Repentance for the Holocaust
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Create in me, O God, a pure heart;  
give me a new and steadfast spirit.  

Psalm 51:12

I shall give you a new heart  
and put a new spirit within you.  

Ezekiel 36:26

“No other tradition has invested as much as Judaism in teshuvah [repentance],” proclaimed Rabbi Pesach Schindler to a group of Chinese educators at Yad Vashem learning about how to teach the Holocaust in China.¹ This may sound like a startling claim, considering the existence of similar ideas in other religious traditions.² Yet, when one considers the Holy Scriptures, in which the prophets’ calls for repentance are a constant fixture, in which stories of repentance (David’s, Jacob/Israel’s, Naaman’s, Nineveh’s, etc.) abound, in which expressions of repentance in confessional prayers

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¹ Remarks delivered at the International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem, 4 Oct. 2010. The author of this book was in the audience.
and songs suffuse the entire biblical fabric, not to mention the annual ritual of Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, it would hardly be an overstatement to claim that the idea of “turning,” which the Hebrew word *tshuvah* literally conveys, is central to the Jewish tradition. Indeed, the potency of this theological emphasis can also be felt in its “offshoot.” The litany of “confession literature” in the Christian world has caused Chinese literary scholars to reflect on the almost complete absence of such a genre in the history of Chinese literature. The Reformation began when a German monk went public against the church about what repentance (*Buße tun*) should be and should not be.

The richness of this biblical tradition of repentance is also attested by the need to codify and explicate it for the benefit of Jewish communities. Maimonides’s *Doctrine of Repentance* and Rabbeinu Yonah’s *Gates of Repentance*, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries respectively, are among the best-known references. In the historical period around the time of the German plunge into Nazism, the idea of repentance was also prominent in the epoch-defining works of the German-Jewish cultural world, such as Franz Rosenzweig’s *Stern der Erlösung* and Martin Buber’s *Ich und Du*. In the words of Buber, “The event that is called repentance (*Umkehr*) from the side of the world is called from God’s side redemption (*Erlösung*).” For Rosenzweig, inner repentance (*innere Umkehr*) is that event through which fundamental attitudes toward “nothing” and “something” are reversed by revelation (*Offenbarung*). The uniqueness of the biblical paradigm is in fact rooted in its point of departure—it does not begin “speculations” with the “good” and the “perfect,” but with the “fallen” and the “broken,” not with the “pure” and the “unblemished,” but with the “ messed-up” and the “ downtrodden”—hence the need for “turning.”

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3. See Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang, 罪與文學：關於文學懺悔意識與靈魂維度的考察 [Confession and Chinese Literature] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002). This bespeaks of course not the Chinese lack of imagination but of different frames of meaning circumscribing imagination.

4. See the first three “propositions” of Luther’s 95 Theses.


Given this prominence of “repentance” in the Jewish and Christian symbolic universe in general and the German-Jewish one in particular, it is only legitimate to ask how this wealth of conceptualizations might have a bearing on the perceptions of the Shoah and, more precisely for our interest, of its aftermath. In other words, how might a repentance-informed perspective change how those affected by the Shoah see catastrophes, human atrocities, the perpetrators, the victims, the bystanders, and the “solutions”? And, if followed through, how might this repentance-informed course of action change the way they relate to each other after what is done is done and cannot be undone?

A mere section of a book is obviously not sufficient to provide even an outline of a sketch of the hermeneutical and theological significance of biblical repentance; were it possible, it would not have been really as pivotal as has been touted. What will be attempted here is to merely explore the few potencies that have the clearest relevance, in my view, to our inquiry into how human groups can “turn” after unspeakable atrocities have been done by one on the other. We will attempt to do this by reciting the Bußpsalmen, or the Psalms of Repentance, as keys (especially Psalm 51), to link up with and shed light on some other biblical passages, which promise together to unravel the cluster of knots (i.e., questions regarding justice and revenge, change and making amends, etc.) engendered by human wrongdoing. The aim is not to “unearth” anything theologically new, but to outline a paradigm that is “usable” in the subsequent historical analysis.

According to Christian tradition, the seven Psalms of Repentance are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143 (following the Hebrew numbering system). The exact origins of this selection are unknown: though as early as in the third century, there were already references to the repentance psalms (without specifying which were included); only from the sixth century do we have a concrete record (by Cassiodorus) of the use of these seven psalms as we know them today. From then on the collection Psalmi poenitentiales was often

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7. The scriptures cited in this study are not arbitrarily chosen. Most of them stem from the “daily readings” of German Catholics in the period 2009–13. Portions of Psalm 51, for instance, are read regularly during Lent, when repentance is emphasized.
used (collectively and individually) in the liturgy of the church in the Middle Ages, which then was carried forward into Protestantism as “Bußpsalmen” by Luther, who had published an exegesis of these seven psalms even before the Reformation.\textsuperscript{8}

It is important to keep in mind, however, that in the Jewish tradition not all of the seven are recognized—either as a group or individually—as particularly relevant to repentance. According to Willy Staerk, only Psalm 51 is explicitly captioned as a “repentance song.”\textsuperscript{9} It is therefore imprudent to assume that the Bußpsalmen represent Jewish understanding of repentance, even as the contents are, no doubt, from the Hebrew Bible. When the texts are used in this book as the starting point of its theorizing, it is by no means an affirmation of this false assumption; rather, this study proceeds again from the anthropological viewpoint: What do these texts—used and continuing to be used by German Christians and Germans in a Christianized culture—offer the perpetrators as “raw materials” for conceiving repentance, which are nonetheless not irrelevant to the victims? After all, the fact that the “Old Testament” is being used by Christians does not mean it stops being the Bible for the Jews. It is precisely this “bridging” characteristic of the Bußpsalmen—and the Psalms in general—that makes them a veritable spiritual resource in the wounded German-Jewish relationship.\textsuperscript{10}

We’ll now first deal with the God-human relationship, and then turn to the interhuman, when repentance and reconciliation are concerned. We’ll demonstrate that, in the biblical tradition, both concepts are understood in specifically relational terms. We’ll further explore the boundaries (and problems) of transference, that is, the seeing of the interhuman in light of the God-human relationship.


\textsuperscript{9} Staerk, \textit{Sünde und Gnade}, 58.

\textsuperscript{10} See the contemporary use of the Psalms of Repentance in the German context in Beutler-Lotz, \textit{Bußpsalmen}; and also Ludwig Schmidt, ed., \textit{Umkehr zu Gott: Themagottesdienste zu Passion, Karfreitag, Bußtag und zu den Bußpsalmen} (Göttingen: Klotz, 1982).