



Sin...Yours, Mine, and Ours

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What Do Jewish Writings Say About Sin?

What do Jewish Scriptures and traditions say about sin and its consequence? Is there a permanent solution?

Steven was raised in an Orthodox Jewish home. He went to Hebrew school, had his bar mitzvah and observed the holidays. Yet when he turned 15, his parents began to experiment with a more liberal Jewish lifestyle. Perhaps it was an act of rebellion against her own mother, but Steven's mother began making pork chops, a food previously forbidden from the family menu and alien to their palates. At the same time, and seemingly unrelated at first, his father bought a smoke alarm. In case of fire, they would be ready! But as it happened, whenever the mother made pork chops, the alarm would start to blast. Its piercing warning would upset the otherwise peaceful household. Sometimes there was even smoke accompanying the alarm. Steven's father quipped that maybe God was trying to tell them something--namely that they shouldn't eat pork. The rest of the family shrugged off the remark as a joke and the culinary experiments continued. Still, whenever pork was cooked, the alarm sounded. Eventually, Steven's father took the obvious solution. He got rid of the smoke alarm!

Of course, removing the smoke alarm didn't solve the problem. In fact, it heightened the potential for danger. They had merely disarmed the warning in an effort to deny the problem.

That is the way many of us choose to deal with the problem of our sin. We might refuse to acknowledge there is such a thing as sin--and we especially deny our own sins. The very word "sin" often makes us uncomfortable. Maybe because we like to think of ourselves as "modern, rational twentieth-century people" who have no need for such "archaic" concepts. Or maybe we don't like to acknowledge the problem of sin because we are not certain there is a solution. If we hear sounds that indicate we're erring, many of us would rather not heed the warning.

One warning sign is the shofar blast on Rosh Hashanah, calling our people to repentance. Too often we choose to weaken the significance of this liturgical alarm. We avoid the unpleasant aspects of its meaning, often treating sin and repentance as some sort of ancient side issue. By redefining, reorienting and revising the revealed message we make it more agreeable to ourselves.

Origin of Sin

The Hebrew Scriptures often refer to sin, yet do not explain or define it. Presumably the Bible reader already knows that there is a difference between right and wrong. God did provide a set of do's and don'ts (murder, for example, is a don't). But the sin problem goes much deeper than merely obeying or disobeying the rules.

God is continually showing us through the Scriptures that we have a choice: we can go his way or our way. Loving God means choosing his way. The other direction includes endless opportunities to serve self.

Ultimately, sin is linked with the disposition of the heart--a disposition to go our own way rather than God's way. Pharaoh exemplifies the hardened heart that rejects and rebels against the living God. The heart is often described as being in need of repair or replacement due to damage caused by sin. The



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prophets used the term "uncircumcised hearts" to describe people who were not obedient to God. The prophet Jeremiah records God as saying,

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

It is difficult to deny the truth of this pronouncement. Few people would argue against the existence of sin. But the question of how and why sin entered the world often takes center stage in "Jewish-Christian" debate. Jewish scholars are quick to point out major differences in the Jewish and Christian views of sin's origin. Christian teaching states that when Adam and Eve sinned, all the human race was infected with a sin nature.

Traditional Jewish thought not only disagrees with this view, but often cites the rejection of that doctrine as characteristic of Jewish belief:

No more abhorrent doctrine than original depravity has ever been conceived. It is completely alien to Jewish thought and to the Bible, even though Christians use the Garden parable to give it divine sanction. ¹

However, many would be surprised to discover that the concept of "original sin" is found in ancient Jewish documents. Samuel Cohon, former professor of theology and liturgy at Hebrew Union College, explained the changing nature of Jewish views of sin in the early centuries:

About the time of the beginning of Christianity three main conceptions of sin struggled for recognition in Judaism. The first regarded corruption of the race as hereditary. The second vaguely asserted a connection between Adam's sin and his posterity's liability to punishment, without defining the exact nature of the connection. The third view considered all sin as the fruit of man's own action. ²

As the early followers of Jesus continued holding to a traditional view of sin as linked to Adam, the rabbinical authorities put more emphasis on sin as exclusively the result of our own actions. Perhaps it is because followers of Jesus regarded sin as universal contamination that the rabbis disclaimed and spoke strongly against it. Today, Christians still teach that sinful actions stem from a sin nature. The rabbis seem to teach that the condition of sin is subsequent to an act of sin. The Bible seems to indicate that we commit sin because we are sinners.

Cohon continued to describe rabbinical views of sin in the following centuries saying that they "...have the character of random, informal and private opinions without any dogmatic import whatever." ³

The most common of these opinions is that of the yetzer ha tov and the yetzer ha ra (the good inclination and the evil inclination). This concept states that we have potential for both good and evil and that it is up to us to choose. However, this view is often expressed more as a tip of the hat to Jewish

¹ Fisher, V., *American Zionist*, Nov. 5, 1953, p. 14.

² Cohon, Samuel, *Essays in Jewish Theology* (Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 1987), p. 240.

³ *Ibid.* p. 240.



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folklore than as a true problem in need of a solution. Like the "evil eye," it is part of our tradition, not part of our present reality.

Many views of sin that are espoused by the Jewish community today often parallel non-Jewish thought, whether inspired by psychology or the many variations of New Age religion or philosophy. The former seeks to shift the blame while the latter denies the problem. (In New Age thought we are all part of God, rather than the biblical view of a Creator separate from his creation.)

Reality of Sin

The nature of good and evil has been discussed and debated since the dawn of philosophy. In our time the notion of evil is often explained away or relabeled. Allan Bloom, in his book, *Closing of the American Mind*, recognized this tendency among modern American university students. When asked who they thought was evil, their only response was Adolph Hitler. Bloom remarked:

They have no idea of evil; they doubt its existence. Hitler is just another abstraction, an item to fill up an empty category. Although they live in a world in which the most terrible deeds are being performed and they see brutal crime in the streets, they turn aside. Perhaps they believe that evil deeds are performed by persons who, if they got the proper therapy, would not do them again--that there are evil deeds, not evil people. There is no inferno in this comedy. ⁴

It is easy to recognize sins of the very sinful; murderers, rapists and child molesters immediately come to mind. These acts remain distant from us, usually foreign in our own experiences. The evening news presents us with radical examples of sin, causing us to wonder how and why such evil still exists "in this day and age." But what does "this age" have to do with anything? Our age of advanced technology has not found a way to deal with the age-old problems of the human heart. Bigotry, hatred and greed still abound.

The political process also offers us a unique glimpse into the human condition. No candidate ever comes through the mudslinging sessions without ending up all muddied. Even the best are less than spotless. Dirt is always disclosed to reveal the "true identity" of the opponent. It then becomes our choice of the lesser of two evils. Does the political process create their problems, or does it merely spotlight the imperfections? What it is that gets "brought out," anyhow? Where does it come from, and why do we spend so much time denying it, covering it up or accusing others of having more of it than we do?

A few decades ago the bestseller *I'm OK, You're OK* helped change our thinking about the nature of our own humanness. Our imperfections were dismissed because they were seen as "only human." But that is the very problem that should not have been dismissed. Psychologists today have begun to acknowledge this. "Twelve-Step" programs and other self-help groups abound. Surely, we are not all okay--we have seen the enemy and it is us.

What about the people who do not commit the "big" sins, who are not in the political or social spotlight and who do not even come from "dysfunctional" families? In the eyes of the larger community they are

⁴ Bloom, Allan, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1987), p. 67.



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okay, perhaps even righteous. But the most dangerous sins are the ones that are unseen by others, the ones that fester in our hearts, for which we remain unrepentant.

All "okay, nice and righteous" people fall into this category. It may involve the choices made to protect our egos even at the expense of others. Or it may involve our desire to have our own needs met on demand as if we deserve something in this life. It might also come about as we defame or judge others, as if we ourselves are in a position to judge. Some of us might take credit for good deeds or talents given by God as though we deserve glory and God doesn't. And what about the "little white lies," as well as the not-so-little ones? Which person does not decide that his or her way of following God (or not following God) is acceptable or good enough in their own sight? All of these are subtle ways of saying to God, "My will, not your will be done!"

We all experience and understand that sin is a problem whether or not we deny it, relabel it, or disagree on its point of origin. This is a reality we all must face. God sent the Hebrew prophets to hold a mirror that shows us as we are, as well as how we act. God's message was and is, "I'm OK, you're not!"

Consequences of Sin

A sign in the dentist's office read, "You don't have to floss all of your teeth, only the ones you want to keep." That dentist knew how to communicate. He proclaimed the problem, the consequences and the solution all at once! Such was the message of the prophets of old. They proclaimed a startling message in hopes that we would face our problem and respond rightly.

The consequences of our sin are both immediate and eternal. God declared through the prophet Isaiah: But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear. (Isaiah 59:2)

Separation and alienation from God hinder our communication with him. It is like shouting across the ocean to a friend on the next continent. Sincerity and vocal magnitude are inadequate. In such a case, perhaps a telephone is needed to bridge the gap--not just any telephone, but one that will have no static on the line. In the same way, our sins are the static that keeps us disconnected--separated--from God.

Modern Jewish views on the eternal consequences of sin vary. Many believe that all Jewish people--by virtue of birthright--have a place in the world to come. Others are convinced that only our time here on earth is relevant, and that we are responsible for creating our own heaven and hell now. Still others see the whole notion of judgment as archaic, having no relevance in modern society.

Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles" does not mention sin specifically, but it does comment on the results of our disobedience to God. The eleventh principle states:

I believe with perfect faith that God rewards those who fulfill the commandments of the Torah, and punishes those who transgress them.

Solution to Sin



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In the Chumash, the solution to sin is clearly spelled out in the regulations regarding Yom Kippur. First, the High Priest slaughtered a bull for his own atonement. Then he interceded, making atonement on behalf of the children of Israel. One goat was killed as a substitute for them. Its life was given in place of their sin-tainted lives. Later, a second goat, called the azazel (scapegoat), was chased into the wilderness to symbolize our sins being put far away from us.

A Jewish commentary on the sacrificial system explains its importance:

*The sacrifice substituted for an individual human life or for the lives of the members of the community in situations where God could have exacted the life of the offender, or of anyone else, for that matter. Indeed, all who stood in God's immediate presence risked becoming the object of divine wrath. But substitution could avert the danger, with sacrificial blood being especially instrumental because it was the symbol of life.*⁵

The observance of Yom Kippur was given by God as a solution to a problem. In 70 CE, the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans, thus ending the era of substitutionary atonement.

Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai and his colleagues devised another plan for the Day of Atonement at that time. They stated that in the absence of the Temple, fasting and prayer would become the means of atonement. Our people have followed that plan for centuries, even to this day, yet the inner renewal the day was to bring eludes us. We ignore, redefine and even feel embarrassed about the issue of sin.

There are modern theories of t'shuva (repentance) but they are offered only to those who choose to be religious, as if it is a choice of lifestyle rather than a problem that is pressing and immediate before God. The message seems to be, "just do the best you can and make the right choices."

Unfortunately, our propensity to call wrong choices and actions "right" causes most of our problems in the first place! We have come a long way from the detailed, precise regulations of the Temple's sacrificial system. Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai and his colleagues did their best to provide an alternative in the absence of the Temple. But they did not take into account that inherent in the sacrificial system was the belief that someone else would do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Only a few decades before the Temple's destruction, another Jewish man named Yochannon offered a different solution to the sin problem. One day he saw Y'shua (Jesus) by the Jordan River. Pointing him out to the crowd he declared, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

If the substitutionary solution of Jesus seems foreign, perhaps it is because we have lost sight of the reality and seriousness of the issue of sin. But God's character has not changed, nor have we evolved beyond the same old problems that our forefathers knew. And God has not left us without an operator to remove our static and make the connection:

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Messiah Y'shua our Lord. --
Romans 6:23*

⁵ Levine, Baruch A., *The JPS Torah Commentary, Leviticus* (Philadelphia, JPS, 1989), commentary on Leviticus 17:11.1, p. 115.



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