THE DAY OF ATONEMENT
IN CHARLES DICKENS’
A CHRISTMAS CAROL

*A Christmas Carol* is a permanent fixture in Western literature and popular culture, if only because it is retold at Christmas-time annually. As a morality tale it is a favorite of all age groups, not only because of its sincerity but due also to its emotional appeal.

Dickens completed the work in approximately two months during the autumn of 1843, and in December of that year it was published by Chapman and Hall of London. The plot is a simple one: Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly old bachelor, has outlived his business partner, Jacob Marley, in a firm which employs one underpaid, overworked clerk, Bob Cratchit. It is almost Christmas eve and we perceive Scrooge’s detestable qualities as he deals with Cratchit and the other moral, humanitarian personalities who call upon him in his office: his nephew, and two gentlemen who request donations for the poor.

That night, in his rooms, Scrooge is visited by Marley’s ghost, doomed to wander the world as punishment for being the kind of man Scrooge is: hard-hearted and oblivious to the needs of humanity. He warns Scrooge that three ghosts (of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet-to-Come), will visit him, and that Scrooge will have an opportunity to save himself from Marley’s fate. The ghosts take Scrooge into his past, pointing out the happiness of family and friends he had missed as a result of his anti-social way of life; the current joy experienced by the Cratchit family and by Scrooge’s nephew; and Scrooge’s future, niggardly death, unless he turns over a new leaf. Scrooge awakens the next (Christmas) morning, overjoyed at being alive; learning from his painful and harrowing experiences,
he has a complete psycho-social metamorphosis. The author ends by confirming to his readers that Scrooge’s change of heart and personality are permanent.²

This novelette of nineteenth-century London has been categorized as a sentimental romance, and as a “hymn to the spirit of Christmas.”³ Let us consult one critique:

It appeals to a basic instinct in all of us: the need to overcome self-hate and live in benign self-esteem. We are no good to ourselves or anyone else unless we can find within our own souls the seeds of that goodness we hope to find in the world. Miser and misanthrope, Ebenezer Scrooge has given up on others; he expects nothing and gives nothing. It is ironically fitting that Dickens makes him the master of a counting-house: his ‘ledger’ is perfectly balanced: nothing has gone out and nothing comes in.

Marley’s Ghost provides the terrifying example: this is all Scrooge has to look forward to if he continues to live without involving himself in mankind. The ghosts that follow reveal to the reader the psychological reasons for Scrooge’s warped character, but they are also messengers from Scrooge’s unconscious mind forcing him to confront repressed disappointments and failures of kindness; he is rewarded for standing up to the pain of confrontation with the balm of self-pity. As the various ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future enable Scrooge to confront the truth about his own life, a subtle transference takes place: Scrooge shifts from self-pity to compassion and concern for others. He is reborn in love.

He rises in the morning, a man possessed with the possibilities of kindness and charity. . . . The ecstasy of his rebirth is infectious. The Cratchits, Scrooge’s nephew, and the charity collectors are not only the beneficiaries of Scrooge’s largesse; they are also the heirs of his spiritual awakening. When Tiny Tim cries ‘God Bless us, Every One!’ he is emblematic of the cripple who finds God in his own affliction, as did Scrooge in his loneliness, only to walk in the higher regions opened by the bliss of human love.⁴

A Christmas Carol, the first in a series of Dickens’ “Christmas Books,” embodied what Dickens himself termed his “Carol philosophy,” upon which he did not elaborate very much.⁵ For that reason it is provident to turn to recent interpretations. “Dickens’ personal religious views and principles are derived exclusively from the New Testament,” comprises the first sentence of a summary of George S. Larson’s doctoral dissertation, entitled Religion in the Novels of Charles Dickens.⁶ He continues: “In his fiction a truly religious person may be identified through his generosity, his judgment, his piety, and his selfless life. The efficacy of these Christian qualities is demonstrated by the fact that through them one may transform individual character…”⁷ The summary ends as follows: “Dickens, however, is more sure of his personal faith than his fellow writers are of theirs, and he makes more thematic use of Christianity in his novels than they do.”⁸ (italics mine).
It would be almost impossible that Dickens would have had knowledge of the details of the Jewish Day of Atonement prayers, for Larson and others specify through their research that Dickens was a dedicated Christian believer. Nevertheless, annually on the Day of Atonement, in praying to be written into the Book of Life for the coming year, Jews confirm in Hebrew: “U-teshuvah, u-tefillah, u-tsedakah ma’avorin et ro’a ha-gezerah.”9 The English translation of this prayer is: “And Repentance, and Prayer, and Charity avert the Evil Decree” (i.e., Death).

Prior to dealing with the elements of Repentance, Prayer and Charity, as well as the ability to experience a Change of Heart, as represented in A Christmas Carol, and their existence in Jewish prayer and tradition, it is appropriate to emphasize Dickens’ remoteness from Jewish influences. In a letter to Dickens subsequent to the publication of Oliver Twist, a Jewess of some influence, Mrs. Eliza Davis, stated that Jews regarded the portrayal of Fagin as “a great wrong to their people.” Although in his reply to Mrs. Davis, Dickens stated that he knew of no reason why he should be considered hostile to Jews, he added that Fagin was described as a Jew because during the time period in which the story was set, it was unfortunately true that the class of criminal represented by Fagin was almost invariably Jewish.10 Nevertheless, in a subsequent novel, Our Mutual Friend, one of the characters, Mr. Riah, was an upright, Jewish gentleman, victimized by a Christian money-lender. In the same work one of the heroines, Lizzie Hexam, remarks, in speaking of her Jewish employers: “The Gentleman certainly is a Jew. But I think there cannot be kinder people in the world.”11 In a subsequent exchange of correspondence, and after Mrs. Davis’ gift to him of a Hebrew-English Bible, Dickens wrote that he had a true regard for Jews, whom he would not have willingly offended “or done an injustice for any worldly consideration.”12

Although we eschew the possibility of Dickens’ familiarity with Judaism through Old Testament sources and prayerbooks, another author has pondered as to whether Dickens may have read about ghosts in Classical literature. A two-page article appearing in a 1938 issue of The Classical Journal deals with the possibility that Dickens may have read, in English translation, stories of visits by two ghosts to haunted houses, written by Pliny the Younger. There are striking similarities between Marley’s ghost and those of Pliny, and the author of the 1938 article wondered about the similarities.13

A current expert provides the final corroboration for what he claims to be Dickens’ New Testament religious-philosophical influences (as opposed to those of the Old Testament). In critically
analyzing the social situations of characters in *Little Dorrit*, Ronald S. Librach states:

A comparable bondage, therefore, is shared by Dorrit, whose 'peace' tacitly admits the social cruelty which the Marshalsea represents, and Mrs. Clennam, whose 'compensation' for confinement allows expressly for *the religious cruelty which, for Dickens, the Old Testament promulgates*. If a man is to find 'release' in society, therefore, he must himself embrace a 'covenant' like that offered in the *New Testament*, for the God of the New Testament is for Dickens the God who forgives, who asks in return the willing and loving obedience of man, and who transforms death from a condemnation into a paradoxical condition for eternal life.”\(^{14}\) (emphasis added)

Exception must here be taken to Librach's statements. Let us treat individually, the three elements of Repentance, Prayer, and Charity, and end with a discussion of the “Change of Heart,” a topic encountered in both the Old Testament and in *A Christmas Carol*. In dealing with each element and the “Change of Heart” theme, it is advantageous to point out the circumstances pertaining to each, first in *A Christmas Carol*, and correspondingly in Jewish sources.

**REPENTANCE**

There are numerous instances of Scrooge's repentance in *A Christmas Carol*. Just after the Ghost of Christmas Past revealed to Scrooge his solitary boyhood at school, Scrooge stated his wish to have given something the previous night to a boy singing carols under his window.\(^{15}\) When meeting the Ghost of Christmas Present, he states: “Spirit, conduct me where you will. I went forth last night on compulsion, and I learnt a lesson which is working me now. Tonight, if you have aught to teach me, let me profit by it.”\(^{16}\) Finally, as the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come identifies Scrooge's gravestone to him, Scrooge cries: “Spirit! Hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope? Good Spirit, your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!”\(^{17}\)

Compare Scrooge's italicized assertions with the following prayer from the Additional Service of Yom Kippur: “For according to Thy name so is Thy praise. Thou art slow to anger and ready to forgive. Thou desirest not the death of the sinner but that he return from his evil way and live. Even until his dying day Thou waitest for him, perchance he will repent and Thou wilt straightway receive him.”\(^{18}\) Certainly, the flavor and the essence of this Yom Kippur
prayer are embodied in the words which Dickens placed in Scrooge's mouth, as are the words from the Book of Micah (Chapter VII, verses 18-20), which are also read on the Day of Atonement:

Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth the iniquity,  
And passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?  
He retaineth not His anger for ever,  
Because He delighteth in mercy.  
He will again have compassion upon us;  
He will subdue our iniquities;  
And Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.  
Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob, mercy to Abraham,  
As Thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old.

On the afternoon of the Day of Atonement, incidentally, the story of Jonah is retold, in order to teach the lesson that God accepts repentance. But another reason exists for so doing: Jonah was to deliver a message to the Ninevites; he was reluctant to do so because if he warned them of their sins, they might repent and be forgiven, thus he might become the agent of their salvation. The lesson here is that Gentiles, who are also God's creatures and the recipients of His pity, must not be begrudged God's love, care and forgiveness; as God's creatures, they also merit His pardon if they are sincere in repentance. The thrust of the Book of Jonah, therefore, is not the well-known adventure in the whale's belly but rather the rebuke delivered to Jonah due to his begrudging of potential salvation of the Ninevites and their repentance.¹⁹

In a discussion of free will, Rabbi J. H. Hertz states that mankind may or may not choose to cooperate with God: "And if a man stumble and fall on the pathway of life, Judaism bids him rise again and seek the face of his Heavenly Father in humility, contrition and repentance. 'If a man sin, what is his punishment?' ask the Rabbis . . . The answer of the Almighty is, 'Let a man repent, and his sin will be forgiven him'—the wages of sin is repentance."²⁰

The foregoing concerns only sins committed by man against The Almighty. For sins against human beings the Day of Atonement does not atone "unless and until he (i.e., the sinning individual) has conciliated his fellow-man and redressed the wrong he has done him."²¹ This particular Day of Atonement requirement ties in precisely with Scrooge's greatly modified treatment of Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim, Scrooge's nephew, the donation-collectors, and (according to Dickens' statement at the end of the tale) all humans with whom Scrooge came into contact subsequent to his harrowing experiences with the ghosts. How does Dickens have Scrooge conciliate them? Scrooge ceased neglecting his nephew, specifically by taking Christmas dinner with him and his family, and acting the life of the
party. On the day after Christmas, Scrooge redressed grievances committed against Bob Cratchit, by saying: “A merrier Christmas, Bob, my good fellow, than I have given you for many a year. I'll raise your salary, and endeavor to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, Bob!” And Dickens added: “Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew. . . .”22

PRAYER

Dickens has Scrooge go to church,23 where (it must be assumed), he prayed devoutly on Christmas morning. An additional instance, with an indirect reference to prayer, is Dickens’ statement about Scrooge:

and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed that knowledge.24

The most emphatic use made by Dickens of prayer occurs in Stave Five, paragraph Two, immediately after Scrooge realizes that he is alive. “I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future!” Scrooge repeated, as he scrambled out of bed. “The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. Old Jacob Marley! Heaven and the Christmas Time be praised for this! I say it on my knees, old Jacob; on my knees!” Fervent prayer, indeed, articulated in solemn thanksgiving.

In the morning service of the Day of Atonement, the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah is read. In that chapter the ancient Israelites complain that despite their prayers and fasting on the Day of Atonement, the Almighty has not responded. Isaiah underlines the worthlessness of following ritual without practicing righteousness, impressing upon them that both appropriate conduct and approach to God must underlie prayer and fasting. In other words, “doing justice and loving mercy must go hand in hand with walking humbly with thy God.”25

Can God’s answers to our prayers be as simple, direct and immediate as portrayed in A Christmas Carol? According to Jewish tradition, divine responses are based fundamentally on ethical and spiritual values. Man really provides the answer to his own prayer, and the solution to his problem/situation/need is provided by “a significant change of spirit and outlook. . . . In sum, the Bible conceives prayer as a spiritual bridge between man and God. It is a
great instrument of human regeneration and salvation, worthy even of martyrdom. Rooted in faith and moral integrity, it banishes fear and asks, in its noblest formulations, only the blessing of divine favor. . . . Both the Christian and Muslim liturgies have been profoundly influenced by the spirit, thought, and forms of biblical prayer.”

It is obvious, then, that Scrooge, by means of the aforementioned Change of Heart and Outlook, secured his own means of salvation. We shall treat the Change of Heart topic shortly.

CHARITY

After he awakens from his apparent dream (having realized he is alive), Scrooge opens his window. He calls to a boy outside, subsequently rewarding him handsomely for buying a prize turkey and helping deliver it to the Cratchit home. While taking pleasure in his charity, Scrooge says: “I'll send it to Bob Cratchit's! He sha'n't know who sent it.”

Later, on his way to his nephew’s home, Scrooge meets one of the donation-collectors whom he had peremptorily dismissed the previous day. After requesting pardon for his behavior, Scrooge whispers a sum in the man's ear. When the collector is amazed by Scrooge’s generosity, Scrooge replies: “If you please, not a farthing less. A great many back-payments are included in it, I assure you. Will you do me that favor?” The collector, shaking hands with Scrooge, is overcome: “My dear sir, I don't know what to say to such munificence.” Retorted Scrooge: ‘Don't say anything, please. Come and see me. Will you come and see me?’ ‘I will!’ cried the old gentleman ‘Thankee’, said Scrooge. I am much obliged to you. I thank you fifty times. Bless you!’

The Hebrew word for “charity” is Tsedakah, and its literal translation is “righteousness” or “justice.” It is rabbinical belief that charity is not a favor to the poor but something to which they have a right, and something which the donor must give. Thus, it is said that the poor do more for the donor, by accepting charity, than vice versa, since the poor provide donors the opportunity to perform a mitsvah (literally, to follow a “commandment,” but figuratively, to perform “a good deed”). What is the source of this attitude? The Rabbis have traditionally believed that all wealth belongs to God, and that He decides who is to be rich and who poor. Rabbi Assi stated that Tsedakah is as important as all of the other commandments together: “Giving charity is the way in which man can ‘walk after the Lord your God’, and saves from death.”

Certainly, Scrooge took advantage of this opportunity, in addition to the others mentioned, in order to save his life.
Scrooge also learned another lesson concerning charity, based on Old Testament teachings; he came to realize that true joy is a result of sharing wealth. "The purpose of the poor tithe was to teach the salutary doctrine that man's possessions are only truly blessed when he permits others to join with him in their enjoyment. Self-indulgence, without a thought for those in need of assistance, brings no lasting satisfaction; and such a mode of living is without blessing."30

**CHANGE OF HEART**

Although there is a direct connection between Repentance and a Change of Heart, the Change is not automatic; further, the amount of change is also a matter for consideration. A recent doctoral dissertation categorizes Dickens' characters into five moral-ethical groups: benevolent benefactors, manipulators of righteousness, vehicles of salvation, outcasts, and little children (note that Scrooge, by means of his Change of Heart, transferred from the outcast category to that of benevolent benefactor). It should also be observed that Dickens, as an author, requires much of his characters for redemption: they must undergo suffering unwillingly. And how is this Change of Heart effected? Through by-play between those undergoing the Change and completely virtuous characters, who alternately jar the consciences and solace the souls of the sinners such as Scrooge, the latter ultimately accept suffering as the catalyst by which they repent and experience the Change of Heart,31 which itself is corroborated by their good works.

The Ghost of Christmas Present, according to Dickens, taught Scrooge by taking him on an instructive trip to comfort the sick, commiserate with those in poorhouses and jails, and in general supply hope and courage to those who struggle with life.32 On a later visit with the Ghost of Christmas-yet-to-Come, Scrooge says: "Let me see some tenderness connected with a death . . .,"33 a far cry from his heartless remark to the donation-collector in Stave One, regarding the poor who prefer to die (rather than go to workhouses), and thus, according to Scrooge, help to decrease the surplus population.34

Scrooge's Change of Heart, as a result of the Ghosts' "teachings," is complete when he pleads with the Ghost of Christmas-yet-to-Come: "I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons they teach."35 The fact that his "education" was permanent is evinced by
Dickens in the tale’s final paragraph: “and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed that knowledge.”

What is Dickens’ method for portraying a Change of Heart? A Victorian anti-hero (Scrooge) is caused to review his past and present way of life, and its impact on fellow-humans through the intervention of supernatural beings, who themselves manipulate his attitudes (he regards them as teachers). The manipulation is mainly emotional at first, the elements being nostalgia, pity and fear (the fear of death supplied by the Ghost of Christmas-yet-to-Come). The combined elements, however, eventuate in a complete Change of Heart, with impacts on the mind as well as the heart. (It should be noted here that in Jewish tradition a Change of Heart occurring when death is imminent comprises the lowest level of repentance; it, however, is still acceptable.)

In the Yom Kippur Additional Service, the “U-Netaneh Tokef” (“We Shall Declare”) prayer lists a number of means by which, in the coming year, humans might meet death. A high point of the prayer, however, is the previously mentioned statement: “But Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can avert the Evil Decree.” This statement, rather than asking us to dwell on potential disaster, bids us to experience a Change of Heart, in order to avert the evil decree, as Scrooge did.

Freedom of will (i.e., individual responsibility for our actions), is a fundamental in Jewish ethics. According to Maimonides,

Free-will is granted to every man. If he desires to incline towards the good way, and be righteous, he has the power to do so; and if he desires to incline towards the unrighteous way, and be a wicked man, he has also the power to do so. Since this power of doing good or evil is in our own hands, and since all the wicked deeds which we have committed have been committed with our full consciousness, it befits us to turn in penitence and forsake our evil deeds, the power of doing so being still in our hands; nay, it is the pillar of the Law and of the Commandments.

The foregoing is a commentary on Deuteronomy 30:19, which reads:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed.

To sum up, the bases upon which Scrooge chose life (and as a result of which he experienced a Change of Heart), Repentance, Prayer, and Charity, as set forth in the “U-Netaneh Tokef” prayer of the Yom Kippur Additional Service, comprise the formula by which Jews might avert the evil decree and be written into the Book of Life.
which Scrooge so earnestly desired. While this formula and its Judaic origin might at first surprise Dickensians (and Dickens himself, in his lifetime), upon further examination it might be utilized to advantage for further research into Dickens’ ethical-moral philosophy.

NOTES

4. Ibid., p. 949.
7. Ibid., 328A.
8. Ibid., 329A.
11. Ibid., pp. 1011–1012.
12. Ibid., p. 1012.
16. Ibid., p. 46.
17. Ibid., pp. 82–83.
22. A Christmas Carol, op. cit., p. 92
23. Ibid., p. 89.
24. Ibid., p. 93.
27. Anonymity in providing charity is very highly esteemed in Judaism. In fact, according to Encyclopedia Judaica (volume 5, 1971, column 341), “It is permitted to deceive a poor man who, out of pride, refuses to accept charity, and to allow him to think that it is a loan . . .”