



## Joseph's Brothers: Guilt, Repentance, Remorse

Parashat Mikeitz, Genesis 41:1-44:17 & Parashat Va-yigash, Genesis 44:18-47:27

By Mark Greenspan

“Repentance” by David Lincoln (pp. 412) in *The Observant Life*

### Introduction

One of the central themes in living a spiritual life is *t'shuvah*, repentance. More than just an idea, *t'shuvah* is a way of life: we are constantly striving to return to a fuller and more whole vision of self. While we tend to focus on themes relating to repentance on the High Holy Days, *t'shuvah* is a year-round concern. This is best reflected in the words of Rabbi Eliezer who taught: “Repent one day before your death.” When his students asked, “Does one know on what day he will die?” Rabbi Eliezer answered, “All the more reason one should repent today, lest one die tomorrow” (BT *Shabbat* 153a).

*T'shuvah* literally means ‘return.’ To what does one return? How can one know when repentance (our own and that of others) is sincere? How is repentance before God different from repentance for harm caused to human beings? What role does Yom Kippur play in bringing about repentance? We gain some insight into the complexity of this unending process in the words of the sages: “Yom Kippur atones for sins against God. Yom Kippur does not atone for sins against another human being until one has placated the person offended” (Mishnah *Yoma* 8:9).

David Lincoln suggests that the Bible deals almost exclusively with communal rather than individual repentance. This may be true, but one can argue that the story of Joseph is a dramatic story of individual repentance. We find anger, forgiveness, recrimination and reconciliation between individuals in this moving tale. We are troubled by the elaborate game of cat and mouse that takes place between Joseph and his brothers in the Egyptian court but we are also deeply moved by Joseph's tears. Joseph and his brothers are torn by their past, and their desire for reconciliation. Is Joseph punishing them or is he seeking their better selves? Do the brothers feel remorse and guilt; is this an expression of repentance?

*They said to one another: “Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us.” Then Reuben spoke up and said to them, “Did I not tell you, “Do no wrong to the boy? But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood!” They did not know that Joseph understood them...he turned away from them and wept...*

- Genesis 42:21-24

*“Now, your servant has pledged himself for the boy to my father, saying, ‘if I do not bring him back to you, I shall stand guilty before my father forever.’ Therefore please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!” Joseph could no longer contain himself before his brethren and he cried out...*

- Genesis 44:32-45:1

### Sources and Resources

- a) *Why did Joseph denounce his brothers? Surely it was criminal of him to take vengeance and bear a grudge like a viper. Though they had meant evil God had turned it to good. What justification then had he for taking vengeance after twenty years? How could he ignore their plight in a strange land and that of their families suffering famine and waiting*

*for them, particularly his aged father gnawed by worry and care? How could he not have pity on him and how could he bear to inflict on him further pain through the imprisonment of Simeon?*

- Don Isaac Abarbanel, Commentary on the Torah, chapter 42 (as quoted by Nehama Leibowitz in *Studies in Bereshit*, Parashat Mikeitz)

- b) *What constitutes complete repentance? He who is confronted by the identical thing wherein he transgressed and it lies within his power to commit the transgression but he nevertheless abstained and did not succumb out of fear or weakness. How so? If a person had relations with a woman forbidden to him and he was subsequently alone with her, still in the full possession of his passion for her and his virility unabated and in the country where the transgression took place; if he abstained and did not sin, this is a ba'al t'shuvah, a true repentant.*

- Moses Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilbot T'shuvah 2:1 (as quoted by Nehama Leibowitz in *Studies in Bereshit*, Parashat Mikeitz)

- c) *Evidently Joseph's intention had from the outset been to test them to see whether they still hated him or regretted their deed. He saw no other way of doing it except through his brother Benjamin, to observe how they would react when they saw him in distress and danger. To that end he thought up on the spur of the moment the stratagem of the cup. But since Benjamin was not with them he had to abuse them and trick them into bringing him.*

- Isaac ben Moses Arama d. 1494, Akedat Yitzchak Commentary (as quoted by Nehama Leibowitz in *Studies in Bereshit*, Parashat Mikeitz)

- d) *In other words, a man must be confronted by the same temptation to which he had previously succumbed. If he stands the test and resists he has proved his mettle. How could this be affected in the case of Joseph and his brothers? Whatever affection they might show their brother in Egypt now, would be no indication of their true remorse. With Joseph as the vice-regent of Egypt they could, in any case, do no harm and whatever they would do would constitute a reform prompted by "fear and weakness." How could Joseph test them and give them the possibility of achieving true repentance? Indeed, Joseph arranged everything appropriately...if they would refuse to go back to their father without Benjamin and would be willing to sacrifice their lives as indeed Judah indicated...only then could the brothers be considered true penitents and Joseph would be able to make himself known to his brothers...*

- Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, Parashat Mikeitz

- e) *If he does not repent until his old age, at a time when he is incapable of doing what he did before, even though this is not a high level of repentance, he is a ba'al t'shuvah. Even if he transgressed throughout his entire life and repented on the day of his death and died in repentance, all his sins are forgiven as Ecclesiastes 2 continues: "Before the sun, the light, the moon, or the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain..." This refers to the day of death. Thus, we can infer that if one remembers his Creator and repents before he dies, he is forgiven.*

*What constitutes t'shuvah? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again as Isaiah 55:7 states "May the wicked abandon his ways..." Similarly, he must regret the past as Jeremiah 31:18 states: "After I returned, I regretted." He must reach the level where He who knows that which is hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again, as the Bible states: "We will no longer say to the work of our hands: 'You are our gods' (Hosea 14:4)." He must verbally confess and state these matters that he resolved in his heart.*

*Anyone who verbalizes his confession without resolving in his heart to abandon sin can be compared to a person who immerses himself in a mikvah while holding the carcass of an impure reptile in his hand. His immersion will not be of avail until he casts away the carcass. This principle is implied by the statement in Proverbs 28:13, "He who confesses and forsakes his sins will be treated with mercy." It is necessary to mention particularly one's sins as evidenced by*

*Moses' confession, Exodus 32:31: "I appeal to You. The people have committed a terrible sin by making a golden idol."*

- Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, *Hilkebot T'shuvah* 2:2-3

## Reflections

Nehama Lebowitz shows us in her masterful essay in *Studies in Beresbit* how Joseph struggled with his ambivalent feelings towards his brothers. Imagine facing the men who tried to kill you years before and who sold you into slavery. Then imagine that you have absolute power as a leader of your adopted nation; what would you do? How would you respond to your brothers? Dressed as an Egyptian leader, the brothers do not recognize Joseph. Joseph no longer has reason to fear his brothers but when he faces them, he becomes the seventeen-year-old boy who shared his dreams and was the hapless victim of their fury. At that moment he experiences his own vulnerability all over again. It is hard to know if Joseph responds out of anger or if he is testing his brothers to see if they truly regret their treatment of him years before. The Torah tells us that he recognized the brothers but that he "made himself a stranger to them." (Genesis 42:7) He is drawn to the brothers but repelled by them at the same time. He struggles with two issues. Do the brothers regret what they did to him? Can he let go of his anger and forgive them? Joseph responds with tears and anger.

Initially, Joseph does not forgive them when they express remorse. He listens as Reuben expresses guilt for having allowed the others to sell Joseph into slavery: "Did I not tell you, 'Do no wrong to the boy? Now comes the reckoning for blood.'" Surely this is a sign that they regret their treatment of Joseph! But this is not enough. It is only when Judah offers himself in place of Benjamin that he accepts their remorse and guilt as sincere. Only then does he reveal his true identity. According to Isaac Arama and other commentators, this was all part of a strategy to allow the brothers to prove that they had overcome their animosity and would not repeat the mistakes they made in the past. This, according to Maimonides is the true test of repentance. Yet, how often in life will we find ourselves in the exact same circumstances with the exact same ability to sin as we were the first time we committed a transgression, particularly against another person? I would also argue that if this was all part of a plot hatched by Joseph, then we have to question his character. We have no right to test another person's character to see if they are worthy of our forgiveness. I don't think that Joseph thought this plan through. Rather, caught between forgiveness and recrimination, Joseph could not decide whether he wanted to welcome the brothers back into his life or whether he wanted to punish them for having abandoned and hurt him.

There is another element in the Biblical story. There are two statements of remorse in the story as it unfolds: one by Reuben, the oldest of the sons, and the other by Judah. Both brothers seem to be competing for the leadership of their family here. Both played an important role in the sale of Joseph into slavery. Both committed other crimes against their family (Reuben slept with his father's concubine and Judah slept with his daughter-in-law). Reuben never expresses any regret for his behavior while Judah openly acknowledges his mistake when he realizes that he is guilty of impregnating his daughter-in-law. Both brothers, I would suggest come to Egypt with a lot of baggage and regrets about their past behavior. But it is through Judah that the family is reconciled – and it is Judah's offspring that will become Israel's leaders in the Davidic monarchy.

Joseph cries and cries again throughout this episode in his life. In fact he cries more than any other biblical character. He, too, has regrets about the past. Is it possible he has come to recognize that he was at least partially responsible for the unfortunate event that led to his descent into Egypt? While no one ever apologizes in this story, there is a complex process of repentance that takes place on both sides. Joseph and his brothers meet again as a family.

What does repentance mean for us today? Lincoln defines two types of *t'shuvah*: 'restorative' vs. 'integrative' *t'shuvah*. Restorative *t'shuvah* is a return to Judaism's traditional teachings and a departure from the secular world while integrative (or Rosenzweigian) *t'shuvah* is an attempt to integrate the teachings of Judaism with the secular world in which we live. It is interesting that initially Joseph speaks to his brothers in their native language and sends his Egyptian servants from the room. In order to become one with his brothers he must 'restore' himself to their family. Ultimately Joseph must learn to integrate his past into his present identity by introducing his brothers and father to Pharaoh and making a place for them in Egyptian society. Both elements are necessary for *t'shuvah* to be complete.

### **Halakhah L'ma-aseh**

- a. *The Hebrew word t'shuvah is related to the word meaning "to turn" or "to return." Indeed, the expression "to return in t'shuvah" is part of the vocabulary of modern Hebrew.*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 412
- b. *Conservative Judaism teaches that returning to God in repentance does not and should not require abandoning or rejecting the secular world.*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 412
- c. *Maimonides begins his exposition of the traditions of repentance by insisting that the inner urge toward t'shuvah be given vocal expression. "How does one confess?" he asks rhetorically, then answers with the simple idea that one must say aloud, "I regret my acts and am ashamed of them."*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 412
- d. *The sincere recitation of liturgical confessions constitutes our method of asking God for forgiveness today. We realize that we may not have committed all the sins enumerated in the standard text, but we join with the congregation in reciting the full litany nevertheless, deriving security from the presence of other worshipers who also attempt to approach God in penitential prayer.*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 412
- e. *By confessing our sins as a community, we seek the strength to repent as individuals.*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 412
- f. *Maimonides teaches us that, when approached for forgiveness by someone who has done us wrong, we should forgive them wholeheartedly and neither bear a grudge nor show cruelty by a refusal to accept the apology.*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 412
- g. *We cannot reject Maimonides' teaching that a Jew who lives contrary to the commandments of the Torah is still called upon to repent. Such people, therefore, should not be condemned or dismissed; instead of continuing to live lives informed by a strong sense of Jewish identity yet not engaged with traditional Jewish tradition and observance, they should be encouraged to consider t'shuvah in the Rosenzweigian sense.*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 412
- h. *According to the Torah, one's conduct is entirely in one's own hands and cannot be influenced by external factors...Modern Jews should fully embrace the notion that we are in full command over our actions at all times, that we always have the choice of acting morally or immorally and that this choice is completely unrelated to extraneous details of someone's education, upbringing, culture or talents.*  
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 412

## Questions to Ponder

1. At the end of the Joseph narrative, does Joseph forgive his brothers? How do you know?
2. What regrets do the brothers have; what regrets does Joseph have?
3. In your opinion, what constitutes “complete repentance?” Do we ever completely repent of our wrong doings?
4. Why did the sages make verbal confession an essential part of the process of repentance?
5. Is our conduct “entirely in our own hands,” as Lincoln claims? What actions, if any, are not a matter of free will?
6. Are there times when it is inappropriate or unrealistic for someone to expect forgiveness when they have harmed us?
7. How can we make *t’shuvah* part of our daily lives?

## Postscript

**Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929)** ranks as one of the most original Jewish thinkers of the modern period. He is known for his great work “The Star of Redemption” as well as his compelling life story. As a young man he made a decision to leave Judaism and embrace Christianity but then had a reawakening in which he returned to the Jewish tradition. Together with Martin Buber, he founded a center for Jewish adult education in Frankfurt—the *Lehrhaus*—which attracted the most important young German-Jewish intellectuals of its time, and which is still held up today as a model for educational programs of its type. He spent much of his life wrestling with the challenges of being a Jew in the contemporary world until his early death from ALS disease.

*Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan*