



The Elijah Institute

Religions and Repentance

Judaism and Repentance

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Jerusalem, Purim 5760 - March 21, 2000

Colloquium

1.1 In a text that is remarkable in more than one way, the *midrash* (allegorical commentary of the Bible) states: Six creations preceded the creation of the world: some were actually destined to come into existence, the others were potentially destined to come into existence:

- *the Torah and the Throne of Glory were created before the world;*
- *the Patriarchs, Israel, the Sanctuary and the Name of the Messiah were decided by the Creator before being created in due time.*

Rabbi Ahava, son of Rabbi Ze'ira teaches: repentance also existed before the world.

Other rabbis declare: *The same applies to the Garden of Eden and Gahanna (Bereshit Rabba, chpt. I).*

In seeking to understand what the authors of this *midrash* wish to teach us, we must lay particular emphasis on the binomials proposed by this basic theological text.

The Torah, symbol of light, of truth and of liberty, and the Throne of Glory - image of divine justice - go hand in hand: they associate the attribute of mercy with that of justice. This is the admirable affirmation of G-d's freedom. In the same way the Patriarchs and Israel are associated: the Patriarch Abraham's belief in G-d allowed the world to survive, as we learn from the *Ethics of the Fathers*, and Israel is perceived as the priest-people of mankind, namely the people that brings the *berakha*, blessing, and *kapara*, atonement, pardon, to the world. *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?* (Genesis, XVIII, 25) - the mission of the priest, however, is to obtain forgiveness for the sinner and the blessing of peace will "bring him back to life".

Finally, the Sanctuary and the name of the Messiah are two sides of one value:

the virtue of hope. *The nations will say: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Then the Messiah will judge among the nations and will rebuke many peoples...* (Isaiah II, 3-4).

I.2 I do not have the time to develop here the idea embraced by the rabbis, who establish a relation between each of these divine projects and the six days of the Creation and the specificity of the divine enterprise emphasized by the

pronouncement: *and there was evening, and there was morning ... day one ... day two...* etc... I should like to devote my thoughts here to the founding element represented by repentance, which is compared to the *Shabbat*, clear symbol of liberty. This *Shabbat* is placed on a parallel with the project of the garden of Eden and Gahanna, in other words, with the passage to the eighth day, that is, according to Biblical and Rabbinical symbolism, the beginning of the Messianic era. (Note that on the eighth day the new-born boy *enters Abraham's Covenant*).

I.3 What does the pronouncement that *repentance was planned by G-d before the creation of the world* mean? It means that the world could not survive even for a moment if no possibility was given to human beings, the jewel in the crown of the divine enterprise, to go beyond the state of sin into which man is liable to fall and, thereby to be restored. No condemnation is final. Expiation is always possible through repentance. The Prophet Ezechiel wrote on this subject a sublime page, one of the most beautiful in the Bible: *if the wicked man will turn from all his sins that he has committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his transgressions that he has committed will not be mentioned to him; in his righteousness that he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? says the Lord G-d. Rather is it not true that I wish him to return from his evil ways and live?* (Ezechiel XVIII, 21-23).

How does Saint Augustine, who inspired Luther, interpret this affirmation made by Ezechiel?...

1.4 What is true at the individual level is true naturally at the level of the family, the tribe, the people, the human group, all mankind. The single and unique prior condition is the free choice of the penitent to assume his repentance, with all the responsibilities that this entails.

The rabbis affirm: *Everything is in G-d's hands except for the fear of G-d*¹. G-d has given man free choice and does not allow Himself to intervene in this domain. This incredible privilege, accorded to man, places him, without any possible doubt, above the level of the angel; the angel, totally devoid of free choice, cannot transgress a divine precept. Such a case would be totally absurd. Thus, the fact that the angel obeys its Maker does not imply any merit for it, because it is very precisely for this that the angel was called into being.

1.5 On the other hand, man during the twentieth century that has just come to a close (or as we Jews say, during the sixth millennium which is approaching its end) has committed dreadful crimes against human beings and thus against G-d. I will not go back as far as the Crusades and the destruction of the Jewish communities along the Rhine, nor to the Spanish Inquisition and the pyres on which Jews who refused to deny their faith died, Jews who had sometimes in a moment of aberration reluctantly accepted baptism, but had then reverted to the faith of their ancestors, knowing full well the dreadful death to which they exposed themselves. Nor will I dwell on the dreadful acts of violence of Chmielniski and his Christian hoards in Eastern Europe in the mid-seventeenth century. I wish above all to relate to the abomination of fifty years ago, which is

¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 33B

called Shoah and which constitutes the greatest gauntlet thrown down to man and to G-d. In the last decade, we have witnessed acts of repentance which have aroused both our astonishment and our admiration, unaccustomed as we were to such conduct. The declarations of Pastor Noemoller in Berlin in 1945 have been joined by the admirable declarations of the Bishops of Germany (1996), then of France (Drancy, September 1997), followed by that of the Vatican a few months later; the desire of the Swiss Banks to confess to the *crime of indifference* of which they were guilty and their exploitation of the dramatic situation of the refugees who had thought to find a temporary haven; the courageous declarations of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, affirming clearly France's responsibility in the racist and antisemitic action of the Vichy government, deliberately breaking with the lies or, at least, the lies by omission of the Presidents of the French Fifth Republic, who succeeded each other to power from General de Gaulle until President Mitterand; the decisions to compensate the spoliation suffered by the Jews in Europe ... all these open a basic perspective of hope and indicate the dawning of a new world based on the Biblical precept of *confessing to wrongs and asking for forgiveness*.

II.1 In a remarkable text just published by Mr. Edgar Morin² and entitled **Pardonner** (To Forgive), this great scholar affirms first that to forgive is *to resist the cruelty of the world. Although wrongdoing, sacrilege, shame of one's self, guilt exist in all civilizations, and in many (civilizations) it is recommended to exercise clemency and magnanimity, forgiveness as such arises from within the*

² Le Monde des d'ebats no. 11, Feb. 2000, pp. 24-26

Jewish world; it is transformed into understanding of human blindness in the "they know not what they do", which corresponds to the idea of the Greek stoics for whom the wicked man is an ignorant man, an imbecile. Nearer to our time is Karl Marx's affirmation: "men know neither who they are nor what they do", with also the idea of forgiveness...

II. I await impatiently for the leaders of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church to take the same road of repentance after the Gulag, the deportations of populations, the Refuseniks who had to suffer so much in their attempt to find man's basic possession, namely liberty, Chechnia, martyr of yesterday and today.

II.3 Take heed, however, repentance is not a magic act. It is not enough to pronounce the word *teshuva* in order to be forgiven. This can be understood through a comparison between King Saul's repentance and that of King David.

Saul disobeyed G-d's order to *eradicate the sins*³ (of which Amalek is the symbol) and Samuel, seeing this, fiercely rebukes him. To which Saul replies: *I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words .. I beseech you, pardon my sin; ... honor me now, before the elders of my people, and before Israel; come back with me and I will worship the Lord your G-d*.⁴

³ I Samuel XV, 18: in Hebrew *vehaharamta et hahata'im* (the sins, and not the sinners; *hahot'im*) and *Amalek*.

⁴ Ibid., 24-30.

David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and the prophet Nathan bitingly censured him: *you are the sinner who has taken the lamb of the poor man*⁵. David then said to Nathan: *I have committed a sin before the Lord*, and Nathan answered: *the Lord has pardoned your sin; you will not die*.

Does G-d make distinctions between people? Why is Saul's sin (proof, after all, of culpable weakness but not of deliberate disobedience⁶) not forgiven, while David's sin is wiped out? David's repentance comes from the depths of his soul. In an extremely rare manner, the Hebrew text of the Bible has a space in the middle of the verse after the words *I have committed a sin before the Lord*.

Saul's repentance, however, is half-hearted: *I have sinned, I admit it, now honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel*. In other words, if public acknowledgment of my wrongdoing is indispensable, I agree to it; but the main thing is that you come and honor me before my people. This is the typical example of insincere, worthless repentance.

II.4 The same applies to the repentance of the children of Israel after the sin of the spies⁷: *we will go up to the place which the Lord has promised for we have sinned ... they insisted on going up to the hill top (to fight)*. They considered that since they had admitted their transgression, G-d's forgiveness was obligatory... The severe defeat that ensued showed that this was not the

⁵ II Samuel XI, 3-13.

⁶ Cf. I Samuel XV, 13: *Saul says to Samuel: Blessed be you of the Lord: I have performed the commandment of the Lord*. This declaration at least expresses the sincerity of Saul's feelings.

⁷ Numbers LXV, 40 ff.

case.

Beware, the texts seem to tell us! **Forgiveness depends on the sincerity of the repentance...**

III.1 We Jews are often asked: in face of this considerable movement of repentance of the Christian Churches, the European States, believers or non-believers who recollect their past or their parents' past, why do you hang back, why do you not participate more actively in this *teshuva* movement?

Let us first consider the conscious or unconscious hidden intentions in this question. Can the executioner and the victim be placed on the same level? Can the person who committed no criminal act, but who was the passive witness of the absolute horror, be placed alongside a survivor of the torment (every Jew today is a miraculous survivor of the Shoah)? Are they in the same situation before G-d?

Let us look at the main point in a reflection which comes from deep within Judaism: are there things with which we must reproach ourselves and of which we must repent?

III.2 This question has already been answered by Jewish liturgy (the prayers recited on the New Month and Festival Days): *On account of our sins we were exiled from our land, and removed from our country...*

On account of our sins? Is not Job's basic question posed once again? Job holds the Almighty responsible, asking him vehemently: "*What is my iniquity, what is my sin?*" (Job, X-6).

This problem is admirably formulated in a tale by the great contemporary Israeli author, Haim Hazaz (who died in 1973), entitled *Ashamnu*⁸ (*We Have Sinned*). A pogrom devastated a village in Eastern Europe, 90% of the inhabitants of which were Jewish. The Cossacks, killed, violated, pilfered, destroyed, devastated, set alight ... After the departure of the Cossacks, a deathly silence reigned over the village. Seeing that it was time for *Mincha*⁹, the few survivors, bruised and sore, made their way to the synagogue or to what remained of it. In a voice choked by sobs and tears, the officiating minister recited the afternoon prayer. When he came to the public confession and he uttered the first words: *Ashamnu, bagadnu*, a member of the congregation interrupted him. Pointing an accusing finger towards the sky he cried out: "*Ashamnu, bagadnu?* Is it we who are guilty? Is it we who are responsible?" The rabbi, in tears, begged him to be silent, as if to ask him to have pity on He who, from the celestial heights, suffers with His martyred people, suffers at not having intervened.

Certain rabbis are even so bold as to interpret as an antiphrasis the expression "*it is on account of our sins*", as if we were assuming in place of G-d the responsibility for the suffering unjustly inflicted on the Jewish people.

⁸ This word opens the public confession of our sins.

⁹ The afternoon prayer service

III.3 We must ask ourselves if really, if we examine deeply and carefully our conscience, we have nothing with which to reproach ourselves.

Firstly, reflection and repentance should be undertaken by those rabbis who interpret literally the ancient liturgical text, and dare to assert that the Jews of the mid-twentieth century assumed even a slight responsibility in the Shoah. In my view this is absolute blasphemy. I would then require an explanation as to the responsibility of the one and a half million Jewish children who perished in the gas chambers, the responsibility of entire communities from Poland, Hungary, Rumania, the Baltic countries or even Western Europe, with at their head their rabbis, their Torah guides, their spiritual mentors. I also need to understand why the Gypsies were martyred. Those who, at one time or another of their existence, were tempted by such a perverse idea, have the duty to make *teshuva*.

In a premonitory vision of the Shoah, at the time of the Nazi rise to power in Germany, Haim Hazaz wrote a play entitled: *At the End of Time*, which predicted already *the extermination of European Jewry destined to go up in flames*. The leaders of the Zionist Movement had advocated the mass return of the Jews to the land of their ancestors from the first decades of the twentieth century. At that time England, which had remained faithful to the spirit of the Balfour Declaration, allowed young Jews to enter Mandatory Palestine¹⁰ and

¹⁰ This good will contrasts with the ignoble attitude of Anthony Eden, Winston Churchill's Foreign Minister, who in 1944 vehemently opposed and unfortunately with success the American plan for rescue

King Faisal, in his famous meeting with Chaim Weizmann, maintained that he viewed the arrival of the Jews in the Middle East favorably. At this time, the ultra-Orthodox rabbis of Hungary (particularly the spiritual leaders of the communities of the Carpathian Mountains), of Rumania (the ideological movement around the Satmar Rabbi) placed a ban on Aliyah, i.e. the mass immigration of the Jews to the Holy Land, since this would be to anticipate the coming of the Messiah, all the more so since the Zionist leaders at that time were not particularly religious. In a work published in Budapest in 1943, at the height of the torment, Rabbi Issachar Shlomo Teichthal expressed a deep remorse for this attitude of his teachers which he himself had shared: *"Now that the horror has descended upon us, those who fear G-d (Haredim) and in particular the spiritual leaders of the generation, must admit with all their forces that their duty was to aid, guide and advise the many communities and in particular the young people who had expressed their wish to emigrate to the Holy Land. However, they failed to do so and today we are suffering the dreadful consequences"*.¹¹

III.4 What should we say today of the suffering of our mothers, our sisters, our wives, our daughters? The Bible gave precedence to women, the wife, the mother, in all circumstances: *God said to Abraham: ... All that Sarah says to you, hear and obey*¹². However, influenced by Diaspora society, we have greatly reduced women's status. Anyone who has not seen the suffering of the

of the Jews in Occupied Europe and their transfer to Palestine, since such a humanitarian action was contrary to the Foreign Office's pro-Arab policy.

¹¹ End of the introduction to the work *"Em Ha-Banim Semekha (The Joyous Mother of Children)* (Psalm XCIII,9) (understand, by antiphrasis: the mother of children - Jerusalem - is in the cruelest mourning).

Agunot, wives who are unable to obtain the *get*, the religious divorce document, from their ex-husband, does not know what true suffering is.

And what are we rabbis doing?

III.5 In the years 1948-1950, the leaders of the nascent State of Israel did not welcome their Sephardi brethren with the required open-heartedness and generosity. Ehud Barak formulated this feeling of guilt admirably when he publicly asked the former immigrants from Iraq or Morocco to forgive the harsh absorption conditions that they had suffered. Amnon Shamosh and Sami Michael, two great contemporary writers, relate how they dressed in their *Shabbat suit* in order to enter the Holy Land and how they were greeted by the members of the health service charged with spraying them with D.D.T.....

III.6 Yizhar Smilansky, a member of the Israeli Parliament in the early days of statehood - and also a famous author - wrote short stories: *Sippur Hirbet Hirzah* (Hirzah in Ruins), or *Ha-Shavui* (The Prisoner) ..., with which all Israel - despite the terrorist attacks suffered by the State - united in remembering the transgressions against human beings, in condemning these abuses, which were certainly very few but unfortunately real. It was in this period that Yigal Allon, first Commander in Chief of the Israeli Army, coined the phrase "battle morals" (*tihur haneshek* - literally: "purity of arms"), which is an oxymoron since by definition battle constitutes the height of immorality, impurity. However, he meant that in the Israeli army, above all in the army which must take up arms

¹² Genesis XXI, 12.

for its legitimate defense, it is indispensable to keep always in mind the Biblical precepts of purity, of absolute obedience to morality, to ethics, the absolute value of human beings, even in the case of an implacable enemy.

III.7 The 1982 Lebanon war constituted a dreadful ordeal and we hope that this nightmare will end for Israel next July when the last Israeli soldier will be withdrawn from Lebanese territory. It will be necessary above all to guarantee the security of the north of Israel and also of the South Lebanese Christians, Israel's loyal allies.

III.8 At Sabra and Shatilla, Maronite Christians avenged the assassination of the legitimately elected Lebanese President, who came from their ranks, by a horrendous massacre of Moslems living in these refugee camps. This had to be remembered. However the Kahana Commission, by sanctioning General Sharon, then Minister of Defense, wished to strongly express the disapproval of the people of Israel, **its repentance in some way**, for having stood aside during the massacre, thus infringing the principle of *assisting a person in danger: you shall not stand indifferent to the blood of your neighbor* (Leviticus XIX, 16). It is precisely for this that the Prophet Obadiah rebukes Edom: *the day you stood by indifferent to the massacre of your brother Jacob* (Obadiah I, 10).

III.9 The Jews of the Diaspora must also examine their conscience. Those living in the metropolises along the banks of the Hudson or the Potomac, on the banks of the Thames, the Moskva or the Seine, or also those whose children study Torah under the protective shade of the houses of study, should have the

restraint not to militate arrogantly for Greater Israel. It is not their children who fight in South Lebanon: so, like all of us, they should do some soul-searching.

IV.1 In Conclusion.

The mission of the Jewish people is defined admirably by the Prophet Isaiah¹³: *You are My witnesses, says the Lord, ... and I am G-d*. Commentary of the rabbis: *if you are My witnesses, I am G-d; in other words, for G-d to be recognized by all the nations of the world, Israel must be G-d's witness*. G-d does not need Israel in order to exist: *only G-d is G-d*, but in order for *His sovereignty to be proclaimed over the world*, Israel must accomplish its freely accepted mission. This is why repentance, this creation that preceded the Creation, is indispensable for the survival of the world. When Israel acts as the people that is the witness of G-d, it *sanctifies the Almighty's Name (Kiddush Hashem)*. Merely observe the admiration aroused by the Israeli volunteers sent to the sites of natural catastrophes: Georgia, Latin America, Turkey... Yes! said the nations. *What a wise and intelligent people is this great nation*¹⁴. It is certainly a lot to ask of this small people, *the fewest of all peoples*¹⁵. Yet, it is by resting faithful to the Ten Commandments, the Torah that was destined to exist even before the world was a world, that Israel allows the universe to exist.

IV.2 This Shabbat, time of liberty, twinned on one hand with Israel, **people-witness** of liberty, and on the other hand with **repentance** which reintroduces **liberty** and **mercy** in the world, will soon come to an end. It can end by the

¹³ XLIII, 13

¹⁴ Deuteronomy IV, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* VII, 7.

destruction of the world - the atom bomb can take care of this cataclysm - or it can open on to the Garden of Eden, the eighth day, in which man will live the fulfillment of all G-d's promises in the ineffable joy of proximity to G-d. For that one merely has to accomplish *teshuva*.

*Return unto Me and I will return unto you, says the Lord of Hosts*¹⁶.

May this be our will as it is certainly the Lord's will. Amen.

¹⁶ Malachi, III, 7.