

## Sin

### General

#### *What is sin?*

There is no original sin. There is reference in Genesis (*Bereshit*) to an inclination (tendency) towards bad (the inclination of human thoughts is only bad all day) that comes after a text about some men with power taking whatever women they want and think beautiful. Suggests an inclination to take or do whatever you want. Later, the rabbis refer to both an inclination to good (*yetzer tov*) and an inclination to bad (*yetzer ra*).

#### *What types of sin are there?*

There are both deliberate sins and ones that are not deliberate:

*Cheit* (general term): literally, to go astray, i.e. not following the proper path.

*Avera* (sometimes thought of as the general term): literally, transgression.

*Pesha* (deliberate sin) or *Mered* (literally, rebellion): a deliberate sin; an action committed in deliberate defiance of God.

*Avon* (lit. iniquity): a sin of lust or uncontrollable emotion; done knowingly, but not done to defy God.

*Cheit* (sometimes thought of as a specific term): an unintentional sin, crime or fault.

#### *What is sin like?*

It may suggest a turn to self over community. God brings the flood after powerful men take whatever women they want for *themselves*. Hassidic tradition derives the word *mitzvah* (commandment) from a word that means to connect.

The rabbis think we all have a good inclination (*yetzer tov*) and a bad inclination (*yetzer ra*), both necessary:

Rabbi Nahman said in Rabbi Samuel's name: 'Behold, it was good' refers to the good inclination; 'And behold, it was very good' refers to the bad inclination. (It only says 'very good' after man was created with both the good and bad inclinations, in all other cases it only says 'and God saw that it was good') Can then the bad inclination be very good? That would be extraordinary! But without the evil inclination, however, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children; and thus said Solomon: 'Again, I considered all labour and all excelling in work, that it is a man's rivalry with his neighbour.' (Ecclesiastes 4:4). Genesis Rabba 9:7

Perhaps in response to the presence in us of both types of inclination, God is both just and merciful. The rabbis identify God's two names with justice and mercy, justice with God (*el*, *elohenu*, etc.) and mercy or lovingkindness with God's personal name LORD (YHVH).

“These are the generations of the heaven and earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven.” (Gen. 2.4) It may be likened to a king who had empty vessels. The king said, “If I put hot water into them they will crack; if I put icy cold water into them they will contract.” What did the king do? He mixed the hot with the cold and poured the mixture into the vessels, and they endured. Similarly said the Holy One, blessed be He, “If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy, sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can the world last? Behold, I will create it with both attributes; would that it might endure!”

Genesis Rabbah 12.15, A. Cohen trans.

*Does God forgive sin?*

Yes. God is forgiving. In his self description, the “thirteen attributes of God” (Exodus 3:6), there are eight or nine attributes that can be categorized as compassion/mercy/forgiveness; only two or one, justice. This is the passage sung repeatedly on Yom Kippur:

The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate (*rachum*) and gracious (*chanun*), slow to anger (*erech apayim*), abounding in kindness (*chesed*) and faithfulness (*emet*), extending kindness (*chesed*) to the thousandth generation, forgiving (*noseh*) iniquity (*avon*), transgression (*pesha*), and sin (*chet*); yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity (*avon*) of fathers upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

In addition, God says he will forgive:

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

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

*Can we overcome our tendency to do bad things?*

The Noah story suggests we will *always* have a bad tendency. Nonetheless, we are asked and exhorted to be good and told we can master tendencies we have to be bad. God says to Cain that sin crouches at the door—like a wild animal that desires you—but you can master it. We are accountable. We can master sin.

*Are there some people who do not sin?*

Even leaders go astray. No one's perfect. Humans are mixed. Our forebears, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, Moses, Miriam and Aaron, are not portrayed as semi-divine heroes without flaws. They get angry, jealous, disobedient, drunk, murderous, etc.

## Examples

### Torah

#### *Adam and Eve*

Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?”

The woman replied to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: ‘You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.’”

And the serpent said to the woman, “You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad.” When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths. (Genesis 3:1-7)

*Punishment:* pain in childbirth, desire for her man, her man's rule over her; ground cursed, difficult labor on it; banished from Garden of Eden. *Protection:* clothed them with garments of skin

#### *Cain and Abel*

Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.

The LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?” (Genesis 4:8-9)

*Punishment:* more cursed than the ground, soil will not produce for him, will be a wanderer.  
*Protection:* promise to avenge anyone who tries to kill him and mark on him for protection.

*The 'sons of God'*

And the sons of God saw the daughters of humanind, that they were attractive, and they took women, from all they chose. (Genesis 6:2, Friedman, trans.)

2. worshipping the golden calf [Ex 32.1-],
3. powerful men taking whatever women they want [Gen 6.x ],
4. A&E eating the fruit, hiding from God, blaming what they did on someone else (E on snake—but this may be true, A to Eve) (E saw it was good to look at, to eat and from which to gain wisdom so she eats it, then gives it to her husband to eat)

*Punishment:* flood and destruction of all living beings on earth except for Noah and his family and the animals they take on the ark.

The LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time.

And the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened.

The LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them."

But Noah found favor with the LORD. (Genesis 6:5-8)

*Protection:* saved on the ark; promise/covenant never to destroy humankind again; certain laws (can eat the animals now but not with blood; prohibited to kill a man)

The LORD smelled the pleasing odor, and the LORD said to Himself: "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done. (Genesis 8:21)

*Golden calf (idolatry)*

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him." (Exodus 32:1)

*Other examples*

Breaking any of the 10 commandments: idolatry, taking God's name in vain, not observing the sabbath, dishonoring father or mother, murder, adultery, stealing, coveting (house, wife, slaves, animals, anything else), etc. Violation of any commandment,

Jacob. Jonah. Others?