman *in light of* the God-human relationship.

8. See Willy Staerk, *Sünde und Gnade nach der Vorstellung des älteren Judentums, besonders der Dichter der sog. Bußpsalmen* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1905), 58–68. Also Heinz-Günter Beutler-Lotz, ed., *Die Bußpsalmen: Meditationen, Andachten, Entwürfe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 9–12.

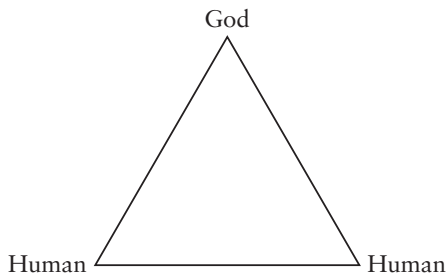
9. Staerk, *Sünde und Gnade*, 58.

10. See the contemporary use of the Psalms of Repentance in the German context in Beutler-Lotz, *Bußpsalmen*; and also Ludwig Schmidt, ed., *Umkehr zu Gott: Themagottesdienste zu Passion, Karfreitag, Bußtag und zu den Bußpsalmen* (Göttingen: Klotz, 1982).

“TURNING” IN THE GOD-HUMAN RELATIONSHIP (R₁–R₉)

In this first chapter, we’ll explore the conceptualizations of the God-human relationship given the condition that humans have already “messed up”—that is, they find themselves in a situation of inextricable guilt. In particular, we’ll ask how God relates to the sinner as presented in the biblical texts and how “repentance” (*Umkehr/Buße tun*) and “redemption/healing” (*Heil/Heilung*) are described and prescribed.

To organize our observations in this chapter, we employ a visual of a triangle to signal the triangular relationship between God and human, and the interhuman.



R1: The Sinner Is Not Sin

Psalms 51:4 Wash me thoroughly of my wrongdoing, and purify me of my sin.

Psalms 51:5 For I acknowledge my wrongdoing, and have my sin ever in mind.

Psalms 51:9 Cleanse me with hyssop, so I can become clean; wash me, so I can become white as snow.

Isaiah 1:18 Though your sins be as red as scarlet, they shall become as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

The first three verses above are taken from the fourth Bußpsalm (i.e., Ps 51), which, according to tradition, was a song of David's after the prophet Nathan had admonished him for his iniquity against Uriah the Hittite and his wife Bathsheba (2 Sm 11–12). A subtle but clear distinction has been made, or rather, reiterated:¹ that I, my wrongdoing (*Missetat*), and my sin (*Sünde*) are distinct entities but entangled as a result of “my doing.” That the sinner is not sin, and the criminal is not crime itself, is an essential distinction—though insufficient by itself—that makes “repentance” possible; for if a sinner/criminal is equated with sin/crime, or recognized as the embodiment of sin/evil itself, then “repentance” can have no meaning other than self-mortification, or suicide, and “reconciliation” becomes either an impossibility, or a “moving forward” that “sees no evil, condemns no evil.”

The biblical image of the sinner is not one of a “broken mirror” or “outpoured water,” that is, one whose “original perfection” is beyond repair.² Rather, as portrayed in the Bußpsalmen, the sinner is someone who is sullied by sin/misdeed, whose inherent

1. Needless to say, the fundamental affirmation of the value of human beings and their redeemability are among the core tenets of Jewish teachings (e.g., Gn 4:7; Ps 25:7).

2. These are common Chinese metaphors used to describe broken relationships and destructive acts, signifying perhaps pessimism about (complete) reconciliation.

dignity as a being created “in the image of God” (Gn 1:27) is nevertheless not thereby destroyed. As Maimonides put it, “The one who does repentance should not think of himself being very far removed from that high rank of the pious ones because of his wrongdoings and sins; for it is not the case; rather, he is just as beloved and sought after before the face of the creator as if he had never sinned.”³ In a striking passage in the book of Isaiah (19:21–25), this indestructible human dignity is explicitly granted even to the traditional enemies of the Israelites: the Egyptians and the Assyrians; hence the universal applicability of the sin/sinner distinction.⁴

Sin/misdeed can be “washed away”; the sinner can be “pardoned,” “excused,” and “purified”—but these actions, as emphasized by these verses, can only be completed by God, the injured party, the victim, not by the perpetrator himself, who must “turn to” his victim to seek purification.⁵ The promise of God to do just that (Is 1:18) is therefore the only hope left for those entangled in their own sins.

R2: The Twofold Damage of Sin

Psalm 51:6a Against you alone have I sinned; what is evil in your sight I have done.

This peculiar verse comes early in the fourth Bußpsalm. It is a repetition of David’s own answer to Nathan in the historical account

3. Moses Maimonides, “Die Lehre von der Buße,” in *Mischne Tora—Das Buch der Erkenntnis*, ed. Eveline Goodman-Thau and Christoph Schulte, Jüdische Quellen (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 479. This German translation dates back to the mid-nineteenth century.

4. But whether this “universal applicability” is universally accepted—that is, *reciprocal*—is another question. See also comparable formulations in Malachi 2:10 and Romans 3:29.

5. Nevertheless, Rabbeinu Yonah also stressed the importance of the participation of the sinner in this cleansing, hence interpreting Psalm 51:4 together with Jeremiah 4:14. Rabbeinu Yonah, *The Gates of Repentance*, trans. and comm. Yaakov Feldman (Northvale, NJ/Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1999), 12.

(2 Sm 12:13) and seems to answer directly the prophet's accusatory question: "Why did you despise Yahweh by doing what displeases him?" (v. 9) The verse is peculiar because, in our secular age, the victim in this case can only be Uriah the Hittite. Why is God offended when a wrongdoing has been committed by a human against a fellow human? And why did David, as in this verse from Psalm 51, recognize God *alone* as the one whom he had sinned against? Regardless of the theological explication of this peculiarity,⁶ one ramification of this way of seeing *victimhood* (the sinned-against-ness) is that both the perpetrator and the "victim" are called to see *beyond* each other, to "someone/thing else" that is the common focal point, in a situation where the relationship between them has been harmed by the wrongdoing of one (or both) of them, hence summoning the basic triangular structure of relationships.

Yet this triangular way of seeing is in no way a "diversion" from one's own guilt—which happens when the particular disappears in the general or universal. For in a biblical passage explicating this triangular relationship among God, the sinner, and the righteous, in which the human, balance-sheet-style "justice" is judged inferior to God's justice (Ez 18:21–28; see R4), it is specifically expressed that the sinner must *see* (v. 28) his wrongdoing/guilt/sin⁷ so that he can turn away from it and live.⁸ Hence it is not diversion or "dilution" that will result when one adopts the biblical triangular-relational paradigm, but rather an *insight* into one's own involvement—and hence guilt—in wrongdoing, for there is the extra dimension of sin. In this sense, David's seeing his crime against Uriah the Hittite

6. See also the same peculiarity in Luke 15:18, 21. One simple answer may lie right within the biblical text concerned: in 2 Samuel 12:9–10, a clear substitution has taken place in which the sword wielded by David on the family of Uriah is turned backward to his own family, and in which Yahweh substitutes Uriah as the injured party. In other words, Yahweh is presented as a god who takes offense when humans offend one another, who does not remain quiet in the face of injustice (Ps 50:21), and who will take vengeance on behalf of the victim.

7. The Lutherbibel (1984) uses *sehen*, which denotes a more general sense of seeing, whereas the Einheitsübersetzung (1980) uses *einsehen*, which implies understanding, realization, and conviction.

8. Cf. the negative formulation in Isaiah 6:10.

as a “sin against God” is not a “sidestepping” of his own guilt, or his responsibility toward the victim(s),⁹ but rather the recognition that something graver than what is purely legal or ethical has been breached—a divine order of existence has been damaged by the “evil done.”

A further collateral implication is that the healing potential of relationship, the bringing back to life of what has been devastated beyond human remedy, ultimately comes from God (or that “someone/thing else”) alone. Consequently, re-cognizing and re-turning to this “center,”¹⁰ which exists above and beyond the perpetrator and the victim, are hallmarks of those inspired by this spirit of repentance.

On the interhuman level, sin is also perceived as a sickness-/wound-inducing and chasm-generating relational event.¹¹ A sinner, or perpetrator, in this sense, is precisely one who has done that which hurts/ails particular relationships,¹² as the perpetrators of specific massacres and genocides have wounded specific, collective relationships, not only of their own generation, but of subsequent generations as well, because of the cross-generational properties

9. In fact, as we shall see in R14, facing God cannot replace facing the human victim.

10. “Umkehr ist das Wiedererkennen der Mitte, das Sich-wieder-hinwenden.” Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1979), 119. It is remarkable that this formulation of repentance links *tshuvah* (turning) and *meta-noia* (change of mind).

11. A question can be raised here: What about relationships that are “enhanced” *because of* sin? When soldiers watch each other’s back as they abuse their victims, for instance, and when father and son conceal each other’s wrongdoings, are their exclusive relationships not “improved”? Upon closer scrutiny, this “improvement” is in fact *impoverishment*: according to Wayne Cristaudo, instead of enjoying the full richness and abundance of human relationships, these sick dependencies close off this possibility by building upon a logic of damage, which ultimately gnaws back inward. See his *Power, Love, and Evil: Contribution to a Philosophy of the Damaged* (New York: Rodopi, 2008).

12. The real and significant differences between “sin” (*Sünde*) and “crime/wrongdoing” (*Verbrechen/Missetat*), and hence, “sinner” (*Sünder*) and “perpetrator” (*Täter*), are not to be understated. Sins are not necessarily crimes, and vice versa. The migration in word choice from “sinner” to “perpetrator” can thus only be justified where the wounding of relationships by the act of the sinner/perpetrator is concerned.

of sin (see **R12** in the following chapter). In the Bußpsalmen, we hear specific references to the sickening effects of sin and wrongdoing in interhuman relationships, as when the psalmist/perpetrator expresses loneliness (Ps 102:8). Not only has enmity among his enemies increased (Ps 6:8–9), but his friendships, love relationships, and neighborly relationships are also negatively affected (Ps 38:12). This is attributed to the self-inflicted, sin-induced wounds in himself (Ps 38:5–6).

In the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, “guilt” and “wrongdoing” in the Bußpsalmen are often expressed by a more relationally charged word, *Abtrünnigkeit*,¹³ which can be translated as “unfaithfulness” or “infidelity,” and is etymologically related to *Trennung*, or “separation.”¹⁴ One practical implication of this way of conceptualizing problems of interhuman—including international—relations is that it points to realities that are beyond justice and material reparation, and indicates that there is more to adjudicating between right and wrong, settling scores or national interests. The restoration of relationship—or the healing of relational wounds, “incurable” as they may seem (Jer 15:18)—becomes the binding vision of *both* the repentant perpetrator and the victim, with divine promise of participation (Jer 30:12, 17).

R3: Mercy Precedes Repentance; Repentance Responds to Mercy

Psalms 51:3 Have mercy on me, O God, in your love. In your great compassion blot out my sins.

Psalms 6:3–5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, . . . rescue me for the sake of your love.

Psalms 102:14 Arise, have mercy on Zion; this is the time to show her your mercy.

13. See, for example, Psalms 51:4–5, 13; 32:2, 5.

14. See *Duden Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*, ed. Werner Scholze-Stubenrecht (Mannheim/Zurich: Dudenverlag, 2011), s.v. “abtrünnig.”

Isaiah 65:1, 24 I let myself be sought by those who did not ask for me.
I let myself be found by those who did not seek me. . . . And before they
call, I answer; while they are still speaking, I hear them.

If the distinction between sin and sinner has made “repentance” possible conceptually, “mercy” (*Gnade/Barmherzigkeit*) makes it a *real* possibility. In the biblical tradition, God’s mercy is the bed-rock of all repentive transformation. The message is unambiguous: it is not the sinner’s own “strength” or “merit” that enables him to achieve repentance as a self-transformative strategy, but that God has, out of his own will, mercy, and goodness, enabled the sinner to do so, to partake in the healing process. As Maimonides put it, interpreting Lamentations 3:38–41, “The healing of this sickness lies accordingly in our hands, just as we have sinned out of our free choice, so can we repent (*sich bekehren*) and come back (*zurück-kommen*) from our evil actions.”¹⁵ But repentance is ultimately an ability that comes from God, who can and did according to tradition in certain circumstances “withhold repentance” from sinners, who then no longer had the option to choose repentance after freely choosing sin. “God sometimes punishes man by not granting him free will with regard to repentance so that he does not repent.”¹⁶ Thus Rabbeinu Yonah also stressed the necessity to pray for divine help: “Pray to God, when you do *tshuvah*, to always help you with it. As it’s said, ‘Turn me back, and I will return. For You are God my Lord’ ” (Jer 31:18).¹⁷

But if he chooses to exercise this given ability to repent, the sinner will not be rejected. A core biblical message reverberates in the Bußpsalmen: if a sinner confesses to God, he will be heard (we’ll come back to the central demand of confession later, in R5). For instance, when the sinner calls to his God to show him the way of repentance—“Show me the way I should walk, for to you I lift up

15. Moses Maimonides, *Acht Capitel: Arabisch und Deutsch mit Anmerkungen von M. Wolff* (Leipzig: Commissions-Verlag von Heinrich Hunger, 1863), 61.

16. Ibid., 67–69. The chief example given by Maimonides is the “hardening” of the Pharaoh’s and his servants’ hearts (Ex 10:1). See also Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 471–73.

17. Yonah, *Gates of Repentance*, 61.

my soul" (Ps 143:8)—he has already been assured—"I will teach you, I will show you the way to turn to; I will guide you with my gaze" (Ps 32:8). Indeed, the only direct response from God in the otherwise monological Bußpsalmen is this positive reassurance of guidance. We see the corresponding unswerving trust in the repentant sinner's self-reassurance: "The Lord has heard my cry. The Lord has heard my plea. The Lord will grant all that I pray for" (Ps 6:9–10). He is so sure of this that it doesn't even seem inappropriate to him that he should ask God to "hurry up" (e.g., Ps 143:8; 79:8).

Mercy, however, as encapsulated in the Bußpsalmen, is not "forgive and forget," but a promise to "show the way" and to "keep an eye" on the sinner (rather than to discard and close the file, so to speak). The "gaze" is not one of a distrustful, watchful eye, but one of accompaniment and forewarning, what Maimonides called "the forerunner of repentance"¹⁸—before the sinner wanders too far on the misguided path again and before the damage is too great. The mistrusting gaze is characterized by the preoccupation to protect the self (against the *perpetual* sinner); the latter has the well-being of the other (i.e., the *former* sinner) as the point of departure; that is why the enduring love of God for the sinner is recalled and resorted to throughout the Bußpsalmen, and is reinforced elsewhere in the Bible: "For whom the Lord loves he reprimands, like a father does the son he's pleased with" (Prv 3:12). Hence admonishment in the form of "pangs of conscience" is also mercy—a warning before catastrophe. We are brought to *feel* this in the Bußpsalmen, for instance, with the descriptions of "burned bones,"¹⁹ "frightened and weakened bones,"²⁰ and "bones left without flesh."²¹ These "sensations" are first associated with the sinner's own sins ("There is nothing wholesome in my bones because of my sins"²²) but also

18. Maimonides, "Lehre von der Buße," 449.

19. Psalm 102:4. See also Ezekiel 24:10.

20. Psalms 32:3 and 6:3.

21. Psalm 102:6.

22. Psalm 38:4.

attributed to their divine origin *and intention* (“Let me hear joy and gladness, let the bones you have crushed rejoice”²³).

But just as mercy is granted out of free will, repentance, according to the biblical tradition, can also only be exercised freely—it cannot be forced. It can only be a *response*, not a reaction. In the Bußpsalmen, there is a peculiar verse pointing to the undesirability of “forced or *reactive* turning”:

Psalm 32:9 Do not be like the horse or the mule—without understanding and led by bit and bridle.

The juxtaposition of “instructing, showing, and watching over/leading” (Ps 32:8) to being “led by bit and bridle” clearly conveys the message that, when forced, it is not repentance, which does not belong to the “action-reaction” logic of nature. Even pangs of conscience can be overcome and “mastered.” But the repentant sinner *responds* to mercy. “Just as man becomes sinner through his own free will, so must he do repentance with full consciousness and out of free will.”²⁴

The idea that mercy precedes repentance, or presents a proactive call to repentance, is ubiquitous in the biblical tradition. See, for example, the story of Elisha the prophet and Naaman the Aramean general (2 Kgs 5), in which the national enemy who was also a leper asked for healing from Israel, and Elisha granted him just that without asking for anything in return—except turning him to Yahweh (see also the similar “instruction” of the Aramean soldiers with power and mercy; 2 Kgs 6:8–23).²⁵

Overflowing with gratefulness from inside out, the repentant one is not mindful of his vulnerability—this inevitably exposes him to the risks of abuse (e.g., by those who contrive to benefit from their claimed “victimhood,” and by those mockers and cynics; see

23. Psalm 51:10. See also the promise of rebirth from “dry bones” in Ezekiel 37:1–14.

24. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 469.

25. See also Romans 2:4.

Ps 1:1). As Maimonides advised, “The repentant ones are used to being humble and utterly modest; if the fools reproach them for their former actions and say: ‘You have acted in such and such a way, and said so and so,’ they do not have to care about that, but listen to these with serenity, as they know this is also beneficial to them, for the shame of their earlier sins and the blush before these increase their merit, and obtain for them an even higher place.”²⁶ Furthermore, Yahweh is the one who will deal with these scorners, impostors, and profiteers. We will come back to this important point when we look at another character in the story of Naaman: Gehazi the servant (see R11).

R4: Recognizing Punishment as Just

Psalm 51:6b You are right when you pass sentence and blameless in your judgment.

Psalm 130:3 If you, O Lord, should mark our evil, O Lord, who could stand?

Psalm 143:2 Do not bring your servant to judgment, for no mortal is just in your sight.

Psalm 6:2 O Lord, in your anger do not reprove me; nor punish me in your fury.

Daniel 9:18 Incline your ear, my God, and listen . . . for we do not rely on our justice, but your mercy.

Mercy, however, does not preclude just punishment or catastrophe.²⁷ Biblical scholars concur that acts of repentance, as recorded and represented in the Bible, are not always “successful” as a

26. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 485. On the meaning of the “higher place,” see R7.

27. As Rabbi Yaakov Feldman explains, referring to Yonah’s interpretation of Psalm 51:6, the roots of “just” and “charitable” in Hebrew are the same, hence the double meaning. See Yonah, *Gates of Repentance*, 63–64.

strategy to avert these.²⁸ A prime example of this, in our context, would be David himself—he sinned and repented, and was also “forgiven” (his sins being “taken away”) by Yahweh, so that he would not die, but his first child with Uriah’s wife was to die (2 Sm 12:15), and no amount of fasting and weeping could avert that. A “collective” example of this can be found in 2 Kings 22–23, when even after Josiah’s religious reforms, neither the anger of Yahweh nor the punishment of Judah was averted (2 Kgs 23:25–27).²⁹

It is even questionable whether the “avoidance of punishment” is a legitimate motivation for genuine repentance. In the conclusion of his *Doctrine of Repentance*, Maimonides stressed that love for God (as expressed in the Song of Songs) rather than fear of divine punishment should be the ultimate motivation of all those who turn to God.³⁰ Likewise, even as Rabbeinu Yonah called repentance an “escape hatch,” repentance was for him ultimately not about getting away from punishment, but coming back to God: “And the greater the degree of your *tshuvah*, the closer to God you get.”³¹ In the Christian tradition, the distinction between “attrition” and “contrition”—that is, merely fearing punishment and genuinely recognizing the wrongfulness of sin—is also a noted example of this concern. In the Bußpsalmen themselves, we hear expressions of recognition, on the part of the sinner, that God’s judgment (and punishment) is just, so much so that if God is to be true to his own words, as expressly recognized by the repentant sinner, he can’t help but mete out just punishments to all (e.g., Ps 51:6; 130:3; 143:2).

But then how are we to understand the seemingly contradictory entreaty to God to refrain from punishment (as in Ps 6:2)? When the centrality of mercy is recalled, it seems that the sinner’s

28. See Terence Fretheim, “Repentance in the Former Prophets,” in *Repentance in Christian Theology*, ed. Mark Boda and Gordon Smith (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 36–37.

29. It would be instructive, though, to compare Josiah’s case with Ezra’s in Nehemiah 8–10 and see the contrast between the two in terms of the common people’s relative passivity and proactiveness.

30. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 503–9.

31. Yonah, *Gates of Repentance*, 12.

recognition of God's right to justice does not exclude him from beseeching his God to exercise his freedom of mercy instead. In fact, in the biblical tradition, as reflected in the Bußsalmen, the two often, if not always, go together. The "rod against wrongdoings" and the "strikes against sins" do not preclude love for sinners, or their faithfulness (Ps 89:31–34). What appears to counter this biblical spirit of repentance, though, is the *reversal of values*: when mercy becomes a requirement, and the right to justice is not recognized.

To move from an individual example to a collective one, the most striking instance of the recognition of God's judgment/punishment as just, or of catastrophe as a possible manifestation of such, may very well be the prophetic interpretation of *the* historical trauma of Israel—the Babylonian captivity. In a way that is inconceivable to our modern, nationalistic mind, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel unambiguously attributed the foreign invasion and the subsequent exile to the sinfulness of Jerusalem and Judah (Ez 12:13; 17:19–20; Jer 19:15; 20:4). It was Yahweh who delivered Jerusalem to the Babylonians, according to these prophets. Consequently, it was not to the Babylonians that Israel had to *turn* with remembrance of hatred and revenge,³² but it was Yahweh alone that they must face and *return* to. The evildoers of the invasion and captivity would have to face Yahweh in their time (Jer 30:16; Is 10:12).³³ As in the case of the individual sinner, the community of sinners was promised restoration if they repented.³⁴

According to this biblical conception of repentance, then, one may safely conclude, the concern of the repentant sinner is not directed primarily to punishment/catastrophe or the fear of such, but to the *promised* restoration of relationship. Repentance in this

32. Rather, one finds "peculiar" places in the Bible where the "good memory" of Babylonians is preserved (e.g., 2 Kgs 25:27–30).

33. See the idea of the "nonmutual cancellation of guilt" in R11.

34. Linguistically, the Hebrew terms for "repentance," "turning" and "returning," and "restoration," all bear the same root, *sub*, thus pointing to their symbolic and essential oneness. See Mark Boda, "Renewal in Heart, Word, and Deed: Repentance in the Torah," in Boda and Smith, *Repentance in Christian Theology*, 11–12.

conception is not a mechanical, causal device—that is, “with this and this input, and the outcome will be that.” Nothing concerning the consequences of sin is “guaranteed” in advance—only the restoration of relationship made possible through mercy and repentance. When this is in focus, whether something is “punishment” or “atonement” is a moot point, for that which is conducive to the healing of wounded relationships is welcomed, or even sought after,³⁵ by the repentant sinner. That is why punishment is no substitute for repentance³⁶—for without turning, it is only suffering without meaning.

Yet, as the *Bußgebet*, or prayer of repentance, in Daniel reminds, human justice is not what the repentant sinner ultimately relies on and hence attempts to “satisfy,” for God’s justice is not human justice (Ez 18:25; see R6). The acceptance of punishment as just is hence not without qualifications—the justifiability and limits of human justice (whether it be the victors’ or the victims’) are always subject to the light of the triangular relationship with God.

R5: Confession as the Only Acceptable Sacrifice

Psalm 51:19 The sacrifices that please God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, O God, will not despise.

Psalm 32:5 Then I made known to you my sin and no longer concealed my guilt. I said: “To the Lord I will now confess my trespasses.” And you forgave my sin, you removed my guilt.

Psalm 130:6 My soul waits for the Lord, more than the watchmen for the dawn; more than the watchmen for the dawn.

35. Freud pointed to the sickening side of what he called *Strafbedürfnis*, or the “need for punishment.” Luther, on the other hand, proclaimed that “sincere contrition (*aufrichtige Reue*) desires and loves penalty” (the 40th of his 95 Theses). There is indeed only a thin line between recognizing punishment as just (or the healing effect of atonement) and yearning for punishment as such. See Sigmund Freud, *Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1930), 99.

36. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 411. It is granted, though, that repentance, especially where cross-generational guilt (R12) is concerned, acts as “armor (*Panzer*) against God’s punishment” (469).

Jeremiah 31:6, 9, 13 There shall be a day when watchmen will call out: "Come, let us go to Zion, to Yahweh our God!" . . . They will come weeping, but I will accompany them, comforting them, . . . I will turn their mourning into joy.

That the repentant sinner should confess his sins to God should strike one as odd: why the need to tell someone something he already knows? But in the Bible it is not uncommon to see such paradoxical "communications," as in the book of Genesis where God is presented as asking Adam after he had eaten the forbidden fruit: "Where are you?" (3:9). Does he not know the whereabouts of his creatures? Or is he giving Adam a chance to *acknowledge* (both to get to know and to make known) his "lostness," or his having wandered away from God? Without such knowledge and acknowledgment, how could the lost one begin to *turn back*?

If we follow this line of interpretive argument, then the act of confession, as exists between human and God, is first of all an act of open self-dialogue: it is not to say what the other wants to hear, but to listen to what oneself needs to hear. When a person confesses, he identifies his sins—that is, he does not, in effect, identify his self *with* Sin. He is of course through his confession inviting demands for penalties and indemnification, but he is no longer the Sin that needs to be exterminated. He is simultaneously walking away from Sin and owning up to the consequences of his sins.

In the Bußpsalmen, confession, acting as a severance between the sinner and his sins and wrongdoing (Ps 32:5), is clearly conceived as a *relief* for the sinner, for keeping silent about one's sins and misdeeds saps one's strength (Ps 32:3).³⁷ Confession is thus a process of overcoming the impulse to conceal, an act of "letting light pass through" oneself, so that what was hidden, including the

37. Maimonides warned, though, that one should only confess publicly sins against fellow humans (especially when it comes to deceased victims who could no longer be asked for forgiveness), not those against God ("Lehre von der Buße," 421–23, 427–29). This caveat calls for reflection on some demands for "public apology" that neglect the nature of the wrongdoings and the question of who is truly entitled to receive the apology.

tendency to hide, is now in “broad daylight”—hence the image of “dawning” (Ps 130:6). But this “dawning,” if it is to be valuable as a sacrifice, cannot be coerced (as when someone “confesses” only because the facts are against him) but longed for—more than the “watchmen” for the dawn. This curious character of the “watchman,” which is repeated in Psalm 130:6 twice,³⁸ deserves closer attention.

In the prophetic books, the watchman is frequently used to symbolize the community’s *conscience*, “posted there” by God to give warnings to the community (Ez 3:17, 33:7; Is 21:6), but sometimes the watchmen became “blind,” “dumb,” and “asleep” (Is 56:10), and other times their warnings were not heeded (Jer 6:17)—hence the downfall of the community. Therefore, the reform and restoration of conscience, which will now see and tell what it sees and will be listened to, are hallmarks of the confessing sinner. In Jeremiah 31:6–13, we have an image of a sinner or a community of sinners heeding their restored conscience—the “watchmen,” turning and returning to God weeping, who then turned their mourning into joy.

This brings us to another important function of confession: to provide an occasion for “curative mourning.” It is not the case that only the repentant sinner weeps for his wrongdoing and his guilt (Ps 6:7; 102:10); God also weeps for the damages and consequences of sin (Jer 14:17, 48:31–32; Is 22:4, 16:9, 15:5). Hence in a later section (R14), when we explore interhuman relationships, we’ll see how confession is linked to curative mourning—which is itself a difficult “turning” for the victim³⁹—in which the turning from mourning to joy becomes apparent.

In the Bußsalmen, finally, confession is further construed as an act of *sacrifice*: through confessing, the sinner offers his “broken

38. See also Psalm 127:1.

39. The victim can, of course, choose *not* to make this turning—turning to the sinner, to his confession—by turning away from him, by refusing to listen, because to listen to a confession, while curative, is to allow access to a wound that still hurts.

spirit and contrite heart,” which is the only sacrifice by a sinner acceptable to God (Ps 51:18–19). In return, God promises to renew both the heart and the spirit, so that the sinner can *live* and the broken relationship can be *restored* (Ez 36:28).

R6: Repentance as Inner Death and Rebirth

Psalms 51:12 Create in me, O God, a pure heart; give me a new and steadfast spirit.

Ezekiel 36:26–27 I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I shall remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I shall put my spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and keep my laws.

Ezekiel 18:32 I do not want the death of anyone, word of Yahweh, but that you repent and live.

Repeatedly, the biblical conception of repentance revolves around one's heart and spirit, as is also reflected in this central verse of the fourth Bußpsalm. In the Torah, for example, we hear exhortations to the “circumcision of the heart” (Dt 10:16, 30:6), which are repeated in the Prophets (Jer 4:4) and the Epistles. The images of changing or circumcising the heart should point one to the apprehension of coming to—or through—death, for how else could one accomplish something like that? In this conception, however, one kind of death is required, and another not. And for the right kind of death to be achieved, the essential asymmetric mutuality between God and human is stressed.⁴⁰

40. It is of no small significance that Rabbeinu Yonah begins his *Gates of Repentance* with an enigmatic line: “[*Tshuvah* is] among the favors God has done *with* us, His creations.” This “with” is noted by the translator and commentator of the work, Rabbi Yaakov Feldman, as pointing to the conception that “*tshuvah* is a means of solidifying and deepening our and God's mutual love.” Yonah, *Gates of Repentance*, 4 (emphasis added).

At the very least, the circumcision should call to mind the voluntary “cutting off” of oneself, which is extremely painful, as it is so deep within one’s innermost being, as symbolized by the heart. In fact, inner callousness, or the inability to feel pain, is suggested by the “heart of stone,” which needs to be replaced by a “heart of flesh,” one that can and does feel pain (Ez 36:26–27). But to feel pain for what? Or for whom? The immediate images of “bloodshed” and “cannibalism” in Ezekiel (36:13, 18) suggest insensitivity to the suffering of fellow human beings, and hence to the suffering of God.⁴¹ In other words, the “heart of flesh” can mean a *vulnerable* heart⁴² that feels for others, whose suffering is made invisible time and again by hard-heartedness and misguiding spirits, that is, “justifications” such as national interests, racial superiority, class struggle, religious identity, and so on. These utmost “frames of mind,” as we now call them, or orientations that have been taken to one’s heart—that is, held sacrosanct as part of the “self-identity”—are part and parcel of what needs to be put to death.

But when the repentant sinner is able (and only he is able) to put his innermost self in mind and spirit—which led him to sin in the first place—to death,⁴³ and to feel again the pain of the victims of his wrongdoings or negligence, chief among them God himself (see R2), he is also by this act of inner self-mortification exposing himself to the danger of despair—outright despair (“Nothing is possible for *me* anymore”). This is in fact what happens when people are unable to bear the magnitude of their guilt, as they begin to *see*

41. It is Heschel’s thesis that prophecy is the communication of the divine *pathos*—including jealousy, disappointment, and frustration—to the people, in order to bring about the needed *sympathy* as a human response. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Die Prophetie* (Kraków: Verlag der polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1936). The extended English version of this work by Heschel appears as *The Prophets*, Perennial Classics (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

42. Becoming *vulnerable* is a central theme of repentance. See Yonah, *Gates of Repentance*, 6, 12.

43. Even here, however, there is divine assistance (Hos 6:5).

the enormity of their misdeeds—they commit suicide.⁴⁴ Hence in the Bußpsalmen and the Torah in general, the creative/redemptive power of God⁴⁵ is stressed: to create and to give a pure heart and a new spirit (Ps 51:12); not only is one called to participate in the circumcision of the heart (“[You shall] circumcise your hearts . . .”; Dt 10:16), but God has promised to participate in it too (“Yahweh, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants”; Dt 30:6). It is within this relational reality that repentance, as inner death and rebirth, as can be gleaned from the biblical tradition, is understood and accomplished. It is not, and cannot be, achieved by the sinner alone.

The sinner is not called to repent through death, bodily death, but to repent so that he may have life (Ez 18:32). Nor is he asked to cover his shame by changing his face or his name as a way of hiding.⁴⁶ The idea that the right way to achieve repentance is by killing oneself or being killed is nowhere to be found in the biblical tradition. “There is no sin that cannot be atoned for by repentance,” Maimonides unequivocally asserts. “Everyone must strive to do repentance . . . so he may die as a repentant [i.e., when the hour of death comes, he has already done repentance, like the “godless sinner” Ezekiel had spoken of in 18:21], and in this way gain entry to life in the world to come.”⁴⁷ In other traditions, however, the

44. See Paul’s differentiation between “Godly” and “worldly sorrow” in 2 Corinthians 7:10.

45. Stressing this prerogative of God’s, Luther commented on this verse: “A clean hand . . . is easy to do and within human power; but a pure heart . . . is the work of the creator and of divine power.” See his “Auslegung der sieben Bußpsalmen,” in *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 4, *Auslegung des Alten Testaments: Auslegung über die Psalmen*, ed. Johann Georg Walch (Groß-Oesingen: Verlag der Lutherischen Buchhandlung Heinrich Harms, 1987).

46. To be sure, name changing can also be a sign of the repentant, but never as an attempt to hide or evade responsibility. It is rather a signal that “he has become another being, no longer the same as the one who had committed the bad deeds.” See Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 421.

47. See Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 445, 479. According to Yonah, however, there is a sin of which only “death” absolves the sinner: the profanation of God’s name (*Gates of Repentance*, 300). But even here, Rabbeinu Yonah, in disagreement with the masters he was quoting, granted an “escape hatch”: using one’s whole life for the sanctification of God’s name (310). Likewise, when

idea that “only through death can one’s honor and the honor of one’s family name be saved” is not uncommon. There is the Chinese idea of “using death to apologize” (*yisi xiezui* 以死謝罪), for instance, and that of *seppuku* or *harakiri* in the Japanese tradition. It may seem a moot point to argue about whether death is meted out as punishment or considered a requirement of repentance, when the sinner will die all the same,⁴⁸ but it is in fact a fine and important difference when death, especially suicide, is seen as an ideal of repentance or as a consequence of sin. The first precludes the life-saving power of repentance; the latter does not: just as God is justified in demanding death from the sinner, but can and does choose to exercise his freedom of mercy, so too can those created in his image. Indeed, it has been a repeated call of the prophets that God desires mercy, not sacrifice (Hos 6:6), and this is repeated by Jesus (Mt 9:13). There is no injunction against the “year of mercy” (Lv 25:10; Lk 4:19). The story of Jonah illustrates succinctly that even a prophet of Israel cannot withhold repentance, as a life- and

Maimonides indicated that such a sin is atoned for “only through death,” he was not being self-contradictory. For the biblical passage (Is 22:14) that he cited in its support sheds light on why this is the case: the people have mocked the call to life through repentance, and chose death instead; hence it is only a logical conclusion that death becomes the only outcome when the option for life, that is, repentance, is rejected. The same is true in Amos 9:10, where repentance is not seen as a necessity for life; when the severity of sin’s consequences is not recognized by a dumb optimism, death results for sinners. See Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 415–16.

48. See, for example, the passages in the Bible where the death penalty is sanctioned (Ex 21; Lv 24:10–23). One may argue that these penal laws were actually meant to increase leniency—that is, to limit the penal violence to the wrongdoer himself in proportion to the crime he had committed—or that the death penalty is used to highlight the sanctity of life (i.e., “Murder is a serious crime!”). Historically true as these arguments may be, no attempt is made in this book to justify or gloss over these biblical passages that seem to run counter to the “spirit of repentance” I’m trying to outline here. It is readily conceded, rather, that a living tradition is far from “consistent,” and that intratraditional tensions are the rule rather than the exception. The questions for the present generation seem to be the following: Where do we stand? Which voice do we *choose* to listen to, and why? Rabbeinu Yonah, for example, asserted that even the biblically “sanctioned” capital punishments can be averted through *tshuvah*, Yom Kippur, and tribulations (*Gates of Repentance*, 308).

relationship-saving device, when it is granted by God himself to human beings, even to pagans. But to avail oneself of this device, besides the courage to circumcise one's heart, patience is required. When the sinner's will to return is "like the morning mist and the early dew," which disappears almost as soon as it appears, the "divine operation" can be of but little help to him (Hos 6:1–4). The repenting sinner, as depicted in the Bußsalmen, is a soul that waits (Ps 130:5).

The "reborn" sinner—that is, in the sense of one with a renewed heart and spirit—is certainly no saint, nor is this rebirth guarantee of any "proof" against future relapse. This is a recognized fact in the biblical tradition, as when we hear that even circumcised hearts at times need to be "humbled again" (Lv 26:40–42). Martin Buber's well-chosen biblical example (Jer 34:15, 16, 22) of repentance-as-return also illustrates the multifarious kinds of "return"—the return to God, the return to one's former evil ways, and the return of enmity among human beings.⁴⁹ Even dogs and fools do "turning"—but only to their own vomit and folly (Prv 26:11). Hence, as Rabbeinu Yonah insisted, before Luther, repentance should be a "lifelong" exercise.⁵⁰

R7: "Helping Others Repent" as the New Task of the Repentant

Psalm 51:15–17 I will teach the wrongdoers your ways and sinners will return to you. . . . Of your justice I shall speak aloud. O Lord, open my lips, and I will proclaim your glory.

Jeremiah 15:19 If you repent, word of Yahweh, . . . you can stand before me again . . . and you will be as my own mouth again.

49. See Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 35.

50. Yonah, *Gates of Repentance*, 109.

Psalm 130:12–13 For you have turned my wailing into dancing, removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so I praise you and will not remain silent.

The last of Rabbeinu Yonah's "principles of *tshuvah*" is a curious one: "Turning Others Away From Sin as Much as You Can."⁵¹ Indeed, in contrast to some other traditions where a sinner appears no longer good for anything (even with repentance), and the "less-than-immaculate" has no right to teach others, in Judaism and Christianity the repentant sinner is valued precisely for his repentance. In the words of Maimonides, "[The repentant one's] reward is even greater [than that of the pious], for he has already tasted sin, but nonetheless renounced it and subdued his evil inclination. The sages said: The place the repentant ones occupy is not allowed even the most pious ones, which is to say, their place is higher than that of those who have never sinned, because they have more cravings to rein in than these."⁵² What the repentant one has learned is of such high value that he is even required to proactively teach others the way to repent, as exemplified by the verse above from Psalm 51. Aside from David, the ascribed author of this psalm, Paul also serves as such a paradigmatic figure: having been blinded by his own murderous fanaticism, after returning to sight he preached against others' blindness (see Acts 9:8–9, 13:9–11).

So important is this duty to warn others—which is not reserved to the repentant—that Maimonides considered it one of the more significant sins if one omitted to fulfill it. "To this category belongs also the one who has the power to turn his neighbors aside from the sin but does not do it; this is relevant to the single individual as well as to an entire community, if he lets it fall prey to the sin."⁵³

51. Ibid., 70. He in fact derived this principle from Psalm 51:15 as well as from Leviticus 19:17: "Criticize your neighbor diligently, and do not bear sin on his account."

52. Maimonides, "Lehre von der Buße," 481.

53. Ibid., 447.

This renewed spirit to speak out,⁵⁴ however, is characterized not by a sense of “pride” of having accomplished repentance, nor by a sense of victimhood (“Why should I be singled out to repent but not *them*?”), but by gratitude and joy about having been “turned around” by God. Psalm 51 again exemplifies this characteristic by emphasizing the link between this “new speech” and the “new spirit”: in the space of a few verses (vv. 12–17) the word “spirit” is mentioned three times (“a new and steadfast spirit,” “your holy spirit,” and “a willing spirit”⁵⁵), and three manners of speaking out have been proposed (“teaching . . . your ways,” “speaking aloud of . . . your justice,” and “proclaiming . . . your glory”). Divine ways, divine justice, and divine glory are the central themes of the new speech; the (past) sinfulness of the repentant sinner/speaker and the (present) sinfulness of the audience are pointed out *only* in relation to these themes.

The tradition of “confession literature” in the West, starting with Augustine, exemplifies this spirit. And the Hebrew Bible, if read historiographically, is also astonishing in this self-critique: not only of the kings and the “elite,” but of the people, the “masses” themselves.⁵⁶ It is as if only from that height of a new self, through “the change of heart and spirit,” that one can bear to look back and recount that old self, which is no longer alive (i.e., *effective* in the sense of determining one’s thinking and action), but neither is it disowned.⁵⁷ Duty bound, the repentant sinner has to criticize his neighbor diligently so as not to suffer the consequences of his sin (Lv 19:17). Yet, being the last *tshuvah* principle according to Rabbeinu Yonah, this duty can be understood as the *consummating act*

54. The connection between “spirit” and “speech” is of course more apparent and natural if we recall the biblical synonyms of “spirit” and “breath” in Ezekiel 37.

55. Maimonides further interpreted Psalm 51:14 as David’s call to God not to “withhold repentance” from him. “Lehre von der Buße,” 475.

56. A prime manifestation of this spirit is Ezra’s prayer in Nehemiah 9:6–37.

57. Rabbeinu Yonah’s interpretation of Psalm 51:5 is that the repentant sinner should always remember his sins and his self having sinned, while not necessarily repeating the same confession (*Gates of Repentance*, 313).

of a long and arduous process of repentant efforts, rather than the beginning of these. Indeed, as we have already seen in the previous sections (especially **R4**), speaking of the guilt of others is highly suspicious as an act of impenitence. It is therefore a hard-won duty, a thankless task, and a narrow path between self-righteousness and paralyzing “humility.”

R8: Repentant Disagreement

Psalms 51:5 For I acknowledge my wrongdoing, and have my sin ever in mind.

Isaiah 43:16, 18–19, 25 Thus says Yahweh . . . “Do not dwell on the past, or remember the things of old. Look, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not see? I it is, I am He who blots out your offenses for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.”

Psalms 51:7 See, I have been guilt-ridden from birth, a sinner from my mother’s womb.

Ezekiel 18:4, 20 All lives are my possession, the life of the father and the life of the son are mine. Only the one who sins shall die. . . . The son shall not bear the guilt of his father nor the father the guilt of his son.

In this “mutual-turning” of repentance, turning *to* each other, one remarkable feature is that both sides often *disagree*. As the first example quoted above shows, whereas the repentant sinner insists on always remembering his past sins, God speaks of not dwelling on the misdeeds and sins of the past, but invites the sinner to see the “new” coming into being instead of wallowing in disbelief. Indeed, one can even argue that whereas confessing one’s past sins, atoning for them, and remembering one’s “capability to sin” are characteristic of the biblical spirit of repentance, “dwelling on the past” as an end in itself is not. For the emphasis of this spirit is always and only on the *present*: there *is* a sickened/wounded relationship that *needs* healing; and there *is* a choice to be made to

“return” and be a conduit of healing power, or not.⁵⁸ In this light, the “new” (heart/spirit and the relationship between the reborn and his God) is not at all a “compromised old at best,” a “broken mirror” that is scarred forever even after repair, but something altogether better than it has ever been. All the “going back to the past,” “remembering,” and “apologies” lose their meaning the moment one loses sight of the sole reality of relationships and their healing potential at present. These efforts become “futile,” for “the past cannot be undone.”⁵⁹

Another instance of “repentant disagreement” that we will look at here concerns “generational guilt.” Whereas David or the psalmist accepts the link between God’s judgment on him and the sins of his former generations, and assumes personal responsibility for them,⁶⁰ God speaks of “everyone for his own sins,” that sons and fathers should not be made to bear each other’s guilt.⁶¹ While we must explore the inherent ambiguities more deeply (e.g., couldn’t “generational sin” also be a way to evade responsibility,

58. Buber, *Ich und Du*, 63.

59. This is in fact a popular criticism of present-day efforts at reconciliation—at times betraying the underlying defensiveness of the critic, at times bespeaking a sense of despair of those attempting “repair” without any affirmation of possible success.

60. See also Jeremiah 14:20.

61. There seems to be a “divine disagreement” here as well: for wasn’t it also the same God who said: “For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the wrongdoing of the fathers to the third and fourth generation, *who hate me*” (Ex 20:5). Once again, the relational context and the respective audience may shed light on the seeming discrepancy. In Exodus, the cited text appears in the pronouncement of the Decalogue—in particular, the prohibition against idol worship; thus the principal relationship in question is between God and his chosen people. The thrust of the text is clearly toward warning the listener (i.e., the present generation) of the dire consequences of sin (especially idol worship), which may lead to a cross-generational rebellion against or hatred toward God, which then necessitates a “turning around” by punishment. In Ezekiel, the cited text appears in the comparison between divine justice and human ways of judging (see Ez 18:2, 25). The thrust of this text is then toward limiting indiscriminate interhuman punishment, which is based on fallible human judgment. In fact, the possibility of repentance by later generations with regard to idol worship is explicitly recognized in this text (Ez 18:15), thus bearing out the interpretation of the Exodus text above.

and if one is “born into sin,” how can one be held accountable for something one had no choice about to begin with?), which we will do in a subsequent section dealing entirely with generational guilt (R12); suffice it to say here concerning “repentant disagreement” that the unreconciled ones often in fact fundamentally agree with each other, whereas the “mutual-turning” ones (i.e., those inspired by this biblical spirit of repentance) often “disagree.”⁶² On the assignment of guilt, for instance, these often “contradict” each other in content (if one sees their responses *only* in the dimension of argument with premises and categories, etc.), while the essential emphasis—if one is able to see theirs as relational gestures and responses—is always each other. Establishing logical consistency in terms of rules and ideas is never their primary concern, but the reestablishment of their relationship.⁶³ It is as if through, and only through, *going further than* what is required/right in the “objective” sense in opposite directions that “mutual-turning” is accomplished, and healing ensues.

R9: Even God Repents

Genesis 6:6 The Lord regretted having created men on earth, and it pained his heart.

Genesis 8:21 And the Lord said to himself: “Never again will I curse the earth because of man, even though his thoughts are evil from youth. Never again will I exterminate all those that live like I have done.”

Exodus 32:12–14 Turn away from your burning anger, and let yourself regret the evil that you are thinking of doing to your people. . . . Then the Lord lets himself regret the evil He had threatened his people.

62. Perhaps this is why those who avoid “confrontation” at all costs often fail to achieve reconciliation. For in avoiding disagreements, they also miss those that are necessary for healing.

63. Yet this tentatively termed “relationism” must be differentiated from relativism: at the very least, the first is grounded in the asserted reality of relationships (in the triad of God and human beings) and proceeds from a particular understanding of how these relationships are wounded and healed; the latter is not.

Hosea 11:8 How could I give you up, Ephraim? And deliver you, Israel? . . . My heart turns against me, all my compassion⁶⁴ is ablaze.

An element of repentance is not spoken of in the Bußpsalmen, and it is only right that this is so. For it entails a “turning” on the part of God that is beyond the turning in terms of mercy (R3) and of participation in the renewal of the sinner (R6). It refers to the “regret” (*Reue*) of God when faced with the sinfulness of men. Had the repentant sinner voiced this aspect of turning, as if he could now *demand* the repentance of God—that God should look into his own guilt in the sinfulness of his creature—it would have nullified every other expression of repentance on his part. For then the sinner would be in effect blaming God for his sin, like Adam,⁶⁵ rather than owning up to it himself.

Yet elsewhere in the Bible, references to the turning of God himself in this distinct aspect are readily found right from the very beginning. The quoted verses above and their related passages portray a God who is not only concerned about justice and mercy, but is also self-blaming and willing to change himself in response to the sinfulness of men. If not, the flood and extermination would have been perceived as “justice served” rather than something “never to be done again”—even *without* any prior guarantee from man that his heart and his world would never be filled with that much evil again (Gn 6:5; likewise in Hos 11:1–9). If not, the threats of punishment would have been counted as “merciful reminders” rather than as something to regret (*reuen*).⁶⁶ If not, furthermore, human wickedness should have aroused only divine anger and disappointment, not regret and pain. This regret thus arises from the consciousness of both the guilt of one’s *constitutive* part in the sin committed against oneself, and the consequence of being caused by the human evil done to think and/or to do evil as a *reaction*.

64. The King James Version (1611/1769) uses “repentings” here, whereas the German versions use “Mitleid” and “Barmherzigkeit.”

65. When asked by God whether he had eaten from the forbidden tree, Adam shifted the blame back to God via Eve: “The woman *you* put with me gave me the fruit from the tree” (Gn 3:12).

66. See also similar references in 2 Samuel 24:16 and Jonah 3:10.

In translating Amos 7:3 into English, Abraham Heschel adopted the verb “repent”: “The Lord repented concerning this; / It shall not be, said the Lord.”⁶⁷ God’s repentance, of course, as emphasized by Heschel, is not indicative of his “wrongdoing” or wrong judgment, but rather of his mercy as “perpetual possibility” against the iron law of cause and effect. An illustrative biblical example of this chain reaction—and the divine regret that breaks it—can be found in Exodus, where the idolatry of the “molten calf” almost brought about the extermination of the people of Israel (Ex 32). When the people corrupted themselves and “turned away” from the way of God, this effected divine anger and their imminent destruction (Ex 32:7–9). And as in the case of Jeremiah (7:16), Moses was commanded by God not to stand in the way of this outpouring of fury. But Moses disobeyed and rejected the temptation to become “a great nation” (vv. 10–11). He asked God to turn away from his anger, and to let himself regret (*reuen*) the evil or disaster he had in mind for his people (v. 12).⁶⁸ He even “threatened” God by daring him to “blot me out of your book” if forgiveness was not to be granted (v. 32).⁶⁹ The Lord let himself regret the evil that he had conceived for his people (v. 14).⁷⁰

67. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 43. In the German original, Heschel used “gereuen”: “Der Herr ließ es sich gereuen” (*Die Prophetie*, 59). This is more in line with common German translations using “reuen.” By contrast, the Buber-Rosenzweig translation reads: “IHM wards dessen leid.” See Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift: Bücher der Kündigung* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992).

68. See also Psalm 106:23.

69. This is in sharp contrast to Aaron, who tried to assign the guilt solely to the people while saving himself by claiming passivity (Ex 32:22–24). On the representativeness of prophetic repentance, see R10.

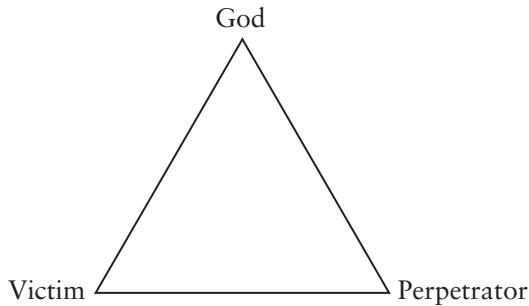
70. To be sure, the people of Israel did not escape punishment altogether, a plague (Ex. 32:35) and a self-initiated violent purge (vv. 27–29) did follow. But as we have seen in R4, punishment is not the same as the termination of relationship, which, even when “punishment-free,” is perceived to be worse than the worst punishment. The Israelites’ refusal to go away “freely” without their God points to this understanding (Ex 33:4).

INTERHUMAN AND COLLECTIVE REPENTANCE (R10–R14)

In this second chapter, we will turn our attention to the interhuman relationships, especially the victim-perpetrator, *in light of* the God-human relationship, for in the biblical tradition, the latter is often upheld as the hermeneutical context for the former.¹ The God-human relationship is the one “line” that cuts across all other relational lines.² We will therefore employ a visual of a modified triad to undergird our discussion.

1. See, for example, 2 Chronicles 36:14–23.

2. In Buber’s words, “The world of It has its context in space and time. The world of Thou has no context in either. It has its context in the center, in which the extended lines of relationships cross each other: in the eternal Thou.” Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1979), 119.



R10: Repentance's Representative Minority

Psalms 51:20 Shower Zion with your favor: rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Psalms 130:7–8 O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with him is mercy and redemption. He will deliver Israel from all its sins.

Nehemiah 1:5–6 O Yahweh, God of heaven. . . . May your ears be attentive and your eyes open to listen to the prayer of your servant! I am now in your presence day and night, praying for your servants, the Israelites. I confess to you the sins we the Israelites have committed against you: I myself and the family of my father have sinned.

Genesis 18:32 And he said: “Let not my Lord be angry, for I will speak but one more time. Perhaps ten could be found there.” And He said: “I will not ruin it for the sake of ten.”

In the interhuman dimension, which seeks in the biblical tradition behavioral and judgmental guidance from the divine-human, sin can be understood as an injury- and separation-causing act, after which relational healing is called for (R2). In this process, questions concerning representative repentance, abuses, inherited guilt and responsibility, and the place of remembrance in turning as the narrow path toward reconciliation are among the major issues addressed in the Bußpsalmen and related biblical passages on repentance.

Regarding “representation,” religious and political figures are recognized “mediators” between God and nations when expressing

repentance and pleading for mercy are concerned in the biblical tradition. Josiah the king and the long line of major and minor prophets were all examples of this mediation. Two particularly relevant questions concerning this will be dealt with here: What are the common characteristics of the mediators, and in what sense are they “representative”? How many repentant sinners are necessary for an entire nation to be judged as having “repented enough”?

Concerning the common characteristics, their voluntary *participation in* relation should be noted first and foremost. They differ from most of those whom we call “social critics” today in that with their social criticism they implicate themselves in instead of extricate themselves from the society in which they live (e.g., Neh 1:4–7; Jer 14:19–21). They are not jurists who distance themselves from the accused as they pass sentence on them, but are shepherds who feel personally guilty for the unfaithfulness of their flock.³ They also possess an unusually acute sense of God’s pain,⁴ and are able to “cross over” from grief over personal/communal tragedy to an alertness toward the suffering of the others (examples range from Hosea as a betrayed husband to Amos’s social justice to Malachi, the champion of foreigners’ rights). Often as guiltless as anyone could possibly claim to be, they draw shame upon themselves (symbolically and literally smashing their “respectable image” by tearing their fine garments and smudging their body with ash) when pleading to God for forgiveness for his community (e.g., Josiah in 2 Kgs 22:11–13). As if echoing Psalm 51:19, they offer their “broken hearts and spirits” as an atoning sacrifice, a sacrificial victim that is perfect and blameless (itself an “injustice,” no doubt, but an *inverted* injustice), in an effort to appease the anger of a God infuriated by the injustice and unfaithfulness of the nations concerned.

On the one hand, these mediators become the “representatives” of God vis-à-vis the sinful nation, calling their own communities’ attention to the justice and wrath of God if the offer of repentance as mercy is ignored or taken advantage of (e.g., Moses’s reminder

3. See the inclusive “we” in the collective confessions of Israel in Maimonides, “Die Lehre von der Buße,” in *Mischne Tora—Das Buch der Erkenntnis*, ed. Eveline Goodman-Thau and Christoph Schulte, Jüdische Quellen (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 425.

4. See Heschel’s idea of “divine pathos” in R6.

of Yahweh's "generational punishment" before his enduring mercy in Deuteronomy 5:9–10).⁵ The "mediators" are not supposed to give false comforts when there are real causes for trepidation (Is 5:20; Jer 8:11). But on the other hand, they become "representatives" of a nation, not in the modern sense of the word, as statistically or democratically representative, for that they are most certainly not.⁶ Rather, they become "representative" by voluntarily sharing the guilt of their nation, by embodying the change of heart that is taking place and by representing the new spirit that the nation can be. In this sense, to risk an exaggeration, a nation's prophets give hope not only to the people, but to their God as well, that change is still possible from *within*. Hence Isaiah the prophet, even as he himself was despondent about his utility, was addressed by God as Israel the people, "in whom I will be glorified" (Is 49:3–4). "Blot me out of your book if you don't forgive them," declared Moses, boldly challenging his God (Ex 32:32) to have more hope in his people, who had sinned against him. At times, the prophet is the only one standing in the way of divine wrath (Ps 106:23), and he is designated as *the* bond between God and his people (Is 42:6).

As for how many such "representatives" are sufficiently representative of a repentant nation, that is, a nation whose relationship with God is not severed for good, two particular biblical passages are worth reading together closely: the passage in the book of Genesis in which Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah, and that in Jonah in which the Ninevites as a nation responded to Jonah's prophecy. In the first, Abraham "negotiated" with his God about whether Sodom would be destroyed if one finds⁷ fifty or even ten righteous people among the population, and the promise is that "for the sake of ten good people," Sodom would not be destroyed (Gn 18:16–32). From the story itself we do not know the population of Sodom at the time, but it is safe to assume that ten was

5. As Rabbeinu Yonah notes, the only ones to whom repentance is denied are those who think: "I'll sin first and do repentance later." Rabbeinu Yonah, *The Gates of Repentance*, trans. and comm. Yaakov Feldman (Northvale, NJ/Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1999), 72–73.

6. True prophets are often unpopular among the people (e.g., Is 30:10–11).

7. The present tense here is important: a nation cannot be content with having "the righteous" among them in the past; righteousness needs to be kept alive in each generation in the present.

most probably not a “significant representation” of it. From this account alone, then, it seems that God’s leniency and patience are being emphasized, as shown by his “absolute minority rule,” which his believers, that is, those created in his divine image and loved by him, are called to emulate (Hos 6:6; Mi 6:8; Dt 10:12, 19; Lv 19:2).

The story of Jonah, however, introduces a different viewpoint. The story is that Jonah, the reluctant prophet, after some rebellion against his God’s will, finally proclaimed his message to the Ninevites: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed” (Jon 3:4). Despite the uncharacteristic prophetic message (for there is no explicit mention of God’s mercy, nor of the chance for repentance),⁸ “the people of the city believed God; they declared a fast, and *all of them*, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth to repent” (v. 5; emphasis added).⁹ It was only after this first collective and spontaneous act of repentance that the king of Nineveh “got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat down in ashes” (v. 6). He then issued a decree asking “*everyone* [to] call aloud to God, turn from his evil ways and violence” (v. 8; emphasis added). Then we have the resolution of God’s “repentance” (see R9) as turning away from his vengeful thoughts: “When God saw what *they* did and how *they* turned from their evil ways, he regretted the evil that he had threatened to bring upon them and did not carry it out” (v. 10; emphasis added). Thus from this account it seems that collective repentance is “valid” if and only if *everyone* partakes in it—not just the king or the prophet (or in this case, despite the reluctant prophet) or a handful of “righteous” citizens, but every single individual in the community.¹⁰ Indeed, if

8. It must be noted, however, that mercy and the chance for repentance are already implied in the postponement of punishment and in the prophecy itself. Otherwise, why would God bother to send a prophet and then wait for forty more days?

9. Slightly different from the English translations, both the Einheitsübersetzung (1980) and the Lutherbibel (1984) emphasize the repentant symbolism of putting on sackcloth (*Bußgewänder/Sack zur Buße*).

10. Again if we recall the case of Josiah (where the king led the way while the people appeared only to be “following orders”) and the case of Ezra (where the people responded spontaneously), as mentioned in note 29 in R4, further credence is accorded to this interpretation.

the Bußpsalmen are taken as a whole, it is glaringly obvious that they are primarily expressions of *personal* repentance; only scant and secondary references with a collective or representative nature can be found (e.g., Ps 51:20; 130:7). “God has no grandchildren,” it is popularly said.¹¹ So one can also say, “Repentance has no proxy.”¹²

How are we to resolve this apparent contradiction between the “absolute minority rule” in Genesis and the “absolute totality rule” in Jonah? And what can we then say about “collective repentance,” if there is such a thing at all? For Maimonides, these questions hinge not only on the numbers of the righteous/repentant vis-à-vis the wrongdoers/impenitent but also on the “dimensions” of the acts, and the prerogative to judge rests with God alone. Explicating the case of Sodom and Gomorrah and other related passages, Maimonides said: “The assessment of sins and good deeds is not according to the number, but to the dimensions of these. . . . The weighing can only take place in the wisdom of the omniscient and omnipotent one. He alone knows how the good deeds and the sins are to be compared.”¹³

Furthermore, as already noted, logical consistency and statistical accuracy are not the primary concerns of *relational speech*, whose sole consideration is the relational *directions* of God and human, and between human and human—that is, whether they are *turning to* each other, or away from each other. God is willing to “repent,” that is, to turn to and to restore the sinners, to turn from destructive wrath to loving patience, exercising his freedom to be merciful to the full (and the sinners are asked to imitate him, when the time comes). But if the sinners abuse this mercy and think a handful of “righteous/repentant” ones will be enough to save all, then they are not doing their own “repentance,” that is, turning *to* God and *away* from their evil ways; instead, they’re turning away

11. See also Ezekiel 18:4.

12. As Maimonides noted, even at times when the high priest could offer atonement sacrifice in the Temple for all of Israel, “only those who had taken this opportunity to do repentance could partake in the pardon,” thus emphasizing the primacy of personal repentance in the collective, symbolic act. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 411–13.

13. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 429–31.

from him. That is why Maimonides advises individual human beings to think of the whole community/world as half just and half guilty; thus if a person commits a sin or makes a good deed, the scale will be tilted toward the ruin or salvation of the world.¹⁴ Thus those attuned to the spirit of repentance in the biblical tradition are sensitive to those who are being spoken to *through* the Bible: The sinners before God? Or the wrongdoers before their fellow human beings? The “victims”? Or the “perpetrators”? As we have seen in “repentant disagreement” in **R8**, the issue of audience and the problem of “contradictions” are integral to the biblical conception of repentance, and hence also to the issue of representativeness.

R11: Justice between Abused Perpetrators and Abusive “Victims”

Psalm 38:20–21 My foes are many and mighty; they hate me for no reason; they pay me evil for good and treat me as an enemy because I seek good.

Psalm 102:9 All day long I am taunted by my enemies; they make fun of me and use my name as a curse.

Psalm 143:1 O Lord, hear my prayer; in your truthfulness, listen to my cry; in your justice, answer me.

Jeremiah 30:15–16 Why cry out for your plight and your wretched suffering? I have done these because of your immense guilt and your many sins. But all those who devoured you shall be devoured, and all your oppressors shall be taken captive; who plundered you will be plundered, and I will make those who preyed upon you a prey.

It is not true that the Bußpsalmen concern only the perpetrator and his God in a binary mode. Many references point to relationships with others, friends as well as foes. Some of these relationships are wounded because of the perpetrator’s own wrongdoing, as explored in **R2**, but some others are wounded by the wrongdoing

14. Ibid., 433.

of *other* perpetrators: “They hate me for no reason; they pay me evil for good and treat me as an enemy because I seek good” (Ps 38:20–21). Some other fellow human beings take advantage of the perpetrator’s perhaps well-deserved suffering as a consequence of his own sins: “All day long I am taunted by my enemies; they make fun of me and use my name as a curse” (Ps 102:9). The Bußpsalmen thus, like other biblical passages (e.g., Jer 30:15–16),¹⁵ recognize the reality that perpetrators may be victimized by other perpetrators,¹⁶ and their pleas to God, not from a self-righteous heart but from a broken one, that is, one that recognizes their own part in contributing to their suffering, will be heard (Ps 102:18).

The most peculiar inclusion in the Bußpsalmen is perhaps the seventh, Psalm 143. For unlike the other six, which first and foremost implore God for “mercy” (*Gnade/Barmherzigkeit*) and “peace” (*Frieden*), Psalm 143 asks God to exercise “truth” (*Wahrheit*) and “justice” (*Gerechtigkeit*) instead.¹⁷ Why would a perpetrator want his God to do that? Would not a judge upholding truth and justice *above all* be disadvantageous to the accused? It is clear that this psalm, taken as a whole, speaks of one besieged by perpetrators. But unlike other “lamentation psalms” (e.g., Ps 44), this is a psalm by one who also identifies himself as a perpetrator: “Do not bring your servant to judgment, for no mortal is just in your sight” (v. 2); “Show me the way I should walk. . . . Teach me to do

15. A corollary of this triangular vision of guilt is the important idea that *guilts do not cancel each other out*: the perpetrator’s guilt is not canceled out by the victim’s or the abuser’s guilt, and vice versa. Regardless of the recognition or rejection of the “just punishment” thesis by the perpetrator (see R4), each of the three is reminded by this vision that they will have to face the one judge to account for their own wrongdoing per se. In view of this, it is only logical that the biblical paradigm also rejects the idea of interhuman retaliation or vengeance (see R13)—for no guilt is “evened out” in the process; the total guilt is only increased.

16. It is thus characteristic of sin as relational sickness (R2): it drags love relationships into victim-perpetrator relationships in which nobody “gains” and everybody suffers. Repentance, in this sense, promises to break apart precisely this dragging force: so that not only the perpetrator is redeemed, but also the victim, for the “chain reaction” of sin is broken.

17. There is, of course, wide variation in the translation of these biblical terms. The Buber-Rosenzweig version, for example, uses *Treue* (faithfulness) and *Wahrhaftigkeit* (truthfulness) instead.

your will. . . . Let your Spirit lead me on a safe path” (vv. 8–10). These are familiar expressions of repentance in other Bußpsalmen.

Given the “vulnerability” (R6) of the repentant perpetrator, abuse by fellow perpetrators or even the victims (aside from those whose claim to “victimhood” is dubious) is only to be expected. And the biblical tradition is not oblivious to this. Besides the Bußpsalmen, in which we hear the complaints of the repentant and the promise of a “truthful” and “just” God, in Kings there is an instructive story (already mentioned in R3) about someone trying to gain from a vulnerable, repentant perpetrator: the story of Naaman and Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the prophet (2 Kgs 5). Struck by both the power to heal and unconditional mercy,¹⁸ Naaman, the commander of a foreign army hostile to Israel, “returned/repented/converted” (v. 15). Meanwhile, disappointed by his master’s mercy and justifying his greed, Gehazi contrived an implausible lie to extort “silver and clothing” from Naaman. The *new* man (v. 14), true to the spirit of repentance, that is, vulnerable and willing to risk possible injustice/harm to himself in the course of atonement, gave Gehazi the benefit of the doubt, even giving double what was asked—a spontaneous sign of a repentant with overflowing gratefulness from his circumcised heart (R6) for the mercy received. The “man of God,” Elisha, knew everything all along, and he gave Gehazi a chance to confess (v. 25). But the servant did not seize the opportunity for repentance, and hence was made to suffer the punishment that was originally Naaman’s (i.e., leprosy).

All in all, one may conclude, then, that the repentant perpetrator is encouraged to exercise vulnerability and not to be thwarted by possibilities or even actual incidents of being “abused.” “Truth” and “justice” (Ps 143:1) are assured to him (just as they are to other victims); he does not even need to worry about defending himself against animosity amid just accusations, for God himself will be the judge (Ps 38:14–16). Victims or pseudovictims, on the other

18. The layers of mercy in this account of course go beyond Elisha’s refusal to accept “gifts in return” (v. 16); they extend also to the unnamed young Israelite girl, who, despite her real victimhood of having been kidnapped and reduced to servitude, proactively pointed the way to healing to Naaman (vv. 2–3).

hand, are reminded that they, too, will have to give an account to God as to how they deal with the repentant sinner. Exploiting a neighbor's shame for one's own benefit belongs, according to Maimonides, to those sins that threaten "partaking in the future life."¹⁹

R12: The Sin of the Fathers as Cross-Generational Guilt

Psalm 51:7 See, I have been guilt-ridden from birth, a sinner from my mother's womb.

Psalm 51:16 Deliver me, O God, from the guilt of blood; you who are my God and savior.

Psalm 102:20–21 From his holy height in heaven, the Lord looks on the earth, he hears the groaning of the prisoners and sets free the children of death.

Deuteronomy 5:9–10 For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing mercy unto the thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Ezekiel 18:2–3 What's that for a proverb you use in the land of Israel: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge"? "As I live," said the Lord God, "none of you shall use this proverb again."

In collective reconciliation, some of the most relevant questions asked across nations and cultures concern generational guilt and generational responsibility: To what extent are the (grand)children of perpetrators guilty of the wrongdoing of their forefathers? Is it justified at all that later generations of the victims should demand "apology" and/or "repentance/atonement" from later generations of the perpetrators, who were not even born when the atrocity took place? What are the responsibilities of the subsequent generations of the victims? And of the perpetrators?

19. Maimonides, "Lehre von der Buße," 445. See also Yonah, *Gates of Repentance*, 31.

The Bußpsalmen, as a whole, express an awareness of both the cross-generational “properties” of sin, as exemplified by Psalm 51:7 quoted above, and the ability (and eagerness) of God to break the chain of condemnation (i.e., the “blood-debt” in Ps 51:16 and those condemned to death in Ps 102:21). Indeed, the “guilt of the fathers” is a frequent motif in the Bible (e.g., Ex 34:7; Nm 14:18; Dt 5:9), and sons (and daughters) are encouraged to confess (i.e., to uncover) and to learn from their former generation’s wickedness in order to reform themselves and their present society (e.g., 2 Kgs 22:13; Neh 1:6–7). The commandment to “honor father and mother” (Ex 20:12) does not seem to have precedence over the demand to turn away from them when they have sinned: the “sons of Levi” responded to Moses’s call to engage in a violent purge against even their closest relatives after these had turned to a false god (Ex 32:26–29).²⁰ We have already dealt with the “repentant disagreement” concerning generational guilt in the God-human relationship (see R8); we will continue here to explore its implications for victim-perpetrator and intraperpetrator relationships.

When a generation “confesses” the sins/wrongdoings of the former generation (e.g., Neh 1:6–7), they recognize both the cross-generational longevity of sin (e.g., in human nature, customs, and institutions) and the cross-generational consequences of sin (e.g., natural and social disasters).²¹ By this very act of recognition, they are also exercising the freedom to break away from wrongful practices and frames of mind, and shouldering the responsibility for the aftermath of crimes and wrongdoings. As Jeremiah exclaimed in the face of such responsibilities, “Mine is this affliction; I must bear it” (10:19),²² so is the attitude of a

20. Whether this text can be cited in support of intergenerational violence against apostasy is of course highly controversial. In the relevant text itself, one does not find an explicit demand from Yahweh to Moses for such a drastic measure. Rather, God was shown, before and after, to be willing and ready to “turn away from anger” and to “change his mind” (Ex 32:11–14).

21. Natural degradation because of previous exploitation, and the loss of social trust following totalitarian regimes, are only two of the more obvious examples.

22. Compare the rather unusual translation from the Lutherbibel (1912)—“Es ist meine Plage; ich muß sie leiden”—with more contemporary versions.

repentant generation. But when a man acts as a judge and condemns entire families/communities/nations for the sins of one or some among them, he in effect denies them such freedom and hence, by extension, negates real personal responsibility (see the biological causality of the proverb condemned by both Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2). Or when a person blithely thinks that simply by virtue of being born late and having the benefit of historical hindsight, he is “free from the guilt/sinfulness” of his former generation(s), he is in fact blind to the cross-generationalities, that is, the *presentness* of sin, and hence fails to make the necessary turning. This blindness also often misleads a person to consider himself a “victim” in having to deal with the “unfair” consequences at all.

In the victim-perpetrator relationship, then, reconciliation seems to hinge on the particular configuration of “repentant disagreement”: whether on the “generational punishment” side, there is generational confession in the “perpetrator-nation” that seeks repentance and responsibility, or generational condemnation in the “victim-nation” that seeks perpetual blame and punishment; and whether on the “generational absolution” side, there is repentance aversion in the “perpetrator-nation” that bespeaks reluctance and/or indifference, or repentance acceptance in the “victim-nation” that assumes the fundamental redeemability of human beings. Again, “mutual-turning” requires nothing less than deliberate “repentant disagreement” of a particular kind—a kind that the biblical tradition appears to advocate. After all, in the book of Jeremiah, it is the prophet who speaks of generational condemnation when “representing” the “perpetrator-nation” to face God (14:20), while it is Yahweh who responds with generational absolution when proclaiming restoration (31:29–30).

R13: Remembrance for Life as Cross-Generational Responsibility

Psalm 143:5 I remember the earlier days; I reflect on what you have done and speak of the work of your hands.

Psalm 38:13, 16 Those who seek my life lay snares for me; those who wish to hurt me speak of my ruin. . . . But I put my trust in you, O Lord; you will answer for me, Lord God.

Psalm 102:19 Let this be written for future generations, and the Lord will be praised by the people he will form.

Psalm 40:11 I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and your help. I do not remain silent about your kindness and truth before the great community.

In biblical repentance, if the intraperpetrator relationships (i.e., in this context, the intergenerational relationships within a perpetrator-nation) are “difficult,” for coming to terms with “the sin of the fathers” can only be discomfiting, to say the least, the intravictim relationships are no less demanding. The later generations of the victims also have to deal with the set of questions related to the perpetrators and the later generations of the perpetrators, and also those related to the dead, the survivors or *remnants*, and the generations that are yet to come. We have already discussed the generational aspects of the problem above; we’ll now turn to the responsibilities of later generations of the victims with regard to justice for the victims, vengeance/revenge and remembrance.

“The Lord Yahweh will wipe away the tears from all cheeks and eyes,” declares Isaiah (25:8). Thus the restoration of the victims, especially the dead, for whom the living can apparently do no more than commemoration, is assured. This is of course not to replace human justice, or more precisely, the endeavor for justice as much as humanly attainable,²³ but rather, to *complete* it, especially where it fails or where it is impossible to fulfill. To employ the prophetic vision of human sins as relational wounds (R2) once again, it is clear to anyone who has dwelt with any adequate depth on human atrocities against each other that the wounds are beyond human cure (Jer 14:19, 15:18)—even in the case of “perfect” justice with the most complete compensation and punishment as humanly possible. In this sense, if the ultimate duty of the victims’

23. After all, to do justice is a fundamental duty of the believer (Mi 6:8).

descendants/compatriots is to achieve *full* justice for them, disappointment seems inevitable. “Our entire justice is like a piece of filthy clothing” (Is 64:5). It is with this understanding of the “not-nearly-enough” quality of human justice—all the more so, the more heinous the iniquity—that the hope for full restoration and retribution is placed, in the biblical tradition, in God and God alone. For even as God also speaks of the incurable wounds, he has promised to heal them as well (30:12, 17).

Unlike in some other traditions, human vengeance is not elevated to a moral duty in either Judaism or Christianity. “Vengeance is mine,” declares the Lord, who will give justice to his people in his own way and time (Dt 32:35–36). Seeking revenge is expressly prohibited to the victims (and their later generations) (Lv 19:18). Rather, the later generations’ attention, as we have seen in part, is deflected from enemy hatred and self-pity to self-critique: to reflect on their own (and their fathers’) possible sinfulness as the “original cause” in their national calamity, whether it be foreign invasion, captivity, or oppression. As exemplified in Ezra’s prayer in Nehemiah (9:6–37), three times it is mentioned that it was God who had “handed the [Israelites] over to their enemies” because of their unfaithfulness, thus orienting the victim-perpetrator relationship staunchly within the God-victim-perpetrator triad.

In this three-dimensional vision, it is not just justice and mercy that have acquired different meanings (i.e., as compared to the unilinear victim-perpetrator-only relationship), but also remembrance. Whereas memory can—and often does—become a servant of intercommunal hatred, it is by and large employed in the Bible to serve the God-human relationship. “Thou shalt remember . . .” is a frequent formulation in the Torah. Invariably, the faithfulness of God and the destructiveness of sin are the two major themes of this remembrance, under which the memory of the perpetrators themselves is subsumed, as captured also in the Bußpsalmen verses above. “Remember that when you were a slave in the land of Egypt,” reads a “reasoning” in the Decalogue in Deuteronomy (5:15); yet it does not follow that the Egyptians are the ones to be remembered, for “it was the Lord your God who brought you out with a mighty hand and a stretched-out arm.” And as if to

counter the prevailing and powerful culture of mutual justification of wrongdoings, the centrality of the God-Israel relationship is cited as the only “remembrance reason” for Jewish victims of oppression and slavery and their subsequent generations to refrain from imitating the Egyptians in their own relationships with *their* others. “You should love him [the stranger] like yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God” (Lv 19:34). The “mighty hand” and “stretched-out arm” that freed Israel can also turn against him, should he venture to become “like the nations” in their idolatry and wickedness (Ez 20:32–33).

It is true that the Lord “forgets not,” but his nonforgetfulness is not the same as a human grudge. “Can a woman forget her child, a mother her own son? Even if she might forget him, I do not forget you” (Is 49:15). Furthermore, as Maimonides emphasized, remembrance is not to serve the purpose of shaming: “It is also a great sin to say to the repentant: Remember your former actions, or to bring him to the memory of these, just to shame him. . . . All this is forbidden and prohibited in the general commandments of the Torah.”²⁴ In other words, a loveless reminding that does not serve the purpose of turning is incompatible with the biblical precept of remembrance.

We will take a closer look at but one other biblical example to illustrate the intricacies of this triangular relational structure of memory, into which the details of the past are placed and from which their meanings are derived: the “remembrance of Amalek” (Ex 17:14–16; Dt 25:17–19).²⁵

According to tradition, the Amalekites attacked the wandering Israelites after the latter had found a new source of water. With the help of Yahweh, the attackers lost, and Moses was instructed by God himself to “write this in a book as something to be remembered . . . that *I* will wipe out the remembrance of Amalek

24. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 485.

25. I am grateful to Rabbi Pesach Schindler for pointing me to these passages by linking them to Simon Dubnow’s entreaty to the Jewish survivors to “record accurately all the tragic details of the Holocaust.” See Schindler, *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1990), 1, 139.

from under heaven” (Ex 17:14). Moses then took this to mean that “Yahweh is at war with the Amalekites from generation to generation” (v. 16). In Deuteronomy, this incident is recounted with two instructions: “Remember what Amalek did to you when you were on the road, coming out of Egypt. He went out to meet you on the way and when you were weak and tired attacked all who were left behind. He had no fear of God” (25:17–18); “*You shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget*” (v. 19).

The probable confusion on the part of the reader is well justified: What is not to be remembered? And what is not to be forgotten? Or what does it mean to not forget to wipe out remembrance? The key to a possible interpretation pertinent especially to our relational viewpoint is highlighted in italics in the quoted scriptures above: the “I” of Yahweh God and the “you” of the Israelites in the wiping out of “the remembrance of Amalek.” One must ask, indeed, if Moses’s interpretation was all there was to understand, then what could be left for the Israelites to wipe out? And if everything should be wiped out, then what could be left to remember?

That Yahweh’s faithfulness—all the more important in these times of fratricidal treachery²⁶—is the main theme and content to be remembered has already been mentioned above. In fact, the monument erected by Moses right after the war was not called “Victory against Amalek” or “The Accursed Amalekites,” as one might have expected, but was an altar with the name “Yahweh My Banner” (v. 15).²⁷ What is also to be remembered seems not the Amalekites themselves or their name, for only the righteous are worthy of remembrance (Prv 10:7), but their *wrongdoings* (the taking advantage of the weak strangers, the tired, and the left behind) and their “godlessness,” which the Israelites are called to remember so as not to commit the same themselves (Ex 22:20; Dt

26. According to tradition, Amalek was a grandson of Esau—the brother of Jacob/Israel (Gn 36:12).

27. See contrasting examples in ancient Rome in D.S. Levene, “‘You shall blot out the memory of Amalek’: Roman Historians on Remembering to Forget,” in *Historical and Religious Memory in the Ancient World*, ed. Beate Dignas and R. R. R. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 220.

10:19).²⁸ Indeed, the immediate verses preceding the instructions concerning remembrance of Amalek in Deuteronomy speak clearly of this danger: holding one set of standards against oneself, and another against the “others,” the “enemies” (Dt 25:13–16). The Amalekites themselves had been victims of foreign oppression (Gn 14:7), yet they not only failed to remember the good that Abram/Abraham had done for them (i.e., by subduing their conquerors), but also committed the same or even worse crimes against others, even their benefactors, Abraham’s descendants. On the other hand, the victory of the Amalekites & Co. over the Israelites was presented elsewhere in the Bible as the (reluctant) divine response to the repeated mis-turnings of the latter (Jgs 3:12–14).

All in all, the injunctions concerning the “remembrance of Amalek” could be the following: to remember God’s faithfulness, to remember sins and wrongdoings, and to make an effort in overcoming the natural remembering of the perpetrators in one’s heart—for

28. Rabbi René-Samuel Sirat has raised a complementary point when interpreting the text of 1 Samuel 15:18, in which he points out that the Hebrew text did not say “to destroy the Amalekite sinners,” but “to destroy sins (of which Amalek is but a symbol).” See Sirat, “Judaism and Repentance” (paper presented at the Religions and Repentance Conference: Growth in Religious Traditions, Facing a New Era, Elijah Interfaith Institute, Jerusalem, 21 Mar. 2000). Indeed, the apparently divinely sanctioned violence against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, in which the prophet Samuel told Saul the king to kill every single Amalekite, including children and infants, has always been problematic in biblical theology. At one extreme, it seems as if the “wiping out of remembrance” meant genocide (1 Sm 15:2–3). However, a counterexample of the vengeful Gibeonites (2 Sm 21) used by Maimonides points to the problem of this interpretation (“Lehre von der Buße,” 427). Furthermore, with the Abrahamic plea for Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis already mentioned (R10), one might ask whether even in the event of a clear and direct divine order of violence, one should not actually be bold enough—like Abraham—to *disagree* with God and try to placate him, instead of simply offering an “obedience” that is indifferent to the injustice inherent in any indiscriminate punishment. It is thus legitimate to ask whether both Saul *and* Samuel had in fact failed the “Abrahamic test” (Gn 22:1), and whether God regretted (1 Sm 15:11) that Saul had failed to kill all, or that he had *just* spared the strong and the useful, instead of having compassion for the weak and those of “no value” (15:9). For relevant exegetical possibilities, see Louis H. Feldman, ‘Remember Amalek!’ (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 46–53.

it is the only place “under heaven” where God needs the victim’s “help” in wiping out the remembrance of the perpetrators. Yet this inner wiping out takes time and is, like other turnings, not to be accomplished under force (R3). Hence it is only with peace and security that this active and selective remembrance and forgetting are to be achieved (Dt 25:19).

R14: Reconciliation as Turning to Each Other through Turning to God

Psalm 51:11 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my offenses.

Psalm 102:3 Do not hide your face from me when I am in trouble. Incline your ear to me; make haste to answer me when I call.

Psalm 32:5 I said: “I will confess my wrongdoings before the Lord.” Then you forgave me the guilt of my sins.

Psalm 143:7 Answer me quickly, O Lord, for my spirit is dying. Do not hide your face from me, so that I will not be like those who go down to the pit.

Psalm 80:20 Turn to us, O Lord, God of hosts; let your face shine so we can be saved.

The Bußpsalmen repeatedly express the repentant perpetrator’s/ sinner’s wish to seek God’s *face*, that is, for “divine turning”: from being fixated on the sins and wrongdoings to turning toward the perpetrator himself. It is as if sin (given birth into reality by the sinner) has effected a double turning-away: the sinner’s turning away from God, and God’s turning away from the sinner. Correspondingly, when repentance as “(re)turning” is spoken of in the Bible, it is meant to be “mutual-turning,” in which it is invariably the God-victim who makes the turning *first*—in the various forms of mercy (R3), in the enabling of and participation in the sinner’s repentance (R6), and not the least in repenting himself (R9). The various turnings on God’s side implored—as opposed

to being demanded²⁹—by the sinner are expressed in concrete actions: “incline your ear,” “answer,” “carry away,” “hide (not),” “cast out not.” In this last section, we will review some aspects of mutual-turning in light of further examples of *interhuman* reconciliation in the Bible, in order to bring out certain elements that are obscured or overlooked in our exploration of repentance in the God-human relationship (R1–R9).

Interpersonal Reconciliation between Joseph and His Brothers (Genesis 37–50): The Link between Confession and Curative Mourning

Genesis 42:21, 24 They said among themselves, “Alas! We are guilty toward our brother! For we saw the fear of his soul when he pleaded with us, but we did not listen; that is why this misery has come upon us. . . .” And Joseph turned and wept.

In the book of Genesis, Joseph, son of Jacob/Israel, who had been betrayed and sold into slavery by his brothers, wept seven times.³⁰ Two instances of particular importance were occasioned by his brothers’ confessions. The first time he wept was after the *internal confession* among his brothers, in which they drew the link between their present predicament (i.e., being imprisoned) and their past sin against their brother Joseph, hence recognizing the punishment as just (see R4).³¹ The third time, in which he “wept aloud” and finally revealed himself to his brothers, after testing their resolve of repentance,³² was upon Judah’s *public confession* of sin.

29. Divine turning is not a matter of “right” that the sinner can demand from God. It is rather always a matter of divine initiative in the dead-end situation in which the sinner rightfully finds himself.

30. Genesis 42:24; 43:30; 45:2, 14–15; 46:29; 50:1 and 17.

31. Genesis 42:21–22.

32. Why would Joseph keep first Simeon and then Benjamin, but let his other brothers go? It is possible that he wanted to see whether his brothers had really learned and turned: Would they let Simeon, their brother of the same mother (Leah), languish in slavery, as they had done to Joseph? Would they do that to Benjamin, regarded not as their brother but only their “father’s son”—as Joseph was regarded (Gn 37:32)—of their mother’s rival (Rachel)? In other words, were they still constrained by a narrowly defined notion of kinship love? As Maimonides has

Judah said: “God has found out the iniquity of your servants” (Gn 44:16). Rather than pleading their actual innocence of theft, Judah attempted to shoulder all the guilt by substituting Benjamin (44:34). Finally, seeing that his brothers were still burdened by the fear of retribution and a conception of guilt that enslaves, Joseph wept for the seventh time and “comforted” them (50:17, 21).

Hence, although in the Bible one does not read of divine “tears of joy,” but only God weeping for our sins (see R5), we can see at least from this example of interhuman reconciliation the *curative* potential of confession. That is, even though past wrongdoings cannot be undone, even though a confession may not reveal anything that is not already known—in other words, even though a confession “does nothing”—by confessing a sinner/perpetrator still has much to contribute to healing—not only of the wounded relationship but also of the wounded victim.

International Reconciliation between the Israelites and the Edomites (Genesis 25–33): The Difference between Reconciliation and Integration

Genesis 33:10, 16–17 Jacob answered [Esau]: “. . . I saw your face, as if I was seeing the face of God. . . .” Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. And Jacob went to Succoth.

Perhaps the most relevant and direct question with regard to the original intention of this biblical investigation is, Where are the examples of “collective reconciliation” in the Bible? With our conceptual preparation up to this point, we shall now finally deal with this question squarely, by looking at the story of Israel (or the Israelites) and Esau (or the Edomites) in Genesis 25:21–33:20. This story is assuring in one sense and “surprising” in another. It is assuring because conflicts between “nations/peoples” (25:23) are framed within the triad of relationships (R2), pointing to the *shared origins*

said, the test of “complete repentance” (*vollkommene Buße*) is when the sinner is given a chance to commit the same sin again but does not sin even though he can. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 417. Judah, who had led the group in selling Joseph into slavery (37:26–27), also took the lead in passing both of these tests.

of the conflicting parties (first through Rebekah their mother but ultimately to Yahweh-God, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac).³³ It is also assuring that the “causes” of these conflicts are not conceived as “black and white,” or in terms of a good-versus-evil or us-versus-them kind of historiography; rather, natural disparities (25:23) and parental favoritism (25:28) are cited, alongside the conflicting parties’ own respective sinful behavior (R1), that is, Jacob’s lying and Esau’s disregard for the sacred right of the first-born, for instance. It is also assuring that the Israelites were in effect taught through this particular scripture to see themselves not as “pure and innocent” (R11) in their conflicts with the Edomites; rather, Jacob (Israel) had every reason to repent and to proactively seek reconciliation with Esau (Edom), just as Esau did with Jacob. And for Jacob to be “motivated” to do so, the only thing he could and did count on was God’s mercy and power (32:10–13), rather than his own “self-power” of “self-transformation” (R3 and R6), of overcoming past mistakes and their consequences. Indeed, even before he met Esau, he was already made a *new man*, “Israel” (32:28). Finally, it is assuring that in international reconciliation, the “forgetting and anger-self-dissipating” approach³⁴ is judged not reliable (R13); the guilt-bearers have to *turn to* their victims, who in turn have to be willing to “face again” their former perpetrators and their shared—yet differentiated—guilt and pain (33:3–4). They both have to face their God and see each other (33:10) if reconciliation is to take place between them.³⁵ It is only “surprising” that the story does not end with “And they lived happily ever after,” as we might have expected. Instead, the two still parted ways (33:16–17).

33. See also Obadiah 1:10, 15.

34. Rebekah told Jacob to flee until Esau forgot what Jacob had done to him and his anger “turn[ed] itself away from him” (Gn 27:44–45). It didn’t happen.

35. The same occurred in Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers: first, when he turned to them as a “God-fearing man” (Gn 42:18); then, as he took away their guilt by accusing God of delivering him to the Egyptians in order to save the entire family (Israel) from famine (45:5–8). The entire human act of fraternal betrayal was thus enveloped and interpreted in a greater act of divine “culpability” and, ultimately, mercy, which is typical in the biblical paradigm (e.g., Ps 105:25; Ex 11:10).

All of this shows, on the one hand, the challenges for those seeking inspiration for collective reconciliation from the Bible, and on the other, the challenges for the conception of “reconciliation” itself. Does it have to mean “integration,” as in intermarriage, similar schooling and worldview, same language and laws, and so on? Does it mean “world peace,” in which not only are past relational wounds healed but future wounds are also forestalled, which immediately renders “reconciliation” unattainable as the problem is intractable? Does it mean “going back to the past when things were good,”³⁶ which brings to the fore both the impossibility of “going back” and the paucity, if not outright absence, of the “original state of good relationship” between communities? Or can it mean a “renewal of relationship,” in which wounds are being tended to while a *new* relationship of a *new* liveliness (still under the ever-present threat of new wounds and illnesses) that *has never been* (Is 43:19) is coming into being?

The question of interhuman reconciliation therefore does not have to be burdened with unrealistic expectations on the one side, and is not to be confused with social integration on the other. As Yahweh commanded Jeremiah, “If you return, I will return to you. . . . Let them return to you, but do not return to them” (Jer 15:19).³⁷ It is repentance to God rather than reconciliation with one another per se that stands at the core of mutual-turning efforts. In the biblical vision, for both the human victims and the perpetrators, drawing closer to God (both themselves and each other) takes precedence over merely drawing closer to one another; should both be turning to God, then no contradiction will arise from their turning to each other. In fact, as we have seen, both—but especially the perpetrator—benefit from the other’s efforts in turning to God. But should interhuman mutual-turning give rise to the danger of turning *away* from God, as in “compromises” in issues concerning

36. As implied by a common Chinese formulation that is used to express “reconciliation”: 和好如初 (literally, “harmonious and good as in the beginning”).

37. In this single verse, the verb “repent/return” appears four times—possibly no other verse in the Bible contains more instances of turning. That even God “repents/turns” is not, as we have seen in R9, an alien notion in the Bible. Cf. Zechariah 1:3.

truth and justice,³⁸ then such “reconciliation” in the human sphere, according to the scripture cited above, is to be rejected in favor of repentance to God.

But can one simply choose to repent *only* to God—that is, without turning to the human victims, who can be much more difficult, if not impossible, to restore than the merciful, ever-ready-to-turn God? From the experience of Jacob, this “sidestepping” of the human victims is to be refuted, for even as the new man, Israel, was already formed *before* facing Esau, his wronged brother, he had to meet him nonetheless, bearing the full risk of rejection—or even abuse (R11)—of his genuine repentance. Indeed, such is the high price for human iniquity: a double healing is necessary for the double damage of divine-human and interhuman relationships (R2). Had the reconciliation with God alone sufficed, then the Lord would not have to bring famine to the Israelites, his people, in order for them to face the Gibeonites, to atone for Saul’s “guilt of blood,” through which he annihilated the non-Israelites “in his zeal for Israel and Judah” (2 Sm 21:1–14). It is as if God will not allow himself to be reconciled to the sinners unless they have made at least earnest attempts—so long as these are still humanly possible—to repent also to their human victims.³⁹ For when the prophet proclaimed, “For the wound of my people I am wounded,”⁴⁰ it was indicative of the “divine pathos” (Heschel) when relationships among the children of God remain damaged. Hence according to Maimonides, the Jewish “Day of Atonement/Reconciliation” (*Versöhnungstag*)⁴¹ is a time for all to repent, as

38. See, for example, the problems of premature “healing/reconciliation” and “unjust peace” in Jeremiah 6:13–14.

39. The need to seek reconciliation with the victims of one’s own sinful acts before seeking reconciliation with God is also stressed in the Gospels. For if the victims are asked to leave their gifts at the altar to go and face their siblings who had done wrong against them (Mt 5:23–24), shouldn’t the perpetrators have all the more reason to summon up the courage to seek the face of their human victims—rather than just seeking absolution from the confessors?

40. Jeremiah 8:21.

41. Yom Kippur is usually translated as “Day of Atonement” in English (see, e.g., Lv 23:27), but the common German translation, “Versöhnungstag,” can also mean “Day of Reconciliation.” This is probably due to the etymological

individuals and as a community. But “repentance, and the Day of Reconciliation as well, only have the power to forgive sins that man has committed against God. . . . The injustice that a man has done to another . . . will never be pardoned until he compensates his neighbor, to the extent he is guilty toward him, and placates him . . . and begs him for pardon.”⁴² And should the victims be dead before pardon can be asked for, the guilty ones are to make a public confession before an audience in front of the graves of the dead victims: “I have sinned against the Eternal One, the God of Israel, and against so-and-so; in this and that way I have done injustice against them.”⁴³ To seek the face of the victim—irreplaceable and unrepresentable—is thus liturgically enforced in Judaism. Before the face of God, on the other hand, the victim is also reminded of his own sinner-hood (Eccl 7:20–22). And though it is his prerogative to withhold forgiveness for his victimizer, nevertheless it is not recommended that he do so toward the repentant one.⁴⁴

Toward the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph’s brothers feared that the death of their father, Jacob, would remove the inhibition of Joseph’s revenge against them. And so they put words in the mouth of the deceased to request forgiveness from Joseph: “Forgive your brothers . . .” (Gn 50:17). But Joseph did not utter that one word they were seeking. Instead he answered: “Am I in the place of God?” (v. 19). It is one thing to consider oneself capable of issuing forgiveness yet withholding it; it is another not to consider oneself to be “in the place” to issue forgiveness, as in the case of Joseph, who, although the undisputed victim of his brothers’ wrongdoing, considered himself indebted to God, who had turned the evil intentions of men and his misery into salvation for many (v. 20).

link between *Versöhnung* (reconciliation) and *Sühne* (atonement), which at once points to the need for atonement in reconciliation and the conciliatory nature of atonement.

42. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 423–29.

43. Ibid.

44. Maimonides went so far as to claim that if even after repeated attempts on the part of the repentant to seek forgiveness privately and publicly from his victim, who nonetheless is unwilling to grant it, the guilt will then rest with the unforgiving victim. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 427.

Instead of forgiveness, Joseph offered his brothers much more: care, comfort, and companionship (v. 21).

Conclusion: A Review of Biblical Repentance

The common translation of the Hebrew word *tshuvah* as “repentance/penitence/penance” in English and “Buße” in German (which derives from “Besserung,” or “betterment”)⁴⁵ has its pros and cons. The most obvious loss of connotation in these translations is the mutuality of turning. For the immediate import of the close linguistic proximity between *tshuvah* and *turning, returning, restoring*—turning away from one’s evil ways, turning back to God, turning on the part of the sinner as making amends (Jer 26:13), turning as “re-facing” the sinner (Ez 39:29), and turning as restoring (relationally as well as geographically) on the part of God—is that “repentance” is very much a mutual act, involving both the perpetrator and the victim (in this case, God himself). Although there are crucial differences between what each side needs to turn from and to (re)turn to, hence an *asymmetry*, the overall “structure” of biblical repentance is one of “mutual-turning,”⁴⁶ rather than a unilateral turning to be “accomplished” by the sinner alone. In other words, if God did not turn to the sinner in the first instance—to offer him the chance (and guidance/encouragement/admonishment) for repentance—the sinner would have

45. See Kluge *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, ed. Elmar Seebold (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), s.v. “Buße.” In verb form (*büßen*), it assumes the meanings of “to make better” (*verbessern*) and “to make good again” (*wiedergutmachen*). See *Duden Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*, ed. Werner Scholze-Stubenrecht (Mannheim/Zurich: Dudenverlag, 2011), s.v. “büßen.”

46. The problem with mutual-turning, one must never fail to remember, is when it becomes a “requirement” by the perpetrator of the victim, as when the French intellectual Pascal Bruckner demands “absolute reciprocity,” in terms of official apologies, from the victims of French colonialism. See Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton, NJ/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 43.

no recourse to turning at all. To borrow Franz Rosenzweig's formulation, repentance is in essence an "evented event" (*ereignetes Ereignis*).⁴⁷

The words "repentance" and "Buße" convey at best only the sinner's side—indispensable nonetheless—of *tshuvah*, that is, of regret, of self-bettering. At worst, they convey only punishment, as, for example, *Bußgeld* (a fine) or *büßen* (to suffer). Although all these elements (including the Greek *metanoia*, roughly, "change of mind"), as has been demonstrated in this part of the book, belong to the conceptualizations of "turning" in the Bible, none alone "defines" what biblical repentance means. The one advantage "repentance" has over "turning" is its religious specificity: not all turnings correspond to biblical repentance, as is shown in the example in Jeremiah 34:15–22 (see R6). In cultural contexts where the word "turning" does not enjoy an intuitive link with penitential "turnings" as meant in the Bible, the imperfect translations are necessary compromises. In this sense, although *Umkehr* (turning back) most resembles *tshuvah* in its non-closed-endedness, it suffers from the same nonspecificity as "turning" in English, as in *umgekehrt* (conversely) or *Umkehrung* (reversal).

The problem of biblical repentance does not lie in its imperfect translations into German and English alone, which is a general problem with all cultural borrowings and is not insurmountable with careful clarification. More significant for the purpose of this investigation is the problem of relational transference. To what extent can the God-human relationship be the "model" for the inter-human one? What are the limits of this "trans(re)lation"?

To begin with the obvious, the victim is not, by virtue of the wrongdoing and the resultant victimhood, the perpetrator's "god";

47. This term is used in the context of love in revelation. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt a.M.: J. Kauffmann Verlag, 1921), 203. See also Bernhard Casper, "Transzendente Phänomenalität und ereignetes Ereignis: Der Sprung in ein hermeneutisches Denken im Leben und Werk Franz Rosenzweigs," in *Der Stern der Erlösung*, by Franz Rosenzweig (Freiburg im Breisgau: Universitätsbibliothek, 2002).

rather, in the biblical paradigm, they both have the one God to face, who acts as the judge between them (1 Sm 2:25). This seemingly insignificant point is in fact of crucial significance if we consider the problems of interhuman reconciliation, when the perpetrators feel beholden to the victims' demands for "repentance"—even those totally uncharacteristic of the spirit of biblical repentance (see **R11**)—as if the latter were now also the "God-victim."

Secondly, the issue of power is also problematic. Whereas in the God-human relationship, power and mercy on the part of God often come hand in hand (whether as the power to punish or as the power to heal), this does not always correspond to the interhuman. Not all victims are in a position to ponder judgment or clemency, punishment or magnanimity. Quite often, they are still locked in a semidependent, underprivileged relationship with the perpetrators. One cannot exercise mercy, so to speak, if one cannot not exercise it. In this sense, the "restoration of the victims" is of primary importance in interhuman reconciliation, although unnecessary in the God-sinner relationship.

Finally, if God's mercy is the beginning of repentance, temporally and ontologically, as we have demonstrated (**R3**) that the repentant sinner/perpetrator seems to be able to overcome the obstacles to the "circumcision of the heart" (**R6**) only by counting on it, where is the promise of turning in the interhuman? It is not mercy as automatic impunity—this we have seen is not the biblical idea of mercy (**R4**)—but mercy as the promise to restore, that is, to "face again," to hear and speak to again, in short, to reenter into relation with. And if there is no such "guarantee" from the human victims' side, but in its place the possibility—if not already the reality—of permanent condemnation, regardless of whether one repents or not, then where can another motivational force be found?

"Repentance is the most optimistic device," Rabbi Schindler told us at Yad Vashem. We did not know what he meant until he referred to the biblical texts about remembrance ("For you were strangers in the land of Egypt") and then turned to the present-day Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, without such optimism, difficult

questions regarding one's own or one's nation's past and present can be much harder to come to terms with, if at all. Turning to the next chapter, we shall look at how this "device" has been at work—insofar as it is visible—in the history of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

