

HOW IS ATONEMENT MADE?

The feeling of guilt is common to all human beings. On this day of Atonement, we are concerned with how to release our guilt. We are concerned with making amends for the errors we have committed. We seek above all on this day - atonement.

Guilt will make people do strange things. In ancient times, we are told the primitives would bodily attack themselves in seeking atonement. With sharp instruments, they would cause themselves to bleed, or they would dismember themselves, cutting off a portion of the body and offering it as atonement to the Gods. It is for good reason that our Bible specifically forbids the Hebrews to attack themselves in this manner. They are forbidden to bring a sharp instrument to bear upon their body. This is one of the reasons that Jews in the past would not shave with a razor. This is part of the reason that Hasidic Jews today grow long paious on the side of their faces. This prohibition in our Bible was dictated by a very much prevalent custom of the pagans in mutilating themselves.

As you know, Orthodox Jews today put on a ribbon when someone in the family dies. Most of them tear this ribbon without understanding why. The practice of tearing the ribbon or tearing one's clothes was introduced into Judaism thousands of years ago as a substitute for the more primitive practice of tearing one's body. When someone dies, among the emotions we experience is guilt. We imagine that the deceased is experiencing pain. We want to share their pain. We want to hurt ourselves. Orthodoxy says, "Don't mutilate your body. Tear this piece of clothing as a substitute." There is a sound psychological basis behind this custom. Men want to punish themselves when they seek release from guilt.

Men are more punishing to themselves than any god could ever be. We punish ourselves for crimes that are not even on God's list. For example, some people punish themselves for failing at a particular task. Failure at making a great deal of money is no religious sin, yet some people will berate themselves so much for this kind of failure that they will bring on an ulcer or a heart attack. Any doctor can tell you of the strong link between certain physical symptoms and the patient's anxiety caused basically by guilt. In modern times people don't attack themselves with knives as the primitives did. Instead, we internalize our attack. We slowly punish ourselves for imagined sins that we built up to unrealistic proportions in our sub-conscious. Such punishment shows our lack of faith in the mercy of God. It is a reflection of our childhood belief that our parents would not forgive us.

Of course, suicide is the extreme form of self-punishment. Some people are so overwhelmed with guilt that they are unable to deal with it, and they seek atonement through self-elimination. While the causes for suicide are complex, among its contributory causes has to be the feeling that there is not a God who forgives. In this sense, a suicide attacks the very heart of Judaism, and

among our fathers a suicide was considered a renegade from the faith. He was considered as one who denied God.

Let us try to follow primitive man in his attempt to release his guilt-feelings. If he was not to punish himself for his sins against the gods, what else could he do to get rid of these feelings? Primitive man decided that he would find a scape-goat, and by a kind of magic he would transfer all of his sins to that goat. When the goat was punished, that is to say, when the goat was killed, the man could consider that all of his sins were killed, and he would be once again pure.

Our Bible contains not only some of the highest achievements of mankind, it also contains the record of some of the more primitive practices of mankind. The Hebrew prophets spoke out against the retention of these ancient practices, but the priesthood tried to preserve its power through these rituals. In the book of Leviticus (ch. 4), we are told that when a ruler sins, he should bring a goat to the Temple, lay his hand upon the goat's head, recite his sins over the goat, and offer up the goat for a sacrifice. The portion concludes (v. 26), "So the priest shall make atonement for the ruler's sin, and he shall be forgiven." Atonement for the average citizen, and, indeed, for the entire group was made in a similar fashion. When the priest put his hand upon the goat's head and recited the sins of the people, it was assumed that the sins were transmitted in some magical fashion to the animal, and his death was an atonement for the entire group.

We may be surprised to learn that our exalted Bible contains remnants of primitive practices such as this, but if we look around us today, we will see that this kind of ritual is indulged in by individuals and by nations. What did Hitler do but make the Jews the scapegoat for all of the inadequacies of Germany? There are white people who blame the negroes for all the problems in their community. There are politically oriented people who make a scapegoat of the pinkos and communists, whether they are in existence or not. You and I know individuals who hate themselves so much, who feel so guilty for their past, that they turn this hatred upon those around them. Every organization, whether it is a garden club, a sisterhood, or a synagogue has active people who are so filled with self-hatred that they violently attack the people around them, and even the organization itself. Those who constantly accuse others in the most extreme manner are frequently those who carry such a large burden of guilt that the only way they can live with them is to make someone else the scapegoat. Those who cannot bring themselves to confess, "I did it", are frequently those who cry loudest, "They did it." These people are to be pitied, because forgiveness is not as difficult to obtain as they think, and if they could be a little less demanding upon themselves, they would not have to search so desperately for a scapegoat.

All of Christianity is based upon the theory of the scapegoat. The New Testament tells us that it is the blood of the lamb of Jesus that atones for the sins of all men who will believe that he died for their sins.

Billy Graham assures us over and over that it is not good deeds which makes for atonement but faith - faith that you are vicariously forgiven by the miracle of the crucifixion. You might think that modern people would be beyond belief in the theory of the scapegoat, but I assure you they are not. As you know, there is a Christian congregation now located on Bird Road near Red Road, which calls itself Beth Yeshua. On the front of the building, there is a Jewish star. Inside prayers are recited in Hebrew, and Yiddish is spoken. When the service is over, Jewish-Christians try to convert you to Christianity. They ask you to accept the idea that Jesus died for your sins. It is tempting to some people to unload their sins so conveniently. When a person shows some interest, the sponsors of this church tell the Jew to turn to the 53rd chapter of the Book of Isaiah, and they say, "Look, the prophet Isaiah prophesied the coming of Jesus, because the prophet said, 'Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrow. . . but he was wounded for our transgressions and he was bruised for our iniquities'". The evangelists will then say to the Jew, "You, too, will be forgiven if you believe in Jesus". I have had people call me on the phone, and say, "Rabbi, they seem to be right. That's what the text says. Maybe we Jews are wrong in not accepting Jesus." Every Jew should know a few things about the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. First of all, he should know that it is not a prophecy. It is not written in the future tense in the Hebrew. It is written in the past tense. Isaiah is speaking about someone who has already suffered, not about someone who is yet to suffer. Secondly, the 53rd chapter of Isaiah was written 500 years before Jesus was born. Thirdly, most responsible scholars, Christians as well as Jews, teach that the 53rd chapter of Isaiah speaks of the Hebrew people itself, which was afflicted and wounded, much beyond the punishment that it deserved. Finally, the 53rd chapter can only be understood in terms of the chapters around it, and in all the other chapters it is made clear that the person about whom the prophet is speaking is the collective person of the people of Israel.

The Hebrew prophets like Isaiah actually argued against the doctrine of the scapegoat. In fact, they attacked the entire sacrificial system of the priests. Isaiah himself in chapter 54 contends that God will forgive Israel simply because it is the nature of God to forgive. The evangelical Christians like to quote chapter 53 of Isaiah, for some reason, they don't quote chapter 54. In that chapter Isaiah quotes God as saying to Israel,

"For a brief moment I forsook you,
But with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,
But with everlasting love I will have compassion upon you." V. 7 ff

The Israel that is described as bearing the sorrows of many nations in chapter 53 is forgiven in chapter 54. No promise that Christianity extends to the Jew can be more convincing than God's own promise made in Isaiah 54. The prophet quotes God as saying, (v. 10):

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed
But my love shall not depart from you,
And my covenant of peace shall not be removed.

Let the evangelical Christian who quotes Isaiah 53, quote on. He will soon do himself out of business.

If atonement is not to be obtained by self-punishment, if atonement is not to be obtained by the punishment of others for your errors, how, then, are we to obtain forgiveness.

Judaism contends that the process is simple. In our prayers we have said, "but repentance, prayer, and righteousness" averts the negative decree.

(Written in Hebrew)

T'shuvan, the Hebrew word for repentance, means simply return. It involves the desire to do better, and the confession of one's sins. Judaism believes that confession is good for the soul. Some people will stubbornly refuse to admit that they ever did anything wrong. This stubbornness is a reflection of insecurity. The person who knows that atonement is readily available, as Judaism assures us, has no fear about admitting errors. We are only human. We are all fallible. We all make mistakes. You, no doubt, observed that our Kol Nidre service begins with a confession by the Rabbi of the mistakes he has made. We all have guilt, whether we are conscious of it or not, and the person who refuses to admit to this is merely bottling up his guilt. He is merely making it more explosive. Judaism urges us to confess. Confess to God in your silent meditation. Confess to your spouse. Confess to each other. We must all acknowledge our imperfections. There is healing in the acknowledgement.

After T'Shuvah, says our Prayer Book, after repentance, we must observe T'filah, we must pray. By prayer we mean here the direction of our heart and mind to the highest of which we can conceive. We mean the attempt to find a new direction, the attempt to make our search for love and justice more intensive. To pray, in this sense, means to climb to a higher level of day to day practice. It means reaching out for the deeper parts of yourself and for the deeper parts of those around you. When one seeks atonement, he prays that he will be less indifferent to the needs of others. He prays that he may enlarge the areas of his sympathy. To pray means to prepare oneself through study and thought and meditation and verbalization - for the life of righteousness.

Finally, our Prayer Book says atonement is obtained through Tzadakah. This is the final step. Tzadakah is the active life for which prayer prepares us. The deed of Tzadakah is the deed of righteousness that links us to our fellow man. When we treat a person with tzadakah, we do the reverse of making them the scapegoat. Instead of projecting our guilt over to them, instead of blaming them for our faults, we try to understand their pain, so that we can help them through their problems.

To be able to live in terms of tzadakah we must be able to forgive others. But unless you can forgive yourself, you can't forgive others. We all know people who can't tolerate criticism. They will either lash out at others,

criticizing those who are aware of their errors, or they will retreat into a mood of silence. For days, they won't talk to you, trying to punish you, but they are only punishing themselves. This vindictive silence is the only way in which they can handle the problem. If this person could forgive himself a little more, he would not have to be so harsh on you. Judaism teaches that the readiness of God to forgive is assured. The Rabbis taught that even God prays. There is a legend, that once an angel humbly asked God, "Lord of the Universe, what do you pray for when you pray?" God is reputed to have answered, "I pray that my mercy shall exceed my justice." Both of these qualities, mercy and justice, are essential to our world.

A person cannot play a game with loved ones and with God. You can't act unrighteously time after time under the assumption that forgiveness is automatic. Forgiveness is there for those who make sincere atonement, for those who return to the path of right-dealing. Forgiveness is there for those who actually re-direct their hearts to a loftier level of living. It is there for those who seek to set right the wrong that was done. It is there for those who bind the wounds. It is there for those who can forgive themselves.

Let no one think that atonement and irresponsibility go together. It is not enough to say, "I am sorry." One cannot act the role of the baby and say, "I didn't know what I was doing", or, "I was angry." There must be sober consciousness of one's error. There must be a recognition of the hurt that has been done. Only then is true redirection possible, only then do you qualify for the privilege of forgiveness in depth.

Our tradition teaches that God waits for the person who seeks atonement in truth. He is waiting now for your return. He waits also for you to forgive each other. In the respect and sympathy that you manifest for one another lies the seeds of your own forgiveness.