

The following segments from Rav Kook's classic *Orot ha-Teshuvah* have been selected and translated by Rabbi Alter B. Z. Metzger in the hope that they may afford a glimpse into the religio-psychological perspective of one of the most creative Jewish thinkers of the modern era. Rabbi Metzger's explanatory notes may eliminate some of the difficulties which the reader is bound to encounter in the attempt to grasp the doctrines of this extra-ordinary Talmudist-philosopher-poet-mystic.

## RABBI KOOK: THE NATURE OF THE SOUL

Repentance is the healthiest experience of the soul. A healthy soul in a healthy body must inevitably come into the great happiness of repentance, and the soul feels therein the greatest natural pleasure. The casting out of the harmful substances exerts its virtuous and healthful effect upon the body, when the body is perfect in its character; and the spiritual voiding of every evil deed and all the evil and corrupt impressions caused thereby, of every evil thought, of every withdrawal from emanant Godliness in general (lack of which is the basis of all evil), the casting out of all coarseness and ugliness — all this must inevitably come when the organ is healthy both in terms of its spiritual and material aspects.

Corresponding to every segment of abomination which departs from the soul of man by means of his inner assent to the light of repentance, there are revealed within the soul complete worlds in their exalted clarity. Every passing of sin is comparable to the removal of an obstructing object from the perceiving eye, and a complete horizon of vision is revealed, a light of the vast heavens and earth and all that is therein.

The world must inevitably come to perfect repentance. The world is not a stationary entity; rather, it proceeds and develops; true perfect development will inevitably bring to the world perfect well-being both material and spiritual. And this development will also bring with it the light of repentant life.

The spirit of repentance hovers over the world giving it its primary character and also impelling it toward its development; with the scent of its fragrances, it refines the world and gives it all of the world's distinctive beauty and splendor.

The obstinacy of remaining constantly with one opinion and being sustained thereby in the bonds of sin that have become custom, either in actions, or in thoughts, is an illness that comes from descent into oppressive enslavement which does not permit the light of repentance's freedom to illumine with the power of its strength; for repentance strives toward original true freedom which is the Godly freedom completely devoid of enslavement.

Without the thought of repentance with its tranquility and assurance, a man would be unable to find rest, and spiritual life could not develop in the world. The ethical sense demands of man righteousness and virtue — perfection. How remote from man is the realization of ethical perfection in terms of actuality? How frail is his ability to make his deeds correspond to the purity of the ideal of absolute righteousness? How shall he strive for that which is not all within the realm of his ability? Repentance is natural to man and causes him perfection . . . The primary basis of perfection is the yearning and the enduring desire for perfection. This desire itself is the basis of repentance which constantly triumphs over his way of life and truly causes him perfection.

#### ANXIETY AND THE SOUL

The great pains which grip the soul because of the thought of repentance, though they appear at times to arise from out of fear of punishment, are actually nothing but essential suffer-

ing. The soul is seared by them because sin causes it pain; sin is contrary to the soul's conditions of life. These sufferings in themselves cleanse the soul. The man who has an inner awareness of the beneficent treasure, which resides within these sufferings, accepts them with absolute love, and his mind achieves tranquility in them. He thus ascends to many levels and his learning remains with him; his inner character is perfected, and the impressions made upon him by his iniquities are erased. They are transformed into virtuous manifestations from which there emerges a soulful splendor.

Iniquities are the essence of sorrow, and when the soul is purified and senses the essence of iniquity, the sorrow of repentance prevails upon the soul, and there burns within its heart the flame of remorse, shame and awesome fear. This in itself causes the cleansing of the soul, which after the passing of wrath is able to return to its own strength, to stand in its honor and essential worth.

One must be on guard against melancholy, but not to so great a degree as to restrain the light of repentance from piercing to the depth of the soul. Melancholy spreads as a malignant disease to the whole body and soul, because sin pains the heart and causes melancholy to acquire permanence over the searing bitterness of flaming repentance; though repentance is possessed of melancholy aspects, they are as a purifying flame, purging the soul, strengthening it upon the basis of natural constant joyousness appropriate to the soul.

Every sin imposes separate anxiety upon the soul, which can be expelled only by means of repentance. Commensurate with depth of repentance, the anxiety itself is transformed into faith and courageousness . . . The despair that occurs within the heart, in itself, is indicative of an inner sensitive self-reproach, which flows forth from an exalted awareness of ethics and sanctity. It is, therefore, appropriate that despair itself should strengthen the heart of man, not to be afraid of returning from all sin with repentance, tranquility and spiritual courage.

When the thought occurs to man to return in perfect repentance, and to rectify all his actions and emotions — even in thought alone — let him not become despondent because of

anxiety over his many iniquities, which he now senses to a greater extent. For this is the nature of the matter: as long as man is pursued by the wrath of coarse habits and the darkness of evil qualities which surround him, he does not fully sense his sins. At times he does not sense them at all. Thus he is righteous in his own eyes. However, when his inner ethical faculty is awakened, the light of the soul is immediately revealed. It is by means of this light that he searches his entire soul, and perceives all its blemishes. His heart suffers great anxiety over his lack of perfection and the depths to which he has fallen. Specifically then he should realize that this perception and the accompanying anxiety are the best indications, for they bring him tidings of eternal salvation regarding the soul's rectification, and he should strengthen himself with this knowledge of the Lord, his God.

#### RETURN TO THE SELF

The thought of repentance constantly found in man is the basis of all virtuous qualities. The melancholy thought that arises out of profound repentance is itself the source of joy. The basic quality of repentance is the realization of the grandeur of exalted Godly perfection through which our iniquities become highly manifest.

“Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee,  
Our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance” (Psalms 90:8).

. . . When there is forgetfulness of the essential nature of the soul, when there is distraction of thought from perceiving the inner life of the self, all things become confused and in doubt. The primary repentance, which illumines the dark places immediately, is the return of man to his self, to the source of his soul. And immediately shall there be a return to God, the Soul of all souls. Man shall proceed, striding and ascending constantly in sanctity and purity . . .

## THE DESIRE FOR REPENTANCE

Repentance comes from the striving of all existence to be more virtuous and pure, stronger and more exalted than its present state. Repentance constantly abides within the heart; even at the time of sin itself, repentance is concealed within the soul, and it sends forth its rays, which are revealed afterwards at the time when there comes the cry calling to repentance. Repentance abides in the very depths of being because it preceded the world, and even prior to the occurrence of sin there awaits in readiness repentance from the sin. Therefore nothing is so assured in the world as repentance. Ultimately all things will rectify themselves, and most certainly Israel is sure and ready to repent, to come closer to the will of its origin, to actualize in life the nature of its soul, despite all the restraining iron barriers obstructing the revelation of this enduring nature.

## REPENTANCE AND THE FUTURE

The future will reveal the wonders of the might of repentance. This revelation will be of inestimable interest to the entire world greater than all the wondrous visions which are normally perceived in the vast panorama of life and existence. This new revelation will draw the heart of all in its wondrousness to such an extent as to affect all through its spirit. Then will the world arise to its true renaissance. Sin will cease, the spirit of impurity will be consumed, and all evil will pass away like smoke.

The Congregation of Israel, with its great spiritual sensitivity, is the first in the world to repent. Israel is the unique form in the world wherein there shall first be revealed the quality of repentance. It is impelled to be in harmony with the Godly light that is in the world, wherein there is no sin or iniquity.

Every withdrawal from this characteristic causes a defect in the perfection of this nation's nature. Ultimately repentance's mighty power in life will triumph over the disorder, and perfect

well-being will come to Israel. With this, its great power shall be caused to vibrate. The light of repentance will first manifest itself in Israel. Afterwards, Israel will be the unique channel bestowing the vigorous desire for refined repentance upon the entire world, to illumine the world and to exalt its state.

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CHAPTER 9

*The Value of the Will is Revealed by Means of Repentance*

I. The constancy of the thought of repentance is what establishes the character of man upon a basis of nobility. He then constantly absorbs within himself a refined spirit. Thus this thought establishes him upon the spiritual basis of life and existence.

The repentance which is constantly within the heart ascertains for man the great value of spiritual life. By virtue of the light of repentance that is constant within him the important principle that the virtuous will is everything and that all the talents in the world are naught but its fulfillment becomes a content natural to his soul. Consequently, there continuously rests upon him a great emanation of the spirit of Godliness, and a will exalted in sanctity, greater than the fixed measure of ordinary persons, becomes constantly stronger within him; and he comes to realize the true virtue of perfect achievement which

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CHAPTER 9

PARAGRAPH I. Rabbi Kook strives to clarify the function of "the will for virtue." *Ratzon* or "will" is equated with the transcendence of God in Jewish mystical literature. "Thus did it ascend in His will" is given as the reason for the creation of the world. This will for *tov* may be translated as a will for virtue or goodness. Thus the transcendent will strives for the actualization of virtue and goodness within the immanence of the world. (See *Likutei Amarim, Tanya*, Chapter 22) Man who is endowed with divine qualities also possesses the will for virtue. It is the profoundest and most inherent aspect of his personality. Injustice and evil occur only due to a defect in the will for virtue. Repentance is the process whereby man returns to his essential self. People of outstanding ethical stature or "Masters of Repentance" aid in guiding mankind toward the actualization of the will for virtue.

is reliant only upon man himself, and not upon any external condition, dependent only upon the will for goodness. This achievement is a happiness greater than all treasures and wealth; it alone can bring happiness to the world and all existence. For the will for goodness which constantly abides within the soul, transforms all of life and existence unto virtuousness, and by means of the virtuous perception, whereby he perceives the reality of existence, man affects existence and the paths of confusion in life so that they may emerge from their state of corruption; and all things blossom forth and live in happiness, as a result of the soulful wealth and contentment within the virtuous will.

This teaching that all world problems are reliant solely upon the virtuous will, is promulgated in the world by means of the "Masters of Repentance" for the content of repentance is the constant striving of their souls, thus the will proceeds to become refined and virtuous, and the world proceeds toward greater perfection.

III. Repentance brings actual healing to the entire world, the swift flow of will completes its effect by force, specifically by means of its emergence from constraint. The "Masters of Repentance" draw with exceeding power the strength of life from the source of virtue. All actions and creations are existentially united with the might of will which assumes form in man in the glory of its brightness.

IV. Despite the weakening of will which results from constant absorption with repentance, though it represents a physical and spiritual weakness, which requires remedy, nevertheless, there exists within it much refinement and nobility, which purifies the spirit and "all its transgressions shall be concealed by love."

VII. There is a fault in the character of lower repentance, in that it weakens the will of man, and thereby causes defect in his personality. This fault is corrected, when the thought of repentance comes to its fullest development. For it then is united with higher repentance, the primary intent of which is not the weakening of will and the breaking of the personal character

of man but the strengthening of the will and enhancement of the worth of his personality. Thus, intentionally evil acts are transformed into acts of merit:

“If he turns from his sin and does that which is lawful and right; upon them shall he live” (Ezekiel 33:19).

X. Every sin flows from defect in the capability of man's soul. If the soul is so weakened that it cannot stand against the inclination toward evil within it, then upon emergence to actuality, this inadequacy weakens the power of the will of virtue, and weakness of the will causes weakness of knowledge and the awareness of virtue becomes obscured. Repentance occurs after understanding, when the awareness of virtue is strengthened . . . Repentance, and all its ways of action, with the general spirit which prevails primarily during the days designated for repentance (so beneficial for the cleansing of the soul, the refinement of the spirit and the purification of deeds from their ugliness) must inevitably conceal within itself some form of weakness, from which even the most powerful cannot find refuge.

When there is constriction of will, when the power of life is inhibited due to the inner recoiling and the inclination to return from all sin, the will for virtue is also constricted, and the power of pure life is also weakened. Thus it occurs that man endures from his purification weakness comparable to that endured by a sick person who is cured by means of a strong electric charge. For though it has eliminated the virus of his illness, it has also weakened the vital and healthy power within him.

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PARAGRAPH X. This paragraph refers to the sequence of Jewish Holidays during the first month of the year, “the days designated for repentance” is a specific reference to the ten days of penitence commencing with Rosh Hashona the Jewish New Year and concluding with Yom Kippur the day of Atonement. This period is characterized by “constriction of will” and “the power of life is inhibited due to the inner recoiling and the inclination to return from all sin.” This repressive phase of repentance causes “that the will for virtue is also constricted, and the power of pure life is also weakened.” Repression is, however, a necessary preliminary experience to the higher form of repentance from joy, “thus it occurs that man endures from his purification weakness comparable to that endured by a sick person who is cured by means of a strong electric charge.” See *Tanya*, Chapter 27 for similar concepts.



CHAPTER 16

*The Inner Nature of Repentance*

II. The dark realms of existence are concealed by false fears. Their great darkness extends within the soul of the individual and society, within the soul of a world bound with conditions of oppression and statutes which restrict its true freedom. The penitent fears that his iniquities have already destroyed him and that his hope has already come to naught. He does not know that already within his fear rest concealed the lights of his deliverance. The earth also feared and did not bring forth the tree in its perfection, so that its taste would be as the taste of its fruit. The moon feared, "lest two kings conflict for one crown." Humanity is in fear because of the free, clear, exalted values. The entire world is afraid of the manifestation of the

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PARAGRAPH II. This paragraph cites two passages from the Midrash which are interpreted as symbolically implying a fear of self-realization on the part of two aspects of nature. Rabbi Kook extends this to the realm of the human with the assertion that man, too, is afraid of self-realization and actualization. The first Midrash quoted states that God commanded the earth to bring forth the trees in such a manner that their taste would be as the taste of the fruit they bore. The second Midrash is from the Babylonian Talmud (*Chullin* 60b). The Midrash relates that at the onset of existence the sun and the moon were equal in magnitude. The moon appeared before the Almighty and inquired: "Is it then possible for two kings to rule with one crown?" Whereupon God told the moon to proceed and diminish itself so that the majesty of light would be possessed by the sun. The moon, by seeking primacy in the realm of light, was compelled to relinquish the degree with which it was already endowed. Similarly, a vain person seeking to usurp that which belongs to his fellow-man will ultimately be deprived of what he already possesses. Rabbi Kook juxtaposes these two passages and interprets them as indicating that the fear of self-realization and self-emergence is to be found in nature as well as humanity. "The earth also feared and did not bring forth the tree in its perfection, so that its taste would be as the taste of the fruit. The moon feared 'lest two kings conflict for one crown.' Humanity fears because of the free, clear, exalted values. The entire world is afraid of the manifestation of the world to come, 'Glorious in holiness.'" By means of faith, man achieves the strength to overcome this fear. "However, from the treasure of faith there comes tranquility, and fear passes from its basis . . ."

Faith is the quality which will dispel fear and bring tranquility "with the sanctity of faith the defects of the world and all within them shall be set aright."

require obstruction so as to make possible the pleasure from its light. Therefore in relation to its value, all coarseness, all material inclinations, and most assuredly all wickedness and folly are in themselves corrupting matters, causing crookedness and sickness: the soul is weakened by them, the soul is filled with wrath, sickness and anger because of their existence.

This is not the lot of the sublimely righteous, possessors of transparent Godly intellect, bearers of pure will, among whom the exalted, gleaming light abides. They discern that the pure light is greater than the world's power to endure it. Nevertheless it is necessary that it illumine in the world; it is also necessary, due to the nature of the world, that there be many veils to conceal the light. These veils are wickedness and its bearers, hence, they, too, are included within those who rectify the world order.

Therefore the real greatness of pain derives from the pain endured by the "Masters of condensed Godly light," who do not possess the faculty to perceive how all wickedness in its entirety is naught but a veil setting aright the radiance of light. Therefore, "Messiah shall come to bring the righteous back in repentance." With the ascent of the righteous to the degree of upper repentance they shall discern that the great light is "vast beyond understanding" and manifests itself in the world with the strength of the "mighty mercies." Were it not for the many veils which occur due to all the categories of wickedness, material and spiritual, the world would dissolve from the great light.

Thus it occurs that all return to world rectification, and all the wicked are rectified and return to virtue, when they discern their purpose: the wicked are punished because they pained the righteous in the world of condensation; and the righteous who stand in the "Godly expanse" come and liberate the wicked from all the straits of the "nether-world" and all things come thereby to abound in "strength and gladness."

"Passing through the valley of Baca  
they make it a place of springs;  
Yea the early rain clotheth it with blessings,  
They go from strength to strength  
Every one of them appeareth before  
God in Zion" (Psalms 84:7, 8).