

Forgiveness

Historical

First mention of forgiveness in Torah: “forgive us our iniquity and our sin.” (Ex 34.9)

Atonement was through expiation and sacrifice during the portable mishkan and temple periods.

After the destruction of second temple, atonement was through prayers and acts of repentance, forgiveness, atonement, etc. From the midrash, Avot de Rabbi Natan:

One time, when Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was walking in Jerusalem with Rabbi Yehosua, they arrived at where the Temple now stood in ruins. "Woe to us" cried Rabbi Yehosua, "for this house where atonement was made for Israel's sins now lies in ruins!" Answered Rabban Yochanan, "We have another, equally important source of atonement, the practice of *gemilut hasadim* ("loving kindness"), as it is stated "I desire loving kindness and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6)

General

What is forgiveness?

1. Forgiveness does not mean lack of consequences. It does not mean forgetting the past wrongdoing.
2. Forgiveness is a change of relationship with the one who has done the wrong.
3. Terms for forgiveness: *selichah* (forgiveness), *mechilah* (wiping away), *kapparah* (purging).

Who forgives?

1. The person wronged (in the case of wrongdoing against another person).
2. God (in the case of wrongdoing against God).

3. The day (i.e., the Day of Atonement): "It was taught in the mishna: Yom Kippur atones for sins committed against God but does not atone for sins committed against another person." (Yoma 87a9)

What is teshuvah (often translated 'repentance')?

1. Turning or returning

2. Returning to God. For example:

"Yet even now"—says the LORD— "Turn back to Me with all your hearts, And with fasting, weeping, and lamenting."

Rend your hearts Rather than your garments, And turn back to the LORD your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in kindness, And renouncing punishment.

Who knows but He may turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind For meal offering and drink offering To the LORD your God? Joel 2:12-14

Our sins are like veils upon our faces, hiding us from our Maker! Moses Ibn Ezra (1060-1139)

3. Returning to soul. For example:

"Inscribe us for life." There is a holy point in each Jewish person's heart. This is the living soul, of which it says: "God has implanted eternal life within us." But over the course of each year as we have become accustomed to sinning, the material self overpowers and hides that holy point. We then have to seek compassion from the blessed Holy One, asking that this imprint in our heart be renewed on Rosh Hashanah. This is what we mean when we say: "Inscribe us for life."

The Language of Truth, "Rosh Hashanah," ch. 1, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (the Sefat Emet), Arthur Green, trans.

What does repentance (teshuvah, turning) involve? Who is a penitent (chozer be-teshuvah or baal teshuvah)? Some different answers:

1. Six aspects of repentance: recognition of the sin (*hakarat ha chet*), feeling remorse for it (*charata*), ceasing to do it (*aziva*), giving recompense for it (*pei'raon*), confessing it out loud to the one mistreated (*vidui*), asking that person for forgiveness.

(from Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, below)

2. Prayer (*tefilah*), repentance (*teshuvah*), righteous action (*tzedakah*). High Holiday liturgy

3. Humbling yourself, praying, seeking God's face, turning from wicked ways. II Chronicles (below)
4. Fasting, weeping, lamenting, rending your heart (Joel 2:12-14, below)

Are there different types of repentance? Yes, according to some sources:

1. Repentance out of love, repentance out of fear, repentance out of suffering (Talmud; Hassidic)

Do I have to forgive?

Not if the above criteria are not met. You don't have to forgive someone who is still doing the wrong, who has not acknowledged the wrong, who has not adequately compensated for the wrong, etc. You can forgive in those cases if you wish to but there is no obligation to do so.

It is Maimonides, not the Talmud, who says that if a person asks forgiveness three times and you do not give it, then the sin lies with you. The Talmud just says you should ask for forgiveness only three times. It does not say the person asked must give it.

We are, however, told to be compassionate and gracious, etc., which indicates that forgiving someone who has repented is a generally good thing to do.

Torah

...when he realizes his guilt in any of these matters, he shall confess that wherein he has sinned. Leviticus 5:5

And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial; and you shall do no manner of work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the LORD. It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial; it is a law for all time. (Leviticus 16:29-31)

Speak to the Israelites: When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the LORD, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess the wrong that he has done. He shall make restitution in the principal amount and add one-fifth to it, giving it to him whom he has wronged. If the man has no kinsman to whom restitution can be made, the amount repaid shall go to the LORD for the priest—in addition to the ram of expiation with which expiation is made on his behalf. Numbers 5:6-8

Prophets

Wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.

Come, let us reach an understanding, —says the LORD. Be your sins like crimson, They can turn snow-white; Be they red as dyed wool, They can become like fleece. (Isaiah 1:16-18)

I wipe away your sins like a cloud, Your transgressions like mist— Come back to Me, for I redeem you. Isaiah 44:22

Is this the fast that I desire? A day to afflict body and soul? Bowing your head like a reed, covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast--a day worthy of the favor of Adonai? Is not this the fast I desire--to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home and never to neglect your own flesh and blood? Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall quickly heal, your Righteous One leading the way before you, the Presence of Adonai guarding your from behind. Then, when you call, Adonai will answer, and, when you cry, will respond "Here I am." Isaiah 58:5-9

Now, O mortal, say to the House of Israel: This is what you have been saying, "Our transgressions and our sins weigh heavily upon us; we are sick at heart about them. How can we survive?" Say to them: As I live--declares the Lord GOD--it is not My desire that the wicked shall die, but that the wicked turn from their [evil] ways and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, that you may not die, O House of Israel! Ezekiel 33.10-11,

“Yet even now”—says the LORD— “Turn back to Me with all your hearts, And with fasting, weeping, and lamenting.”

Rend your hearts Rather than your garments, And turn back to the LORD your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in kindness, And renouncing punishment.

Who knows but He may turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind For meal offering and drink offering To the LORD your God? Joel 2:12-14

Ninevah was an enormously large city a three days' walk across. Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he had the word cried through Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast--of flock or herd--shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be

covered with sackcloth--man and beast--and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from evil ways and from injustice. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? God may turn back from wrath, so that we do not perish."

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.

Jonah 3.3-10

"For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings" (Hosea 6:6)

Writings

If My people who are called by My name humble themselves, pray, seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. II Chronicles 7:14

Then I acknowledged my sin to You; I did not cover up my guilt; I resolved, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and You forgave the guilt of my sin. Psalms 32:5

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart. Psalms 51:19

Have mercy [or, grace] upon me, O God, as befits Your faithfulness [or, lovingkindness]; in keeping with Your abundant compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify me of my sin; for I recognize my transgressions, and am ever conscious of my sin. Have mercy upon me, O God, as befits Your faithfulness; in keeping with Your abundant compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify me of my sin; for I recognize my transgressions, and am ever conscious of my sin. Psalm 51:3-5

Talmud

But isn't it taught in a baraita: Seven phenomena were created before the world was created, and they are: Torah, and repentance, the Garden of Eden, and Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of the Messiah. Nedarim 39b4

Just as it is prohibited for an adulterous wife to return to her husband, it should be prohibited for the Jewish people to return to God from their sins, yet repentance overrides this prohibition. (Yoma 86b1)

With regard to repentance, the Gemara asks: What are the circumstances that demonstrate that one has completely repented? Rav Yehuda said: For example, the prohibited matter came to his hand a first time and a second time, and he was saved from it, thereby proving that he has completely repented. Rav Yehuda demonstrated what he meant: If one has the opportunity to sin with the same woman he sinned with previously, at the same time and the same place, and everything is aligned as it was that first time when he sinned, but this time he overcomes his inclination, it proves his repentance is complete, and he is forgiven. (Yoma 86b8)

It was taught in a baraita that Rabbi Yosei bar Yehuda says: When a person commits a transgression the first time, he is forgiven; a second time, he is forgiven; a third time, he is forgiven; but the fourth time, he is not forgiven, as it is stated: “Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, but for four I will not reverse it” (Amos 2:6). And it says: “All these things does God do twice or three times with a man” (Job 33:29). (Yoma 86b10)

Similarly, Rabbi Yehuda raised a contradiction between two verses. It is written: “Return, you backsliding children I will heal your backsliding” (Jeremiah 3:22), implying that anyone can achieve healing, which is dependent only on repentance. But it also states: “Return, O backsliding children, says the Lord, for I am a lord to you, and I will take you one from a city, and two from a family” (Jeremiah 3:14), implying that repentance is available only to certain individuals. He resolved the contradiction and explained that this is not difficult: Here, it is referring to repentance out of love or fear, which few people achieve; there, it referring is repentance through suffering, as everyone has thoughts of repentance when they suffer. Rabbi Levi said: Great is repentance, as it reaches the heavenly throne, as it is stated: “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God” (Hosea 14:2). This implies that repentance literally reaches to God. (Yoma 86b16)

The Gemara returns to interpreting the mishna. It states there that one who says: I will sin and I will repent, I will sin and I will repent, is not given the opportunity to repent. (Yoma 87a7)

It was taught in the mishna: Yom Kippur atones for sins committed against God but does not atone for sins committed against another person. Rav Yosef bar Ḥavu raised a contradiction before Rabbi Abbahu: The mishna states that Yom Kippur does not atone for sins committed against a fellow person, but isn't it written: “If one man sin against another, God [Elohim] shall judge him [ufilelo]” (I Samuel 2:25). The word ufilelo, which may also refer to prayer, implies that if he prays, God will grant the sinner forgiveness. He answered him: Who is Elohim mentioned in the verse? It is referring to a judge [elohim] and not to God, and the word ufilelo in the verse indicates judgment. Atonement occurs only after justice has been done toward the injured party by means of a court ruling. (Yoma 87a9)

Rav Ḥisda said: And one must appease the one he has insulted with three rows of three people, as it is stated: “He comes [yashor] before men, and says: I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not” (Job 33:27). Rav Ḥisda interprets the word yashoras related to the word shura, row. The verse mentions sin three times: I have sinned, and perverted, and it profited me not. This implies that one should make three rows before the person from whom he is asking forgiveness. (Yom 87a12)

And if the insulted friend dies before he can be appeased, one brings ten people, and stands them at the grave of the insulted friend, and says in front of them: I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and against so-and-so whom I wounded. (87a13)

Rabbi Yosei bar Ḥanina said: Anyone who asks forgiveness of his friend should not ask more than three times, as it is stated: "Please, please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did evil to you. And now, please forgive" (Genesis 50:17). The verse uses the word please three times, which shows that one need not ask more than three times, after which the insulted friend must be appeased and forgive. And if the insulted friend dies before he can be appeased, one brings ten people, and stands them at the grave of the insulted friend, and says in front of them: I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and against so-and-so whom I wounded. (Yoma 87a14)

There were some lawless men living in the neighborhood of R. Meir and they used to vex him sorely. Once R. Meir prayed that they should die. His wife Beruriah exclaimed, "What is in your mind? Is it because it is written, "Let sinners cease out of the earth" (Ps. 104.35)? But the text can be read so as to mean, "Let sins cease out of the earth." Glance also at the end of the verse, "and let the wicked be no more"--i.e. when "sins shall cease" then "the wicked will be no more." Rather should you pray that they repent and be no more wicked!" R. Meir offered prayer on their behalf and they repented. (Berakhot 10a, Cohen trans.)

Midrash

1. Who is mighty? He who turns his enemy into his friend. *Avot de Rabbi Natan* 23
2. Israel said to the Holy One of blessing, Master of the worlds, if we do Teshuvah, will you accept us? God said to them: I have accepted the Teshuvah of the people of Nineveh, and shall I not accept your Teshuvah? (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, Agnon trans., revised)

Liturgy

Yom Kippur liturgy

Our God and God of our fathers and mothers,
pardon (*m'chal*)
our failings on this Day of Atonement
erase our misdeeds; see beyond our defiance.

Hear our call, Adonai our God. Show us compassion.
 Accept our prayer with love (*rachamim*) and goodwill.
 Take us back, Adonai; let us come back to You;
 renew our days as in the past.

Our God and God of our fathers and mothers,
 may our prayers reach Your presence.
 And when we turn to You, do not be indifferent.
 Adonai, we are arrogant and stubborn,
 claiming to be blameless and free of sin.
 In truth, we have stumbled and strayed.
 We have done wrong.

Our Father, our King, hear our voice,
 Our Father, our King, we have sinned before You,
 Our Father, our King, have compassion on us and on our families.

Our Father, our King,
 Answer us with grace, for our deeds are wanting.
 Save us through acts of justice and love.

Piyut

Adon Ha Selichot

Master of forgiveness, Who examines hearts, Who reveals depths, Who speaks righteousness, We have sinned before you, have mercy on us.

Who is glorious in wonders, Who is eternal in consolations, Who remembers the covenant with our fathers, who delves into our innermost parts, We have sinned before you, have mercy on us.

Who is good and does good to living beings, Who knows all hidden matters, Who extinguishes wrongdoing, Who wears righteousness, We have sinned before you, have mercy on us.

Who is filled with merit, Who is awesome in praises, Who forgives wrongdoing, Who answers requests, We have sinned before you, have mercy on us.

Who works redemption, Who sees the future, Who calls out the generations, Who rides in the heavens, Who hears prayers, Who is pure in knowledge, We have sinned before you, have mercy on us.

Bedtime shema

Master of the universe! I hereby forgive anyone who has angered or vexed me, or sinned against me either physically or financially, against my honor or anything else that is mine, whether accidentally or intentionally, inadvertently or deliberately, by speech or by deed, in this incarnation or in any other—any Israelite; may no person be punished on my account. May it be Your will, Lord my God and God of my fathers, that I shall sin no more, nor repeat my sins; neither shall I again anger You, nor do what is wrong in Your eyes. The sins that I have committed, erase in Your abounding mercies, but not through suffering or severe illnesses. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before You, Lord, my strength and my redeemer. —Isaac Luria (1534 - 1572)

Medieval

Our sins are like veils upon our faces, hiding us from our Maker! Moses Ibn Ezra (1060-1139)

What is complete repentance? He who once more had in it in his power to repeat a violation, but separated himself therefrom, and did not do it because of repentance, not out of fear or lack of strength. For example? One who knew a woman sinfully, and after a process of time he met her again privately, and he still loving her as theretofore, and he being in a state of potency, and the meeting is in the same land where the sin was first committed, if he parted without sinning, he has attained complete repentance. (2:1)

What is repentance? The sinner shall cease sinning [1], and remove sin from his thoughts [2], and wholeheartedly conclude not to revert back to it [3], even as it is said: "Let the wicked forsake his way" (Is. 55.7); so, too, shall he be remorseful on what was past [4], even as it is said: "Surely after that I was turned, I repented" (Jer. 31. 19). In addition thereto he should take to witness Him Who knoweth all secrets that forever he will not turn to repeat that sin again [5], according to what it is said: "Say unto Him.... neither will we call any more the work of our hands our gods" (Hos. 14.3–4). It is, moreover, essential that his confession shall be by spoken words of his lips, and all that which he concluded in his heart shall be formed in speech [6]. (Repentance 2:2)
Maimonides (1138-1204), *Mishneh Torah*, "Repentance"

Once on the New Moon of Elul, the zaddik Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berditchev [18th cent.] was standing at his window. A Gentile cobbler passed by and asked him, "And have you nothing to mend?"

At once the zaddik sat himself down on the ground and weeping bitterly cried, "Woe is me, and alas my soul, for the Day of Judgment is almost here, and I have still not mended myself!"

Zikhron la-Rishonim, 13th c. German, Agnon trans.

Hasidic

Always look for the good in yourself. And remember: joy is not incidental to your spiritual quest; it is vital. For so it is written (Isaiah 15:12): “You will go out through joy, and be led forth in peace.” Focus on the good in yourself; take joy in what is good, and you will be led forth from inner darkness.” Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav

“Inscribe us for life.” There is a holy point in each Jewish person’s heart. This is the living soul, of which it says: “God has implanted eternal life within us.” But over the course of each year as we have become accustomed to sinning, the material self overpowers and hides that holy point. We then have to seek compassion from the blessed Holy One, asking that this imprint in our heart be renewed on Rosh Hashanah. This is what we mean when we say: “Inscribe us for life.”

The Language of Truth, “Rosh Hashanah,” ch. 1, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (the Sefat Emet), Arthur Green, trans.

“The shofar blasts are sounds without speech. Speech represents the division of sound into varied and separate movements of the mouth. But sound itself is one, united, cleaving to its source. On Rosh Hashanah the life-force, too, cleaves to its source, as it was before differentiation or division. And we, too, seek to attach ourselves to that inner flow of life.

Language of Truth, “Rosh Hashanah,” ch. 2

The verse says: “Return us to you, Lord, and we shall return” (Lam. 5:21). This refers to the two kinds of *teshuvah*: that of fear and that of love. When a person is defiled by sin, it is impossible to return from love. Only the return due to fear is possible, and this requires the help of heaven. Thus the ancients have told us that God helps the one who returns. This is the meaning of “return us.”

But those who return from love do so on their own, because of the love of God that burns within. This requires no help. Thus the Midrash recounts that Noah needed help to “walk with God,” while Abraham needed no help to “walk before Me.” One acted from fear, the other from love.

Language of Truth, “Shabbat Shuvah”

Let the person who wishes to merit Teshuvah [repentance] make it a practice to recite Psalms. There are many barriers to doing Teshuvah. One person may not be sufficiently awake and even he who arouses himself faces many barriers, for the gates of Teshuvah are shut in the face of many. There are others who do not know how to do it, and pass their days and die, God forbid, without having done Teshuvah. But, even people who are not awake for Teshuvah will merit the awakening, by reciting Psalms, and will open all the closed gates and come into the gate of Teshuvah that belongs to their particular soul, until they merit a complete Teshuvah.

Rabbi Nathan of Breslov (student of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav), Kitzur Likkute Moharan, Agnon trans. revised

The essence of the ultimate *teshuvah* – returning to one’s Source in heaven - is that deliberate sins are transformed into merits, for one turns evil into good, as I learned from the Ba’al Shem [and from the Talmud] “Turn aside from evil and do good” [Psalms 34:15] means “turn the evil into good.” (Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polnoye, student of the Baal Shem Tov)

Recent and contemporary

Irrespective of the degree of awareness, several spiritual factors come together in the process of spiritual conversion. Severance is an essential factor. The repentant cuts himself off from his past, as though saying: "Everything in my life up to this point is now alien to me; chronologically or historically it may be part of me, but I no longer accept it as such." With a new goal in life, a person assumes new identity. Aims and aspirations are such major expressions of the personality that renouncing them amounts to a severance of the old self. The moment of turning thus involves not only a change of attitude, but also a metamorphosis. (Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz)

Rather than allow ourselves to be burdened by regret for our past misdeeds, we must strive to develop the inherent goodness which lies hidden in our souls, beneath layers of tarnish left by our sins. (Rabbi Joseph Stern, interpreting the Sfat Emet)

In Judaism, we emphasize sincere repentance—including fully owning harm done & deep transformational work to become the kind of person who makes different choices. Not forgiveness. And only the victim can truly forgive. And sometimes the victim has been murdered.

Of course, a person who has been harmed can always choose to forgive irrespective of whether the perpetrator has done the work of repentance, and those impacted by harm (family of the victim) can forgive as well. It can sometimes be healing and freeing to do so. Yes.

But we speak in the language of obligation, and there’s no obligation on the victim of an unrepentant perpetrator, or on other people, to do so. And when harm cannot be truly repaired, there’s no obligation to forgive. (Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, October 2019, Twitter)