



The Ability and Responsibility to Change

By: Rabbi Elliot Dorff

A few weeks ago, I was part of a rabbinic court (*beit din*) for someone who was converting to Judaism. In his essay to describe his journey to Judaism, he mentioned that he had grown up as a Protestant Christian. During the conversation, I mentioned that the High Holy Days were coming and asked him what he thought their meaning was. He rightfully said that they were a very serious time when we are prompted to evaluate what we have done in the past year, seek forgiveness from anyone we have wronged, and plan ways to improve our relationships with others and with God during the year to come.

I then said that I have a Ph.D. in philosophy, and so the next question I was going to ask may be too abstract for him to address, and, if so, he should just tell me, and we would move on. I asked him what he thought were the differences between the way Protestant Christianity teaches its adherents to think about sin and the way that Judaism does. He immediately responded that Protestants believe in Original Sin, according to which every person is, in his or her origins, sinful, and, as Paul says in the New Testament, there is no salvation by deeds (Romans 3:20-23, 4:1-7, 9:31-32; Galatians 2:16, 3:10-12; Ephesians 2:8-9; etc.) – that is, nothing you do can redeem you from your sinfulness. He found that doctrine to be inconsistent with Protestant Christianity's insistence that we are created in the image of God. In any case, because nothing we do can redeem us from our sinfulness, the only path to redemption is through belief in a supernatural intercessor, Jesus. In contrast, he said, in Judaism we are born with the ability to do bad things but also good things, and we have the ability and therefore the responsibility to avoid doing bad things, if we can; to repair the damage we have done, if we do something wrong; and to do good things to repair the brokenness of the world and to make it ever more supportive, loving, and whole.

Right on! We Jews tend to think that the whole world is Jewish – or, at least, that the whole world thinks exactly as we do. There are, of course, some important perceptions and values that we Jews share with other religions and secular philosophies, but Judaism is indeed distinct in a number of ways, and this is an important one. We *do* have free will and the ability to act in accordance with it, and so we *do* have both the ability and responsibility to change bad attitudes and behaviors and nurture good ones. As I put it to Christian and Muslim groups in some of the interfaith work that I do, "Judaism spells 'responsibility' with a capital R."

Furthermore, Judaism does not see sinfulness as ingrained in our DNA and beyond our ability to repair. Just think of the words used for sin in our Bible and liturgy:

חט, *het*, which comes from the world of archery and means missing the mark

און, *avon*, which comes from the verb meaning to go astray

פשע, *pesha*, which means intentionally violating the law, and so in modern Hebrew the word for a criminal is based on this root.

None of these ways of acting, of course, is good, but they each can be avoided or changed. When we miss the mark, we can practice to hit it right the next time. When we go astray, we can find our way back to the proper path. When we intentionally violate the law, we can relearn why we must adhere to it and follow it in the future.

In each case, we probably will need to do some repair of ourselves and of the injury or damage we caused, but the words for doing that indicate another important difference between Christianity and Judaism. English is a Christian language: it was created by Christians, and still to this day the vast majority of people who speak it as their native language are Christians. You should not be surprised, then, that English words, especially those relevant to religion, have Christian connotations. That is certainly true for "messiah," "salvation," and "holy," but it is also true for "prayer," which misleads you into thinking that prayer is about asking for things ("Do this, I pray"). Jewish liturgy does include some petitions, but the vast majority of it is about thanking and praising God.

The English word for making up for past bad acts is "repentance," coming from the Latin root meaning to punish, as in other English words based on that root, namely, "penal" and "penitentiary." To make up for something bad you did, you have to be punished. In contrast, the Hebrew word for making up for doing something bad is *teshuvah*, from the Hebrew root meaning to return. When we miss the mark or go astray, or even when we intentionally violate the law, our task is to do what we must to return to the proper way to live and to the good graces of God and the community.

So on this Yom Kippur, may we use our ability to evaluate our actions, take responsibility to change what needs to be changed, and then do specific things to make this a better world.



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