

## Message for Rosh Hashanah

So Rosh HaShana has finally arrived. This festival, which literally means 'head of the Year' not only kicks off 5779, but it also kicks off ten days of communal repentance. This therefore seems as good a time as any to ask what on earth is repentance? It's a word that you often hear in the mouths of religious people, whether they be Jewish or Christian, and it's apt to be misunderstood and misinterpreted - especially the further away from Jewish tradition one looks. When many Christians, for example, think of 'repentance' they may well think of a suitably dour looking man silently walking up and down a street while dressed in a sandwich board upon which the words 'repent because the end is nigh' have been emblazoned. The wider populace who are presumably just going about their 'sinful' daily business are expected to look at this board, instinctively know what 'repentance' is and do accordingly in order to avoid a presumed but unspecified sticky end when it actually, eventually does become nigh. Similarly, one often still comes across tract distributing Christians in town squares shouting angrily about the sins of society, terrifying people with visions of burning forever in hell, being mercilessly tortured by a horned red devil, and demanding that they repent. Indeed, what many such street preachers mean by 'repentance' is in fact quite simple - by 'repentance' they mean to confess belief in God's plan of salvation through the atoning work of Yeshua. Should anyone of the harangued general public miraculously respond to their preaching they will appropriately be invited to declare such a confession of faith, often by means of the so-called 'sinners prayer'. Indeed, the same scenario is often to be found in evangelistic meetings in churches where after a period of impassioned preaching designed to point out the guilt of non-believers the audience are invited to close their eyes, or raise their hands in order to indicate their desire to become a born again Christian. Once again the 'sinners prayer' may feature large. But is this what 'repentance' is all about? Certainly not from a Jewish perspective! In fact this apparent conflation of 'repentance', or as we call it in Hebrew 'teshuvah', with adherence to a set of theological beliefs is far from the Jewish paradigm. As we have heard, for many Christians such expressions of faith in the stated divine plan of atonement is synonymous with repentance, but for Jews it has always been more to do with a developed social and ethical conscience. As we shall see, repentance in Judaism is much more about what you *do* than what you *believe*. The concept of repentance in the Hebrew Scriptures is much more about how you *treat* people than what you *think* about God, and as we shall also see, this concept is naturally deeply embedded too in the Messianic Writings. No more plainer statement of the Jewish concept of repentance can be found in this respect than in the writings of Yaakov. Yaakov, of course, was one of Yeshua's brothers. Although he was not one of the original twelve shlichim, Yaakov, by virtue of his piety, nevertheless became leader of the Judean Messianic community in the wake of Messiah's death and resurrection. In fact, writing in the mid-second century CE, Hegesippus, who was one of the earliest Jewish chroniclers of the Messianic community wrote this about Yaakov: "James, the Lord's brother, succeeds to the government of the Church, in conjunction with the apostles. He has been universally called the Just, from the days of the Lord down to the present time. For many bore the name of James; but this one was holy from his mother's womb. He drank no wine or other intoxicating liquor, nor did he eat flesh; no razor came

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upon his head; he did not anoint himself with oil, nor make use of the bath. He alone was permitted to enter the holy place: for he did not wear any woollen garment, but fine linen only. He alone, I say, was wont to go into the temple: and he used to be found kneeling on his knees, begging forgiveness for the people-so that the skin of his knees became horny like that of a camel's, by reason of his constantly bending the knee in adoration to God, and begging forgiveness for the people. Therefore, in consequence of his pre-eminent justice, he was called the Just, and Oblias, which signifies in Greek Defence of the People, and Justice, in accordance with what the prophets declare concerning him." Given Yaakov's status as a tzaddik and the leader of the Messianic Jews it is highly important to listen to his views on the question of teshuvah. In fact this subject is central to the only document of his that yet remains. Indeed, the temptation to conflate repentance with belief *about* God is something that he took direct aim at. As we read, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such 'faith' able to save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, and someone says to him, 'Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!' without giving him what he needs, what good does it do? Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions is dead. But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions! You believe that 'God is one'? Good for you! The demons believe it too - the thought makes them shudder with fear!" The phrase 'God is one' is, of course, to be found in the Shema, the Jewish people's earliest statement of faith. The recitation of the Shema naturally has a profound place in the spiritual life and beliefs of us as Jews, and tradition would have us recite it several times each day. And yet, Yaakov tells us, belief in and recitation of the Shema is meaningless when it comes to the repentant life. After all, Yaakov exclaims, even the demons 'believe' that God is one! Wow! That's a stunner! Apparently even the demons believe in the key doctrines that so many people think define and save God's people from the ungodly and thus condemned. Belief in doctrines Yaakov declares, in and of itself, is therefore effectively meaningless and is unable to save those who trust that it will do so. Perhaps someone ought to relate this key fact to the street and televangelists who conflate repentance with a confession of faith? You believe that Yeshua died for the sins of human beings? Mazel tov! So, according to Yaakov, do the demons! How then are you any different to them? That is the key question that we should be asking. Yaakov naturally supplied the answer, and it was an immensely practicable answer - mitzvot (good works). Shock horror! What did I just say? This word and this answer is something that disquiets protestant folk like Martin Luther, for whom assent to core doctrines was apparently the be all and end all. Indeed, it was because of this that Luther made attempts to remove not just the book of Yaakov, but Messianic Jews, Y'hudah and Revelation from the canon of Scripture. For Luther the message of Yaakov deeply conflicted with his ideas of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, the principles of salvation by grace working through faith alone. Indeed, his ideas in this respect are still central, as may now be clear, to Christian evangelism. The altar call and 'sinners prayer' with their conflation of confession of belief in the classical Christian doctrine of atonement with repentance are effectively rooted in the Lutheran principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Luther accordingly demeaned Yaakov's work as a 'straw epistle', presumably in

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contrast to the works of Rav Shaul which were of 'gold' and of lasting value since they conformed more to his theology of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Yaakov's work, Luther chided, had "nothing of the gospel" in it. Though Luther failed to have Yaakov and the others just listed removed from the canon, to this day these works are placed last in Lutheran Bibles. Historically many Christians, taking their cue from *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, together with the inherent anti-Semitic bias that prevailed in Lutheran and other Protestant teaching, have turned their nose up at Yaakov's writings, with his emphasis on repentance as works or mitzvot rather than belief in doctrines, as being too Jewish. Still, today, many Christians have an aversion to mitzvot as 'Jewish works of the Law', as therefore being in opposition to the supposed gospel of salvation that they preach, and as something that is more likely to get one condemned to hell rather than assigned to a blessed place in heaven. According to Yaakov, however, this could not be further from the truth. For Yaakov true teshuvah or repentance is founded upon the performance of mitzvot and is entirely practicable and possible. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food," he writes, "and someone says to him, 'Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!' without giving him what he needs, what good does it do?" Note the entirely practical and human level of this scenario. As Yaakov sketches out the meaning of true repentance he makes it clear that it is all about meeting human need and reducing the scope of human suffering. Repentance, he effectively says, isn't up in there in the clouds in some mystical, spiritual meeting of God and the human; it isn't even about whether you believe the Shema or some other doctrine, but simply about whether you are helping someone, a brother or sister no less, who is without clothes and is hungry. Indeed, Yaakov's letter is full of this same concern. "Don't deceive yourselves," he cautioned, "by only hearing what the Word says, but do it!" Oh, that's a bad word for many people! The word 'Doing!' sends many a believer into a tail spin. It sounds too Jewish and too unspiritual! How many of you have been warned by well-meaning Christians about the dangers inherent with doing so-called works of the Law? And Yaakov is all over this like a rash! *Be* a "doer," Yaakov says, "of the work it [the Torah] requires!" Indeed, "Anyone who thinks he is religiously observant but not control this tongue is deceiving himself, and his observance counts for nothing." Moreover, "The religious observance that God the Father considers pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being contaminated by the world." Note again Yaakov's concern for human suffering. Caring "for orphans and widows in their distress" rather than confession of faith is the "religious observance that God the Father considers pure and faultless". No wonder Luther hated this letter! Yaakov went on to demand equality of treatment for the poor and marginalised. One is not permitted to treat the poor person less preferentially to a rich person, for such preferential treatment is 'evil'. Indeed, Yaakov, like his brother before him, summarised the point of all religious observance not to be conformity to doctrine but "loving your neighbour as yourself." Favouritism, he said, was 'sin'. Moreover, as far as escaping judgement was concerned, Yaakov did not preach the sinners prayer but practical mercy. "For judgement will be without mercy," he said, "toward one who doesn't show mercy; but mercy wins out over judgement." Repentance he concluded in chapter 5, is eminently practical and consists, for example, of such a mundane and apparently unspiritual

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matter as simply treating your workers with fairness, paying them a fair wage and on time. In sum, he said, living indulgently and without reference to the suffering of others and doing nothing to ameliorate this suffering was a grievous sin. For "You have led a life of luxury and self-indulgence here on earth - in a time of slaughter, you have gone on eating to your heart's content. You have condemned, you have murdered the innocent; they have not withstood you."

Interestingly we find Yaakov's ideas about teshuvah as being the pursuit of social and ethical justice mirrored in the teaching of his brother, the Messiah. Thus we note that Yeshua told a parable of sheep and goats in which humanity was divided into two camps prior to judgement. The first camp, the sheep, were people who, though they, and this is remarkable, did not recognise God in their actions, still less made no confession of faith, nevertheless actively took looked after the practical needs of "the least of these my brethren." For "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you made me your guest, I needed clothes and you provided them, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." The people in the goat camp however saw this same human suffering and need and did nothing. It is on this basis, Yeshua declared, on the basis of what they did or didn't do to help others, that the sheep people would be blessed and the goat people would be cursed. Similarly Yeshua's parable of the Good Samaritan juxtaposed the presumed right belief but lack of compassionate actions of a Cohen and Levite, with the supposed wrong belief but compassionate actions of a hated Samaritan. Having declared the love of one's neighbour to be the purpose of the Torah Yeshua then declared that it was the Samaritan and not the Cohen or Levite who had acted in a neighbourly manner, thus kept the Torah and thus been justified before God. "Of these three," Yeshua asked an expert in the Torah, "which one seems to you to have become the 'neighbour' of the man who fell among robbers?" He answered, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Yeshua said to him, "You go and do as he did." This parable reminds me of the saying that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover - and that apparently is precisely what God does not or will not do. As Hashem said to the prophet Shmuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Indeed, as Melech David wrote in a Psalm which is oft recalled during this season of teshuvah, "For you don't want sacrifices, or I would give them; you don't take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; God, you won't spurn a broken, chastened heart." Repentance is what God wants and true repentance apparently begins deep inside our hearts. In the Hebrew mindset the heart does not necessarily connote emotion but rather it is symbolic of the seat of our motivations. True repentance therefore involves us honestly, quietly and soberly investigating and becoming mindful our inner motivations. It involves developing a sense of emotional intelligence. It means reflecting on the events and processes that have made us what we in this moment. In short it mean becoming aware of makes us tick and seeking to expand our boundaries. Are we or are we not moved not just to compassionate emotion but to meaningful action when we become aware of the needs and

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suffering of other people around us and in the wider world? The High Holy Days are here precisely for the purpose of such reflection. At this time of year we especially need to hear and heed the words of the prophets of old who chastised now deceased generations for their lack of loving action. As Yeshayahu once proclaimed, "The crimes of your sister S'dom were pride and gluttony; she and her daughters were careless and complacent, so that they did nothing to help the poor and needy. They were arrogant and committed disgusting acts before me; so that when I saw it, I swept them away." Little has changed. Injustice, inhumanity, grinding poverty, and a callous disregard for human suffering are still patently issues in this and in wider society and what, if anything are we doing? Yaakov would say that "in a time of slaughter, you have gone on eating to your heart's content." Not that it's wrong to eat or to enjoy life. Repentance isn't about becoming a depressive who bears the burden of the world perpetually upon their shoulders but is fundamentally about becoming a decent, merciful, forgiving, compassionate human being. Upon such as these we have assurance that God looks favourably. Because as the prophet Mikhah declares, "Human being, you have already been told what is good, what Adonai demands of you — no more than to act justly, love grace and walk in purity with your God."