

## The Seven Steps of Repentance

(excerpted from October 21, 2012 sermon *Hopeful Sorrow*, by Mae Gibson Wall)

I turned to Jewish teachings to better understand repentance, because, as *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* tells us, “No single component of the human condition takes higher priority [than repentance] in establishing a right relationship with God, and none bears more profound implications for this-worldly attitudes and actions.” As I learned more about *teshuvah* – the Jewish practice of repentance – I came to recognize the deep need in myself for complete repentance, and I started to believe I could actually get there by taking the seven steps of *teshuvah*. I would like to share these steps with you, as outlined in Louis Newman’s book *Repentance: The Meaning and Practice of Teshuvah*.

The first step of *teshuvah* is **culpability**, in which we acknowledge to ourselves that not only did we do the thing that was hurtful, but that we are at fault. It doesn’t count if it includes the words, “they made me do it.”

The second step is **remorse**. Louis warns that if we don’t feel bad about what we have done, then we have “removed ourselves twice from the moral sphere of society – first by our misconduct and second by failing to exhibit the appropriate moral judgment about that conduct.”

The third step is **confession**, in which we bring our mistakes into the open. Newman says that “we need to admit our wrongs – clearly, forthrightly, and publicly [because] the antidote to shame is disclosure.... We drop the pretense of being better than we really are and allow ourselves to appear in public just as we are in private...bringing a kind of wholeness.... It is only

when we see ourselves – and allow others to see us – as we really are that we can reach a level of self-acceptance that is the very pre-requisite for the self-transformation” of repentance.

The next step is **apology**, in which we seek forgiveness, to repair a relationship that we have damaged through our behavior. Whether or not we are successful in receiving forgiveness, the goal is to demonstrate to others that “we acknowledge the hurt we have caused and are openly sorry to have done so. It is a plea to accept us as the remorseful person we are now rather than to reject us as the hurtful person we were before.”

The fifth step is **restitution**, in which the offender tries to undo the wrong that was done to the extent that it is possible. While we can never undo our actions, we must create a situation that is as close as possible to the state of affairs that would have been had we not behaved immorally. “To harm someone is to incur a moral debt,” says Newman, “and it must be repaid in the same currency.” When that is not possible, we must make the best effort we can. In the film *Gandhi*, a Hindu fighter asks the Mahatma to forgive him for killing Muslims. Gandhi’s response is that he cannot grant the forgiveness, and obviously, neither can the dead, and so he admonishes the Hindu fighter to adopt a Muslim orphan and raise him as Muslim in his own home. Newman tells us that “we cannot find wholeness ourselves if we do not guarantee it to those we have harmed.... When we insist on restitution, we are affirming that the keys to repentance are held by the very people we have hurt.”

The sixth and penultimate step in the practice of *teshuvah* is **soul reckoning**, turning inward to address our harmful behavior at its roots. What caused us to behave this way? We seek to come

to terms not only with the deeds we have done but also with the person we have become, and so our entire sense of self is at stake. Genuine soul reckoning is meant to lead us to acceptance and integration, not to self-flagellation or self-hatred. It is a hopeful sorrow. The poem by Nancy Shaffer asks, “How shall we mend you, sweet Soul? What shall we use, and how is it in the first place you’ve come to be torn?” We look to the past in order to create a different future; we claim the past and also disclaim it; we remember so that we might forget. We cannot mend ourselves if we don’t first understand what caused us to break.

The seventh and final step in *teshuvah* is **transformation**, which encompasses both an inner reorientation and a change in outward behavior. In the Christian scriptures, Jesus often explains the purpose of his ministry as being the repentance of sinners. This concept of repentance is more than turning away from sin. It is a complete change of the total spiritual personality. In Galatians, Paul describes it as crucifixion and resurrection. The ultimate test of true transformation is if, in the same circumstance, we can resist repeating our behavior. We may then acknowledge that “the person who did those things was me, but I am no longer that person.”

Three spheres in which to repent – spiritual, moral, psychological – and seven steps. This is a monumental task, but it is no less than vital for our human moral survival. Rabbi Harold Schulweis writes, “*Teshuvah* begins with the self, but it must not end there; it would be only half a prayer. *Teshuvah* is neither divine grace segregated from human works nor human works amputated from the arms of grace. What begins as the solitary search within the self evolves into sanctification of our world.”