Reconciliation, Repentance and the World to Come: A View from Judaism

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Introduction: Diminishing the global crisis

The challenge of addressing the issue of reconciliation as both a theological and political idea from the perspective of Judaism is at least two-fold.

1. Reconciliation as a theological construct

First, reconciliation as a theological concept both is, and is not, a Jewish (or, perhaps more accurately, Ancient Israelite) idea. By that I mean that the Christian theological notion of reconciliation (the resolution of the polarities of body and spirit in the body of Jesus as Christ) is drawn out of Hebrew (specifically prophetic) scripture. Hence, its genealogy likely originates in the Ancient Israelite religion. However, as much as some may like to view this idea as having 'Jewish', i.e., biblical roots, its Christian formulation is founded on a (Jewish?) critique of normative Judaism of the time and, in response, Jewish reactions to reconciliation as a theological idea are often critical responses to its Christian instantiation, which is, itself, a critique of Judaism. We read, 'Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation . . . beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.' (2 Cor. 5 17–21). To be a Christian (that is, to be in Christ) is to be reconciled. And to be part of Christ's ministry is to work for the reconciliation of humanity. This notion is quite powerful and its application has contributed greatly to the progress of Western civilization (although not without its darker side).

When we think about reconciliation from a Jewish perspective, both as a theological construct and as a political strategy, we must look at how Judaism (at least in the West) after the advent of Christianity, a religion that, at least

in modernity, is living in response to a critique of itself, can contribute to this Christian agenda. Judaism has largely constructed itself as a non-reconciled religion, if by reconciliation we mean the resolution of the spirit of God and the body of humankind.[1]

2. Reconciliation as a political strategy

The second challenge, one that is fraught with painful obstacles from a Jewish perspective, is the political dimension of this exercise. The context of this project is, in essence, political – to think about how religion can contribute to resolve our present global crisis. And, the theological/political dimension of this exercise is decidedly a Christian one – that is, that religion can or should be the vehicle for world peace. As a religion devoted to the salvation of humankind (which is one of Christianity's greatest strengths) reconciliation as a theological idea can more easily translate into the political arena than it can for Judaism, as I will argue below.

My assignment is to write about how Judaism can contribute to diminishing world conflict, or how Jewish theological thinking can be deployed to soften and not harden opposing sides of any conflict. For Judaism, this question shakes the foundations of its theological and political history because much of that history, and ability to survive, has been its (desired) detachment from regional and global crises that lie outside the direct impact of Jews or Judaism.[2] Yet, as Jewish scholars are now proving, there is a 'Jewish political tradition'[3] and it is therefore incumbent upon Jewish thinkers to confront the ways in which that 'tradition' can contribute (if it can at all) to global concerns. The fundamental problem, of course, is that Judaism was historically never very concerned with global matters, leaving the image of a utopian peaceful world to its eschatological vision of the future. In Judaism, the resolution of global crisis was a messianic idea, always coming yet never here. In fact, Judaism began and remained, for much of its history, a tribal religion, devoted to its 'people' and the survival of its covenant with God. Emancipation, and more specifically Zionism, has changed all that but in some very fundamental ways it has not. Here I would like to explore two distinct but connected dimensions of this issue: the theological and the political. The first part will explore what I see to be the ways in which reconciliation does function in the Jewish theological tradition. The second will explore the ways I think Judaism needs reform, from within and from without, in order to better contribute to the quest for theological solutions to global crisis.

I. Reconciliation and incarnation

One of the most challenging dimensions of political conflict is the investment each side has in its own position. This investment is not only tactical but, in many cases, becomes canonical; the very existence of the community is seen as threatened if its position is compromised. In many ways, it is religion that is the primary culprit of this transformation of a situational dilemma into theological doctrine. And, in many cases, this transmorphing of politics into theology (we are, in essence trying here to reverse the trajectory) is supported by those who are not adherents to or believers in the religious tradition in question. What results is the advocacy of doctrinal claims by individuals who do not adhere to the subtleties of religious traditions, many of which contain elements of emulating a compassionate God and the sanctity of human life.[4] When claims of national aspiration become cosmic tropes and eschatological battles of good against evil severed from any utopian vision of a just end or divine compassion, mercy is viewed as naïve and righteousness as false piety. One first step for those invested in religious traditions is to own the extent to which religions are a root cause of the conflict. Whether religions also have the resources to diffuse what they, in fact, created is the burden that we, as religious philosophers and theologians, must carry.

1. A world not yet redeemed

One methodological caveat. The frame of my discussion will be what I call post-ecumenical. I will not offer an apologetic reading of Judaism, defending it against its critics. I will also not reflexively suggest how Judaism, as presently construed, can contribute positively to the reconciliation of global conflict. Rather, I will offer a few observations about the Jewish notion of repentance (*teshuvah*) as a theological construct and then suggest how that construct, as I interpret it, can serve a global political end.

As I understand it, reconciliation is a founding principle of Christianity based on the unification of matter and spirit in the body of Christ. If the link between reconciliation and incarnation is correct, the theological construct of reconciliation can be viewed as an extension of the factual event of incarnation. While reconciliation may be too ambiguous a concept to elicit much Jewish response, incarnation is not. The question of incarnation in Judaism is complex. In a recent essay Michael Wyschogrod asserted: 'A human being who is God loses all legitimacy [in Judaism] from the outset. No sharper

break with Jewish theological sensibility can be imagined.'[5] It would seem, from Wyschogrod's perspective, that Judaism is an anti-reconciliationist religion – it demands the un-resolution of God and the human. While this conventional wisdom largely remains intact it is not unchallenged. Scholars have argued that incarnationalism is not as foreign to Judaism as is commonly thought and, even stronger, that the Christian idea is an extension, and not an aberration, of an idea already prominent in pre-rabbinic and rabbinic culture. This new post-ecumenical approach to incarnation in Judaism opens up new vistas for Judaism on the question of its contribution to global politics. As Elliot Wolfson recently noted, 'reclaiming the significance of incarnation in the history of Judaism . . . can simultaneously acknowledge the common ground between Judaism and Christianity and the uniqueness of this doctrine in each religious culture'.[6] The question here is not to debate whether incarnationalism is endemic to Judaism or not.[7] Rather, it is merely to show that reconciliation, a political idea that may be founded on a theological principle, is not hopelessly foreign to the Jewish religion. I will suggest another way of looking at reconciliation that is not founded on the end as the beginning. That is, in Christianity, reconciliation as redemption is where this new history begins, and salvation is where it ends. We are, at the outset, already redeemed.[8] For the Jew, salvation and redemption are co-joined. We live in a world not-yet-redeemed, yet a world where reconciliation can function existentially, albeit temporally, where we move from one un-redeemed place to the next, reconciled and then unreconciled, again and again.

2. *Repentance* (teshuvah)

The Jewish concept of repentance (*teshuvah*) best illustrates this idea. Rooted allusively in biblical religion, it becomes a foundational principle in later rabbinic constructions of the Jew's relationship to her fellow (Jew?) and God. The word *teshuvah* does not appear in the Pentateuch but is alluded to in one passage in Deuteronomy.[9] Its prominence emerges in the Prophets in their warning to the Israelites to turn back towards God to avoid his wrath and their destruction.[10] It has become, through rabbinic interpretation, the central motif of the High Holiday season and the centrepiece of the Jewish New Year (Rosh Ha-Shana). That is, the Jews view themselves, by definition, as deficient partners in God's covenant. The rectification of their sinful behaviour is mediated through repentance which amounts to a recognition of wrongdoing and a resolution to live more in concert with divine will. The liturgical tradition consists of confession, both collective and individual, that the penitent recites to frame and direct her own internal personal introspection.

One of the weaknesses of conventional notions of repentance as presented in the Jewish tradition is that it is, to a large extent, a reactive act. That is, one sins, feels contrition, acts on that feeling by re-assessing their behaviour and its underlying motivations, confesses through liturgy, and moves on, awaiting the next sin to spark the next act of repentance. Repentance becomes the way 'out of sin', only to be needed again as the individual continues along his or her path of imperfection. While this may create a culture of individuals who watch their actions more carefully than others (not that they act any differently, only that they may be more aware of the act) its reactive nature fails as a model for conflict resolution. This is because adversaries in conflict often justify their actions, as sinful as they may be, as necessary or even in concert with divine will.[11] If the actor does not think her act is 'sinful' or unjust, no act of repentance is required.

For the Jewish notion of repentance (*teshuvah*) to function as a path towards a notion of reconciliation, that is, a stance that can contribute to conflict resolution by recognizing the limitations of the other through the limitations of the self, it must transcend its exclusively reactionary and responsive function. For Christians the theological category of reconciliation as the resolution of body and spirit in *Corpus Christi* may function as a model for peace. Christianity's challenge may be to sever that very powerful notion of humanity from the idea that all resolution comes through the body that is already reconciled. That is, that all reconciliation is reconciliation in Christ and that resolution occurs when all are part of the body of Christ, that is, Christian. Underlying the universalism of Christianity is an exclusivity that, if unrestrained, can, as we have seen, result in violence, hatred, and bloodshed.

3. *A non/reactive notion*

What I think Judaism can contribute here is a notion of repentance whereby non-resolution of the self, and the recognition of the imperfect understanding of the other, is a posture of reconciliation. That is, repentance should not be viewed as a reaction to an act but an existential posture endemic to the human condition whereby each side of any conflict is already at fault before the act yet can rectify that fault through *teshuvah*. But, *teshuvah* does not resolve the condition of the act; in fact, *teshuvah* is revela-

tory, it reveals another dimension of imperfection. On this model, *teshuvah* results in a transformed individual who, in receiving a new level of consciousness, now sees another fault in her position previously unknown and also sees the extent to which the first *teshuvah* does not sufficiently address the present state of her self-understanding. The reconciliation here is not the resolution of disparate polarities but the equaprimordiality of non-resolution of both sides. Nothing can become doctrine according to this model as every realization of 'truth' reveals its human untruth. Perhaps the reconciliation that Judaism has to offer is the reconciliation of non-reconciliation, the transformation of the individual (or community) through repentance which yields another level of non-resolution that enables both sides to remain always at fault and always desiring to act in a way to reveal new levels of imperfection. This can also result in new ways of understanding the justice in the other's position, even if it is still contested.

This existential and non-reactive notion of *teshuvah* was introduced by a late eighteenth-century Hasidic master, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (d. 1810).[12]

Thus, a person should perpetually embrace the attribute of repentance. For who can say, 'I have cleaned my heart, I am purged of sin?' (Prov. 20.9). Even at the moment a person says 'I have sinned, I have transgressed, I have acted wantonly,'[13] it is impossible for him to say this with a pure heart and without an ulterior motive. We find, therefore, that he must repent for his first act of repentance, for the 'I have sinned, I have transgressed, I have acted wantonly,' that he uttered.[14]

Reading Proverbs 20.9 (Who can say, 'I have cleaned my heart, I am purged of sin?'), Nahman suggests that any act of *teshuvah* is always imperfect since it can never be purer than the individual performing it. Since the individual has an innate need to perform *teshuvah* as a response to her depraved condition, not in response to any particular act, the act of *teshuvah* must also be tainted. As opposed to the act erasing and expiating sin, the act of repentance results in taking the individual out of the very condition that caused her to act in any particular way. Hence, successful *teshuvah* will result in a more self-conscious and therefore more refined individual in that she is more aware of her state of imperfection. When this individual (immediately) reflects back on this 'past' *teshuvah* she will now see its deficiency. This has the potential to push her back into the darkness she just emerged from. Therefore, R. Nahman suggests, she must enact *teshuvah* on the first *teshuvah* (*teshuvah 'al ha-teshuvah rishona*).

And even if a person knows inside himself that he has been totally sincere in his repentance, he must repent for his first act of repentance. This is because when he first repented, he did so according to his level of perception then. But afterwards, when he again repents, he certainly recognizes and perceives even more about God. So that relative to his present perception, his first perception was certainly crude in comparison.[15]

He likens the relationship between these two states (before *teshuvah* and after *teshuvah*) to the relationship between the physical and spiritual realm and this world and the next. Both realms remain relevant as both need correction and rectification. Enacting *teshuvah* creates the potential to correct the physical because it objectifies it by taking the individual to a new level of clarity. Nahman suggests that one reason why one cannot rectify the place that they are in is because they cannot adequately see the deficiencies that underlie that place. Only by being lifted out of that place can one see it for what it really is and then re-enact *teshuvah* in order to complete its rectification. This, of course, yields another realization of human deficiency that requires one to begin the process all over again.

II. The world to come

In essence, Nahman suggests that *teshuvah* is an act that makes one transparent to oneself; it does not erase sin. The clarity it achieves is the inverse of faith. It does not yield an apprehension of reconciliation of body and spirit but the deep imperfection of all human endeavours. Yet this does not support a posture of human impotence but of human potential. The path towards self-understanding and, I would add in this context, an understanding of the other, is through a recognition that all sinful behaviour is rooted in a lack of perception. If we perceive ourselves as justified, or our enemy unjustified, we are living in that lack of perception. Repentance reveals the unjustified nature of our actions and, perhaps in reverse, the justified nature of the actions of the 'other'. I do not mean this in any absolute sense, for the whole nature of Nahman's theory of repentance is one of relativity. Repentance enables me to see the illusion of the moral certitude of my behaviour which then enables me to repent on the lack of vision that led to that mistake.

1. A process, not a result

This process, not its conclusion, Nahman calls the World to Come, which I will call Reconciliation.

This is the meaning of, [On that day] 'there will be neither bright light nor thick darkness' (Zech. 14.6) – concerning which the sages said, 'The light which is substantial in the world will be insignificant and slight in the World to Come.'[16] We see, therefore, that in the World to Come, when people merit a greater perception of His Godliness, they will surely be contrite and repent for their perception in this world. For perception in this world is [materialistic] in comparison with perception in the World to Come.[17]

The World to Come, or the culmination of the process of enlightenment, will not yield a cessation of repentance (since sin is eradicated) but rather its continuation. Hence, the existential act of *teshuvah* is, in fact, the experience of Reconciliation and *teshuvah* has little to do with sin. As long as I am not repenting, I am not dispelling the darkness that I create in the worlds that I construct (all of which are false because they are mine). In some deep way, this is a critical critique of all 'religion' if by that term we mean any system of ideas or behaviours that we deem 'perfect' because of their divine origin. More importantly, however, this model can serve to undermine the arrogance and certitude that underlies communal conflict. It is this latter point that I will briefly develop.

2. Detecting deficiencies

What kind of individual or community is created by believing that 'I am wrong the moment I begin,' and only by repenting do I recognize the ways in which that is true? And, that my assessment of the 'other' is mistaken the moment I make it and will only recognize that mistake when I repent. While the incessant move inwards that this notion requires could easily yield a narcissistic personality (and often does) it can also avert the dangers of reification by forcing each side to view its own position as cracked and severed from godliness as long as the crack goes undetected. What Jewish repentance, at least according to Nahman, can offer the world is the realization that human beings create the world they live in and, as human creations, their worlds are deficient. Yet, that deficiency, living falsely as certainty, remains undetected until one repents from one's own station, after which one is privy to a new light that shows clearly the imperfection of one's past station (and the first repentance that achieved that clarity). What is achieved in this non-resolution is the reconciliation of any claim of absolute justness or absolute victimhood. Both sides are reconciled to their deficiencies, and to their deficient assessment of the 'other'. In human imperfection lies a source of human justice.

Conclusion: discovering in the depths

As to the problem mentioned above that Judaism has always been reluctant to enter the global community, this is something that needs immediate attention. If the Jewish people want the benefits of global participation, Jews must theologically and sociologically re-access the tribal (and thus insular) foundations of their religious sentiments. This is a challenge no less daunting than Christianity's re-thinking its notion of salvation as only salvation in Christ or Islam's position on the exclusive political sovereignty over Islamic lands. This goes to the core of Judaism's notion of divine election, one of the most protected ideas in the Jewish religion.[18] Judaism's ability to see itself as a full participant in the resolution of global conflict, conflicts that do not in any way impact or threaten Jewish interests, would require a re-formatting of Judaism at its roots. Without such fundamental re-thinking, I fear Jews and Judaism will always begin any discussion about world events with the question; 'Is it good for the Jews?' and in doing so, will always limit their ability to contribute to world peace.[19]

What Jews can do, and are now doing, is discovering in the depths of Judaism's insular tradition (in sometimes out-of-the way places), models that can be translated and used outside the sphere of Judaism. I think Nahman's model of *teshuva* is one example. While surely not intending his notion of *teshuvah* to be a model for global conflict resolution, Nahman offers us his take on the human condition that, when refracted through a more universal light, and interpreted in that light, offers some interesting observations about how the perpetual experience of human fragility can serve to diffuse the hard edges and certainties of ideologies that drive political and military conflict. A staunch particularist himself, and one who had little good to say about the Gentile 'other', Nahman's notion of *teshuvah*, despite itself, breaks new ground in understanding how reconciliation can exist in the Jewish world of non-resolution.

Notes

1. While I agree with those who say that Judaism, in its non-polemical manifestations, is far more tolerant of such a notion, its own identity, at least in the West, is very invested in *not* being Christian. Therefore, many of those motifs have been effaced or, in certain cases, erased.
2. There are numerous exceptions to this rule. For example, the work of Marc Gopin, both in his Jewish organization Hesed, devoted to world hunger relief

and his book *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (New York: Auckland Press 2002) applies Jewish models of justice to global issues. Another example is the 'Jewish Community Justice Project' in Los Angeles, California, which is dedicated to implementing theories of restorative as opposed to punitive models of justice into the Los Angeles County legal system. Coupled with writing educational curriculum on restorative justice from classical Jewish sources, members of this group are actively engaged in legal arbitration where they are acting with power of the court to resolve legal conflict through this alternative model. A third example is *Anshe Hesed*, a Conservative congregation in Manhattan that runs its own homeless shelter and many Reform synagogues who run soup kitchens. Given Diaspora Judaism at large, these are exceptions that prove the rule.

3. See the four-volume study, *The Jewish Political Tradition* ed M. Walzer, M. Loberbaum, N. Zohar, 2 vols, New Haven 2000, 2003.
4. On this see Louis E. Newman, 'The Quality of Mercy: On the Duty to Forgive in the Judaic Tradition,' in idem, *Past Imperatives*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1998, pp. 83, 84. 'But while human justice and divine mercy represent quite distinct moral standards, they are not to be viewed as irreconcilable. In fact, it is the very point of Portia's famous speech to Shylock [in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*] that human standards of justice must at times be supplemented and corrected by an element of divine compassion. Even the most just laws by human standards sometimes sanction immoral behaviour unless we attempt in conformity with God's example, to 'season human justice with (divine) mercy'. I would also add that God's law, if not filtered through human reason, can also yield 'immoral behaviour'.
5. Michael Wyshogrod, 'A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation,' *Modern Theology* 12-2 (1996), p. 198.
6. Elliot R. Wolfson, 'Judaism and Incarnation' in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed Frymer-Kensky, Novak, Ochs, Sandmel, Signer, Oxford: Westview Press 2000, p. 240. In a sense this is the post-modern turn whereby the very doctrine that previously distinguished Judaism from Christianity becomes that which draws them back together. This is not to deny the unique instantiation of each religion on the question of incarnation. It is to say, rather, that undoing classical Jewish apologetics intent on inextricably separating Judaism from Christianity demands a more nuanced, and less polemical, appraisal of both Jews and Christian ideas. Cf. Jacob Neusner, 'The Question of Incarnation' in *Jewish-Christian Debates about God, Kingdom, Messiah*, ed Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, Minneapolis 1998, pp. 215–25.
7. In a recent attack on the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, David Berger argues that the foundational ideas in Christianity, including incarnation, are unequivocally incompatible with normative Judaism. See David Berger, *The Rebbe, The Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, London/Portland 2001. See also Menahem Kellner, 'How Ought a Jew View Christian Beliefs About Redemption' in *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (n. 6), pp. 269–75

8. See Clark Williamson, 'A Christian View of Redemption' in *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (n. 6), pp. 288–90.
9. In his code of Jewish law and Book of Commandments, Moses Maimonides does not include repentance (*teshuva*) as a formal mitzvah. Rather, he includes confession (*vidyui*) as the formal commandment that must accompany *teshuva*. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 'Laws of Repentance,' 1'1 and *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment # 73. For more on the nature of *teshuvah* as a commandment, see R. Joseph Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, New York: Paulist Press 1984.
10. See, for example, Isa. 31.6; Jer. 3.14, 22; 18.11; 25.5, Ezek. 33.11, 12; Zech. 1.3, 4; Mal. 3.7 and in 2 Chron. 30.6.
11. The present Middle East conflict is a good example of this. Islamic doctrine, and with it the Palestinian militants who follow it, is quite explicit that *dar 'al Islam* does not have room for a sovereign non-Muslim entity (i.e. Israel). Many Jewish religious nationalists, at least those that work from the Jewish theological tradition, cannot justify relinquishing any part of biblical Israel, 'promised' to them by God. Hence, violent action on both sides can be justified as 'divine will' given the parameters of how each community understands it, and the performance of violence against the 'other' does not warrant any act of repentance.
12. On R. Nahman's life and thought, see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master*, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights 1992; and *God's Voice from the Void: Old and New Essays in Bratslav Hasidism*, ed Shaul Magid, Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2002.
13. This is the standard liturgical formulation of confession in Jewish prayer books.
14. R. Nahman of Bratslav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* I:6. In English, see *Likuey Moharan*, Volume I, trs Moshe Mykoff, ed M. Mykoff and O. Bergman, Jerusalem/New York: Breslov Research Institute 1995, p. 249.
15. Ibid.
16. B.Talmud Pesahim 50a.
17. Ibid (n. 14), p. 257.
18. See David Novak, *The Election of Israel*, Cambridge 1995; and *The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume 2: Membership*, ed M. Walzer, M. Lorberbaum, N. Zohar, New Haven 2003, pp. 9–107.
19. A good beginning to this fundamental re-thinking can be found in Marc Gopin's *Holy War, Holy Peace*.

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