

Hermann Cohen and the redemptive potentiality of sin

By *Richard Mather*

Do I desire the death of the wicked? says the Lord God. Is it not rather in his repenting of his ways that he may live? [...] Therefore, every man according to his ways I will judge you [...] Cast away from yourselves all your transgressions whereby you have transgressed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, and why should you die [...] For I do not desire the death of him who dies, says the Lord God: so turn away and live! (Ezekiel chapter 18, verses 23, 30a, 31, 32)

Anticipating Martin Buber, Hermann Cohen said we must recognize the living, breathing individual as a “Thou,” and not just as a generic example of humanity. As significant as the universal ethical ideal is for Cohen, he recognized that ethics is concerned with individuals only insofar as they are members of humanity as a whole. Ethics can’t always deal with individual moral feelings or with sin. In other words, it is *religion* -- rather than ethics -- that concerns itself with the sin of the individual.

It is the prophet Ezekiel whom Cohen singled out as bringing a new and important aspect into early Judaism: the sin of the *individual* for which he *alone* stands responsible before God. This is Cohen's interpretation of Ezekiel's “Cast away from yourselves all your transgressions whereby you have transgressed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit” (18:31). Whereas ethics offers a collective but not individual self-transformation, Ezekiel's Judaism promises personal liberation from sin through repentance.

It is only when we acknowledge our own moral failings that it is possible for us to atone and to strive for moral improvement. This act of atonement establishes an intimate and personal relationship between the individual and God. And in relating to God, the individual becomes a unique moral and religious self:

“The apex of monotheism is Messianism, but its center of gravity lies in the relation between God and the individual. At this point Ezekiel deviates from the mainstream of Messianism, insofar as he ceases to look at the world and turns to an inward look into the individual. Ezekiel transmitted to religion the God of the individual man” (Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*).

Moreover, it is through Ezekiel that God informs us that the fateful correlation between sin and punishment is now broken, and so the punishment of death is abolished. In *Jewish Writings*, Cohen stated that to “sever the connection between suffering and guilt – to discard, that is, the notion that suffering is a punishment for guilt – is one of the most far-reaching consequences of monotheistic thinking, and of momentous significance for man’s approach to the social problem.”

As well as breaking the old connection between sin and punishment, Ezekiel tells us that *teshuvah* (repentance) now stands as a substitute for public sacrifice. The prophetic rejection of burnt offerings leads to the religious birth of the individual who, instead of performing a public act of sacrifice, now engages in an *inward* sacrifice of introspection, private repentance and moral improvement. “In myself, I have to study sin, and through sin I must learn to know myself [...] I am permeated by the thought that I do not know any man’s wickedness as deeply, as clearly, as my own,” Cohen wrote in *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*.

Interestingly, Cohen offered the view that sin and its subsequent repression has the effect of making a person unique: it lifts him or her out of the impersonal totality of nature. Indeed, it is through sin -- and in the recognition of sin -- that man first becomes an authentic individual. Nevertheless, the sinner has a choice: stay unique in your sin (we are uniquely bad rather than uniquely good, it seems), or repent and return to the ethical community.

“[For Ezekiel] the individual raises himself up out of his social environment, and indeed through his own sin,” Cohen said. But this sin “is not an end-station for man, but rather an ever repeated beginning of an ever-opening new life.” A new beginning “must be joined” to the public realm, that is, a return to the world.

In other words, sin, introspection and repentance ought to be followed with a renewed commitment to the messianic task of raising up humanity and helping to relieve the suffering of the exploited and the abused, so that they may live better lives. Or as the prophet puts it: God does not desire the death of him who transgresses; rather, God wants you to "turn away and live!" (Ezekiel 18:32)