

Yom Kippur 2025

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I have loved Ian McEwan's book *Atonement* since it came out. But I have always been troubled by it. Something seemed wrong or incomplete about it.

Now I think I understand. It has two deep flaws. First the title is wrong. It should not be *Atonement* but *Repentance*. Or if it is *Atonement*, the book needs a different shape. This difference may seem minor, but at least in Jewish understanding of the Days of Awe and Yom Kippur the distinction of *Atonement* and *Repentance* matter.

The second problem relates to the timing of the revelation. It works great as a novel, but it fails in human terms.

Let me begin with a few more words on the *Atonement-Repentance* distinction. As I understand the tradition Judaism distinguishes three things:

*Repentance*, *Atonement*, and *Forgiveness*. They are all different and distinct and that distinction matters. I will say only a little about *Atonement* and *Forgiveness*.

Traditionally the Days of Awe are about *Repentance* and Yom Kippur is about *Atonement*.

*Repentance* is about our relationship with other humans. *Atonement* is about our violations of our relationships with God—our spiritual and religious failings that do not have to do with a fellow human.

By this time in the year, after the days of Awe, emphasizing *Repentance* may be a bit late. It always seems to me college graduation speeches occur at the wrong end of a collegiate career—they give a lot of advice which would be more useful at the start—or at least the middle—but certainly not at the end of college. So too, my comments may be ten days

too late. But we are living a life, so there is always tomorrow and the rest of the year.

I would like to highlight seven thoughts on repentance.

- 1) **Freedom.** As has been noted by many others, repentance assumes freedom; the freedom to recognize a wrong and to actually change.

Humans cannot have Repentance without assuming there is such a thing as human freedom.

Real human freedom assumes we will make mistakes. They are inherent in having the ability to make judgments and act. Thus, God made us with the power for virtue and vice, greatness and sin. Man has both abilities. And inevitably with thousands of decisions and choices in a life, we will sin—and many times. We have Repentance because we will sin and harm others. And we need to do something with that other than pile them up.

- 2) **Can God sin?** If humans are made in God's image and humans have freedom like God and God has freedom to create it inevitably leads to the question of whether God also makes mistakes and has to repent? He may end up harming people. Think of the flood, Babel, having Isaac experience his father almost killing him, maybe preventing Moses from going into the land of Israel, the Holocaust, the present government of Israel, and other events. Are some of these potentially sinful, God harming humans? What does Judaism do with that? How are we to understand that?

- 3) **Norming.** Different commentators distinguish different numbers of things that compose or are necessary for true Repentance. They are all very similar lists of actions but let me point out that every commentator emphasizes at least three things in common:

- 1) admission and remorse (harata),
- 2) confession (viduy) and

3) behavior change (shinui maaseh).

Think of how we go about recognizing an error. I would argue the first step is not admission or owning the harm but **Identifying or Recognizing** the norm by which we know we have made a mistake. Only once we have a norm can we recognize we have violated it and sinned against another human being.

We might say some harms are obvious. Think of stealing or betraying a pledge. But many other harms or violations are not so obvious, and many are contested.

Even God recognizes that humans need norms and they are not “obvious” but need specification—that is the point of the Ten Commandments and more clearly the Talmud.

As humans, a lot of what we do is identify norms by observing what other people do. We are social animals, and we figure out what is right and wrong by watching what others do.

Is spraying graffiti on a highway underpass or a bus or making a mural on a building right or wrong? We look at what others do. Is doxxing right or wrong? We look at what others are doing and extrapolate the norm.

We cannot recognize we have sinned unless we have a norm. And we cannot have a norm unless there is clarity on ethical standards. If we are watching others for norming, we can often have a problem. Who are the others we are watching? Are they clear about the norm? And here homogeneity has big advantages over diversity. Diversity brings diverse standards and norms and confusion.

I would say one of our biggest problems today is cacophony around norms and standards. What one person thinks is a violation others don't.

And let's face it—sometimes the behavior of others is wrong, so we will extrapolate the wrong norm. Think about someone who grows up in a racist or antisemitic social environment. A behavior seems normal—ethical—that is a wrong. When I was in the UK, my lab colleague had his car—a Citroen—repaired and was outraged by the price. He came to the lab and told me “I was Jewed out of it.” It made me think hard about my common use of the phrase “I got gyped” that I had never previously thought deeply about.

Similarly, beginning somewhere in his mid-to-late 20s, Benjamin Franklin began owning slaves. This was normal when he looked around and ran ads in his newspaper about reclaiming runaway slaves. And the idea that Blacks were inferior to whites was the norm even among educated people throughout the colonies—including Jews, I might add. Then when Franklin was in his 50s, he visited a school for black children that he was financially supporting. By observing the children, he came to a realization that he wrote about to a friend:

“I was on the whole much pleas'd, and from what I then saw, have conceiv'd a higher Opinion of the natural Capacities of the black Race, than I had ever before entertained. Their Apprehension seems as quick, their Memory as strong, and their Docility in every Respect equal to that of white Children. You will wonder perhaps that I should ever doubt it, and I will not undertake to justify all my Prejudices, nor to account for them.”<sup>1</sup>

Franklin sees the mistake, sees the wrong norm based on bad data, defines it as a prejudice not a reasoned, justified judgment, a prejudice he cannot justify or account for.

From then on, he does not own a slave. And in his will many years later, he forces his son-in-law to free all his slaves to get his large inheritance and petitions Congress to end slavery.

- 4) **Internal Acknowledgement.** After norming we do need the viduy confession that I violated the norm. This is the acknowledgement. I

think again we have simplified this too much. It is really two steps. First, we need internally recognize that we violated a norm. Much of life is avoiding this internal acknowledgement which is why we can repeat over and over the same transgression and maybe with many different people. That internal recognition or acknowledgment precedes the external acknowledgment to others and the harmed party.

- 5) **Guilt.** Jewish guilt is a punch line. Guilt is so Jewish. Jews make a big deal at least implicitly if not by long essays about differentiating guilt and shame. Jews are famous for guilt not for shame. Guilt tripping someone is telling them they have committed a wrong. Shaming someone is telling them they are wrong. The difference between a bad behavior or action and a bad person.

When we tell our children you did wrong but that does not mean you are wrong—we make a very important point to them. I never fully appreciated this difference and the importance of this difference.

At this moment American society does not take this difference seriously. Too much of today emphasizes people's identity as tied to their doing something wrong. But identity—race, sex, sexual orientation—is about things that cannot be changed. But Judaism recognizes that repentance is all about things that can be changed because we are both capable of and will commit vices and sins. In this fundamental way, Judaism is against identity politics. And this perspective goes very deep.

One of the messages I think of from the Days of Awe is that identity is much less important than behavior and action. The **what** is more important than the **who**.

So, I would like us to think about how this might change how we go about talking with other people and confronting our national politics.

6) **Behavior Change.** Of course, the biggest problem of Repentance is changing behavior—committing ourselves to not repeating the norm violation. Viduy does not guarantee this. I would say being clear about the norm and making an internal acknowledgement are keys.

But as behavioral economics has taught us, behavior change is hard because we humans naturally default to habits and behavior change is typically about breaking habits. And we all know how hard that is. That is why by after about six weeks, 80% of New Year's resolutions are broken.

We cannot try to improve all our virtues at once. Again, Franklin is instructive. In his Autobiography, he writes that as a youth he kept a book of 13 virtues and evaluated his performance on them: Frugality, Orderliness, Temperance, Moderation, Industry and others. But he recognized that he could not improve all the virtues at once. As he wrote "I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once." Instead, he tried to improve one each week.<sup>2</sup>

Focus change on individual ones. Work serially on behavior change not in parallel. And recognize it will not be quick but a process of breaking bad habits and forming new ones.

That means the Days of Awe are annual, repeated every year. And that means that Repentance is not one and done. It is a lifelong process. We are never going to be perfect. We will all sin again and we will all have to work at it. The goal is not perfection but improvement.

7) **Growth.** Not only is freedom inherent in Repentance but so is growth. Inherent in the notion that we can break our bad habits, that we can

do tshuva, is that all of us are capable of human growth and improvement. We need to commit to that personally.

I take it one of the great things we do on the High Holidays is rededicating ourselves to growing. Becoming better and better—be a grower and associate with growers. They are very special people, the ones you want to learn from and befriend. They will rub off on you.

Speaking of growth makes me troubled by the discussion of shuva and the linking of Shuva or return with repentance and Tshuva.

If growth is a key outcome of repentance, it is a rejection of returning. Growth means we are not returning, but we are moving beyond where we were. Growth is not going back to the same place or being but moving beyond the place we were when we violated the norms. So, I think we need to not talk about shuva but conceive of tshuva differently.

**Atonement.** As I said I have long both enjoyed and been haunted by the book *Atonement*. I felt it was a great book, but it did not sit right with me. Jews understand atonement as something between God and man for our failure in the spiritual realm, in the way of relating to God's laws independent of people.

I would like to offer a different view—maybe because I am atheist.

Maybe Repentance is about individual harms we do to other people, but Atonement is about the whole direction of our lives. It is NOT about this or that transgression or sin, but about how we orient our being. In this sense what we do on Yom Kippur is less confess about a sin to this person or a harm to that friend or acquaintance but be challenged to think about what our life will amount to.

This is something people who are dying think a lot about. What has it all been for? It is one reason people who survive cancer or some other near-

death experience change their lives and stop wasting time on trivial things and obligations. They find a new purpose.

Maybe the whole Yom Kippur service is about imagining the end of your life and how you will give account of the whole of it. Maybe that is why we associate the kittel with the shroud—not as purity but as confronting our death. Maybe also that is the whole purpose of the structure of the Unetaneh Tokef to make us realize this could be the end of our life and think of the whole Yom Kippur service as if it were a near death experience and a chance not just to confront this or that sin but the whole arc of what we are doing on this planet earth.

### **Forgiveness.**

Why is forgiveness in the sequence of Repentance and Atonement? It is a different kind of action—not the sinner but the sinned against. Why do we have it in Yom Kippur at all?

I think it is because **not forgiving** is a kind of sin. It is a violation of our relationship with another person. We are reminded that being able to forgive a person who has asked for it and shows willingness to change is important . . . as is helping them to change their behavior.

If we are not to be expelled from the land of Israel yet again and peace is to reign, we and the Palestinians will need a lot of forgiveness. There has been some remarkable forgiveness in the region, but we need there to be some after this horrific Gaza war.

There is an interesting book called the *Place of Tides* about Norway—a country I love—that talks about the power of forgiveness. At the end of the book the British farmer and writer talks about the protagonist—an older Norwegian woman who goes to the outer islands of Norway to harvest eiderdown feathers from ducks the way her family did it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He went to Norway to be with her.

I had been drawn to Anna because she seemed heroically tough—and she was tough, but her real superpower was forgiveness. She knew that a life full of other people meant accepting their weaknesses and still being there

for them. I had mistaken Anna for a loner. I thought she went to the island for the same reason I had: to get away from others. And perhaps she had, but the truth was that she lived surrounded by people who loved and admired her...The lesson she taught me was not about toughing it out. Or being as hard and judgmental as an Old Testament prophet. She was showing me that a good life was about forgiveness—accepting others' flaw as we hope the might in turn forgive ours. Anna showed me how much we all need each other and how empty it is to be alone.

1. Benjamin Franklin to John Waring, 17 December 1763.  
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-10-02-0214>
2. Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, Chapter 9.  
<https://www.kellscraft.com/FranklinAutobio/FranklinAutobiographyCh09.html>