

Repenting for Antisemitism: “To Elevate Evil into a State of Goodness”¹

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This paper examines repentance as a practice of transformation that aims to improve relations between the Jewish and Christian communities but also changes Christian theology itself. In his lectures, *On Repentance*, Orthodox rabbi and philosopher Joseph Soloveitchik maintains that “it is the memory of sin that releases the power...to do greater things than ever before. The energy of sin can be used to bring one to new heights.”² My subtitle invokes Soloveitchik’s claim that a certain “quality of repentance...elevates evil to a state of goodness.”³ Following Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah* (1170-1180), Soloveitchik unpacks the interlocking precepts of *teshuvah*, the Hebrew term for repentance that literally translates as turning back or returning to God. The basic precepts of repentance are not unlike the three-step process of the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance. What attracts me, a Lutheran theologian, to the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance and the Jewish ritual observance of *teshuvah* is precisely their clearly outlined set of obligations that provide texture and structure to the process.

Repentance, in Soloveitchik’s startling declaration, has the power to transform historical wrongdoing into a state of productive and constructive “goodness.” This is an audacious hope, even in religious communities, where the teachings and practices of repentance appear to lie increasingly fallow; it seems outlandish. The language of repentance has largely been replaced by that of reconciliation. The terminology of reconciliation is popular in the fields of transitional justice, cultural memory, politics, and theology, while penance sounds quaint and antiquated, too “religious” for serious consideration in the areas of politics, law, and psychology. A quick search confirms that there are over ten times more titles on “reconciliation” than on “repentance” in the Library of Congress and the libraries of Boston College

¹ Pinchas Peli, ed. *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 255.

² Ibid, *On Repentance*, 254-255.

³ Ibid, *On Repentance*, 255.

and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. With some intrepid exceptions, penance, and repentance are of interest mostly to medieval historians.⁴ In his introduction to *Civic Repentance*, Amitai Etzioni notes the peculiar absence of this concept from public discourse.⁵ While the concepts of reconciliation, forgiveness, and memory also have religious roots, they are more readily appropriated than guilt and repentance across the academic and political spectrum because these latter terms are more prominently associated with religion. And even within religious discourse, they seem to have lost cachet.

The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, decided to rebrand the sacrament of penance in its post-council liturgical revisions. When the revised rite was published in December 1973, its name was officially changed.⁶ The sacrament of penance was henceforth and “throughout the document...called ‘reconciliation’.”⁷ Subsequently, this new name appeared alongside the old in most Vatican publications, such as the International Theological Commission’s 1983 “Penance and Reconciliation”⁸ and Pope John Paul II’s 1984 “Reconciliation and Penance.”⁹ The new language about reconciliation was supposed to address the rapid decline in confessional observance and the perceived “contemporary crisis of penance.”¹⁰

However, the shift from penance to reconciliation is more than a matter of names: reconciliation focuses on the goal rather than the process. It strives for the restoration of relations between offender, God, and/or the victim. Penance, on the other hand, is about practice. It is an exercise that cultivates change, encourages service, and exacts compensation from perpetrators. Reconciliation is warm and happy, while repentance signals strain, effort, suffering, and discipline. Reconciliation, and even more so, forgiveness, is imagined as a dramatic moment, while penance requires time and patience; reconciliation is received passively as a grace, while penance is an active pursuit. Reconciliation is a relational concept. In reconciliation, victims are asked to relinquish some of their rights and resentments, while penance imposes obligations, precepts, commandments, and conditions on perpetrators. Reconciliation puts the onus on victims, while repentance demands change

⁴ Exceptions include: Linda Radzik, *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Antony Duff, “Penance, Punishment and the Limits of Community,” *Punishment and Society* 5, no. 3 (2003): 295–312; Stephen Garvey, “Punishment as Atonement,” *Cornell Law Faculty Publications* 264 (1999): 1801–1858; Amitai Etzioni, ed., *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); Amitai Etzioni, ed., *Civic Repentance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

⁵ Amitai Etzioni, “Civic Repentance,” in *Civic Repentance*, vii–xii.

⁶ *Rite of Penance*, 1974, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Inc., <http://liturgyof-fice.org/Resources/Penance/Penance-Intro.pdf> [January 29, 2021].

⁷ Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M., *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 205.

⁸ International Theological Commission, *Penance and Reconciliation*, 1982. (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1982_riconciliazione-penitenza_en.html) [January 11, 2021].

⁹ John Paul II *Apostolic Exhortation, Reconciliation and Penance* (1984) http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html) [January 11, 2021].

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, *Penance and Reconciliation*, II. 2, II.4, III.1.

from perpetrators. For all of these reasons, it is worth “returning” to repentance and *teshuvah* in the aftermath of atrocity and systemic evil in order to map the lengthy and circuitous process of transformation.

Jean Amery wrote his essay on “Resentments” amid the Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt am Main in 1965. This became the fourth chapter in his seminal book *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations of a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. Here, he eloquently and passionately defended the right of victims to deny reconciliation and to hold on to “hard feelings” and “grudges.”¹¹

In two decades of contemplating what happened to me, I believe I have recognized that forgiving and forgetting induced by social pressure is immoral. Whoever lazily and cheaply forgives, subjugates himself to the social and biological time-sense, which is also called the “natural” one. Natural consciousness of time actually is rooted in the physiological process of wound-healing and became part of the social conception of reality. But precisely for this reason it is not only extramoral, but also antimoral in character. Man has the right and the privilege to declare himself in disagreement with every natural occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about.¹²

Amery defended his resentments in principle, because he demanded nothing less than the “annulment of time” and the “negation of the negation” before any forgiveness was to be extended to the German nation.¹³ His resentments—including of German youth—intended to arouse “self-mistrust” and the desire to “reject everything, but absolutely everything, that [Nazi Germany] accomplished in the days of its deepest degradation, and what here and there may appear as harmless as the Autobahns.”¹⁴ Nothing short of “the spiritual reduction to pulp” in an “actual practice” of repentance was required to alleviate his trauma and resentment. By 1965, this process had barely begun in West Germany. And Amery saw very little hope that such “an extravagant moral daydream” would ever come to pass: “Nothing of the sort will happen, I know, despite all the worthy efforts of German intellectuals.”¹⁵ As a secular thinker, he famously disavowed atonement as something that “has only theological meaning and therefore is not relevant for me.”¹⁶

Amery underestimates the possibilities of atonement, which in my view, should not be relegated to the heavens. Repentance, taken seriously, implements an “externalized and actualized” performance of steps that take place in “the field of history.”¹⁷ As the “culture of contrition” and the broad program of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* [working off the past] gained momentum in Germany, some of

¹¹ Jean Amery, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 68.

¹² *Ibid.*, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

what Amery envisioned occurred: the cultural and political conditions created by National Socialism shifted. Susan Neiman, an American Jewish philosopher living in Berlin, provocatively titled her book *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* to make that point. There, she examines whether and how the strategies of “working-off-the-past can prepare the ground for freer futures.”¹⁸ Comparing German practices of accountability and reparation to U.S. American cultural memory of slavery and racial segregation, she concludes that the German penitential regime, initially enforced by the Allied victors but later embraced voluntarily, successfully transformed the culture. While Germany is still struggling with the persistent presence of antisemitism, racism, and nationalism, a resilient, racially and religiously pluralistic democracy emerged from the ashes of National Socialism and the Holocaust. For Neiman, as well as other scholars who compare the German case to Austria and Japan, this political and cultural transformation is linked to the collective embrace of repentance as a personal and political practice.¹⁹

Jewish-Christian Relations after the Holocaust

The history of Jewish-Christian relations after the Holocaust provides another case study by which to query the power of repentance to bring about theological and institutional change. Until 1945, most Christians and Christian institutions found nothing morally or theologically objectionable in a habitual denigration of Jews and Judaism. Most Christians faithfully repeated that God had rejected the Jews and punished the people of Israel for failing to recognize and accept Jesus as Messiah. Sporadically, these doctrines erupted into actual violence ranging from expulsions to pogroms, from personal assault to the destruction of entire communities. Casual violence in the form of verbal and artistic defamation is deeply embedded in the history of the Christian West.²⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether has called anti-Judaism “the left hand of Christology,” pointing to its iconic depictions in paintings such as the “Living Cross,” where a hand emerges from the left side of the cross to stab the blind-folded synagogue through the heart.

¹⁸ Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York: Farrar Strauss, and Giroux, 2019), 19.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Thomas Berger, *War, Guilt and World Politics after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); David Art, *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Robert Chazan, *From Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. Norton, 2014).



Hans Fries, *La Croix Vivante*, 1505²¹

Violence against Jews, anti-Judaism, has taken root at the very center of the Christian message, Ruether argued, and extended into all areas of Christian liturgy and doctrine, exegesis and music, art and literature, architecture and education. Christians habitually characterized and condemned the people of Israel as blind, obdurate, hypocritical, deceitful, arrogant, and conspiratorial. Consequently, they exacted punishment from Jews in the form of repression, harassment, ghettoization, exile, and murder.

The “teaching of contempt,” as Jules Isaac called this body of anti-Jewish doctrines, only became an embarrassment to Christian churches after the European

²¹ Reproduced by permission from Art and History Museum Fribourg, Switzerland. For more information about the iconography of the Living Cross, cf. the blogsite created by Mariano Akerman <http://documenta-akermariano.blogspot.com/2010/12/living-cross.html> [January 11, 2021]; Oberlin College Allen Museum, [http://allenartcollection.oberlin.edu/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/search\\$0040/0/title-asc?t:state:flow=479888ab-79f2-46d2-a6d1-4424424635f1](http://allenartcollection.oberlin.edu/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/search$0040/0/title-asc?t:state:flow=479888ab-79f2-46d2-a6d1-4424424635f1) [January 11, 2021]; Achim Timmermann, “The Avenging Crucifix: Some Observations on the Iconography of the Living Cross,” *Gesta* 40, no. 2 (2001): 141-160.

genocide of the Jews.²² The images and reports of extermination rattled the conscience of Christian leaders and activists in a way that the “mere” conflagration of hundreds of synagogues across Germany in November 1938 had not. It bears remembering that burning down synagogues remained within the acceptable boundaries of Christian anti-Judaism. Martin Luther had counseled authorities to do exactly that; his writings against the Jews remained in circulation, republished and distributed in 1938 by the Bishop of Thuringia, Martin Sasse.²³ Only a handful of pastors and priests protested publicly or were arrested for condemning the conflagration of synagogues in their sermons the following Sunday. There were essentially no street protests or offers of sanctuary to Jewish communities by local churches.²⁴ Although the exceptions should not be minimized, for the majority, theological anti-Judaism was too ingrained and normalized to allow for forceful and unambiguous resistance against the politics of National Socialism.²⁵ Without denying the exceptional and heroic efforts that were made, or the national and local differences that existed, the paralysis of Christendom in the face of genocidal antisemitism demands a reckoning with theological teachings, scriptural interpretations, and liturgical practices. The eradication of the habitual denigration of Judaism requires a prolonged process of repentance, which Alice Eckardt recalls James Parkes explaining, will take at least three hundred years.²⁶

Repentance means a return to God’s path and commandments. It is the same word in all three Abrahamic monotheistic religions. As Muslim scholar Mahmoud Ayoub explains: “Like the Hebrew *teshuvah* and the Greek *metanoia*, the [Arabic] word *tawbah* means ‘oft turning’ to God... The active participle *tawwab* implies an attitude of constant turning... Repentance is not a metaphysical or theological

²² Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964).

²³ Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies, 1543,” trans. Martin H. Bertram, in *Luther’s Works 47: The Christian in Society IV*, ed. Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 268-271. See also, “Topographie des Terrors/Gedenkstätte deutscher Widerstand,” in *Überall Luthers Worte: Martin Luther im Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, 2017), 117-127.

²⁴ We know this from the few exceptions, such as Elisabeth Schmitz, who urged exactly such responses. See: Katharina von Kellenbach, “Dialogue in Times of War: Christian Women’s Rescue of Jews in Hitler’s Germany,” in *Women in Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 77-80; Manfred Gailus, *Mir aber zerriss es das Herz: der stille Widerstand der Elisabeth Schmitz* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

²⁵ This is not to deny or minimize the resistance to National Socialism at the level of the hierarchy, such as Pius XI’s 1937 encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge/With Deep Anxiety*, or the Protestant church’s battle over the Aryan Paragraph in 1935 that resulted in the break-away Confessing Church, or many other individual acts of solidarity and rescue. There were also, already, international interfaith campaigns, especially in the United States and Great Britain, that mobilized Christian leaders to protest, intervene, and assist Europe’s Jews. See: Victoria Barnett, “Track Two Diplomacy, 1933-1939: International Responses from Catholics, Jews, and Ecumenical Protestants to Events in Nazi Germany,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 27, no. 1 (2014): 76-86.

²⁶ Alice Eckardt, “Revising Christian Teaching: The Work of the Christian Scholars Group,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity’s Sacred Obligation*, ed. Mary C. Boys (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 264.

concept, but rather a practical attitude or state of moral and religious consciousness.²⁷ Although repentance refers to a return, it is not a backward-oriented, restorative move. The point of repentance is not to return to the past but rather to cultivate the conditions for an open and different future. All three Abrahamic religions mobilize people's ability to reach for wholeness, connection, and fullness of life, and they extend this possibility to any and all repentant sinners. As Hannah Arendt puts it:

without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.²⁸

Repentance affirms the possibility of change and transformation. The past is not the future, and we are not condemned to repeat the same beliefs and actions in endless cycles of repetition. In order to atone for wrongdoing, repentance requires recognition, expressions of remorse, truthful confession, and willingness to engage in penitential service that renders restitution to the victim, community, and God. While Jew-hatred is deeply entrenched in Christianity and the history of Western civilization, it is neither essential nor inevitable. Antisemitism is not eternal, despite Hendryk Broder's book title making that claim.²⁹ Rather, repentance can transform traditions of contempt into teachings of respect, even if such a prospect appears little more than an "extravagant moral daydream," as Jean Amery put it.³⁰

How does this happen? According to Soloveitchik's reading of Maimonides, there must be intellectual and moral recognition of one's sins (*hakarot haḥet*), as well as feelings of remorse and self-loathing (*ḥarata*). These two precepts align with the Christian mandate of *contritio cordis*, heartfelt contrition, which involves both cognitive understanding and moral emotion. Jewish practice requires a firm commitment from a *ba'al* or *ba'alat teshuvah* (penitent) to avoid future repetition of the wrongful act (*azivat haḥet*) as well as restitution and compensation (*peira'on*), which must be rendered either directly to the victim or to the community in general. These two clearly spelled out precepts find a faint echo in the Christian sacramental step of *satisfactio operis*, which traditionally involved the performance of specific tasks of charity, prayer, and austerities. Both the Roman Catholic and the Jewish process of teshuvah require verbal confession (*vidui - confessio oris*) which can be made personally or within a liturgical ritual context. This commandment to confess has puzzled Jewish commentators, since there is no priest who would receive such a confession. Maimonides explains the need for verbal

²⁷ Mahmoud Ayoub, "Repentance in the Islamic Tradition," in *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Amitai Etzioni (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 98.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 247.

²⁹ Hendryk Broder, *Der ewige Antisemit: Über Sinn und Funktion eines beständigen Gefühls* (Berlin: Berlin Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986).

³⁰ Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits*, 79.

articulation of wrongdoing on the basis of the Talmudic principle that “unspoken matters that remain in the heart are not significant matters” (b. Kiddushin 49b).³¹ According to Maimonides, writes Soloveitchik, “confession is the concretization of repentance. Speech, the verbalizing of confession, endows the thought of repentance with reality. It is the climax and final chord of the long and torturous internal process of repentance.”³² Therefore, he argues, the book of Leviticus, which addresses and regulates the offering of guilt sacrifices, adds verbal confession as an extra step: “He shall confess the sin he has committed upon it” (Lev 5:5).

It is the performative, external completion of steps and tasks that make repentance especially relevant for the context of antisemitism. Culpable histories must be publicly expressed and acknowledged in order to be expiated. David Blumenthal likens teshuvah to a spiral, which can begin at any point, and reaches deeper over time as it changes a person at ever more profound levels.³³ Soloveitchik similarly uses organic metaphors for a “repentance that sprouts forth and grows in the course of a long and drawn-out process typified by doubt and speculation, soul-searching and spiritual reckoning.”³⁴ Can this spiritual process that culminates in atonement with God on Yom Kippur be taken out of its liturgical context and applied to more profane intellectual and moral processes of “coming to terms” with antisemitism?

Repentance in Church Documents after the Shoah

In the aftermath of the Shoah, numerous declarations on Jews and Judaism were issued by national churches as well as ecumenical and international church-bodies. The sheer number of synods, assemblies, councils, commissions, and review panels that were convened to study, debate, and vote on declarations on the Jews, Judaism, Christian-Jewish relations, and the Holocaust is remarkable.³⁵ These statements form a body of work that can be examined for insights into the process of repentance for the Holocaust and Christian Jew-hatred.³⁶ They constitute

³¹ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 232.

³² *Ibid.*, 232-233.

³³ David R. Blumenthal, “Repentance and Forgiveness,” *CrossCurrents*, 48 no. 1 (Spring, 1998). See also: Henry Abramson, *Maimonides on Teshuvah: The Ways of Repentance* (Touro College, 2017). https://touro-scholar.touro.edu/lcas_books/1/ [January 11, 2021].

³⁴ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 231.

³⁵ Helga Croner, *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Paulist 1977); Helga Croner, *More Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); Franklin Sherman, ed., *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue, Vol 1: The Road to Reconciliation 1945-1985* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011); Franklin Sherman, ed., *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue, Vol 2: Building A New Relationship 1986-2013* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014); Franklin Sherman, “The Road to Reconciliation: Protestant Church Statements on Christian-Jewish Relations,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 241-252; Eugene J Fisher, “Catholic Teaching on Jews and Judaism: an Evolution in Process,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 252-263.

³⁶ Alana Vincent, “Rituals of Reconciliation: How Consideration of Rituals Can Inform Readings of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue After the Holocaust,” in *Interreligious Relations and the Negotiation of Ritual Boundaries: Explorations in Interrituality*, ed. Marianne Moyaert (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 179-196.

a peculiar form of theological work, distinct from both the academic production of scholarly theology and liturgical and homiletic proclamations of faith.

As a distinct vector of theological production, such statements may not be as effective as their proponents like to assume. Eva Fleischner has noted that “most Christians have no idea of the recommendations various churches have made in the past forty or so years.”³⁷ Official church statements aim to articulate communal principles of faith, but they are regularly ignored, taught neither in seminaries nor in churches. Nevertheless, these Christian declarations about Jews and Judaism, the Holocaust and antisemitism, demonstrate a growing recognition of theological error and willingness to institute theological, liturgical, exegetical, and educational changes. In Franklin Sherman’s words, as a body of work, they add up to a “major ‘turning,’ what the Hebrew term *teshuvah* denotes, at the official levels.”³⁸ And Eva Fleischner affirmed in 2005, the churches engaged in “serious soul searching and, in many cases, ...a conversion of heart and repentance” in response to the Shoah.³⁹

Immediately after 1945, national and international church bodies rushed to declare antisemitism a “sin against God” (WCC 1948) and a “denial of the spirit and teaching of our Lord” (WCC 1946), but the precise function, shape, and history of anti-Judaism remained opaque and largely unacknowledged. It took two decades before the central charge of Jewish guilt for the crucifixion of Christ was officially retracted by various church bodies, most notably in the Second Vatican Council’s *Nostra Aetate*. Many Christians, and certainly all Nazis, were convinced that Jews deserved to be punished. For centuries, Jews were pictured as persecutors of Christ, members of a conspiracy to entrap the innocent man of God. God himself had rejected this people. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the entire people was guilty and had called “his blood upon us and our children” (Mt 27:25). This concept of “collective guilt” has historically applied exclusively to the people of Israel. Punishing the Jews was God’s plan and, by extension, every Christian’s duty, a righteous act of self-defense. Contemporary conspiracy myths, such as *Protocol of the Elders of Zion* and the recent QAnon conspiracy, build upon the Gospel passion narrative of entrapment and wrongful conviction of Jesus by a cabal of powerful Jewish leaders.

The atrocity of the Shoah created the possibility for guilt reversal: for the first time in history, the murderers of Jews were seen as guiltier than their Jewish victims. This “sea change” did not occur, though, until the mid-1960s. The first church body to disavow the deicide charge as a “tragic misunderstanding” was the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in the USA in 1964, who wrote, “To be sure, Jesus was crucified by some soldiers at the instigation of some Jews. But this cannot be construed as imputing corporate guilt to every Jew in Jesus’ day, much less the Jewish people in subsequent generations.”⁴⁰ A year later, in 1965, the Second

³⁷ Eva Fleischner, “The Shoah and Jewish Christian Relations,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 12.

³⁸ Franklin Sherman, “The Road to Reconciliation,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 241.

³⁹ Eva Fleischner, “The Shoah and Jewish Christian Relations,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 10.

⁴⁰ Sherman, *Bridges*, Vol 1, 59.

Vatican Council in Rome overwhelmingly passed *Nostra Aetate*, widely acclaimed as the revolutionary moment in Jewish-Christian relations. It similarly states:

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.⁴¹

The attribution of Jewish guilt had been the cornerstone on which the election of the Gentile Christian church was built. It establishes the reason for God's rejection and replacement of the people of Israel. Any repentance for the churches' silence and complicity in the Holocaust, therefore, must begin with superseding supersessionism and the replacement of replacement theology.

In their 2002 statement, "A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People," the American ecumenical Christian Scholars Group, founded in 1969, laid out ten "sacred obligations" to demand theological, exegetical, liturgical, and educational changes in light of centuries of anti-Judaism. The book, published in 2005, belongs to the genre of consultative theological work. The platform of ten obligations opens with a denunciation of the erroneous traditional portrayal of Jews as "collectively responsible for the death of Jesus and therefore accursed by God... We acknowledge with shame the suffering this distorted portrayal has brought upon the Jewish people. We repent of this teaching of contempt. Our repentance requires us to build a new teaching of respect."⁴² Repentance grounds the search for new interpretations that seek to integrate the theological integrity and religious vitality of rabbinic Judaism into Christians theology, exegesis, and ethics. Revising the Jewish-Christian relation is, the authors argue, "a central and indispensable obligation of theology in our time:"

It is essential that Christianity both understand and represent Judaism accurately, not only as a matter of justice for the Jewish people, but also for the integrity of Christian faith, which we cannot proclaim without reference to Judaism. Moreover since there is a unique bond between Christianity and Judaism, revitalizing our appreciation of Jewish religious life will deepen our Christian faith.⁴³

Self-knowledge triggered by repentance results in not only negative emotions, such as shame and self-mistrust, but innovation and creativity. Repentance is a future-

⁴¹ Ibid, 168.

⁴² Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, "A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People" in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, xiii-xiv.

⁴³ Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, "A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People" in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, xiv.

oriented practice that generates new paradigms and patterns of relating to self and others.

Paul's Olive Tree and the Biology of Grafting

Since *Nostra Aetate*, Paul has become the guarantor of new covenantal thinking. Instead of speaking of superseding and replacing the Jews in God's one and only covenant, Romans 11 introduces the metaphor of the olive tree, into which a new branch has been grafted:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. ... For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree (Romans 11: 17-18, 24).

The science of plant biology and grafting makes the metaphor of the olive tree even more compelling. Biologist and historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger has written extensively about the biology of grafting as well as its metaphorical use in epistemology. Grafting, he points out, provides distinct benefits over other techniques of biological cultivation, such as hybridization, transplantation, and vaccination. In hybridization, transplantation, and vaccination, the genetic material of two different plants mixes and mingles, is absorbed and integrated. In grafting, the genetic difference between the two plants remains for the duration of the lifetime of the plant(s). The graft is neither a parasite that destroys the host, nor does it diminish the growth of the original tree:

Despite complete bonding at the interface, the grafts retain their specific genetic identity, although the base plant influences the development and quality of the graft, which grows more or less, and bears more or less fruit. However, they remain heteronomous to each other.⁴⁴

This suggests that in Paul's metaphor, the Christian graft does not take over the Jewish root, nor does its sap all of its strength thereby harming the growth of the "Jewish" branches. This image of the grafted olive tree provides an alternative model by which to envision Jewish-Christian relations, one not consumed by covenantal rivalry, exclusivism, and triumphalism.⁴⁵ The metaphor of the Gentile church as a wild graft plugged into the established olive tree permits and celebrates difference and dependence within covenantal theology. Such covenantal plurality

⁴⁴ Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, "Pfpfen in Experimentalsystemen," in *Impfen, Pfpfen, Transplantieren*, ed. Uwe Wirth (Berlin: Kadmos Verlag, 2011), 66.

⁴⁵ Cf., the title of Luise Schottroff and Marie Theres Wacker, ed., *Von der Wurzel getragen: Christlich-feministische Exegese in Auseinandersetzung mit dem Antijudaismus* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), viii.

is exceptional, as even Paul retreats to the more prevalent narrative tradition of filial competition. In Galatians 4:21-31, he claims the Church to be the sole legitimate heir of Abraham through the free woman Sarah, while the Jews are heirs of the older brother Ishmael, born to the enslaved Hagar. With his two wives and two sons, Abraham embodies the competitive conflict over the attentions of the F/father.⁴⁶ This legacy of patriarchal rivalry and exclusive identity formation has been critiqued often and eloquently. It begins with the rivalry of Cain and Abel, as Regina Schwartz argues in *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*.⁴⁷ And it continues with Jacob and Esau's lament, "Has God only one Blessing?" cited by Mary Boys in her eponymous rereading of the covenantal dilemma.⁴⁸ The notion that election must entail rejection has been the source of much historical repression and persecution. It underlies the violence of the left hand of Christology that emerges from the "living cross" to stab the synagogue, and the imagery of the triumphant Ecclesia who looks upon the dethroned and destroyed Synagoga.⁴⁹ The triumph of one necessitates the annihilation of the other.

Repenting Supersessionism: Religious Pluralism

There is broad consensus across Christian denominations and Christian theology that anti-Judaism is an evil that ought to be avoided and that supersessionism is implicated. There is no agreement, though, on how exactly supersessionism can be replaced. In light of the covenantal model of the grafted olive tree, I want to examine two pathways that have emerged in recent years. The first pathway is developed by scholars in the Jewish-Christian dialogue who take the metaphor of the grafted olive tree as validation of theological difference, diversity, and religious pluralism within the language of the covenant. The second pathway is taken by Christian theologians, often evangelical, who understand Paul's olive tree as invitation to affirm a Jewish-Christian intimacy and affection that blurs the boundaries between the two religious communities and traditions. The difference between these two positions is partly denominational, but more importantly, hinges on the legitimacy of Christian mission to the Jews.

Members of the Christian Scholars Group exemplify the first pathway. The seventh statement of their "A Sacred Obligation" explicitly repudiates any and all

⁴⁶ Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, "Abraham and his Family at the Interfaith Border Edge," in *Women in Inter-religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille and Jillian Maxey (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock 2013), 88-107.

⁴⁷ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁴⁸ Mary Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Heinz Schreckenberg, *The Jews in Christian Art: An Illustrated History*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1996).

missionary campaigns directed at Jews: “Christians should not target Jews for conversion.”⁵⁰ This statement directly responds to the missionary mandate, known as The Great Commission, that concludes the Gospel of Matthew: “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). Christians have taken this as an obligation to share the “good news” with the world in general, and with the Jews in particular. “A Sacred Obligation” rejects this out of repentance for the violence it caused.

In his contribution “Covenant and Conversion,” Philip Cunningham critiques the triumphalist confidence that lies at the core of missionary campaigns that feel “competent to blame others for failing to ‘believe’ the proclamation of the good news.”⁵¹ Theology, he cautions, is a human enterprise that must remain cognizant of the supreme sovereignty and transcendence of God: “no human being can know the mysterious workings of God’s purposes and grace in the heart of another.”⁵² The faith of medieval Jews “who refused forced baptism out of fidelity to their covenant with God and so were slain by fanatical Christians cannot be faulted for rejecting the gospel.”⁵³ Indeed, their martyrdom and steadfastness inspires respect. Cunningham counsels eschatological humility: “Conceivably, at the end of days Jews will come to appreciate why Christians revere Christ Jesus, while Christians will come to value Jewish love for the Torah. Both may profoundly recognize the presence of their divine covenant partner in the other and so will exclaim with Paul, ‘Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.’”⁵⁴

For theologians such as Phil Cunningham, repentance for anti-Judaism leads to humility and requires a theological paradigm shift toward religious pluralism. Indeed, in another publication, Cunningham draws on Walter Cardinal Kasper’s felicitous phrase of Judaism as the “sacrament of every otherness.”⁵⁵ In the Jewish other, Christianity confronts, and either accepts or rejects, difference and diversity. The false equation of monotheism with monoculture has long authorized the violent suppression of heresy and blasphemy, dissent and difference. Cunningham disavows the vision of a world in which every living human being is baptized in Christ, which would eradicate all other cultivars of religious wisdom and observance, leaving a much poorer and diminished world. He questions the ultimate goal of Christian mission and its universalist vision for “equating the church with the kingdom of God. However, the church is the servant of God’s kingdom, not the kingdom itself...”⁵⁶ Such a vision of the triumph of the Christian church aims to

⁵⁰ Christian Scholars Group, “A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, xvi.

⁵¹ Philip A. Cunningham, “Covenant and Conversion,” 157.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 158, citing Rom 11:33.

⁵⁵ Phil Cunningham in “Judaism as Otherness” in *Jewish-Christian Relations* (2/29/2004) https://www.jcrelations.net/article/judaism-as-sacrament-of-otherness.html?tx_extension_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_extension_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&cHash=f0d431225705ae589d2697cfe7f0d25e [January 21, 2021].

⁵⁶ Phil A. Cunningham, “Covenant and Conversion,” *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 160.

control and conquer multiplicity and difference, beginning with the Jewish “No” to Jesus proclaimed by Christians as the messiah to Israel.

The Vietnamese Catholic theologian Peter Phan, also a member of the Christian Scholars Group, similarly pursues a “Christian theology of religious pluralism.” He sees the Jewish-Christian relation as the foundation for all other interfaith encounters. The Asian religions, not constrained by narratives of fraternal rivalry and monotheistic monoculture, have more easily coexisted and allowed for multiple religious belonging. For Phan, religious plurality exists as “not just a matter of fact but also a matter of principle.”⁵⁷ His theological project, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, however, earned him a “critical notification” by the doctrinal commission of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2007.⁵⁸ Phan is looking for a different covenantal model that envisions a “process of complementarity, enrichment, and even correction [which] is two-way, or even reciprocal.”⁵⁹ This approximates and returns to Paul’s metaphor of the grafted olive tree, where reciprocity and relationality ensure vitality and reproductive success not only of the graft but also of the host and its branches. An “inclusivist-pluralist Christology” understands its vital dependence on the Other not as weakness and diminishment but as enrichment and fortification.⁶⁰



Tree grafted with 40 different types of fruits⁶¹

⁵⁷ Peter Phan, “Jesus as the Universal Savior,” *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 133.

⁵⁸ Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2004). See also: John L. Allen Jr., “Why Is Fr. Phan Under Investigation?” *National Catholic Reporter* (September 14, 2007), <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/why-fr-peter-phan-under-investigation> [January 11, 2021].

⁵⁹ Peter Phan, “Jesus as the Universal Savior,” *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 134-135.

⁶⁰ Peter Phan, “Jesus as the Universal Savior,” *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 131.

⁶¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/nextfuckinglevel/comments/gbnx56/tree_grafted_with_40_different_types_of_fruits/ [June 2, 2020].

Repenting Supersessionism: Jewish-Christian Affection and Intimacy

A different approach to repentance for anti-Judaism is exemplified by the “Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology.” Its members are committed to develop Christian theologies that affirm and respect Judaism, but they are unwilling to completely denounce missionary movements. This leads to an embrace of the Jewish other, which seeks to “unite” Jews and Christians “in the Messiah.”⁶² In their mission statement, the “Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology” writes:

The Society understands post-supersessionism as a family of theological perspectives that affirms God’s irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people as a central and coherent part of ecclesial teaching. It seeks to overcome understandings of the New Covenant that entail the abrogation or obsolescence of God’s covenant with the Jewish people, of the Torah as a demarcator of Jewish communal identity, or of the Jewish people themselves. The Society welcomes participation from all who seek to advance post-supersessionist theology. The Society especially seeks to promote perspectives that remain faithful to core Christological convictions; that affirm the ekklesia’s identity as a table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles united in the Messiah; and that engage with Jewish thought and tradition as an expression of ecclesial partnership with the Jewish people as a whole.⁶³

The aim of establishing “table fellowship of Jews and Gentiles united in the Messiah” threatens to erase the genetic difference between the Jewish tree and its Christian branches. Groups, such as “Messianic Judaism,” “Friends of Israel,” and “Jews for Jesus” practice “table fellowship.” Jews who follow the Torah and observe kashrut do not practice table fellowship with Christians. They are not—not now and not ever—united around the belief in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.⁶⁴ As evangelical Protestant churches reach out in dialogue and support the state of Israel, their unwillingness to denounce missionary movements undermines their efforts.⁶⁵

What emerges is an affection and intimacy that fails to respect the genetic difference between Judaism and Christianity. For instance, increasingly Christians are

⁶² Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology, Mission: <https://www.spostst.org> [January 20, 2021].

⁶³ <https://www.spostst.org> [January 20, 2021].

⁶⁴ Mark Kinzer is president of the *Messianic Jewish Institute*, and author of multiple books: Mark S. Kinzer and Jennifer Rosner, *Israel’s Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, Wipf & Stock, 2011); *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen: The Resurrected Messiah, the Jewish People, and the Land of Promise* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books Wipf & Stock, 2018); Mark S. Kinzer *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock, 2015); Mark S. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005). Cf. Hans Boersma, “On Supersession,” *First Things* (December 5, 2019), <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/12/on-supersessionism> [January 11, 2021].

⁶⁵ See: Stephen Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Alan Middleman, Bryon Johnson and Nancy Isserman, eds., *Uneasy Allies?: Evangelical and Jewish Relations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Book, 2007); Jacob Ariel, *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

celebrating Jewish holidays (especially Passover) and appropriate Jewish liturgies and ceremonial garb (tallis, tefillin). When U.S. Vice President Mike Pence invited Rabbi Loren Jacobs of the Congregation Shema Yisrael to offer a commemorative prayer for the victims of the deadly shooting in the Pittsburgh Synagogue, Jacobs concluded the prayer “in the name of Jesus.” The rabbi is the leader of a “Messianic synagogue,” in other words, an evangelical church in Detroit, MI.⁶⁶ Such events deliberately violate and erase the boundary between Judaism and Christianity.⁶⁷ Another example is the conflict over the approval of the cable station “God TV” by the Israeli Council for Cable and Satellite Broadcasting.⁶⁸ Scandal erupted in the Israeli media when the TV station’s CEO, Ward Simpson, asserted both his Jewishness by virtue of his Jewish mother and his absolute right “to share the good news of Messiah with my own people,” proclaiming that “Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel.”⁶⁹ While evangelical Christianity is a strong political ally of the state of Israel, its investment and entanglement in missionary organizations such as the “Jews for Jesus,” “Friends of Israel,” “messianic Judaism,” “Christian Mission to Israel,” and “Christian Witness to Israel” erases the distinctions and particular expressions of communal Jewish life.⁷⁰

This new affection and embrace of Israel is explained as a form of repentance. For instance, Dan Hummel, the author of *Covenant Brothers: Evangelicals, Jews and U.S.-Israeli Relations*, explained in the *Washington Post* in 2019 why many evangelical Christians have begun to fast on Tisha B’Av:

On Aug. 10 and 11, many Jews worldwide observed the religious holiday of Tisha B’Av by fasting, praying and reading Bible passages related to the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians. Religious Jews have kept Tisha B’Av for centuries as a day of communal mourning. But this year they were joined by a growing number of evangelical Christians who now observe the holiday to lament the historical persecution of Jews by the church. The new

⁶⁶ Congregation Shema Israel, (<https://www.shema.com>) [January 21, 2021].

⁶⁷ Matthew Haag, “How a ‘Jews for Jesus’ Moment Backfired for Mike Pence” *New York Times*, Oct 30, 2018; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/30/us/mike-pence-rabbi-jacobs.html> [January 11, 2021].

⁶⁸ Judy Maltz, “‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ’ in Hebrew: Israel Green Lights New Evangelical God TV Channel,” *Haaretz*, (May 4, 2020) <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-god-tv-israel-un-wittingly-green-lights-new-evangelical-tv-channel-1.8819671> [January 11, 2021]; Joseph Krauss, “‘God TV’ Spat Exposes Tensions Between Israel, Evangelicals,” *AP News*, May 18, 2020, <https://ap-news.com/5e8c72a2c07852ed6cd5128cf36cece2> [January 11, 2021].

⁶⁹ Jeremy Sharon, “God TV CEO wants Jews to ‘reexamine claim Yeshua is Messiah,’” *Jerusalem Post*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/god-tv-ceo-wants-jews-to-reexamine-claim-yeshua-is-messiah-628016>; [January 11, 2021].

⁷⁰ To name only a few of the multiple Protestant mission organizations that are active in Israel: Friends of Israel (www.foi.org); Arbeitsgemeinschaft für das Messianische Zeugnis an Israel (www.amzi.org); International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (www.icej.org); Jews for Jesus (www.jewsforjesus.org); Christian Mission to Israel (www.cm2israel.org); Christian Witness to Israel (www.cwi.org.uk); International Mission to Jewish People (www.imjp.org); Evangeliumsdienst (<https://www.edi-online.de>); [January 11, 2021].

Christian Tisha B'Av calls for penance for past misdeeds—most especially by growing Christian support for Israel.⁷¹

Is the observance of Jewish rituals an appropriate form of Christian repentance? For Dan Hummel, “fusing religious observance, general support for Israel and public denunciations of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust” constitute “practices to atone for past sins.” But when Christians begin to celebrate Sukkot and blow the Shofar, when they put on prayer shawls and adopt Jewish symbols for their brand of Protestant Zionism, the distinctive particularity of the Jewish people is absorbed into the universal Christian Church. This is not repentance. Fusion under the primacy of Christianity ultimately harms the Jewish covenantal tradition and the Jewish people.

In terms of the biology of Paul’s metaphor, this turns Christianity into a parasite rather than a graft. A parasite (or virus) takes over the energy and vitality of the host organism and captures its nutrients for its own purposes. Often enough, this destroys the host. A graft, on the other hand, does not diminish the viability of the original plant. Taking Paul’s metaphor seriously requires not only self-interest in the health of the root, but appreciation for the insuperable, genetic differences of the fused plants. Neither conversion of the Jews nor the absorption of Jewish otherness into Christian theological principles is a genuine fruit of repentance.

Instead, it is the competition itself that must go, along with the strife for primacy. Therefore, it will also not suffice to merely reverse the hierarchy, as Mark Galli has recently suggested in an article in *Christianity Today*. In his reflections in “Killing Jesus’ Brothers and Sisters: Why did we turn on the Jews so quickly? And what do we do about it now?,” he concludes that Christianity must accept its secondary status in order to repent for centuries of Jew-hatred:

And then he [Paul] makes absolutely clear the relationship of Jews to Gentiles: Gentiles are like branches grafted on to the roots and the trunk of the tree (Rom. 11:17–18). The main thing is Israel. Israel is the privileged people. The Gentiles are—to not put too fine a point on it—second-class citizens. There is a hierarchy in the scope of salvation, and the Jews are at the top. It’s as if Paul is saying, “And Gentiles, don’t you forget it.” But we did forget it. And because we forgot it, the world, especially the Christian world, took note and decided that the Jews should become merely a memory.⁷²

⁷¹ Dan Hummel, “Why Many Evangelical Christians Now Celebrate Jewish Holidays,” *Washington Post*, August 19, 2019,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/19/why-many-evangelical-christians-now-celebrate-jewish-holidays/> [January 11, 2021]; Dan Hummel, *Covenant Brothers: Evangelicals, Jews, and U.S.-Israeli Relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

⁷² Mark Galli, “Killing Jesus’ Brothers and Sisters: Why did we turn on the Jews so quickly? And what do we do about it now?” *Christianity Today* (January 3, 2020), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/january-web-only/killing-of-jesus-jewish-brothers-and-sisters.html> [January 11, 2021].

Such a reversal leaves the competitive paradigm of top and bottom, privileged and secondary intact.

But, to invoke the biological metaphor once more, the graft is not second-class or an afterthought. It is deliberately chosen for hardiness, pest-resistance, maturity, and ease of propagation, to name just a few of the benefits that have made grafting a frequent and popular horticultural technique. Joining two plants together while maintaining their distinctions creates abundance and benefit. The relationship of “stock” and “scion,” root and branch, is neither a mother-daughter relationship nor fraternal competition but a distinct model of flourishing that thrives on difference. Repentance for anti-Judaism has the potential to unleash this kind of fruitfulness. But it cannot flow from self-abjection and degradation. That will inevitably lead to resentment and rebellion against the privileged and primary. Instead, repentance for Christian anti-Judaism requires willingness to accept difference and disagreement as a theological good.

By now, it should be clear that I consider the first pathway, exemplified by members of the Christian Scholars Group, the more radical and appropriate form of teshuvah because it rebuilds Christian theology around respect for theological difference and disagreement. The second pathway remains beholden to claims of theological supremacy and cannot repudiate missionary and inclusionary incorporations of Jewish otherness. This ultimately undermines genuine encounters between equals.

Conclusion

The Jewish tradition affirms that the doors of repentance are always open. The “repentant sinner is greater than a truly righteous man,” writes Soloveitchik, having passed through the cleansing fires of contrition.⁷³

Hate is more emotional and more volatile than love. The destructive forces are stronger than the constructive forces. A thoroughly righteous man is not given to feelings of hatred or jealousy... But a man who has sinned and repented may be able—if he proves worthy—to utilize the dynamism of the forces of evil which had enveloped him before and elevate them... and make them operate on behalf of the forces of good.⁷⁴

In the Gospels, Jesus teaches that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and returns than over ninety-nine righteous who do not need to repent (Luke 15:7). Repentance means wrestling with the powerful forces that fuel hatred and contempt. Without a doubt, antisemitism is a powerfully persuasive poison. It requires active and long-term engagement to decontaminate toxic traditions and to transform them into life-giving teachings of theological integrity.

⁷³ Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 261.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

In the words of psychoanalyst Estelle Frankl, “our most calamitous mistakes lead us to our calling and to our most redeeming qualities.”⁷⁵ It is the failures and faults that turn into the sources of strength. In Jewish history, she writes “it was frequently the repentant sinner or wounded healer—not the righteous saint—who was chosen as the hero or ideal leader.”⁷⁶ Indeed, all of the religious leaders in the Bible, from Abraham, Moses, and David, carry moral baggage ranging from deceit to murder, rape, and betrayal. Starting with the first couple in the garden of Eden, the biblical hero sins, repents, and matures in faith and wisdom. It is the genius of the biblical witness that humanity is portrayed and accepted in its sinful, broken, and ambivalent state, presented with choices between life and death, good and evil. Choices are always made within natural constraints and limited knowledge, scarce resources and fraught conditions. Fault and failure are constant companions, fueling the desire for God, wholeness, healing, and fullness of life.

A Christianity without anti-Judaism, a world without antisemitism: what might this even look like? As we observe the global resurgence of antisemitism amidst a pandemic crisis and economic upheaval, ecological collapse and political conflict, repentance for past transgressions seems the least of our problems. But as the old scapegoats and strategies of racial and religious division are deployed once again to channel populist rage, the fruits of repentance, or the lack thereof, are coming due. Repentance is not the pastime of scholars who are “working off the past” while the future is made by propagandists, who exploit the new social media landscapes to drown out the labors of dialogue and critical analysis. Repentance is about a future which is not condemned to repeat, over and over again, the same old patterns. Repentance means that when synagogues are attacked, non-Jews show up in the streets to show solidarity. Repentance means standing with the victims this time. Antisemitism and racism shall not go unopposed and human flourishing in all of its diversity shall be protected as a matter of faith. This time, we shall understand ourselves as one grafted tree weathering a gathering storm.

⁷⁵ Estelle Frankel, “Repentance, Psychotherapy, and Healing,” in *Civic Repentance*, ed. Amitai Etzioni (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 131.

⁷⁶ Frankel, “Repentance, Psychotherapy, and Healing,” 136.