

Teshubah, or repentance, is crucial to the religious experience. Rabbi Levine here analyzes two divergent views—that of the great medieval Jewish sage and that of the famous American psychologist and philosopher—and finds in their attitudes to repentance two completely different approaches to religion itself. Rabbi Levine, who was ordained by Chief Rabbi Herzog of Israel and until recently was a rabbi in Long Island, now devotes his full time to teaching at the Teachers Institute and at Stern College for Women both of Yeshiva University.

THE EXPERIENCE OF REPENTANCE

The Views of Maimonides and William James

Religion and modern psychology have both displayed a keen interest in the phenomenon of conversion or repentance. Yet there is a vast difference in the motivation behind this interest. Religion's interest is dictated by practical regulatory motives of how to use best the capacity for this experience to further religious life. Psychology is interested in repentance for the purpose of understanding human behavior generally and not for the sake of directing it specifically to any particular goals.

Thus we find the eminent Jewish legalist, philosopher, and physician, Moses Maimonides (b.1135, d.1204) turning his attention to this matter in his masterly compendium of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, in the very first of its fourteen books, *Sefer Ha-mada*, "The Book of Knowledge." The section on the Laws of Repentance, forming the last portion of this book, represents one of the unique contributions of Maimonides to our conception of the scope of Jewish law. Though the statements in this section are based by and large on Talmudic and Midrashic material, the *Mishneh Torah* is the first code of Jewish law to include this material as Halakhah — objectively formulated rules of conduct. Up to the time of Maimonides it was felt that this highly personal and complex experience did not lend itself to formal codification but required individual guidance. It was the genius

The Experience of Repentance

of Maimonides that discovered the universal character of repentance and abstracted it from the particular.

In his ten chapters on repentance Maimonides deals with such questions as: Which are the proper motives for repentance — guilt, fear, or love? What type of penance must the sinner do along with his change of heart and new resolve? Which sins require absolution — sins in act only, or sins of thought as well? How should the sinner relate himself to his past and to his previous environment? How can he best gird himself to effectuate the change of plan in his life's pattern? Can he attain the level of perfection of one who has not sinned? Which sins require restitution to society and forgiveness from man as well as forgiveness from God? Which sins, if any, cannot be forgiven? Is the experience of repentance one which requires supernatural intervention?

Modern psychology, on the other hand, interests itself in different aspects of the phenomenon of repentance. It is to the credit of modern psychology that it has not shied away completely from the realm of religious experiences and has not considered them quirks of human behavior beyond psychological interest. Modern psychology in its emphasis on concrete and experimental data rather than on abstract conceptualized schemes of mental operations, seeks its facts of human behavior even in the area of man's religious activity. Of course it attempts to explain this activity from its own vantage point and endeavors to relate it to the general patterns of human behavior and psychology. It interests itself in such questions as: What explanation is there for the radical changes in the behavior patterns of converts who seem to defy at a critical stage in their lives the iron laws of habit and native disposition? Are these changes generally of a permanent nature? Do the claims for supernatural interventions in the form of visions, voices, and promptings accompanying the act of conversion stand up under critical examination? What is the role of the unconscious self in these experiences? Which attitudes and emotional states are most commonly associated with these experiences? To what extent do religion and psychology agree in their understanding of human behavior?

The noted American psychologist and philosopher William James gives us an admirable treatment of these problems in his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹ The contents of this book

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library edition, 1902).

were first delivered as the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh in 1901-1902. We can well understand, in view of the author's background (he was the son of a Swedenborgian theologian) and the audience to which they were addressed, that these lectures are slanted in the direction of Christian religious experience and theology. Actually the personal records and theological interpretation filling this book are almost exclusively Christian. More accurately the title of this volume should read "The Varieties of Christian Religious Experience." Nevertheless, in the absence of an adequate work doing justice to the Jewish experience, we must content ourselves with this otherwise competent and brilliant treatment from the psychologist's point of view. Moreover, as Gershom G. Scholem has pointed out in his work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*,¹ there is a genuine dearth of Jewish autobiographical material of this sort, inasmuch as Jewish religious figures have practiced a kind of voluntary censorship and have not included in their works passages of too intimate a nature. There seems to be a deep-seated reluctance by the Jewish spirit to betray to public eyes personal experiences of mystic dimension. Consequently, we shall have to reconstruct the nature of Jewish religious experience from sources other than the autobiographical. The formulations of the Halakhah and the Agadah must and can serve as trustworthy reflections of the Jewish experience.

Primarily, it is our purpose to show the distinctive character of the Jewish experience of repentance as compared to the types of religious experiences described by William James in his two chapters on conversion. There is a tendency at times to equate all of religion as if there were a common substratum that could be uncovered after stripping each individual religion of its accretions of ritual and formal ceremony. Thus the statement: "Religions are many. Religion is one." This approach does not stand up under careful scrutiny. Not only is Judaism distinctive in its observances, but it is also different in its underlying principles and world-outlook.

In the approach to the matter of emotional experiences in religion there exists also the yet greater error of divorcing the subjective emotional states from the content of religion. Goethe,

1. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), pp. 15-16.

The Experience of Repentance

in his autobiography, relates how when his friends sought to convert him to a specific religion, he constantly repelled their efforts.

In Faith, I said, everything depends on the fact of believing, what is believed is perfectly indifferent. Faith is a profound sense of security in regard to both the present and the future; and this assurance springs from confidence in an immense, all-powerful Being. The firmness of this confidence is the one great point; but what we think of this Being depends on our other faculties, or even on circumstances, and is wholly indifferent. Faith is a holy vessel into which everyone stands ready to pour his feeling, his understanding, his imagination, as perfectly as he can.¹

This view reduces religious experience to the subjective level and divorces it from any specific theology or religious outlook. It is difficult to see how this interpretation is historically tenable. Can one possibly fail to connect the exultant joy and ecstatic rapture of the Chasidim and the sober and more intellectual approach of the Mitnagdim with the specific world-view of each? Do not specific conceptions of the nature of God, world, and man lend themselves to specific emotional reactions to God, world, and man? One might even assert further that it is quite possible that the latter gave birth to the former, and not the reverse. The experience of the Living God gave birth to Theology. Instead of lightly dismissing the formal creed, we should trace it to its source in human experience.

In our comparison of Maimonides and William James we shall see how the very basic differences in the nature of the religious experiences are directly related to differences in theological conceptions. The distinctiveness of Judaism lies not only in its objective content of observances and beliefs, but also in its inner world of subjective human experience.

Let us turn now to the conclusions James draws from his examination of the records of religious conversions. These can be summarized in two major propositions:

1. Self-surrender is the vital turning point of religious life.
2. Conversion is a process of struggling away from sin rather than of striving towards righteousness.

1. Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, Bk XIV, English Trans. by John Oxenford (Boston: S. E. Cassino, 1882), II, 190.

Acher." [R. Meir] prevailed upon him and took him to a schoolhouse. [Acher] said to a child: "Recite for me thy verse." [The child] answered "There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked." (Isaiah 48:22) . . . He took him to yet another schoolhouse until he took him to thirteen schools. All of them quoted in similar vein.¹

In contrast to the teaching described by James, which might be rendered: *Great is the Divine Presence for it brings man to repentance*, Maimonides enunciates the Jewish teaching: *Great is repentance for it brings man near to the Divine Presence.*²

That the experience of conversion is one of inner strength gained from new self-confidence in one's moral and spiritual powers can best be seen from the personal history of Rabbi Meir's other teacher, the great Rabbi Akiba. Rabbinic literature relates:

"And thirstily drink in their words" refers to Rabbi Akiba. What were the beginnings of Rabbi Akiba? It is said: When he was forty years of age he had not yet studied a thing. One time he stood by the mouth of a well. "Who hollowed out the stone?" he wondered. He was told, "It is the water which falls upon it every day, continually." It was said to him: Akiba hast thou not heard, "The waters wear away the stones?" (Job 14:19). Thereupon R. Akiba drew the inference with regard to himself: If what is soft wears down the hard, all the more shall the words of the Torah, which are as hard as iron, hollow out my heart which is flesh and blood! Forthwith he turned to the study of Torah.³

We have here the record of the conversion of Akiba, the ignorant shepherd, into Rabbi Akiba, the outstanding sage and religious leader of his time. At the age of forty, Akiba grew out of the narrow horizons of the shepherd, neither through the abandonment of personal will, nor through a process of self-surrender or yielding to a higher power. On the contrary, he expressed a new confidence in his own moral, spiritual, and intellectual powers, and a new drive for self-realization. There was not present a desire for escape from his occupation as a shepherd, but a desire for greater self-fulfillment as a disciple of Torah. We have not here a record of weakness, but one of strength; not an act of resignation, but of assertion.

1. *Chagigah* 15a,b (Soncino Translation).

2. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, chap. 7:6.

3. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, trans. J. Goldin (New Haven: Yale Judaica Series, 1955) chapter 6, pp. 40-41.

The Experience of Repentance

In the attrition of the role of man's self-will in repentance, Judaism can see only the gravest of threats to religious living. Paradoxically, man must first be able to recognize his own power, in order to be able to serve as an instrument of God's power. When man loses faith in his own powers of decisive moral action, he not only undermines the foundations of his character and his potential for human achievement, but also impairs his fundamental relationship to God and is guilty of dereliction in religious duty.

While it is true that religion sometimes demands constraint of our personal will so that we do not sin, such is not its primary demand upon us. Our ideal relationship to God is that wherein there is an identification of our will with the Divine Will, and not the complete obliteration of individual will in acquiescence to the Divine Will. Only when human passion and error would direct us to contravene the Divine Will are we called upon to foil such inner drives by setting aside our will. This, I believe, is the meaning of the teaching of the *Ethics of the Fathers*:

Rabban Gamliel, the son of Rabbi Judah the Prince, used to say: "Do His will as if it were thy will, that He may do thy will as if it were His will. Nullify thy will before His will that He may nullify the will of others before thy will."¹

The last portion of this passage implies that the will we are enjoined to nullify is comparable to the will of others and is not our own real will.

The incident of the conversion of Rabbi Akiba highlights yet another important aspect of the Jewish concept of the experience of repentance. Ideal repentance is conceived as inextricably bound with the process of thought and cognition. R. Akiba's initial inspiration when he beheld the rock bored through by water required years of patient study for its fruition into his mature spiritual development. His intellectual growth in Torah was a necessary correlate to his spiritual fulfillment. It is significant that Maimonides classifies the section on repentance as the concluding section, the climax, if you will, of the *Sefer Ha-mada* — the Book of the Knowledge of God, attained through cognitive process. In the very last chapter of this book, which is also the conclusion of the Laws of Repentance, Maimonides emphasizes that the true

1. *Ethics of the Fathers*, chap. 2, Mishnah 4 (Hertz prayerbook trans.).

TRADITION: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought

motive of righteous living should not be the desire to attain life in the World-to-Come:

Let not a man say, "I will observe the precepts of the Torah and occupy myself with its wisdom, in order that I may obtain all the blessings written in the Torah, or to attain life in the World-to-Come; I will abstain from transgressions against which the Torah warns, so that I may be saved from the curses written in the Torah, or that I may not be cut off from life in the World-to-Come." It is not right to serve God after this fashion, for whoever does so, serves Him out of fear. This is not the standard set by the prophets and sages. Only those serve God in this way, who are illiterate, women or children whom we train to serve out of fear, till their knowledge shall have increased when they will serve out of love.¹

Maimonides accounts the worship of God even for the sake of salvation and eternal life as being the worship of God out of fear. Maimonides then concludes the entire book with these beautiful words:

One only loves God with the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge, will be the love. If the former be little or much so will the latter be little or much. A person ought therefore to devote himself to the understanding and comprehension of those sciences and studies which will inform him concerning his Master, as far as it lies in human faculties to understand and comprehend as indeed we have explained in the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah.²

Thus Maimonides sees the high point of repentance — the experience of the Love of God, and the Love of God as linked always with His knowledge. Thus true repentance and knowledge of God are always intimately bound together.

It is significant that in the order of daily prayers — the *Shemoneh-Esreh* — the second blessing of the middle portion, which is the section of petitions, consists of prayers for the experience of repentance:

Return us, O our Father to Thy Torah and return us our King to Thy worship and cause us to return with complete repentance before Thee. Blessed art Thou who desirest repentance.

1. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, chap. 10: 1. (Hyamson Trans.)

2. *Ibid.*, chap. 10: 6.

The Experience of Repentance

The very first petition, however, is a plea for the gift of knowledge and understanding. The order of Prayers clearly indicates the need for the development of our intellectual powers in order to attain the experience of *Teshubah*. As the Talmud remarks: "R. Ami said: 'Great is the role of knowledge for it is placed at the very head of the week-day petitions.'"¹ The Jerusalem Talmud stresses the rôle of knowledge even more: "Rabbi declared: 'I am amazed that they [the early Rabbis] set aside the petition for knowledge on the Sabbath, for without knowledge how can one pray at all?'"²

The Jewish view has consistently seen the phenomenon of conversion as being associated with the growth of intellectual awareness. Witness the very first conversion in all of history — that of our Patriarch Abraham. According to the Midrash, Abraham, who was brought up in a house of idol worship, turned to the worship of the one true God through a process of reasoning:

Now the Lord said unto Abraham: "Get thee out of thy country" . . . Said R. Isaac: "This may be compared to a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. Is it possible that the palace lacks a person to look after it? he wondered. The owner of the palace looked out and said: 'I am the owner of the palace.' Similarly because Abraham our father said, 'Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?' the Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, 'I am the Guide, the Sovereign of a Universe.'"³

There is a remarkable statement in the Talmud which reveals how the Rabbis conceived the glory of Torah study as being the necessary and sufficient condition for bringing new converts to the Jewish faith. On the verse in Isaiah 46:12: "Hearken unto Me, ye stubborn-hearted that are far from righteousness," R. Ashi comments: "The people of Mata Mechasia are *stubborn-hearted* for they see the glory of the Torah twice a year and never has one of them been converted."⁴

Maimonides, in concurrence with the classical Jewish philosophy of R. Saadia Gaon and R. Bachya Ibn Pakuda, sees reason as the antidote to human passion and propensity to evil. According to

1. *Berakhot*, 33a.

2. Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* IV:3.

3. *Genesis Rabbah* 39:1, (Soncino trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. I, p. 313).

4. *Berakhot*, 17b.

this view, the two dynamic forces within man contending with one another are not the impulse for evil and the impulse for holiness, but the evil impulse and the faculty of reason.¹ This conception is in marked contrast to the general tendency of modern thought of seeing faith and reason as two different claims for the deeper allegiance and commitment of man. Religion is too often identified with that area of man's response to life wherein reason is dormant, and where faith, in the sense of emotional self-involvement, reigns most actively. Judaism does not rely so readily on the capacity of the emotions to guide us aright, even if these emotions are of the higher order of religious inclination. The individual needs at every level of religious awareness the guiding light of reason to help him translate his emotional impulses into appropriate modes of behavior. Error of intellectual judgment in matters pertaining to morality is equivalent to moral wrong, notwithstanding all good intentions to the contrary. *Sefer Chasidim* illustrates this principle with a number of telling examples.

There is a kind of charity which is pernicious. In what manner is it? One who gives alms to adulterers or to a glutton or a drunkard . . . is regarded as though he aided them. There is a kind of piety which is bad. For instance, a man whose hands are unclean sees a holy book fall into the fire, and says, "It is better that it should be burned," and does not touch the book. Another instance has also been cited: a man sees a woman drown in the river and says: "It is better that she should drown than that I should touch her."²

This view of repentance as being an act dependent on man's moral choice and use of reason does not seem to be completely in agreement with the scriptural teaching. Maimonides was aware that the simple surface meaning of a number of passages in Scripture attributes to God the vindication of man or his moral failure as part of the Divine scheme for human affairs. Thus Maimonides declares in the opening of the sixth chapter:

There are many verses in the Pentateuch and in the prophets which seem to contradict this fundamental doctrine. And they lead most people astray and make them think that God decrees that a person

1. See R. Israel Salanter, *Iggeret Ha-musar*, printed in *Or Yisrael*, ed. R. Yitzchak Blazer (London, 1951), p. 105.

2. Quoted and trans. by B. Halper, *Post-Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Phila.: Jewish Publication Society, 1921), p. 164.

The Experience of Repentance

shall do good or evil, and that a man's heart is not under his own control to incline him in whichever direction he pleases.¹

Particularly in the penitential prayers of the Psalms, there are a number of passages which emphasize the need for the Divine spirit in order for man to be saved from moral perdition. Maimonides asks:

What is meant by David's utterance, "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He will teach sinners in the way. He will guide the meek in judgment and will teach the meek His way?" (Psalms 25:8,9). It refers to the fact that God sent them prophets to teach them the ways of the Lord and bring them back in repentance; furthermore, that he endowed them with the capacity of learning and understanding. For it is characteristic of every human being that, when his interest is engaged in the ways of wisdom and righteousness, he longs for these ways and is eager to follow them."²

Maimonides then strips the experience of repentance of the element of immediate Divine intervention or incursion into the spirit of man. Divine help in the experience of repentance comes about in two indirect ways. Either the individual may receive the benefit of inspiration from contact with God's prophets, or he will, through the use of his capacity to learn and understand, come to the point of emotional absorption in the ideals of God's ways which will result in a change in his behavior patterns.

There are other passages in the Psalms asking for Divine intervention in the act of repentance which Maimonides explains in a somewhat different manner. He avers that an unusually serious form of punishment of sin is for God to deprive man of his freedom of choice. Various sins are punishable in various forms. Some sins are punishable only on the physical level, that is, the individual suffers loss of health or financial reverses. More serious sins involve the yet greater punishment of loss of soul — the power of moral autonomy, or the opportunity for true penitence. The penitent beseeches God that his sins should not be reckoned as of the latter sort. The prayer, therefore, would not be for positive Divine intervention to aid in the act of repentance, but for the absence of Divine interference with the normal process of repentance which might come about because of very grave sins:

1. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, ch. 6.

2. *Ibid.*, 6:5.

And thus the prophets and the righteous beseech the Almighty, in their prayers, to help them to the way of truth; as David said, "Teach me, O Lord, thy way" (Psalms 86:11), that is, May my sins not keep the way of truth from me, that I learn from it Thy way and the unity of Thy name. So also his prayer, "Let a noble spirit uphold me" (Psalms 51:14) means, Suffer my spirit to accomplish its desire and may not my sins cause repentance to be withheld from me, but let me have liberty, till I return and understand and know the way of truth. Every text similar to the above can be explained in the same way.¹

Nor is Maimonides alone in his insistence on man's complete freedom in repentance. R. Saadia Gaon in his work *Beliefs and Opinions*, in the chapter on free will, also raises the problem of scriptural contradictions to this principle, and indicates various ways in which they are to be interpreted "so as to harmonize with reason."² Thus we see that according to Maimonides and also Saadia the experience of *Teshubah* is not granted man by an external higher power at the time when man surrenders his conscious self. On the contrary, *Teshubah* can only come about through man's maximum use of his own higher conscious powers; and the most he can look for from God is forgiveness and the ability to use his powers freely. Not the gift of faith, but the will for faith brings about repentance.

Maimonides too recognizes the primary role of faith in repentance, but in a different sense than does William James. Consequently, we find that in the third chapter on Repentance, Maimonides records lack of faith as the most serious and irreparable of sins. For all sins there is expiation (even the sin of the desecration of the Name of God is forgivable at death),³ but the sin of disbelief in the higher power of God and in the veracity of His revealed will can never be condoned:

All wicked persons whose iniquities exceed their merits are judged according to their sins and have a portion in the world to come; for all Israelites, notwithstanding that they have sinned, have a share in the life hereafter. . . . And so too, the saints among the gentile peoples have a portion in the world to come; but the following

1. *Ibid.*, 6:4.

2. Saadia Gaon, *Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise IV, ch. 6 (Yale U. Press, Yale Judaica Series), pp. 201 ff.

3. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, 1:4.

The Experience of Repentance

have not a portion in the world to come but are cut off and perish, and for their great wickedness and sinfulness are condemned for ever and ever: Heretics and Epicureans, those who deny the Torah, the resurrection of the dead or the coming of the redeemer, etc. . . .¹

Without faith one has no link with the Jewish past or with the Jewish future, or for that matter with the Jewish present, for what value can one attribute to a present moment not linked to the past or directed to a future? Jewish history has abundantly proved that breach of faith has inevitably led to breach in the practice of the *Mitzvot* and loyalty to the Jewish people. But though lack of faith is the greatest of vices, the possession of faith is not reckoned as the greatest of virtues. All Jews are presumed to have faith and are tested mainly in their willingness to live up to the implications of this faith. Thus Maimonides does not see the importance of emphasizing faith for the repentant person, as much as sheer will power and strength of character.

It is significant that while James, on the one hand, emphasizes the supernatural character of the experience of conversion, and insists that this alone is true spiritual religion, as we have earlier quoted, he, on the other hand, is not at all prepared to accept for himself the veracity of such claims:

Were it true that a suddenly converted man as such is, as Edwards says, of an entirely different kind from a natural man . . . there surely ought to be some exquisite class-mark, some distinctive radiance attaching even to the lowliest specimen of this genus, to which no one of us could remain insensible, and which, so far as it went, would prove him more excellent than even the most highly gifted among mere natural men. But notoriously there is no such radiance. Converted men as a class are indistinguishable from natural men. . . . The super-normal incidents, such as voices and visions and overpowering impressions of the meaning of suddenly presented scripture texts, the melting emotions and tumultuous affections connected with the crisis of change, may all come by way of nature, or worse still, be counterfeited by Satan.²

James offers in place of the supernatural explanation of conversion, one of natural psychological process centering around the workings of the subconscious. James points out that the

1. *Ibid.*, 3:5, 6.

2. James, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

most important step forward that has occurred in psychology in his mature life was the discovery

. . . that in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual centre and margin, but an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs.¹

According to James, some people are more richly endowed with strongly developed extra-marginal lives. Such persons are constitutionally ready to experience instantaneous conversion, which is an incursion of fringe consciousness into the core. Moreover, the act of surrender of the conscious self prepares the ground for the fringe consciousness becoming the core. James allows that if one insists upon the direct presence of the Deity in conversion it would appear in the subconscious region alone.

While the above is a possible explanation, it is at best a brilliant example of explaining the known in terms of the unknown. Admitting the existence of unconscious cerebration, or "subliminal activity" as James calls it, such an area of mental states is, of necessity, less amenable to scientific study and examination than the conscious self. In referring to this area as the source of the conversion experience one is doing no more than shifting one's ignorance to a more distant realm. If James does not allow in his world view the operation of the supernatural in the area of conscious man, why reserve the activity of the supernatural for the area of greatest human ignorance — the subconscious? Furthermore, modern Freudian psychology sees in the subconscious, not man's higher aspirations but man's drive for sexual satisfaction.

In support of the spiritual authenticity of the conversion experience, despite his denial of its supernatural element, James offers yet another thesis. He maintains that the merit of a thing cannot "be decided by its origin." Furthermore, he states:

Our spiritual judgment . . . our opinion of the significance and value of a human event or condition must be decided on empirical grounds exclusively. If the *fruits for life* of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of

1. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

The Experience of Repentance

natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it.¹

James then proceeds to demonstrate that the fruits for life very often are such as to win our admiration and approval. In the first chapter of this work, James summarizes this teaching with the statement: "By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots."²

This approach seems to be fallacious to its very core. To follow the analogy: it does matter what are the roots or seeds of a fruit. Were we to observe a remarkably robust tree issue forth from a seemingly sickly seed, we would not simply behold the tree in amazement, but would most likely revise our original estimate of the quality of the seed. Similarly, in man's psychological life, we should endeavor to trace the connection between the fruits of its operation and its roots. James is correct in saying that religious genius should not be reduced to a state of neurosis. He is not justified, however, in completely severing the nexus of mental creativity and its psychological origins. It would seem that we have here an error in conception. It is not true that mental fruits do not bear an important relation to their origins. It is simply that the origins are misunderstood. Neurosis is not the origin of literary genius. Literary creative power alone is the origin of literary genius. Frustration in love or dope addiction may be pre-disposing factors but not the origin. Let us not make light of origins. Before disposing of the intimate connection between result and process, let us be certain that we are ascribing the proper process to the proper result.

The Jewish conception very definitely maintains that the worth of a thing is decided by its origins. The worth of the world is determined by its origin as God's wilful creation. So too, the worth of man is established by the fact of his being made in the image of his Creator. Rabbi Akiba in *The Ethics of the Fathers* declares: "Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God; but it was by a special love that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God."³ In other words, man by virtue of his accomplishments alone, would not have the same value as he does have in the light of his origin. The Bible in

1. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

3. *Pirke Abot*, chap. 3, Mishnah 18. (Hertz Trans.)

this impulse into constructive outlets. Without the existence of the factor of potential evil within the human personality, the possibilities of spiritual growth are shut out. And precisely in the great man is this factor present to the largest degree. The Talmud teaches: "The greater the man, the more potent is the evil impulse within him."¹ Indeed the Talmud is replete with instances of outstanding Sages overcoming temptations of the flesh only after difficult inner struggle. Judaism cannot accept as normal or typical the experience of the convert whom James quotes as saying: "I have had no temptation since conversion, God seemingly having shut out Satan from that course with me. He gets a free hand in other ways, but never on sins of the flesh."² Judaism always sees man as standing in the dynamic relationship of inner tension with himself. I know of no rabbinic description of righteous living that excludes this factor. Thus the Talmud declares: "The disciples of the Wise have no respite either in this world or in the World-to-Come, as it is written 'They shall go from strength to strength.'"³

Consequently, Judaism cannot see conversion as usually being a matter of instantaneous change. Virtue is not like an inoculation which takes and leaves a permanent mark. Rather, each increase of virtue brings an increase of challenge to the individual. The attainment of virtue is a protracted affair, sometimes a life-long struggle. Acquiring virtue in one outstanding heroic moment, though known to the Rabbis of the Talmud to be a genuine occurrence, is not accepted happily. Thus Rabbi Judah the Prince, upon hearing of such instances, wept and said, "Some gain eternal life in one hour while others gain it only after many years."⁴

Nor in the Jewish view is the presence of the evil impulse considered a blight on the virtue of a person. It is important to bear in mind that negative experiences also educate one in the way of virtue. The Bible teaches us the ethical life by narrating to us the deeds of a Laban and Esau as well as a Jacob, an Ishmael as well as an Isaac. It is naive to imagine that we learn the good only by contemplating the good. Very often the good does not become firmly implanted within us until we behold the results

1. *Sukkah*, 52a.

2. James, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

3. *Berakhot*, 64a.

4. *Abodah Zarah*, 10b, 17a, 18a

The Experience of Repentance

of evil. The desire for peace is strengthened within us more by seeing the horrors of war than anticipating the serenity of peace. Positive and negative examples both mold our attachment to virtue. So too in repentance, our religious failures as well as our attainments contribute to our mature religious consciousness. Maimonides goes so far as to maintain, in accordance with one view in the Talmud, that the merit of the penitent is even greater than that of him who never sinned, "the reason being that the former have had to put forth a greater effort to subdue their passions than the latter."¹

From the foregoing emerges the unique feature of Jewish repentance, i.e., its lack of uniqueness. Repentance is a normal human need and hence a normal human experience, not a cataclysmic event. Three times daily the Jew invokes the power of repentance. G. F. Moore, the eminent historian of religions, summarizes the matter well in the following words, "In no ancient religion is normal piety so pervaded by the consciousness of sin, the need for repentance and the conviction that man's sole hope is the forgiving grace of God."²

In the final analysis the real interpretation of the experience of repentance will be rendered neither by psychologist nor halakhist, but by the ordinary man in everyday life as he meets the trials and temptations of the time with true inner dignity, steadfast courageous strength, and unswerving faith in the Eternal God.

1. *Op. cit.*, 7:4.

2. G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, (Harvard University Press), vol. II, p. 214.