

## COMMUNICATIONS

### MAIMONIDES AND JAMES

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

In the first issue of *TRADITION* (Fall, 1958) there appears an article by Rabbi Howard Levine on "The Experience of Repentance" in which the views of Maimonides and William James are compared, analyzed, and shown to be reflections of their respective world views. I wish to take issue with the premises underlying Rabbi Levine's statement of the problem, as I feel they can be shown to be highly questionable.

Rabbi Levine's entire essay is based upon the assumption that conversion and repentance are different names for the same type of experience whose subjective processes, however, differ because of their diverse theological orientations. After having set up the straw man, Rabbi Levine proceeds to demolish it, delivering the *coup de grace* with the discovery that the terms actually mean different things—

that man has to turn back . . . *conversion* implies that he must experience a radical change of nature" (p. 61). If this insight had been introduced on page 40, I believe a simpler and much more plausible thesis might have suggested itself. Perhaps *teshuvah* and conversion *mean* different things because they *are* different things! Indeed, I submit that *teshuvah* and conversion are radically different experiences by their very nature. The differences noted by Rabbi Levine are partially correct but secondary to their more basic dissimilitude of the experiences themselves.

The uniqueness of Judaism lies not so much in Maimonides' emphasis of self-will but in the entire concept of *teshuvah* itself—a turning back to God which can be experienced only by a Jew, a member of an historic community whose soul was also present at Sinai and who, therefore, in spite of the most grievous of sins and estrangement

"*Teshuvah*, meaning return, implies need only turn back to his tradition and his God. Non-Jewish conversion cannot even begin to approximate the quality of this experience. Rabbi Levine makes the interesting observation that "only in the case of the conversion of a non-Jew to the Jewish faith does Judaism apply the notion of a new birth" (p. 61). Now, here and here alone would a comparative psychological analysis be legitimate. If anything, Maimonides' section on *Gerim* (proselytes) rather than the *Hilkhot Teshuvah* should have been the point of comparison with William James. The radical difference between repentance and conversion was seen thus by Martin Buber: "Israel arose from the conclusion of a covenant between them and their God . . . and from migrations experienced as guided by God. The individual finds himself within the objective race memory of such guidance and of such a covenant. His faith is a perseverance in trust in the guiding and covenanting God." Thus repentance is a return to such perseverance. Christianity, however, has a completely different approach. "The summons of Jesus to turn into the Kingship of God . . . was transformed into the act of conversion . . . salvation is offered only if he will believe that it has happened and has happened in this way. This is not a matter of persisting—but in its opposite, the turning about. To the one to be converted comes the demand and the instruction to believe that which he is not able to believe as a continuation of his former beliefs" (*Two Types of Faith*, p. 10).

This helps explain the very curious fact that according to Maimonides the obligation to repent is not included among the actual *mitzvot*. When a man repents, says Maimonides, he must confess his sins. This confession (*viduy*) appears to be the *mitzvah*, not the initial act of repentance itself. Perhaps the explanation is this — although a Jew has sinned, insofar as his future conduct is concerned he is in no way different from any other Jew. Both carry the Sinaitic obligation to persist in their faith and obey the Torah. The only special obligation which the sinner as such incurs is to seek expiation for his past sins. Hence, the *mitzvah* of *viduy*.

This fundamental difference between repentance and conversion has also been described in terms of the different functions of Judaism and Christianity. The nature of Christian conversion is such because "it seeks the creation of a charisma—a divine transforming power in man so that the pagan may be wrenched out of his pagan heritage" [M. Harris, "Two Ways: Halakhah and Charisma," *Judaism* (January, 1952).] Jewish repentance, not having this function, is therefore less traumatic.

Rabbi Levine's second premise is that in view of the dearth of autobiographical material bearing on Jewish religious experience, "the formulations of the Halakhah and the Agadah must and can serve as trustworthy reflections of the Jewish experience" (p. 42). I feel such an approach to Halakhah is unwarranted and unwise.

James, as a psychologist, is primarily interested in the highly sub-

jective, inner workings of the religious experience. Is Halakhah designed to catch and reflect the subject experience? Rabbi Levine himself states that Maimonides' genius was to "discover the universal character of repentance and abstract it from the particulars." If so, one would hardly expect it to retain any of the subjective feelings or personal impressions of the penitent. However, a more basic objection is the consideration that Halakhah is normative and not descriptive. Halakhah, with its roots in the Torah, gives us the divine requirements of an act rather than reflect anyone's personal experience. The subjective form these requirements may take and the psychological phenomenon which may or may not accompany them is a matter of empirical research. For a reflection of the Jewish experience, one must interview the penitent, the *Ba'al Teshuvah*. Is Rabbi Levine prepared to state that from the Jewish point of view an exhaustive description of the Jew's relations to his parents is completely contained in the emotions "respect" and "fear" because nothing else is reported in the Halakhah?

Furthermore, such an approach is unwise because it commits Judaism to a specific subjective experience of repentance. If a *Ba'al Teshuvah* reports "the invasion of a higher power" to which he promptly responds with "self surrender"—are we to consider his experience inauthentic and his repentance invalid? Rabbi Levine himself has suggested that Maimonides abstracted from the rich and variegated subjective experience of

the penitent the basic, minimal points required by the Torah: remorse, confession, and resolve. This is merely the skeletal outline. The flesh and sinew of the Jewish experience of repentance is the personal matter of every *Ba'al Teshuvah* to whose memory or memoirs the psychologist must have recourse.

I would not be at all surprised if such a study does indeed report experiences of "help by a higher power" and "self surrender." I fail to understand why Rabbi Levine should assume that the easy rationalism of Maimonides or Saadia exhausts the rich mine of Jewish thinking. The Talmud tells us: "He who comes to be purified will be helped" (*Sab.* 104). And again, Man is told: "Open for me a door the size of a needle and I will broaden it so that carriages can go through" (*Ber.* 34). Among the steps involved in repentance, Rabbi Jonah Gerondi lists the following: "Also the penitent should constantly pray to God that He should help him to repent."

Of course, man's free will and self-will are fundamental to Judaism. But this does not exclude the possibility that after man initiates the process, he is helped from above. If repentance is a narrow intellectual process only, then indeed it becomes awkward to find a place for God's assistance. If however, as is evident from the Bible's entire approach, repentance is a turning of the whole man involving will and the subjugation of rebellious instincts, then indeed the need and the place for divine assistance can be found. "Man's evil inclination renews itself against him

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each day and were it not for the Almighty who helps him, man could not overcome it" (*Suk.* 52).

There is an interesting account of the act of faith in Abarbanel's *Rosh Emanah* in which he states that man's volition is involved in the initial preparatory steps leading to faith. After that point, however, the actual birth of the believing state of mind comes by itself, as a consequence of the preparations. The expression of "self surrender," therefore, may not be completely out of place to describe man's attitude in the final hours of his spiritual journey.

Finally, some of Rabbi Levine's illustrations seem to me to be somewhat misapplied. The personal history of Rabbi Akiva is offered as an illustration of a "conversion" brought about by a new confidence in one's spiritual intellectual powers. Yet the transformation recorded here is from "Ignorant Shepherd" to "Outstanding Sage." It does not involve an "Augustinian" conversion from the abyss of pagan immorality and disbelief to religious faith. We have no reason to doubt that, even as a shepherd, Rabbi Akiva believed in and feared the Lord. Small wonder, then, that all that is involved here is a "drive for self-realization."

Again, to illustrate the point that intellectual awareness is the basis of conversion, Rabbi Levine quotes the Midrash which concludes that "because Abraham asked: is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?" the Lord appeared to him. Yet I wonder whether the Midrash really points to a "process of reasoning" from palace to Owner, from world to Guide, from

creation to Creator—in short, the cosmological proof for the existence of God. We would be making of Abraham a scholastic or at least an Aristotelian Greek.

In the original parable we read that "the man saw a palace in flames." Why is this necessary? If all that is involved here is the cosmological argument, then it is sufficient that the man see a palace. I believe it is because the Midrash implies not a process of reasoning but a moral passion. Even Terah and his contemporaries knew that the palace must have an owner. But only Abraham possessed the moral sensitivity to be outraged by a palace in flames, by a world gone awry in its immorality and estrangement from God. Only Abraham was torn by the paradox that the palace must have an owner who is concerned, and yet why does he not appear if his palace is burning?—as Abraham was later to exclaim, "will the Judge of all the world not do justice?" The Midrash describes not what brought about Abraham's conversion but what merited him the vision and appearance of God; not reasoning but moral anguish. The Greek mind may have been impressed by the cosmos, but Abraham the Hebrew was outraged by a cosmos in flames.

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RABBI LEVINE REPLIES:

I find Rabbi Spero's comments on the theme of my article, for the most part, both valid and relevant. Unfortunately, however, I cannot find valid points that are relevant or relevant points that are valid.

1. The point is raised that *Teshuvah* and conversion are "radically different experiences by their very nature."

The fundamental meaning of the term "conversion" seems to be misunderstood. It is not taken in the narrow sense of an "Augustinian conversion from the abyss of pagan immorality and disbelief to religious faith." It is rather the radical change in the way of life of an individual, such as a change from the dissolute life of a drunkard to that of a responsible person striving towards worthwhile goals. As James points out (p. 200), these conversions sometimes do not involve any theology at all. The title of my article is neither Conversion nor *Teshuvah*; it is the *Experience of Repentance*. We are interested primarily in the psycho-dynamics of the change. We are concerned with theology only inasmuch as it bears on the psychological process. The vast difference in theological approach in itself does not throw light on our problem.

2. Consequently, the "objective race memory" of the Covenant does not relate immediately to our subject. Admitting that Jews are especially granted the gift of Faith, we do not thereby understand the immediate psychological process that brings about the change in the actual behavior of the *Baal Teshuvah*. To bear the Sinaitic obligation and to fulfill it are two completely different things, at least as far as empirical observation of humans in action would indicate.

As I write on pp. 54 and 55, "Not the gift of faith but the will for faith brings about repentance. . . . All Jews are presumed to

have faith and are tested mainly in their willingness to live up to the implications of this faith. . . . Thus Maimonides does not see the importance of emphasizing faith for the repentant person as much as sheer will power and strength of character." In this light, the quotation from Abarbanel bearing on the attaining of faith is irrelevant to our discussion.

Moreover, Rabbi Spero's quotation from Martin Buber is most unhappy. How can one seek to understand the *Baal Teshuvah*, who in our sense is a Jew observant of *mitzvot*, from Buber's description of Israel's faith as "perseverance in trust in the guiding and covenanting God," when for Buber this faith does not involve a commitment to Halakhah and *mitzvot maasiyot*?

3. The point is further raised that my illustration from the life of Rabbi Akiva is misapplied. "We have no reason to doubt that even as a shepherd Rabbi Akiva believed in and feared the Lord."

Again the main point is missed. *Teshuvah* does not mean gaining a new religion, nor does conversion have this meaning, as we explained above. There is no doubt that Rabbi Akiva did experience a radical change in his way of life and system of values. Thus the Talmud (*Pes. 49b*) records that R. Akiva said: "when I was an *Am ha-Aretz* (ignoramus) I was wont to say 'Would that a *Talmid Chakham* (disciple of the wise) would fall in my hands and I would bite him as the donkey bites.'" The view of the *Talmid Chakham* toward the *Am ha-Aretz* (*ad locum*) is not much kinder. "A man should not

marry the daughter of an *Am ha-Aretz* because they are disgusting, their wives are likened to crawling creatures, and of their daughters it is written 'Cursed is he who lies with an animal.' While the view of our Sages certainly has softened in time, we must understand Rabbi Akiva's life in terms of his historic period wherein his transformation from the ignoramus to Sage was unquestionably one of a radical nature.

4. The statement is made that "*Teshuvah* . . . a turning back to God . . . can be experienced only by a Jew."

The Book of Jonah read on Yom Kippur, the day of repentance par excellence, belies this assumption. Nineveh was a non-Jewish city, yet Jonah was summoned to call its people to repentance, was punished for trying to evade his calling, and finally went and succeeded in turning the people back to God. Does not Rabbi Spero believe that all men were created in the Image of God and all men were commanded the seven laws of the sons of Noah? One must take a dismal view of the world to be bound by the premise that the non-Jew cannot turn back to God. Such a view contradicts the authentic Jewish one that "All people will acknowledge that God is One and His name One."

5. As refutation of Maimonides, the talmudic statement is quoted: "He who comes to be purified will be helped."

First, even if statements in the Talmud can be found which contradict the view of Maimonides, they are not immediately relevant to my paper which is a comparative study of *Maimonides* and James.

Second, I am amazed that Rabbi Spero quotes in refutation of Maimonides the very passage which Maimonides took pains to explain in his Laws of Repentance and which is largely quoted in my article on p. 53: "For it is characteristic of every human being that, when his interest is engaged in the ways of wisdom and righteousness, he longs for these ways and is eager to follow them." The very next words in Maimonides (*Hil. Teshuvah* 6:5), following upon this passage I quoted, are: "Thus have our sages declared: he who comes to be purified will be helped; that is, he will find himself aided in that direction."

Nor is the quotation that the "evil inclination renews itself. . . each day" more to the point. If anything, it proves too much. The divine help here is not an extraordinary intervention or incursion into the affairs of man. Man hears no voices, sees no visions, nor is there any mention of self-surrender to a Higher Power. The mere fact that it is "every day" would tend to support our view that divine aid is rendered in the form of universal life processes.

6. I rather like Rabbi Spero's interpretation of the Midrash about Abraham and the palace in flames. He is guilty, however, of the fallacy of reduction. When I say the Midrash implies a process of reasoning, an argument from design if you will, it does not follow that it contains only that element. Nor does it follow that because it implies a moral passion and concern that it does not also imply a process of reasoning. There is no reason to suppose that rational people are

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incapable of experiencing moral passion.

It simply is not true that "even Terah and his contemporaries knew that the palace must have an owner." The polytheistic idol-worshipping Terah certainly did not know that such is the case. He did not have the conception of the universe as a unitary, ordered creation or entity. A. N. Whitehead writing in his *Science and the Modern World* on the faith in rationality, states (p. 18): "In Asia, the conceptions of God were of a Being who was either too arbitrary or too impersonal for such ideas to have much effect on instinctive habits of mind. Any definite occurrence might be due to the fiat of an irrational despot, or might issue from some impersonal, inscrutable origin of things. There was not the same confidence as in the intelligible rationality of a personal being."

It was the unique contribution of the Monotheism taught by Abraham that gave birth to the scientific conception of an ordered universe as well as the moral concern for it.

I suspect that Rabbi Spero's apparent strong bias against rationalism is misleading him. In this connection, the teaching of the *Sefer ha-Chinukh* is quite enlightening when he states (No. 253) as a reason for the prohibition of magic and witchcraft, that he who is led to confusion about the natural order of things will not properly appreciate the miracles recorded in the Torah and will thereby fall prey to disbelief in true religion. In other words, one cannot properly appreciate the *supernatural* when he is entirely lacking in the concept of the *natural* order of things.

Incidentally, I would not hasten to describe the complex and varied thought of Maimonides as "easy rationalism." If rationalism it is, easy it is not. Its rigorous demands are strenuous indeed. Nor would I express such disdain for understanding causal relations in the world in which we live and in which we must learn to operate even for moral and spiritual ends.

7. I cannot agree that Halakhah is as remote from human experience and as divorced from life as Rabbi Spero would have us believe. The "divine requirements of an act" do reflect human experience, for what are the numerous *gezerot* and *takkanot* (rabbinic enactments) if not a reflection of human experience and needs? How can one explain in any other fashion the enactment of our Rabbis that a stolen beam built into a house need not be returned intact out of consideration of human weakness and the need to encourage the penitent in his *teshuvah*, as the Talmud (*Gittin* 55a) records?

If Halakhah is normative, then of necessity it is also descriptive of the experience of a religious person. If the Halakhah teaches us what emotion we should experience, then we can and will experience this feeling as we live up to the demands of the Torah. If, for example, the Halakhah and Agadah teach us that we should be inspired by love rather than fear in the experience of repentance, then we can experience this feeling, and precisely this emotion would describe and characterize the true *Baal Teshuvah*. Halakhah would be cold and bare indeed if "the

flesh and sinew of the Jewish experience of repentance is the personal matter of every *Baal Teshuvah*" and his psychologist.

Yes, I also believe that a good description of a Jew's relations to his parents is contained in the Halakhah and Agadah which go far beyond the bare words "respect and fear" and are dealt with extensively in the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 30b ff.) and elsewhere.

I fail entirely to see how a true belief in Torah can allow the severance of the vital connection between the imperatives of Torah and the inner life of man. Is religion a matter of externals only? Can it be that we are commanded concerning the motions of our external organs and we are not commanded as to the activities of our highest faculties, our thoughts and feelings, as R. Bachya argues in the introduction to his *Duties of the Heart*?

8. Finally, I must take exception to Rabbi Spero's espousal of the experience of self-surrender in repentance "to describe man's attitude in the final hours of his spiritual journey."

There are no "final hours" in our spiritual journey, as I take pains to show on p. 62 of my article. "Judaism always sees man as standing in the dynamic relationship of inner tension with himself. . . . Thus the Talmud declares: "The disciples of the wise have no respite either in this world or in the

World-to-Come. . . . Each increase of virtue brings an increase of challenge to the individual.'"

Note the incongruity. Rabbi Spero begins by saying that *teshuvah* and Conversion are "radically different experiences by their very nature" and ends by maintaining that they are similar in their psychological aspect of self-surrender; whereas he objects to my viewing the two as sharing common features, though I conclude with their significant differences.

In conclusion, I do not believe that escape from the responsibility of intelligence, courage, and steadfastness into a hazy world of "objective race memory" and self-surrender represents a contribution to Jewish religious living or thinking.

#### BLENDING WHISKEY

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:  
I have followed most carefully Rabbi Hyman Tuchman's "Review of Halakhic Literature." Recognizing the limitation of space, I wish to point out that the reviewer did not state all the salient points for my permitting the use of blended whiskey. May I call the attention of the readers of *TRADITION* to the academic correspondence quoted in *Ha-darom*, Nissan 5719 issue, pages 117-122, with full talmudic references. The clarity of the issue will be fully revealed therein.

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