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Teshubah, or repentance, is crucial to the religious experience. Rabbi Levine here analyzes two divergent views—that of the great medieval Jewish sage and that of the famous American psychologist and philosopher—and finds in their attitudes to repentance two completely different approaches to religion itself. Rabbi Levine, who was ordained by Chief Rabbi Herzog of Israel and until recently was a rabbi in Long Island, now devotes his full time to teaching at the Teachers Institute and at Stern College for Women both of Yeshiva University.

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The Views of Maimonides and William James

Religion and modern psychology have both displayed a keen interest in the phenomenon of conversion or repentance. Yet there is a vast difference in the motivation behind this interest. Religion's interest is dictated by practical regulatory motives of how to use best the capacity for this experience to further religious life. Psychology is interested in repentance for the purpose of understanding human behavior generally and not for the sake of directing it specifically to any particular goals.

Thus we find the eminent Jewish legalist, philosopher, and physician, Moses Maimonides (b.1135, d.1204) turning his attention to this matter in his masterly compendium of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, in the very first of its fourteen books, *Sefer Ha-mada*, "The Book of Knowledge." The section on the Laws of Repentance, forming the last portion of this book, represents one of the unique contributions of Maimonides to our conception of the scope of Jewish law. Though the statements in this section are based by and large on Talmudic and Midrashic material, the *Mishneh Torah* is the first code of Jewish law to include this material as Halakhah — objectively formulated rules of conduct. Up to the time of Maimonides it was felt that this highly personal and complex experience did not lend itself to formal codification but required individual guidance. It was the genius

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of Maimonides that discovered the universal character of repentance and abstracted it from the particular.

In his ten chapters on repentance Maimonides deals with such questions as: Which are the proper motives for repentance — guilt, fear, or love? What type of penance must the sinner do along with his change of heart and new resolve? Which sins require absolution — sins in act only, or sins of thought as well? How should the sinner relate himself to his past and to his previous environment? How can he best gird himself to effectuate the change of plan in his life's pattern? Can he attain the level of perfection of one who has not sinned? Which sins require restitution to society and forgiveness from man as well as forgiveness from God? Which sins, if any, cannot be forgiven? Is the experience of repentance one which requires supernatural intervention?

Modern psychology, on the other hand, interests itself in different aspects of the phenomenon of repentance. It is to the credit of modern psychology that it has not shied away completely from the realm of religious experiences and has not considered them quirks of human behavior beyond psychological interest. Modern psychology in its emphasis on concrete and experimental data rather than on abstract conceptualized schemes of mental operations, seeks its facts of human behavior even in the area of man's religious activity. Of course it attempts to explain this activity from its own vantage point and endeavors to relate it to the general patterns of human behavior and psychology. It interests itself in such questions as: What explanation is there for the radical changes in the behavior patterns of converts who seem to defy at a critical stage in their lives the iron laws of habit and native disposition? Are these changes generally of a permanent nature? Do the claims for supernatural interventions in the form of visions, voices, and promptings accompanying the act of conversion stand up under critical examination? What is the role of the unconscious self in these experiences? Which attitudes and emotional states are most commonly associated with these experiences? To what extent do religion and psychology agree in their understanding of human behavior?

The noted American psychologist and philosopher William James gives us an admirable treatment of these problems in his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹ The contents of this book

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library edition, 1902).

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were first delivered as the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh in 1901-1902. We can well understand, in view of the author's background (he was the son of a Swedenborgian theologian) and the audience to which they were addressed, that these lectures are slanted in the direction of Christian religious experience and theology. Actually the personal records and theological interpretation filling this book are almost exclusively Christian. More accurately the title of this volume should read "The Varieties of Christian Religious Experience." Nevertheless, in the absence of an adequate work doing justice to the Jewish experience, we must content ourselves with this otherwise competent and brilliant treatment from the psychologist's point of view. Moreover, as Gershom G. Scholem has pointed out in his work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*,¹ there is a genuine dearth of Jewish autobiographical material of this sort, inasmuch as Jewish religious figures have practiced a kind of voluntary censorship and have not included in their works passages of too intimate a nature. There seems to be a deep-seated reluctance by the Jewish spirit to betray to public eyes personal experiences of mystic dimension. Consequently, we shall have to reconstruct the nature of Jewish religious experience from sources other than the autobiographical. The formulations of the Halakhah and the Agadah must and can serve as trustworthy reflections of the Jewish experience.

Primarily, it is our purpose to show the distinctive character of the Jewish experience of repentance as compared to the types of religious experiences described by William James in his two chapters on conversion. There is a tendency at times to equate all of religion as if there were a common substratum that could be uncovered after stripping each individual religion of its accretions of ritual and formal ceremony. Thus the statement: "Religions are many. Religion is one." This approach does not stand up under careful scrutiny. Not only is Judaism distinctive in its observances, but it is also different in its underlying principles and world-outlook.

In the approach to the matter of emotional experiences in religion there exists also the yet greater error of divorcing the subjective emotional states from the content of religion. Goethe,

1. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), pp. 15-16.

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in his autobiography, relates how when his friends sought to convert him to a specific religion, he constantly repelled their efforts.

In Faith, I said, everything depends on the fact of believing, what is believed is perfectly indifferent. Faith is a profound sense of security in regard to both the present and the future; and this assurance springs from confidence in an immense, all-powerful Being. The firmness of this confidence is the one great point; but what we think of this Being depends on our other faculties, or even on circumstances, and is wholly indifferent. Faith is a holy vessel into which everyone stands ready to pour his feeling, his understanding, his imagination, as perfectly as he can.¹

This view reduces religious experience to the subjective level and divorces it from any specific theology or religious outlook. It is difficult to see how this interpretation is historically tenable. Can one possibly fail to connect the exultant joy and ecstatic rapture of the Chasidim and the sober and more intellectual approach of the Mitnagdim with the specific world-view of each? Do not specific conceptions of the nature of God, world, and man lend themselves to specific emotional reactions to God, world, and man? One might even assert further that it is quite possible that the latter gave birth to the former, and not the reverse. The experience of the Living God gave birth to Theology. Instead of lightly dismissing the formal creed, we should trace it to its source in human experience.

In our comparison of Maimonides and William James we shall see how the very basic differences in the nature of the religious experiences are directly related to differences in theological conceptions. The distinctiveness of Judaism lies not only in its objective content of observances and beliefs, but also in its inner world of subjective human experience.

Let us turn now to the conclusions James draws from his examination of the records of religious conversions. These can be summarized in two major propositions:

1. Self-surrender is the vital turning point of religious life.
2. Conversion is a process of struggling away from sin rather than of striving towards righteousness.

1. Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, Bk XIV, English Trans. by John Oxenford (Boston: S. E. Cassino, 1882), II, 190.

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We shall examine each of these propositions in turn as explained by James.

Religion and psychology agree that the surrender of personal will provides the ideal circumstance under which conversion can take place. James quotes approvingly the words of E. D. Starbuck in *The Psychology of Religion*:

Starbuck seems to put his finger on the root of the matter when he says that to exercise the personal will is still to live in the region where the imperfect self is the thing most emphasized. . . . What then must the person do? "He must relax," says Dr. Starbuck, "that is, he must fall back on the larger Power that makes for righteousness, which has been welling up in his own being, and let it finish in its own way the work it has begun."¹

It is important for us to bear in mind that James sees the individual not only as being helped by a higher power — but as being acted upon by an external force in such a manner as seems inexplicable to the person himself. After relating a number of curious records of sudden conversions, James remarks:

I might multiply cases almost indefinitely, but these will suffice to show you how real, definite, and memorable an event a sudden conversion may be to him who has the experience. Throughout the height of it he undoubtedly seems to himself a passive spectator or undergoer of an astounding process performed upon him from above. There is too much evidence of this for any doubt of it to be possible. Theology, combining this fact with the doctrines of election and grace, has concluded that the spirit of God is with us at these dramatic moments in a peculiarly miraculous way, unlike what happens at any other juncture of our lives. At that moment, it believes, an absolutely new nature is breathed into us, and we become partakers of the very substance of the Deity.²

According to James then, this entire process must be considered as one that transcends the realm of normal experience. Thus James concludes:

It is natural that those who personally have traversed such an experience should carry away a feeling of its being a miracle rather than a natural process. Voices are often heard, lights seen, or visions witnessed; automatic motor phenomena occur; and it always seems,

1. James, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

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after the surrender of the personal will, as if an extraneous higher power had flooded in and taken possession. Moreover the sense of renovation, safety, cleanness, rightness, can be so marvelous and jubilant as well to warrant one's belief in a radically new substantial nature.¹

Though James distinguishes two types in conversion, the voluntary type and the type by self-surrender, he is by no means ready to admit that there are any fundamental differences between the two. In the volitional type the change is usually gradual, taking place over a longer period of time and involving the development of new spiritual and moral habits. In the types of self-surrender, however, the change is usually abrupt and no progressive development by stages is apparent to the observer or to the convert himself. Nevertheless the difference between these two types is not decisive and, according to James, the psychology of the self-surrender type is the vital link in our chain of understanding the entire phenomenon of conversion.

James is forced to acknowledge that this process of self-surrender must even require of the convert the loss of his individuality, which must be destroyed before an external power can take over and become "the new center of personal energy." Thus he quotes from the record of conversion of an Oxford graduate:

... "About midday I made on my knees the first prayer before God for twenty years. I did not ask to be forgiven; I felt that was no good, for I would be sure to fall again. Well, what did I do? I committed myself to Him in the profoundest belief that my individuality was going to be destroyed, that he would take all from me, and I was willing. In such a surrender lies the secret of a holy life. . . ." ²

James sees in this very attitude of the self-sacrifice of the conscious self the high point in all of religious life.

"We have used the vague and abstract language of psychology. But since, in any terms, the crisis described is the throwing of our conscious selves upon the mercy of powers which, whatever they may be, are more ideal than we are actually, and make for our redemption, you see why self-surrender has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning-point of the religious life, so far as the religious life is spiritual and no affair of outer works and ritual

1. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 218-19.

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and sacraments. One may say that the whole development of Christianity in inwardness has consisted in little more than the greater and greater emphasis attached to this crisis of self-surrender.”¹

It is astounding to note how very different is Maimonides' conception of the process of *Teshubah* or Conversion in terms of the dynamic involvement of the conscious self. Instead of deprecating the role of the personal will, he emphasizes the very opposite point of conscious self-direction in the act of repentance. Maimonides devotes two full chapters, the fourth and especially the fifth, to the proposition that man is a free moral agent and is self-determining as a religious creature. He finds it necessary in these chapters on repentance to bolster the individual in the belief in his own powers and in his unlimited opportunities of overcoming his moral shortcomings. With great acuteness and force he contradicts the notion that the conception of human freedom of choice and will undermines the role of God in religious experience and human existence. Maimonides declares that this doctrine of free choice “is an important principle, the pillar of the Law and the Commandment, as it is said, ‘See I set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil,’ and again it is written ‘Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse (Deut. 11:26).’ This means that the power is in your hands, and whatever a man desires, among the things that human beings do, he can do, whether they are good or evil. And because of this faculty, it is said, ‘O, that they had such a heart as this always’ (Deut. 5:26), which implies that the Creator neither puts compulsion on the children of men nor decrees that they should do either good, or evil, but it is all left to their discretion.”²

We find here in this passage of Maimonides the vindication of natural man. Natural man, just as he stands, is a spiritual being. His spirituality is not superadded to, or superimposed upon his personality by the gift of grace or by perceiving a special light. God does not have to intercede at the moment of his repentance in order to give him religious dimension. He does not have to be redeemed by some outer force from his evil conscious self. Man's highest self, from the Jewish point of view, is his conscious self or rational self. God has implanted in natural man the divine gift

1. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

2. Maimonides, *Hil. Teshubah* 5:3 (trans. Hyamson, Bloch Publ. Co. But references are to the standard editions).

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of constant moral awareness and the freedom of choice at all times and to all degrees — even unto the moral perfection of Moses our Teacher, to use the example of Maimonides (Ch. 5:2). Man at the time of repentance can not be weak and dare not be at the mercy of outer forces which may save or condemn him. No outer force can subvert or guarantee man's moral integrity. He and he alone is responsible for his own moral dignity and worth. To conceive a purely external force as the source of his vindication is also to conceive a purely external force as the source of his damnation and moral failure. Judaism cannot approve of the attitude in repentance quoted by James:

“Lord, Thy will be done; damn or save!” cries John Nelson, exhausted with the anxious struggle to escape damnation; and at that moment his soul was filled with peace.¹

The very notion that man's religious justification is a gift of grace implies the converse proposition that man's moral damnation is thrust upon him from the outside. This latter conception is completely repugnant to Judaism, for it leads to resignation to one's moral failures. James does not record how many have emerged from the crisis situation “damn or save” with the feeling that they have been damned and not saved. One shudders to imagine the deep and lasting harm wrought by such a negative experience. It might readily negate the good results described by James from this attitude of self-surrender.

Interestingly, the Talmud relates to us an instance of moral deterioration brought about precisely by the attitude of self-surrender in the face of imagined higher powers. The Babylonian Talmud tells us of Elishah ben Abuyah, the apostate teacher of Rabbi Meir and one of the most sublimely tragic figures of rabbinic literature:

Our Rabbis taught: Once Acher (Elishah b. Abuyah) was riding on a horse on the Sabbath and R. Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah at his mouth. Said [Acher] to him: “Meir, turn back, for I have already measured by the paces of my horse that thus far extends the Sabbath-limit.” He replied: “Thou too go back!” [Acher] answered: “Have I not already told thee that I have already heard from behind the Veil ‘Return ye backsliding children’ except

1. James, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

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Acher." [R. Meir] prevailed upon him and took him to a schoolhouse. [Acher] said to a child: "Recite for me thy verse." [The child] answered "There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked." (Isaiah 48:22) . . . He took him to yet another schoolhouse until he took him to thirteen schools. All of them quoted in similar vein.¹

In contrast to the teaching described by James, which might be rendered: *Great is the Divine Presence for it brings man to repentance*, Maimonides enunciates the Jewish teaching: *Great is repentance for it brings man near to the Divine Presence*.²

That the experience of conversion is one of inner strength gained from new self-confidence in one's moral and spiritual powers can best be seen from the personal history of Rabbi Meir's other teacher, the great Rabbi Akiba. Rabbinic literature relates:

"And thirstily drink in their words" refers to Rabbi Akiba. What were the beginnings of Rabbi Akiba? It is said: When he was forty years of age he had not yet studied a thing. One time he stood by the mouth of a well. "Who hollowed out the stone?" he wondered. He was told, "It is the water which falls upon it every day, continually." It was said to him: Akiba hast thou not heard, "The waters wear away the stones?" (Job 14:19). Thereupon R. Akiba drew the inference with regard to himself: If what is soft wears down the hard, all the more shall the words of the Torah, which are as hard as iron, hollow out my heart which is flesh and blood! Forthwith he turned to the study of Torah.³

We have here the record of the conversion of Akiba, the ignorant shepherd, into Rabbi Akiba, the outstanding sage and religious leader of his time. At the age of forty, Akiba grew out of the narrow horizons of the shepherd, neither through the abandonment of personal will, nor through a process of self-surrender or yielding to a higher power. On the contrary, he expressed a new confidence in his own moral, spiritual, and intellectual powers, and a new drive for self-realization. There was not present a desire for escape from his occupation as a shepherd, but a desire for greater self-fulfillment as a disciple of Torah. We have not here a record of weakness, but one of strength; not an act of resignation, but of assertion.

1. *Chagigah* 15a,b (Soncino Translation).

2. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, chap. 7:6.

3. *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, trans. J. Goldin (New Haven: Yale Judaica Series, 1955) chapter 6, pp. 40-41.

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In the attrition of the role of man's self-will in repentance, Judaism can see only the gravest of threats to religious living. Paradoxically, man must first be able to recognize his own power, in order to be able to serve as an instrument of God's power. When man loses faith in his own powers of decisive moral action, he not only undermines the foundations of his character and his potential for human achievement, but also impairs his fundamental relationship to God and is guilty of dereliction in religious duty.

While it is true that religion sometimes demands constraint of our personal will so that we do not sin, such is not its primary demand upon us. Our ideal relationship to God is that wherein there is an identification of our will with the Divine Will, and not the complete obliteration of individual will in acquiescence to the Divine Will. Only when human passion and error would direct us to contravene the Divine Will are we called upon to foil such inner drives by setting aside our will. This, I believe, is the meaning of the teaching of the *Ethics of the Fathers*:

Rabban Gamliel, the son of Rabbi Judah the Prince, used to say: "Do His will as if it were thy will, that He may do thy will as if it were His will. Nullify thy will before His will that He may nullify the will of others before thy will."¹

The last portion of this passage implies that the will we are enjoined to nullify is comparable to the will of others and is not our own real will.

The incident of the conversion of Rabbi Akiba highlights yet another important aspect of the Jewish concept of the experience of repentance. Ideal repentance is conceived as inextricably bound with the process of thought and cognition. R. Akiba's initial inspiration when he beheld the rock bored through by water required years of patient study for its fruition into his mature spiritual development. His intellectual growth in Torah was a necessary correlate to his spiritual fulfillment. It is significant that Maimonides classifies the section on repentance as the concluding section, the climax, if you will, of the *Sefer Ha-mada* — the Book of the Knowledge of God, attained through cognitive process. In the very last chapter of this book, which is also the conclusion of the Laws of Repentance, Maimonides emphasizes that the true

1. *Ethics of the Fathers*, chap. 2, Mishnah 4 (Hertz prayerbook trans.).

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motive of righteous living should not be the desire to attain life in the World-to-Come:

Let not a man say, "I will observe the precepts of the Torah and occupy myself with its wisdom, in order that I may obtain all the blessings written in the Torah, or to attain life in the World-to-Come; I will abstain from transgressions against which the Torah warns, so that I may be saved from the curses written in the Torah, or that I may not be cut off from life in the World-to-Come." It is not right to serve God after this fashion, for whoever does so, serves Him out of fear. This is not the standard set by the prophets and sages. Only those serve God in this way, who are illiterate, women or children whom we train to serve out of fear, till their knowledge shall have increased when they will serve out of love.¹

Maimonides accounts the worship of God even for the sake of salvation and eternal life as being the worship of God out of fear. Maimonides then concludes the entire book with these beautiful words:

One only loves God with the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge, will be the love. If the former be little or much so will the latter be little or much. A person ought therefore to devote himself to the understanding and comprehension of those sciences and studies which will inform him concerning his Master, as far as it lies in human faculties to understand and comprehend as indeed we have explained in the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah.²

Thus Maimonides sees the high point of repentance — the experience of the Love of God, and the Love of God as linked always with His knowledge. Thus true repentance and knowledge of God are always intimately bound together.

It is significant that in the order of daily prayers — the *Shemoneh-Esreh* — the second blessing of the middle portion, which is the section of petitions, consists of prayers for the experience of repentance:

Return us, O our Father to Thy Torah and return us our King to Thy worship and cause us to return with complete repentance before Thee. Blessed art Thou who desirest repentance.

1. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, chap. 10: 1. (Hyamson Trans.)

2. *Ibid.*, chap. 10: 6.

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The very first petition, however, is a plea for the gift of knowledge and understanding. The order of Prayers clearly indicates the need for the development of our intellectual powers in order to attain the experience of *Teshubah*. As the Talmud remarks: "R. Ami said: 'Great is the role of knowledge for it is placed at the very head of the week-day petitions.'"¹ The Jerusalem Talmud stresses the role of knowledge even more: "Rabbi declared: 'I am amazed that they [the early Rabbis] set aside the petition for knowledge on the Sabbath, for without knowledge how can one pray at all?'"²

The Jewish view has consistently seen the phenomenon of conversion as being associated with the growth of intellectual awareness. Witness the very first conversion in all of history — that of our Patriarch Abraham. According to the Midrash, Abraham, who was brought up in a house of idol worship, turned to the worship of the one true God through a process of reasoning:

Now the Lord said unto Abraham: "Get thee out of thy country" . . . Said R. Isaac: "This may be compared to a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. Is it possible that the palace lacks a person to look after it? he wondered. The owner of the palace looked out and said: 'I am the owner of the palace.' Similarly because Abraham our father said, 'Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?' the Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, 'I am the Guide, the Sovereign of a Universe.'"³

There is a remarkable statement in the Talmud which reveals how the Rabbis conceived the glory of Torah study as being the necessary and sufficient condition for bringing new converts to the Jewish faith. On the verse in Isaiah 46:12: "Hearken unto Me, ye stubborn-hearted that are far from righteousness," R. Ashi comments: "The people of Mata Mechasia are *stubborn-hearted* for they see the glory of the Torah twice a year and never has one of them been converted."⁴

Maimonides, in concurrence with the classical Jewish philosophy of R. Saadia Gaon and R. Bachya Ibn Pakuda, sees reason as the antidote to human passion and propensity to evil. According to

1. *Berakhot*, 33a.

2. Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* IV:3.

3. *Genesis Rabbah* 39:1, (Soncino trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. I, p. 313).

4. *Berakhot*, 17b.

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this view, the two dynamic forces within man contending with one another are not the impulse for evil and the impulse for holiness, but the evil impulse and the faculty of reason.¹ This conception is in marked contrast to the general tendency of modern thought of seeing faith and reason as two different claims for the deeper allegiance and commitment of man. Religion is too often identified with that area of man's response to life wherein reason is dormant, and where faith, in the sense of emotional self-involvement, reigns most actively. Judaism does not rely so readily on the capacity of the emotions to guide us aright, even if these emotions are of the higher order of religious inclination. The individual needs at every level of religious awareness the guiding light of reason to help him translate his emotional impulses into appropriate modes of behavior. Error of intellectual judgment in matters pertaining to morality is equivalent to moral wrong, notwithstanding all good intentions to the contrary. *Sefer Chasidim* illustrates this principle with a number of telling examples.

There is a kind of charity which is pernicious. In what manner is it? One who gives alms to adulterers or to a glutton or a drunkard . . . is regarded as though he aided them. There is a kind of piety which is bad. For instance, a man whose hands are unclean sees a holy book fall into the fire, and says, "It is better that it should be burned," and does not touch the book. Another instance has also been cited: a man sees a woman drown in the river and says: "It is better that she should drown than that I should touch her."²

This view of repentance as being an act dependent on man's moral choice and use of reason does not seem to be completely in agreement with the scriptural teaching. Maimonides was aware that the simple surface meaning of a number of passages in Scripture attributes to God the vindication of man or his moral failure as part of the Divine scheme for human affairs. Thus Maimonides declares in the opening of the sixth chapter:

There are many verses in the Pentateuch and in the prophets which seem to contradict this fundamental doctrine. And they lead most people astray and make them think that God decrees that a person

1. See R. Israel Salanter, *Iggeret Ha-musar*, printed in *Or Yisrael*, ed. R. Yitzchak Blazer (London, 1951), p. 105.

2. Quoted and trans. by B. Halper, *Post-Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Phila.: Jewish Publication Society, 1921), p. 164.

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shall do good or evil, and that a man's heart is not under his own control to incline him in whichever direction he pleases.¹

Particularly in the penitential prayers of the Psalms, there are a number of passages which emphasize the need for the Divine spirit in order for man to be saved from moral perdition. Maimonides asks:

What is meant by David's utterance, "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He will teach sinners in the way. He will guide the meek in judgment and will teach the meek His way?" (Psalms 25:8,9). It refers to the fact that God sent them prophets to teach them the ways of the Lord and bring them back in repentance; furthermore, that he endowed them with the capacity of learning and understanding. 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."²

Maimonides then strips the experience of repentance of the element of immediate Divine intervention or incursion into the spirit of man. Divine help in the experience of repentance comes about in two indirect ways. Either the individual may receive the benefit of inspiration from contact with God's prophets, or he will, through the use of his capacity to learn and understand, come to the point of emotional absorption in the ideals of God's ways which will result in a change in his behavior patterns.

There are other passages in the Psalms asking for Divine intervention in the act of repentance which Maimonides explains in a somewhat different manner. He avers that an unusually serious form of punishment of sin is for God to deprive man of his freedom of choice. Various sins are punishable in various forms. Some sins are punishable only on the physical level, that is, the individual suffers loss of health or financial reverses. More serious sins involve the yet greater punishment of loss of soul — the power of moral autonomy, or the opportunity for true penitence. The penitent beseeches God that his sins should not be reckoned as of the latter sort. The prayer, therefore, would not be for positive Divine intervention to aid in the act of repentance, but for the absence of Divine interference with the normal process of repentance which might come about because of very grave sins:

1. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, ch. 6.

2. *Ibid.*, 6:5.

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And thus the prophets and the righteous beseech the Almighty, in their prayers, to help them to the way of truth; as David said, "Teach me, O Lord, thy way" (Psalms 86:11), that is, May my sins not keep the way of truth from me, that I learn from it Thy way and the unity of Thy name. So also his prayer, "Let a noble spirit uphold me" (Psalms 51:14) means, Suffer my spirit to accomplish its desire and may not my sins cause repentance to be withheld from me, but let me have liberty, till I return and understand and know the way of truth. Every text similar to the above can be explained in the same way.¹

Nor is Maimonides alone in his insistence on man's complete freedom in repentance. R. Saadia Gaon in his work *Beliefs and Opinions*, in the chapter on free will, also raises the problem of scriptural contradictions to this principle, and indicates various ways in which they are to be interpreted "so as to harmonize with reason."² Thus we see that according to Maimonides and also Saadia the experience of *Teshubah* is not granted man by an external higher power at the time when man surrenders his conscious self. On the contrary, *Teshubah* can only come about through man's maximum use of his own higher conscious powers; and the most he can look for from God is forgiveness and the ability to use his powers freely. Not the gift of faith, but the will for faith brings about repentance.

Maimonides too recognizes the primary role of faith in repentance, but in a different sense than does William James. Consequently, we find that in the third chapter on Repentance, Maimonides records lack of faith as the most serious and irreparable of sins. For all sins there is expiation (even the sin of the desecration of the Name of God is forgivable at death),³ but the sin of disbelief in the higher power of God and in the veracity of His revealed will can never be condoned:

All wicked persons whose iniquities exceed their merits are judged according to their sins and have a portion in the world to come; for all Israelites, notwithstanding that they have sinned, have a share in the life hereafter. . . . And so too, the saints among the gentile peoples have a portion in the world to come; but the following

1. *Ibid.*, 6:4.

2. Saadia Gaon, *Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise IV, ch. 6 (Yale U. Press, Yale Judaica Series), pp. 201 ff.

3. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, 1:4.

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have not a portion in the world to come but are cut off and perish, and for their great wickedness and sinfulness are condemned for ever and ever: Heretics and Epicureans, those who deny the Torah, the resurrection of the dead or the coming of the redeemer, etc. . . .¹

Without faith one has no link with the Jewish past or with the Jewish future, or for that matter with the Jewish present, for what value can one attribute to a present moment not linked to the past or directed to a future? Jewish history has abundantly proved that breach of faith has inevitably led to breach in the practice of the *Mitzvot* and loyalty to the Jewish people. But though lack of faith is the greatest of vices, the possession of faith is not reckoned as the greatest of virtues. 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.

It is significant that while James, on the one hand, emphasizes the supernatural character of the experience of conversion, and insists that this alone is true spiritual religion, as we have earlier quoted, he, on the other hand, is not at all prepared to accept for himself the veracity of such claims:

Were it true that a suddenly converted man as such is, as Edwards says, of an entirely different kind from a natural man . . . there surely ought to be some exquisite class-mark, some distinctive radiance attaching even to the lowliest specimen of this genus, to which no one of us could remain insensible, and which, so far as it went, would prove him more excellent than even the most highly gifted among mere natural men. But notoriously there is no such radiance. Converted men as a class are indistinguishable from natural men. . . . The super-normal incidents, such as voices and visions and overpowering impressions of the meaning of suddenly presented scripture texts, the melting emotions and tumultuous affections connected with the crisis of change, may all come by way of nature, or worse still, be counterfeited by Satan.²

James offers in place of the supernatural explanation of conversion, one of natural psychological process centering around the workings of the subconscious. James points out that the

1. *Ibid.*, 3:5, 6.

2. James, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

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most important step forward that has occurred in psychology in his mature life was the discovery

... that in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual centre and margin, but an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs.¹

According to James, some people are more richly endowed with strongly developed extra-marginal lives. Such persons are constitutionally ready to experience instantaneous conversion, which is an incursion of fringe consciousness into the core. Moreover, the act of surrender of the conscious self prepares the ground for the fringe consciousness becoming the core. James allows that if one insists upon the direct presence of the Deity in conversion it would appear in the subconscious region alone.

While the above is a possible explanation, it is at best a brilliant example of explaining the known in terms of the unknown. Admitting the existence of unconscious cerebration, or "subliminal activity" as James calls it, such an area of mental states is, of necessity, less amenable to scientific study and examination than the conscious self. In referring to this area as the source of the conversion experience one is doing no more than shifting one's ignorance to a more distant realm. If James does not allow in his world view the operation of the supernatural in the area of conscious man, why reserve the activity of the supernatural for the area of greatest human ignorance — the subconscious? Furthermore, modern Freudian psychology sees in the subconscious, not man's higher aspirations but man's drive for sexual satisfaction.

In support of the spiritual authenticity of the conversion experience, despite his denial of its supernatural element, James offers yet another thesis. He maintains that the merit of a thing cannot "be decided by its origin." Furthermore, he states:

Our spiritual judgment . . . our opinion of the significance and value of a human event or condition must be decided on empirical grounds exclusively. If the *fruits for life* of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of

1. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

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natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it.¹

James then proceeds to demonstrate that the fruits for life very often are such as to win our admiration and approval. In the first chapter of this work, James summarizes this teaching with the statement: "By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots."²

This approach seems to be fallacious to its very core. To follow the analogy: it does matter what are the roots or seeds of a fruit. Were we to observe a remarkably robust tree issue forth from a seemingly sickly seed, we would not simply behold the tree in amazement, but would most likely revise our original estimate of the quality of the seed. Similarly, in man's psychological life, we should endeavor to trace the connection between the fruits of its operation and its roots. James is correct in saying that religious genius should not be reduced to a state of neurosis. He is not justified, however, in completely severing the nexus of mental creativity and its psychological origins. It would seem that we have here an error in conception. It is not true that mental fruits do not bear an important relation to their origins. It is simply that the origins are misunderstood. Neurosis is not the origin of literary genius. Literary creative power alone is the origin of literary genius. Frustration in love or dope addiction may be pre-disposing factors but not the origin. Let us not make light of origins. Before disposing of the intimate connection between result and process, let us be certain that we are ascribing the proper process to the proper result.

The Jewish conception very definitely maintains that the worth of a thing is decided by its origins. The worth of the world is determined by its origin as God's wilful creation. So too, the worth of man is established by the fact of his being made in the image of his Creator. Rabbi Akiba in *The Ethics of the Fathers* declares: "Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God; but it was by a special love that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God."³ In other words, man by virtue of his accomplishments alone, would not have the same value as he does have in the light of his origin. The Bible in

1. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

3. *Pirke Abot*, chap. 3, Mishnah 18. (Hertz Trans.)

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explaining the origin of the prohibition of manslaughter "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man,"¹ very clearly assigns unique value to the life of man. It matters greatly whether the prohibition of manslaughter is based on the primitive man's fear of the magical plaguing effects of shedding blood on the killer or if it is based on the awareness of man's origin in the Divine image. In the latter case the ramifications of a whole set of human relations based on the inviolable dignity of man are implied, whereas the former conception has no such broad implications. So too the conception of the prohibition of manslaughter based only on the self-interest of society is definitely limited in its broader implications for human behavior.

If man exhibits remarkable instances of self-renewal, of spiritual growth and significant change in life habits, we have the right to posit the existence of an unusual capacity in man that transcends the normal limits of biological behavior. Maimonides seems to sense very clearly the need for this unique moral capacity in man when he tells us:

Free will is bestowed on every human being. If one desires to turn toward the good way and be righteous, he has the power to do so. If he wishes to turn toward the evil way and be wicked he is at liberty to do so. And thus it is written in the Torah, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22) which means that the human species had become unique in the world—there being no other like it in the following respect, namely, that man, of himself and by the exercise of his own intelligence and reason, knows what is good and what is evil, and there is none who can prevent him from doing that which is good or that which is evil.²

Here, according to Maimonides, is where the divine element is present in the experience of repentance: in the original endowment of man to know at all times good and evil and not to be a biological creature of habit, environment, or heredity.

This endowment, however, is universal. It is not limited to select individuals at select times, but it is the possession of all persons at all times. The convert, therefore, is not an unusual man

1. Genesis 9:6.

2. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, 5:1.

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because of an unusual intervention in his spiritual life. He is unusual only in the degree to which he has used the universal endowment God has given all men. Judaism, unlike Christianity, cannot view the state of grace or damnation as something attached to man. Either of these states is the fruit of man's effort. That man's positive efforts bear such rich fruit is itself the Divine share in the human experience of repentance.

One might justifiably conclude that James' presentation of this religious experience is not an objective description and interpretation, but is colored by the Christian outlook. This is not to say that James is inaccurate in his descriptions or that his conclusions are unwarranted. It is to say that James gives the mistaken impression that his sampling of the experience of conversion is typical of its very essence and universal character.

It is our contention that the Jewish religious experience is basically different from the Christian experience that James describes. Moreover, we hold the view that the Jewish experience bears a closer and more natural relationship to a scientific view of human psychology. We further maintain that the psychological experience of conversion does not derive from universal patterns of psychical behavior, but derives instead from primary theological conceptions. In a religion based on faith as opposed to reason, wherein a state of grace is not earned but is a mystical grant from an external Higher power, one would expect to find, and does in fact find, the experience of conversion taking place at the moment of abandonment of personal will and of conscious self-direction. In a religion such as Judaism which is based on the objective content of Torah as well as subjective emotional responses, wherein the state of grace is earned by objective performance and direction of one's will to this end, one can expect to, and does find the experience of conversion taking place at the moment when the self is most realized and conscious processes most pronounced. We have good reason to seek for a psychological presentation of the Jewish varieties of religious experience which will do justice to its underlying foundations.

A difference in underlying foundation leading to other distinctive features of the Jewish experience of conversion is pointed to in the second major proposition of James. We earlier quoted James' characterization of conversion as being "a process of struggling away from sin rather than of striving towards right-

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eousness.”¹ The Jewish attitude is quite different in this regard. Repentance cannot be considered as struggling *away* from sin but as struggling *with* sin. Judaism can no more conceive of one struggling away from one’s sin than of one struggling away from one’s physical self. Just as in an individual’s biological development, there is an organic unity between present and past, so too in his spiritual life does the past enter into the picture of the present. The penitent in his new spiritual life must yet refer to his past, because he is his past self to a large extent.

It is interesting to note that Maimonides in formulating the process of repentance includes remorse for past sin as a basic component along with resolve for a change of conduct in the future. In fact, Maimonides in one place sees the recall of the past with regret as the culminating stage of repentance:

What is repentance? It consists in this, that the sinner abandon his sin, remove it from his thoughts, and resolve in his heart never to repeat it . . . that he regret his past as it is said, “Surely after that I turned, I repented, etc.”²

Especially from the Jewish point of view, wherein repentance is largely a means of gaining forgiveness, complete severance from the past is an impossibility. How can atonement be granted for that which is forgotten and not taken to heart? Far from having the penitent escape his past, Maimonides would have him successfully face its challenge. Thus he teaches that perfect repentance is exemplified when the offender, living in the same area of past associations and having the same passion persist unabated, nevertheless refrains and does not transgress. Maimonides also enjoins the penitent:

Transgressions confessed on one Day of Atonement are again confessed on the next Day of Atonement, even if one has continued penitent, as it is said, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”³

Though Maimonides, too, emphasizes the new aspects that attach to the life of the penitent, this newness lies in his relationship to God and not in relationship to himself. He is not a new

1. James, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

2. Maimonides, *op. cit.*, 2:2.

3. *Ibid.*, 2:8.

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man with a new birth, but the former self with a new direction. It is evident that James' conception of a new personality is based on the Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man as a natural creature, and only his new birth can reinstate him in grace. Judaism does not know of the Fall of Man in this sense, and consequently man does not have a new birth but a rebirth. The penitent is not a *new* man but a *renewed* man. This fundamental difference of outlook is reflected in the use of the two terms *conversion* and *return*. The Hebrew term for repentance — *Teshubah*, meaning *return* — implies that man has but to turn back to his original self before the sin in order to be redeemed. The term James uses for repentance, *conversion*, implies that he must experience a radical change of nature before he can be saved.

Only in the case of a radical change of natural relationships such as are involved in the conversion of a non-Jew to the Jewish faith does Judaism apply the notion of a new birth. Hence the Talmud teaches: "He who is converted is as a new born child."¹ Ordinarily, however, the present self of the penitent does not represent any sharp break with the past, but is instead built up on the foundations of past character rearranged into a new pattern. The old core is impregnated with a new aspect so that each element of past character enters into the new picture. Religious zeal exchanges with secular zeal and spiritual ambition replaces the role of worldly strivings. In this manner, the past as well as the future is redeemed. Hence the Talmud teaches that he who repents out of the motive of fear has his past sins accounted as unerringly performed, but he who repents from love has his past sins accounted as merits. That is to say, his past life is not only forgiven but redeemed to the point where it too is considered as part of virtuous existence. Do we not have here in the Jewish idea of the struggle with evil the theme of a Torah of life? Is not James' view of struggling away from evil together with the surrender of self an echo of the Christian theme of redemption through death?

It is evident that our conception of the role of evil in man is pivotal in our understanding of the psychology of conversion. The essence of Jewish religious life is to be grasped in the struggle against the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil impulse. The failure of the wicked lies in his yielding to the promptings of this impulse whereas the virtue of the righteous consists in his channelizing

1. *Yebamot*, 22a.

this impulse into constructive outlets. Without the existence of the factor of potential evil within the human personality, the possibilities of spiritual growth are shut out. And precisely in the great man is this factor present to the largest degree. The Talmud teaches: "The greater the man, the more potent is the evil impulse within him."¹ Indeed the Talmud is replete with instances of outstanding Sages overcoming temptations of the flesh only after difficult inner struggle. Judaism cannot accept as normal or typical the experience of the convert whom James quotes as saying: "I have had no temptation since conversion, God seemingly having shut out Satan from that course with me. He gets a free hand in other ways, but never on sins of the flesh."² Judaism always sees man as standing in the dynamic relationship of inner tension with himself. I know of no rabbinic description of righteous living that excludes this factor. Thus the Talmud declares: "The disciples of the Wise have no respite either in this world or in the World-to-Come, as it is written 'They shall go from strength to strength.'"³

Consequently, Judaism cannot see conversion as usually being a matter of instantaneous change. Virtue is not like an inoculation which takes and leaves a permanent mark. Rather, each increase of virtue brings an increase of challenge to the individual. The attainment of virtue is a protracted affair, sometimes a life-long struggle. Acquiring virtue in one outstanding heroic moment, though known to the Rabbis of the Talmud to be a genuine occurrence, is not accepted happily. Thus Rabbi Judah the Prince, upon hearing of such instances, wept and said, "Some gain eternal life in one hour while others gain it only after many years."⁴

Nor in the Jewish view is the presence of the evil impulse considered a blight on the virtue of a person. It is important to bear in mind that negative experiences also educate one in the way of virtue. The Bible teaches us the ethical life by narrating to us the deeds of a Laban and Esau as well as a Jacob, an Ishmael as well as an Isaac. It is naive to imagine that we learn the good only by contemplating the good. Very often the good does not become firmly implanted within us until we behold the results

1. *Sukkah*, 52a.

2. James, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

3. *Berakhot*, 64a.

4. *Abodah Zarah*, 10b, 17a, 18a

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of evil. The desire for peace is strengthened within us more by seeing the horrors of war than anticipating the serenity of peace. Positive and negative examples both mold our attachment to virtue. So too in repentance, our religious failures as well as our attainments contribute to our mature religious consciousness. Maimonides goes so far as to maintain, in accordance with one view in the Talmud, that the merit of the penitent is even greater than that of him who never sinned, "the reason being that the former have had to put forth a greater effort to subdue their passions than the latter."¹

From the foregoing emerges the unique feature of Jewish repentance, i.e., its lack of uniqueness. Repentance is a normal human need and hence a normal human experience, not a cataclysmic event. Three times daily the Jew invokes the power of repentance. G. F. Moore, the eminent historian of religions, summarizes the matter well in the following words, "In no ancient religion is normal piety so pervaded by the consciousness of sin, the need for repentance and the conviction that man's sole hope is the forgiving grace of God."²

In the final analysis the real interpretation of the experience of repentance will be rendered neither by psychologist nor halakhist, but by the ordinary man in everyday life as he meets the trials and temptations of the time with true inner dignity, steadfast courageous strength, and unswerving faith in the Eternal God.

1. *Op. cit.*, 7:4.

2. G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, (Harvard University Press), vol. II, p. 214.