



The Observant Life Book Club

REPENTANCE

(Source: “Repentance”, David H. Lincoln, *The Observant Life*, Martin S. Cohen, Senior Editor, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2012, pp. 412-421)

While the term “repentance” is likely to conjure up the experience we have on Yom Kippur, Jewish tradition recognizes that the issue of repentance can be a constant in our lives which explains why two of the blessings of the *Amidah*, the prayer that is recited three times daily address this issue: “Our Father, bring us back to YOUR Torah. Our King, draw us near to Your service. Lead us back to You, truly repentant. Praised are You, Lord who welcomes repentance.” And “Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed, for You forgive and pardon. Praised are You, gracious and forgiving Lord.”

Before coming to the book club meeting members should read Rabbi Lincoln’s chapter and come prepared to talk about the questions that follow and share their experiences with the issues of wrongdoing and repentance.

For the leader(s) to use as a basis for group discussion. These questions may occupy the group for more than one sessions. The group should be encouraged to speak freely with the expectation of complete confidentiality. But no one should be forced to speak!

1. Based on the examples of doing wrong and wrong being done to you that you have thought about in preparation for this meeting, can you share an experience with a focus on how it affected you personally and how it affected your relationship with the other party?
 - a. Are there common themes in the stories?
 - b. Are there parts of the experiences that have been shared that seem universal?
2. Regarding the High Holidays, Rabbi Lincoln writes: “By confessing our sins as a community, we seek the strength to repent as individuals.”
 - a. What are the benefits of going through the process of repentance as part of a community?
 - b. In what ways might this communal process be a hindrance to personal repentance?
3. According to the tradition, Yom Kippur only atones for ritual sins, but sins that affect a human being must be handled another way.
 - a. If God is the creator of everything, why can’t one simply seek atonement from God for all sins?
4. Maimonides requires that when approached for forgiveness, one should not be cruel or bear a grudge but should forgive wholeheartedly.
 - a. Doesn’t this put an unfair burden on the one who has been wronged?
 - b. Rabbi Lincoln (p. 418) discusses the idea of misdeeds for which there can be no practical repentance.
 - c. Do you agree that such a category exists? Can you describe circumstances where it would be appropriate to withhold forgiveness? Should that forgiveness ever be withheld absolutely?
 - d. If so, can – or should – the one who committed the offense ever be able to effect atonement?
 - e. Rabbi Lincoln notes that the Holocaust is such a case and thus the perpetrators are unable to repent. Do you agree?

5. If someone refuses to extend forgiveness, the one who has “sinned” is only required to ask for forgiveness three times but if the person refusing is your rabbi, you must ask for forgiveness up to a thousand times.
 - a. Should there be a difference when the one who is being asked for forgiveness is your rabbi? Should there be special terms for forgiveness if, say, the one who has caused injury is a parent?

6. “Modern Jews should fully embrace the notion that we are in full command over all our actions at all times, that we always have the choice to act morally or immorally, and that this choice is completely unrelated to the extraneous details of someone’s education, upbringing, culture, or talents. The meaning of *t’shuvah* for moderns derives directly from this set of ideas....” (p. 416)
 - a. Do you agree that people have complete freewill? If so, how do we reconcile freewill with the demand for *t’shuvah*?

7. “All people should regard themselves throughout the year as though they were half innocent and half guilty. If one commits even one additional sin, therefore, the scale of guilt is then tilted toward evil and one has fully to bear the responsibility of those actions.” (p. 416)
 - a. What do you think? Is this a compelling way to help prevent sinning?
 - b. What strategies do you use to keep yourself on your desired path?