

## What is “Sin”?

**Adin Steinsaltz, “Sin”** (in *Contemporary Jewish Thought*, eds. Cohen and Mendes-Flohr; adapted)

The Hebrew language, in both biblical and post-biblical literature, has numerous names for the concept of sin, each with its own unique sense and shade of meaning. Moreover, from the books of the Bible—especially the prophets—to the latter-day homiletic writings, Jewish literature is filled with reproachful discourses inveighing against all manner of sins.

Nevertheless, the concept of sin in and of itself is never fully developed or clarified in Judaism. Despite the existence of so many definitions of an endless variety of sin, and despite the stern reproof voiced against sin and sinners, concern with sin itself occupies an insignificant place in Jewish thought. The problem of sin is, in effect, treated as a secondary issue. Sin is viewed as a correlate of *mitzvah*; it is treated not as a separate, independent entity but rather as a shadow-essence or even, at times, a reverse image of *mitzvah*. The concept of sin and the attitude taken toward it thus stem directly from how *mitzvah* is understood...

One conception of *mitzvah* sees its principal significance in the divine command. The performance of a *mitzvah* is essentially an act of obedience, through which [a person] approaches God by accepting the yoke of heaven, the supernal discipline. **Sin, from this point of view, is thus primarily an act (by deed or default) of rebellion...** Another understanding of *mitzvah* conceives of it as the right way, the straight and good path. The commandments...are viewed as God’s good counsel for humanity, God’s revelation of the true path that it is natural and right for humanity to follow as we make our way through life. **Sin, then, is conceived as a straying or deviation from this natural path...**

Another conception views the *mitzvah* essentially as an act of rectification or completion. The world is not a fully perfect entity, and the task of the *mitzvah* is to bring about the perfection that is lacking. **Sin, then, is essentially the want of something, a defect in reality; if a sin is one of default, it consists of a failure to rectify some aspect of the world or of humanity, while if it is one of deed, the sinner has added to the imperfection of reality...**

### **Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:3**

A person should not think that *teshuvah* is only necessary for those transgressions that involve action, such as lewdness, robbery, or theft. Rather, just as a person must turn from these, so must s/he search after those negative thoughts/traits that s/he has, and turn from anger, hatred, jealousy, ridicule, from pursuit of money and honor, from pursuit of food and the like—from all these s/he must turn in *teshuvah*. These sins are more difficult than those that involve action. If a person is attached to/absorbed in these, it is difficult to separate from them. And so it says, *May the wicked abandon his path, and the sinful person his thoughts* (Isaiah 55:7).

### **Midrash, Leviticus Rabah 3:3**

*May the wicked abandon his path, and the sinful person his thoughts, and let him return to Adonai, Who will have compassion on him; to our God, Who is abundant in forgiveness (Isaiah 55:7):* Rabbi Bavai bar Avina said: How should a person confess on erev Yom Kippur? S/he should say: “I acknowledge all of the bad that I have done before You. I have stood on the path of the bad, and as for all that I have done, I shall not do it any longer. May it be Your will, Adonai my God, to forgive me for all my sins, and pardon me for all my transgressions, and grant me atonement for all my *chattaim*,” as it is written, *May the wicked abandon his path, and the sinful person his thoughts, and let him return to Adonai, Who will have compassion on him; to our God, Who is abundant in forgiveness.* Rabbi Yitzchak said: Like a person who fits together two boards, and attaches one to the other. Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina said: Like a person who fits together two bed-legs and attaches one to the other—“*and let him return to Adonai, Who will have compassion on him.*”

### **Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion**

In all of conceptions of sin and atonement described above, sin involves a disturbance in the relation between humanity and God, and atonement implies the poise, solace and encouragement that come with the sense of a restoration to a better relationship. From the point of view of ethical religion, the same remains true. *If we identify God with that aspect of reality which confers meaning and value on life and elicits from us those ideals that determine the course of human progress, then the failure to live up to the best that is in us means that our souls are not attuned to the divine, that we have betrayed God.*

### **Sheila Peltz Weinberg (commentary from the Kol Haneshama machzor)**

[Most] of the *hata'im* derive from forgetting our connection to the whole. We imagine that we can act as if there were no consequences, as if we were loose limbs and eyes and mouths divorced from a larger body, the body of our fellow human beings, the body of organic life on earth, the body of all life. Most *hata'im* derive from our separation and isolation from past and future. Most *hata'im* spring from the illusion of separateness. We think we can get away with it. But there is no getting away. There is no forgetfulness. All is remembered. All is related.

### **The vocabulary of “sin”:**

**Chata** - root חטח

– miss (a goal or way), go wrong, commit a mistake; miss the mark

**Avon** – root און – iniquity, guilt; related to Arabic for “err from the way”

**Pesha** – root פשע – rebel, transgress (against people or God)

**Avera** - root אבר - pass over, through, by; transgress, overstep