

Publisher's Note



IT IS HARD to overstate the role of *teshuva*, repentance, in Jewish thought. Yom Kippur, a day set aside in its entirety to focus on *teshuva* on an individual and communal level, is the culmination of the 10 days of repentance that begin with Rosh Hashana. The New Year is itself preceded by a month of buildup beginning with the advent of the month of Elul. That means that about 12 percent of a Jewish year is focused single-mindedly on repentance.

Repentance also enjoyed a central place on the biblical stage. The Temple in Jerusalem was built, in large part, to accommodate the sacrificial ritual as a mechanism for repentance. Certain sacrifices required the recitation of confession, *viduy*, as part of the ritual. Upon the Temple's destruction, much of rabbinic innovation was focused on how we could replace the animal sacrifices that were so essential to our worship with prayer and good deeds.

Why is *teshuva* so crucial to Jewish thought and observance? In part, it's because all people are going to get things wrong, and they are going to do it often. *Chet* is a common Hebrew word we use for

sin. It means we missed the target. *Teshuva* means we recognize that misstep and we seek to return to the right path, to our true selves, to whom and to what we aspire to be.

And that is much of life. Missing the target and then getting back on track—in school, at home, at work, in our relationships. Life would be pretty hopeless if our mistakes, our sins, our *chet*, couldn't be corrected. Maimonides dedicates an entire section of his *Mishneh Torah* to *teshuva* because of its necessity in Jewish life.

One of the most destructive aspects of today's cancel culture is that it removes the opportunity for *teshuva*. That's not to imply that everyone who has been "canceled" by today's self-appointed judges of morality and correctness is guilty. Far from it. But even for those who have a measure of guilt, who have sinned, who have veered off the path, what is the mechanism for *teshuva*? For the sincere penitent, how do we bring him or her back? The mob won't allow for engagement, never mind forgiveness. While cancel culture is certainly unkind, this withholding of *teshuva* is also profoundly un-Jewish.

There is also a communal loss. If there is no return from cancellation, no *teshuva*, people will inevitably police their own writing, speech, even thinking. Discussion will become duller, less provocative. Must we forever exclude people from our communal deliberations because of past errors? No doubt we must, in some cases. But the denial of *teshuva* is rare indeed. According to the Mishnah in *Sanhedrin*, only three kings and four commoners, of all the characters in the Torah, will have no share in the world to come. A small club. It's hard to imagine that anyone is so blameless as to deny repentance to one who seeks it. *