



Hilkhot Teshuva
Laws Concerning Repentance

Chapter 3:4

4 Although the sounding of the *shofar* on the New Year is a decree of the Written Law, still it has a deep meaning, as if saying, “Awake, awake O sleeper, from your sleep; O slumberers, arouse yourselves from your slumbers; examine your deeds, return in repentance, and remember your Creator. Those of you who forget the truth in the follies of the times and go astray the whole year in vanity and emptiness which neither profit nor save, look to your souls; improve your ways and works. Abandon, every one of you, his evil course and the thought that is not good.”

It is necessary, therefore, that each person should regard himself throughout the year as if he were half innocent and half guilty and should regard the whole of mankind as half innocent and half guilty. If then he commits one more sin, he presses down the scale of guilt against himself and the whole world and causes his destruction. If he fulfills one commandment, he turns the scale of merit in his favor and in favor of the whole world, and brings salvation and deliverance to all his fellow creatures and to himself, as it is said, “The righteous man is the foundation of the world” (Prov. 10:25); that is to say, he who acts justly presses down the scale of merit in favor of all the world and saves it.

Because of these considerations, all Jews are accustomed to increase their charities and other good deeds from the New Year to the Day of Atonement and engage in meritorious actions during this period to a greater degree than during the rest of the year. All are accustomed to arise while it is still night and to pray in the synagogues until dawn, with fervent entreaties and supplications.*

Chapter 5:1-4

1 Free will is bestowed on every human being. If one desires to turn toward the good way and be righteous, he has the power to do so. If one wishes to turn toward the evil way and be wicked, he is at liberty to do so. And thus it is written in the Torah, “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil” (Gen. 3:22)—which means that the human species had become unique in the world—there being no other species like it in the following respect, namely, that man, of himself and by the exercise of his own intelligence and reason, knows what is good and what is evil, and there is none who can prevent him from doing that which is good or that which is evil. And since this is so there is reason to fear “lest he put forth his hand . . .” (ibid.). . .

2 Let not the notion, expressed by foolish Gentiles and most of the senseless folk among Israelites, pass through your mind that at the beginning of a person’s existence the almighty decrees that he is to be either righteous or wicked. This is not so. Every human being may become righteous like Moses our teacher, or wicked like Jeroboam; wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, niggardly or generous, and so with all other qualities. There is no one that coerces him or decrees what he is to do, or draws him to either of the two ways; but every person turns to the way which he desires, spontaneously and of his own volition. Thus Jeremiah said, “Out of the mouth of the Most High proceeds not evil and good?” (Lam. 3:38); that is to say, the Creator does not decree either that a man shall be good or that he shall be wicked. Accordingly it follows that it is the sinner who has inflicted injury on himself; and he should, therefore, weep for and bewail what he has done to his soul—how he has mistreated it. This is expressed in the next verse, “Wherefore does a living man complain, a strong man, because of his sins” (ibid. 3:39). The prophet continues: since liberty of action is in our hands and we have, of our free will, committed all these evils, it behooves us to return in a spirit of repentance, and forsake our wickedness, for we have the power to do so. This thought is expressed in the next verse, “Let us search and try our ways, and return to the Lord” (ibid. 3:40).

3 This doctrine is an important principle, the pillar of the Law and the commandment, as it is said, “See, I set before you this day life and good, and death and evil” (Deut. 30:15); and again it is written, “Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse” (ibid. 11:26). This means that the power is in your hands, and whatever a man desires to do among the things that human beings do, he can do, whether they are good or evil; and, because of this faculty, it is said, “O that they had such a heart as this always” (ibid. 5:26), which implies that the Creator neither puts compulsion on the children of men nor decrees that they should do either good or evil, but it is all left to their discretion.*

4 If God had decreed that a person should either righteous or wicked, or if there were some force inherent in his nature which irresistibly drew him to a particular course, or to special branch of knowledge, to special views or activities, as the foolish astrologers out of their own fancy pretend, how could the Almighty have charged us through the prophets: “Do this and do not do that, improve your ways, do not follow your wicked impulses,” when, from the beginning of his existence his destiny had already been decreed, or his innate constitution irresistibly drew him to that from which he could not

set himself free? What room would there be for the whole of the Torah? By what right or justice could God punish the wicked or reward the righteous? “Shall not the Judge of all the earth act justly?” (Gen. 18:25).

Chapter 7:1-7

1 Since every human being, as we have explained, has free will, a man should strive to repent (make verbal confession of his sins) and renounce them, so that he may die penitent and thus be worthy of life in the world to come.

2 A man should always regard himself as if his death were imminent and think that he may die this very hour, while still in a state of sin. He should therefore repent of his sins immediately and not say, “When I grow old I shall repent,” for he may die before he becomes old. So Solomon, in his wisdom, said, “Let your garments be always white, and oil on your head not be lacking” (Eccles. 9:8).

3 Do not say that one need only repent of sinful deeds such as fornication, robbery, and theft. Just as a man needs to repent of these sins involving acts, so he needs to investigate and repent of any evil dispositions that he may have, such as hot temper, hatred, jealousy, scoffing, eager pursuit of wealth or honors, greediness in eating, and so on. Of all these faults one should repent. They are graver than sinful acts; for when one is addicted to them it is difficult to give them up. And thus it is said, “Let the wicked forsake his way and the man of iniquity his thoughts” (Is. 55:7).

4 Let not the penitent suppose that he is kept far away from the degree attained by the righteous because of the iniquities and sins that he has committed. This is not so. He is beloved by the Creator, desired by Him, as if he had never sinned. Moreover, his reward is great; since, though having tasted sin, he renounced it and overcame his evil passions. The sages say, “Where penitents stand, the completely righteous cannot stand.” This means that the degree attained by penitents is higher than that of those who had never sinned, the reason being that the former have had to put forth a greater effort to subdue their passions than the latter.

5 All the prophets charged the people concerning repentance. Only through repentance will Israel be redeemed, and the Torah already offered the assurance that Israel will, in the closing period of exile, finally repent, and thereupon be immediately redeemed, as it is said, “And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you shall take it to heart among all the nations, wherever the Lord your God has driven you, and shall return to the Lord your God, and hearken to His voice according to all that I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul, that the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have mercy upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations, wherever the Lord your God has scattered you” (Deut. 30:1-3).

6 Great is repentance, for it brings men near to the Divine Presence, as it is said, “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God” (Hos. 14:2). Again, it is said, “And you have not returned to Me, says the Lord” (Amos 4:6). Further, “If you return, O Israel, to Me shall you return” (Jer. 4:1), which means “If you return in repentance, you will cleave to Me.” Repentance brings near those who are far away. But yesterday this person was odious before God, abhorred, estranged, an abomination. Today he is beloved, desirable, near [to

God], a friend. So you find that the same expression with which God thrusts sinners away from Him, He employs to bring the penitent near to Him, whether they are individuals or communities, as it is said, “And instead of that which was said unto them: You are not My people,’ it shall be said unto them: You are children of the living God” (Hos. 2:1). Of Jeconiah, while he was wicked, it was said, “Write you this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days” (Jer. 22:30); “Though Coniah, the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were a signet upon my right hand, yet would I pluck you therefrom” (*ibid.* 22:24). But after he had in his exile repented, it is said of his son, Zerubbabel, “In that day, says the Lord of Hosts, will I take you, O Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, my servant, and will make you as a signet, says the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:23).

7 How exalted is the degree of repentance? Just last night a certain individual was separated from the Lord, God of Israel, as it is said, “Your iniquities were making a separation between you and your God”(Is. 59:2). He cries aloud and is not answered, as it is said, “Yea, when you make many prayers, I will not hear” (*ibid.* 1:15). He fulfills religious precepts and they are flung back in his face, as it is said, “Who has required this at you hand to tread my courts?” (*ibid.* 1:12); “Oh, that there were even one among you that would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain; I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at you hand” (Mal. 1:10); “Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifice and eat flesh” (Jer. 7:21). Today, the same individual (having repented) is closely attached to the Divine Presence, as it is said, “And you that cleave to the Lord your God, are alive, every one of you this day” (Deut. 4:4). He cries and is immediately answered, as it is said, “And it shall come to pass that before they call I will answer” (Is. 65:24). He fulfills religious precepts and they are accepted with pleasure and with joy, as it is said, “For God has already accepted your works” (Eccles. 9:7). Yet more, they are eagerly desired, as it is said, “Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant to the Lord as in the days of old and as in ancient years” (Mal. 3:4).

Chapter 9:1-2

1 It is known that the reward for the fulfillment of the commandments and the good to which we will attain if we have kept the way of the Lord, as prescribed in the Law, is life in the world to come, as it is said, “That it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days” (Deut. 22:7), while the retribution exacted from the wicked who have abandoned the ways of righteousness prescribed in the Torah is excision, as it is said, “that soul shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him” (Num. 15:31). What then is the meaning of the statement found everywhere in the Torah that if you obey, it will happen to you thus; if you do not obey, it will be otherwise; and all these happenings will take place in this world, such as war and peace; sovereignty and subjection; residence in the Promised Land and exile; prosperity in one’s activities and failure and all the other things predicted in the words of the Covenant (Lev. 26, Deut. 28)? All those promises were once truly fulfilled and will again be so. When we fulfill all the commandments of the Torah, all the good things of this world will come to us. When, however, we transgress the precepts, the evils that are written in the Torah will befall us. But, nevertheless, those good things are not the final reward for the fulfillment of the commandments, nor are those evils the last penalty exacted from one who transgresses all the commandments. These matters are to be understood as follows: The Holy One, blessed be He, gave us this Law—a tree of life. Whoever fulfills what is written therein and knows it with a complete and correct knowledge will attain thereby life in the world to come. According to the greatness of his deeds and abundance of his knowledge will be the measure in which he will attain that life.

The Holy One, blessed be He, has further promised us in the Torah that if we observe its behests joyously and cheerfully, and continually meditate on its wisdom, He will remove from us the obstacles that hinder us in its observance, such as sickness, war, famine, and other calamities; and will bestow upon us all the material benefits which will strengthen our ability to fulfill the Law, such as plenty, peace, abundance of silver and gold. Thus we will not be engaged all our days in providing for our bodily need, but will have leisure to study wisdom and fulfill the commandment and thus attain life in the world to come. Hence, after the assurance of material benefits, it is said in the Torah, “And it shall be righteousness to us, if we observe to do all this commandment before the Lord our God as He has commanded us” (*ibid.* 6:25). So too, He taught us in the Torah that if we deliberately forsake it and occupy ourselves with temporal follies, as the text says, “But Jeshurun waxed fat and wicked” (*ibid.* 32:15), the true Judge will deprive the forsakers of all those material benefits which only served to encourage them to be recalcitrant, and will send upon them all the calamities that will prevent their attaining the life hereafter, so that they will perish in their wickedness. This is expressed by the Torah in the text: “Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things, therefore shall you serve your enemy whom the Lord shall send against you” (*ibid.* 28:47-48).

Hence, all those benedictions and maledictions promised in the Torah are to be explained as follows: If you have served God with joy and observed His way, He will bestow upon you those blessings and avert from you those curses, so that you will have leisure to become wise in the Torah and occupy yourselves therewith, and thus attain life hereafter, and then it will be well with you in the world which is entirely blissful and you

will enjoy length of days in an existence which everlasting. So you will enjoy both worlds, a happy life on earth leading to the life in the world to come. For if wisdom is not acquired and good deeds are not performed here, there will be nothing meriting a recompense hereafter, as it is said, “For there is no work, no device, no knowledge, no wisdom in the grave” (Eccles. 9:10). But if you have forsaken the Lord and have erred in eating, drinking, fornication, and similar things, He will bring upon you all those curses and withhold from you all those blessings till your days will end in confusion and terror, and you will have neither the free mind nor the healthy body requisite for the fulfillment of the commandments so that you will suffer perdition in the life hereafter and will thus have lost both worlds—for when one is troubled here on earth with diseases, war or famine, he does not occupy himself with the acquisition of wisdom or the performance of religious precepts by which life hereafter is gained.

2 Hence, all Israelites, their prophets and sages, longed for the advent of Messianic times, that they might have relief from the wicked tyranny that does not permit them properly to occupy themselves with the study of the Torah and the observance of the commandments; that they might have ease, devote themselves to getting wisdom, and thus attain to life in the world to come. For in those days, knowledge, wisdom, and truth will increase, as it is said, “For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Is. 11:9), and it is said, “They will no more teach everyone his brother and everyone his neighbor” (Jer. 31:34), and further, “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh” (Ezek. 36:26). Because the king who will arise from the seed of David will possess more wisdom than Solomon and will be a great prophet, approaching Moses our Teacher, he will teach the whole of the Jewish people and instruct them in the way of God; and all nations will come to hear him, as it is said, “And at the end of days it shall come to pass that the mount of the Lord’s house shall be established as the top of the mountains” (Micah 4:1, Is. 2:2). The ultimate and perfect reward, the final bliss which will suffer neither interruption nor diminution, is the life in the world to come. The Messianic era, on the other hand, will be realized in this world; which will continue in its normal course except that independent sovereignty will be restored to Israel. The ancient sages already said, “The only difference between the present and the Messianic era is that political oppression will then cease.”*

Chapter 10:1-3; 5-6

1 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. Those who may serve God in this way are illiterate, women, or children whom one trains to serve out of fear, till their knowledge shall have increased when they will serve out of love.

2 Whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with the study of the Law and the fulfillment of commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits—such a man does what is truly right because it is truly right, and ultimately, happiness comes to him as a result of his conduct. This standard is indeed a very high one; not every sage attained it. It was the standard of the patriarch Abraham whom God called His lover, because he served only out of love. It is the standard which God, through Moses, bids us achieve, as it is said, “And you shall love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:5). When one loves God with the right love, he will straightway observe all the commandments out of love.*

3 What is the love of God that is befitting? It is to love the Eternal with a great and exceeding love, so strong that one’s soul shall be knit up with the love of God, and one should be continually enraptured by it, like a love-sick individual, whose mind is at not time free from his passion for a particular woman, the thought of her filling his heart at all times, when sitting down or rising up, when he is eating or drinking. Even intenser should be the love of God in the hearts of those who love Him. And this love should continually possess them, even as He commanded us in the phrase, “with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 6:5). This, Solomon expressed allegorically in the sentence, “for I am sick with love” (Song of Songs 2:5). The entire Song of Songs is indeed an allegory descriptive of this love.+

5 Whoever engages in the study of the Torah in order that he may received a reward or avoid calamities is not studying the Torah for its own sake. Whoever occupies himself with the Torah, neither out of fear nor for the sake of recompense, but solely out of love for the Lord of the whole earth who enjoined us to do so, is occupied with the Torah for its own sake. The sages, however, said, “One should always engage in the study of the Torah, even if not for its own sake; for he who begins thus will end by studying it for its own sake.” Hence, when instructing the young, women, or the illiterate generally, we teach them to serve God out of fear or for the sake of reward, till their knowledge increases and they have attained a large measure of wisdom. Then we reveal to them this secret truth, little by little, and train them by easy stages till they have grasped and comprehended it, and serve God out of love.

6 It is known and certain that the love of God does not become closely knit in a man's heart till he is continuously and thoroughly possessed by it and gives up everything else in the world for it; as God commanded us, "with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 6:5). 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 comprehend—as indeed we have explained in the Laws of the Basic Principles of the Torah.