

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

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MAN'S atonement, his reconciliation with God — this is the whole problem of religion. Therefore, religion's first demand is that man should need atonement, since his thoughts and acts are in opposition to the great task which God has placed before him. This first demand is followed by the second: that man should not only be in need, but capable of, atonement.

It is in these two demands that monotheism differs from the quasi-religions, especially pantheism. For if God is thought of as being immanent in nature, including man, man need not recognize a discrepancy with God, since he possesses a portion of Him. Still less can he aim at atonement, for he has no need of it. Therefore, since there is no opposition between God and man, atonement with God cannot be the goal of human life.

Religion must be monotheism: God is not only one, excluding plurality, but He is also unique. His being is the only being, and any other being, like nature or man, derives its different being from His. Similarity, or, worse, identity, of nature with God, and thus of man and God, is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of being. This misconception becomes an outrage when we turn from metaphysics to ethics, the difference between good and evil. Pantheism all but obliterates this difference, whereas the concept of God's uniqueness guarantees the supremacy of the good as separated from the evil, and this separation in turn leads finally to the one of true and false.

Man was created to strive for the good. But having also a body, the good in him is opposed by the bad, as the true is opposed to the false. As his finite mind becomes victim to the false, so his finite striving submits to the evil. It is in the very nature of his finiteness that he partakes in evil as well as in error. This does not mean that he partakes in evil only; he is not evil by nature, by a divine decree. But as he is not identical with God's being, so he is not identical with the good. He *becomes* bad, but he never *is* evil. He always remains God's creature, who is the originator and the guarantor of the good on earth.

Only on the soil of pure monotheism could the problem of redemption arise, as it has been perfected in the Day of Atonement. In the language of Deuteronomy one could ask: "Where is there a people who has a Day of Atonement?" And if we still had to prove that the Pharisees were the genuine successors of

the prophets, we would only have to point to the Day of Atonement; for it was the Pharisees, the Sages of the Talmud, who created it out of the biblical day of priestly sacrifices.

A Day of Atonement? Ought not one's entire life be dedicated to atonement? This question may be countered by another one: ought not one's entire life be one continuous divine service?

But this is the very meaning of divine service: that the service of one's entire life should be the very purpose of life. Religious cult is the very model of the symbol: it should present to the entire life a mirror, reflecting an ideal. This holds true for the Day of Atonement: on that day the inexhaustible strength of Jewish religiosity was created and kept alive.

Man strives for atonement with God. Is there anything higher man could strive for? Atonement with God remains man's only goal. Therefore atonement is nothing less than man's redemption from his own inner contradictions. It is thus more than mere redemption from sin, for it not only shakes off the sins of the past, but it overcomes sin, it cuts off the evil in man from his portion in the good.

Atonement with God means man's redemption from sinfulness, his alleged nature. It does not redeem him from his finiteness, from his earthly fate. This would mean to go astray on the paths of pantheism. Redemption, rooted in atonement, allows man to remain in his worldliness. Monotheistic redemption does not transport man into the other world, as a consolation for his mundane sufferings; it does not raise him above the straight continuation of his earthly existence. Neither does it redeem him from the duties and the hopes of this life; it redeems him only from the appearance of his unavoidable share in the evil, from which, though not actually lost in it, he is not removed either. Redemption from sin does not mean redemption from man's humanity; it does not mean the cancellation of the latter, but his atonement with God. The disruption between man and God is healed; but this does not lead to an identification of both.

Thus the Day of Atonement is the climax of monotheistic mankind. Man has the power to strive for such an atonement. It is precisely in this power that he is man. And God, in his turn, has this supreme meaning: to guarantee that atonement. Therefore, his very essence is involved in atonement. Love and justice would remain a contradiction with God, if it were not dissolved in atonement. Thus we understand the many expressions for love and mercy, patience and kindness among God's attributes: they are all aimed at the basic quality of atonement. Therefore, the Psalmist puts "good and forgiving" side by side. What else could God's goodness mean if not forgiveness and atonement?

These divine qualities have great consequences for monotheism. First: Only God can bring about atonement. He is the Only One, just because only He can effect atonement. Second: God in His mercy can grant atonement only to him who strives for the good, who recognizes sin and wishes to avoid it. Without man's moral work in repentance, God would be unable to redeem

him. The Only God has granted me a share in the good. Therefore, I must tear myself away from the evil. Third: Atonement and redemption do not imply man's separation from this world; otherwise, both of them would be an illusion. They do not produce shadowy images but ideals for the moral work of mortal man. Redemption has nothing in common with death and the life to come; it is not redemption from this world's pains and sufferings, but only from its errors and failures.

The Day of Atonement follows the New Year, which is the Day of Judgment. That judgment, however, is not the last one, but universal judgment on earthly existence, a symbol for God's daily judgment of "the creatures of the world," as it is said so beautifully in one of the hymns for that day. Judgment, atonement and redemption belong together in one concept, in which Judaism's absolute monotheism has perfected itself. Unsurpassed in any system of ethics is that great statement in the Mishnah, uttered by Rabbi Akiba: "Happy art Thou, O Israel. Who purifies you, and before Whom do you purify yourselves? — It is your Father in Heaven."