''On teshuvah''

Extract from Jeffrey M Cohen's,
1001 Questions & Answers on Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur (Jason Aronson, 1997)

101. How important a role does repentance fulfil in Judaism?

A pivotal role. All the private and public sacrifices that were offered on account of sins in Temple times were accompanied by a corresponding act of contrition. Furthermore, a recurring theme in the prophetic literature is that our future redemption and the fulfilment of the vision for the ''end of days'' is contingent upon Israel 'returning' to her God and obeying His will. It is human nature to stray. Repentance is the primary spiritual objective to which we should devote ourselves. Perfection is not humanly attainable; striving towards the elimination of sin brings us as close to it as we can possibly expect. And it is that resolve that underpins the *Yamim Nora'im* experience.

104. So, is it not rather surprising, therefore, that nowhere in the Torah is there a specific mitzvah to repent?

It appears so. However, we may conjecture that this is because repentance is in a totally different category to other mitzvot in that it is merely a restoration of the status quo; an exercise in the removal of the negative rather than the assertion of the positive; an act of *tikkun*, repairing the breach in our relationship with God caused by sin. For this to be truly effective it must be a spontaneous reaction, not a *mitzvah*, not something 'commanded'. And only when man, *of his own volition*, feels the stirring of remorse, and is earnestly searching for a means of channelling it, does the Torah guide him as to the required concretization of that state of mind in the form of *viddui*, a verbal confession. And it is the latter, positive act which the Torah specifically prescribes (See Nu. 5:6-7; *RMBM, Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* no.73).

105. Granted that repentance is not allocated a separate mitzvah in the Torah, but, as a subsidiary mitzvah (under the umbrella of confession), should there not have been a blessing prescribed for the penitent?

The answer may be inferred from our comment above regarding repentance as being an exercise in the removal of the negative. Rarely do we find blessings prescribed for negative acts. Among the exceptions are the marriage blessing, ''Blessed are You…who *has prohibited* to us those who are (merely) betrothed and permitted those who are married by means of the chuppah and marriage ceremony,'' and the three early morning *shelo asani* blessings*:* 'who has *not* made me a heathen, a servant, a woman. In all these examples, however, the negative formulation is intended primarily to highlight the positive, and to celebrate the state of marriage, freedom and male privilege of observing all the mitzvot. Thus, their main thrust is also a positive mitzvah. Repentance, on the other hand, although it leads to a life of

positive action, primarily focuses on the state of remorse and a negation of one's former lifestyle.

106. Is there any other reason why no blessing is prescribed?

We may suggest an analogy with the biblical mitzvah of reciting the Haggadah, over which no blessing is reciting. The reasons offered include, (i) that it is a mitzvah that has no prescribed or precise time frame. Some people allocate only a short time to it, while others (like the five sages) spend almost the entire night; some do no more than read the Haggadah, while others analyse and discuss the text, and (ii) that it is a mitzvah that is constantly interrupted for the performance of ritual acts and the eating of ritual foods, as well as for the eating of the meal, hiding the *Afikoman*, and family chats and reminiscences. It is regarded as inappropriate to recite a blessing over a mitzvah that is so protracted and interrupted, since, in that situation, it is impossible to keep one's mind exclusively on the prime mitzvah of reciting the Haggadah. Hence there is no prescribed blessing over the act of repentance.

106. But why is repentance construed as a protracted and interrupted act? Surely it is an on-going state of mind!

From a halachic and a psychological perspective, it is not. This emerges from Rav J. B. Soloveitchik's description of the repentance process:

> Repentance is not a function of a single, decisive act, but grows and gains in size, slowly and gradually, until the penitent undergoes a complete metamorphosis, and then, after becoming a new person, and only then, does repentance take place. And what is the concluding act of repentance? It is confession.
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> (Quoted in Peli, P. H., *On repentance*. Jer. Oroth Publ. House, 84-85)

On the graph of repentance there is no single, uninterrupted vertical line from the first stirring of remorse or recognition that one's life is going in the wrong direction, to the peak of complete repentance. It is invariably punctuated by interludes of doubt, apprehension, and regression. One starts with good intentions to repent, and then one is overwhelmed by the blandishments of habit. There are times when great energy is expended in the battle with one's passions and in the tortuous uphill climb towards the light. And there are other times—which can be most protracted—when the exercise of repentance is put on hold while the person is diverted to other preoccupations and projects. Blessings are pithy and compact ways of consecrating equally compact mitzvot. Where the time scale is outspread, interrupted and intermittent, however, the blessing is dispensed with.

By the same token, we do not recite blessings over mitzvot that are ill-defined and left to individual motivation. Thus, there is no blessing over the giving of charity, for we can never

be sure that the amount we contribute at any time is truly commensurate with the worthiness of the cause or appropriate to our financial situation. It is ill-defined. We can never be sure whether we have really fulfilled the mitzvah by having given significantly or have merely gone through the motions and salved our consciences with what, given our financial circumstance, is but a token donation.

It is the same with repentance. We cannot make a blessing over an exercise that is almost impossible to quantify. We cannot know when, and whether, we have truly reached a level of repentance that constitutes the optimum of our potential. Most of us choose a point of remorse at which we, subjectively, make the assessment that we have effectively put the past behind us. But that may well be an incomplete repentance. We may well have curtailed the exercise of repentance before we have in reality gained the requisite moral strength to resist subsequent temptations. Repentance is too illusory and subjective an exercise over which to recite a confident blessing.

138. Is there an association between Rosh Hashanah and man's expected relationship to his environment?

Rosh Hashanah commemorates the Creation of the world; and the very first task imposed upon the newly-created Adam was *l'ovdah ul'shomrah* – 'to tend and protect' the world into which he had been placed (Gen. 2:15). As such, man was elevated to become a co-partner with God in the act of creation and the preservation of the environment. The Midrash states that, after creating him, God took Adam on a guided tour of all the trees in the Garden of Eden, and said, ''See how beautiful and praiseworthy is all that I have created; and all of it has been created only for you to enjoy. Take great care, therefore, not to spoil or destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no one to rectify it after you!'' (Mid. *Kohelet Rabb*. ch.9).

Twentieth-first century man, who has plundered, polluted, and ravaged his environment, should find this Midrash rather chilling. The earth is for man to enjoy and replenish, not to exploit and exhaust. Man is no more than its carer and custodian, never its owner!

Unetanneh Tokef in poetry

A selection of Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur compositions in rhymed verse.*

UNETANNEH TOKEF*

ונתנה תוקף

The potent sanctity of this day—

So awesome and fearful—

Let us relay.

On it Your kingship

Is universally hailed,

As is Your throne,

With our prayers

Assailed.

אמת כי אתה הוא דיין

You judge,

You know,

You testify;

You record,

You let

Nothing slip by.

The good deeds

We ourselves forgot,

Loom large,

To create a happy lot.

ותפתח את ספר הזכרונות

Your chronicle is read,

In detail, fine;

Man's signature confirmed

On the final line.

ובשופר גדול

The great shofar's sound

Reverberates.

But it's the still, small voice

That berates

Man as he stands

Awaiting sentence

At Your hands.

ומלאכים יחפזון

An awesome moment—

Even the angels quake;

Fearful of their own mistake:

Some act of spiritual

Dereliction;

Some error in choral praise

Or diction.

כבקרת רועה עדרו

Before You, file

All men like sheep,

As they follow on behind;

With You, the Shepherd,

Observing all—

Their fate,

Fairly assigned.

בראש השנה יכתבון

On Rosh Hashanah

Every deed is named;

On Yom Kippur,

Signed, sealed,

Proclaimed:

How many shall die,

Or be born;

For whose early death

Shall loved ones

Mourn?

מי במים

Who shall die by water,

And who by war;

Who by fire,

Or the wild beast's claw;

Who by famine,

And who by drought;

By natural disaster,

Who shall be caught out;

Who by plague

Or strangulation;

Who by stoning

Or assassination?

(Who by a driver's

Rash decision,

Causing a sudden,

Fatal collision;

Who by a drug,

Over-dosed;

Who by an illness,

Undiagnosed;

Who by a terrorist's

Bomb or gun,

Slaying a parent,

Daughter or son?)

מי ינוח ומי ינוע

Who shall be calm,

And who stressed;

Who harassed,

And who at rest?

מי יעני

Who shall be poor—

In their own eyes—

Or brimming with confidence,

Up to the skies?

Whose wealth shall grow

Overnight,

And who shall suffer
Penury's plight?

מי ישפל ומי ירום

Which public figure

Shall fall from grace;

And which shall become

A national face?

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UT'SHUVAH UT'FILLAH UTZ'DAKAH

ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה

But penitence, prayer,

Charity and care,

Move God to efface

The decree of disgrace.

OCHILAH LA'EL*

אוחילה לאל

My hope is in God,

That He shall bestow

An eloquence of speech

That will outflow,

To touch all the souls

Here in our congregation,

That they might sing
With heightened elation.

לאדם מערכי לב

A man may know

What he wants to say,

But apposite words

May not come his way.

So, open my lips

To declare Your praise;

May Your Spirit invest

My every phrase.

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V'YE'ESAYU*

ויאתיו

א They'll all come to serve You

ב And bless Your glorious Name;

ג They'll tell the world about You,

And Your righteousness, proclaim;

ד Those without religion

Shall eagerly seek You out;

ה Praise echoing throughout the earth,

'The Lord is great,'

ו They'll shout.

ז To You they'll offer sacrifice,

ח Their idols they'll reject;

Their statues

They'll reduce to dust –

So great is Your effect;

ט They'll serve You

For eternity,

י As long as sun exists;

כ Acknowledging Your kingdom,

ל Teaching strayers to desist;

Acclaiming Your greatness

נ As the One who reigns supreme;

ס Overawed by Your presence,

ע Crowned in their mystic dream.

פ Then the mountains shall burst forth

צ With a glorious song,

And all the islands shall rejoice

ק At the fealty of the throng;

ר Summoning distant ones

ש To join in adulation;

ת Witnessing Your royal crown

In universal presentation.

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Extracted from Jeffrey M Cohen, *The Machzor in Poetry
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