Repentance for the Holocaust

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Published by Cornell University Press


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In this second chapter, we will turn our attention to the interhuman relationships, especially the victim-perpetrator, in light of the God-human relationship, for in the biblical tradition, the latter is often upheld as the hermeneutical context for the former. The God-human relationship is the one “line” that cuts across all other relational lines. We will therefore employ a visual of a modified triad to undergird our discussion.

1. See, for example, 2 Chronicles 36:14–23.
2. In Buber’s words, “The world of It has its context in space and time. The world of Thou has no context in either. It has its context in the center, in which the extended lines of relationships cross each other: in the eternal Thou.” Martin Buber, Ich und Du (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1979), 119.
R10: Repentance’s Representative Minority

Psalm 51:20 Shower Zion with your favor: rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Psalm 130:7–8 O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with him is mercy and redemption. He will deliver Israel from all its sins.

Nehemiah 1:5–6 O Yahweh, God of heaven. . . . May your ears be attentive and your eyes open to listen to the prayer of your servant! I am now in your presence day and night, praying for your servants, the Israelites. I confess to you the sins we the Israelites have committed against you: I myself and the family of my father have sinned.

Genesis 18:32 And he said: “Let not my Lord be angry, for I will speak but one more time. Perhaps ten could be found there.” And He said: “I will not ruin it for the sake of ten.”

In the interhuman dimension, which seeks in the biblical tradition behavioral and judgmental guidance from the divine-human, sin can be understood as an injury- and separation-causing act, after which relational healing is called for (R2). In this process, questions concerning representative repentance, abuses, inherited guilt and responsibility, and the place of remembrance in turning as the narrow path toward reconciliation are among the major issues addressed in the Bußpsalmen and related biblical passages on repentance.

Regarding “representation,” religious and political figures are recognized “mediators” between God and nations when expressing
repentance and pleading for mercy are concerned in the biblical tradition. Josiah the king and the long line of major and minor prophets were all examples of this mediation. Two particularly relevant questions concerning this will be dealt with here: What are the common characteristics of the mediators, and in what sense are they “representative”? How many repentant sinners are necessary for an entire nation to be judged as having “repented enough”?

Concerning the common characteristics, their voluntary participation in relation should be noted first and foremost. They differ from most of those whom we call “social critics” today in that with their social criticism they implicate themselves in instead of extricate themselves from the society in which they live (e.g., Neh 1:4–7; Jer 14:19–21). They are not jurists who distance themselves from the accused as they pass sentence on them, but are shepherds who feel personally guilty for the unfaithfulness of their flock. They also possess an unusually acute sense of God’s pain, and are able to “cross over” from grief over personal/communal tragedy to an alertness toward the suffering of the others (examples range from Hosea as a betrayed husband to Amos’s social justice to Malachi, the champion of foreigners’ rights). Often as guiltless as anyone could possibly claim to be, they draw shame upon themselves (symbolically and literally smashing their “respectable image” by tearing their fine garments and smudging their body with ash) when pleading to God for forgiveness for his community (e.g., Josiah in 2 Kgs 22:11–13). As if echoing Psalm 51:19, they offer their “broken hearts and spirits” as an atoning sacrifice, a sacrificial victim that is perfect and blameless (itself an “injustice,” no doubt, but an inverted injustice), in an effort to appease the anger of a God infuriated by the injustice and unfaithfulness of the nations concerned.

On the one hand, these mediators become the “representatives” of God vis-à-vis the sinful nation, calling their own communities’ attention to the justice and wrath of God if the offer of repentance as mercy is ignored or taken advantage of (e.g., Moses’s reminder

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4. See Heschel’s idea of “divine pathos” in R6.
of Yahweh’s “generational punishment” before his enduring mercy in Deuteronomy 5:9–10.\(^5\) The “mediators” are not supposed to give false comforts when there are real causes for trepidation (Is 5:20; Jer 8:11). But on the other hand, they become “representatives” of a nation, not in the modern sense of the word, as statistically or democratically representative, for that they are most certainly not.\(^6\) Rather, they become “representative” by voluntarily sharing the guilt of their nation, by embodying the change of heart that is taking place and by representing the new spirit that the nation can be. In this sense, to risk an exaggeration, a nation’s prophets give hope not only to the people, but to their God as well, that change is still possible from within. Hence Isaiah the prophet, even as he himself was despondent about his utility, was addressed by God as Israel the people, “in whom I will be glorified” (Is 49:3–4). “Blot me out of your book if you don’t forgive them,” declared Moses, boldly challenging his God (Ex 32:32) to have more hope in his people, who had sinned against him. At times, the prophet is the only one standing in the way of divine wrath (Ps 106:23), and he is designated as the bond between God and his people (Is 42:6).

As for how many such “representatives” are sufficiently representative of a repentant nation, that is, a nation whose relationship with God is not severed for good, two particular biblical passages are worth reading together closely: the passage in the book of Genesis in which Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah, and that in Jonah in which the Ninevites as a nation responded to Jonah’s prophecy. In the first, Abraham “negotiated” with his God about whether Sodom would be destroyed if one finds\(^7\) fifty or even ten righteous people among the population, and the promise is that “for the sake of ten good people,” Sodom would not be destroyed (Gn 18:16–32). From the story itself we do not know the population of Sodom at the time, but it is safe to assume that ten was

\(^5\) As Rabbeinu Yonah notes, the only ones to whom repentance is denied are those who think: “I’ll sin first and do repentance later.” Rabbeinu Yonah, The Gates of Repentance, trans. and comm. Yaakov Feldman (Northvale, NJ/Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1999), 72–73.

\(^6\) True prophets are often unpopular among the people (e.g., Is 30:10–11).

\(^7\) The present tense here is important: a nation cannot be content with having “the righteous” among them in the past; righteousness needs to be kept alive in each generation in the present.
most probably not a “significant representation” of it. From this account alone, then, it seems that God’s leniency and patience are being emphasized, as shown by his “absolute minority rule,” which his believers, that is, those created in his divine image and loved by him, are called to emulate (Hos 6:6; Mi 6:8; Dt 10:12, 19; Lv 19:2).

The story of Jonah, however, introduces a different viewpoint. The story is that Jonah, the reluctant prophet, after some rebellion against his God’s will, finally proclaimed his message to the Ninevites: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed” (Jon 3:4). Despite the uncharacteristic prophetic message (for there is no explicit mention of God’s mercy, nor of the chance for repentance),

8 “the people of the city believed God; they declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth to repent” (v. 5; emphasis added).

9 It was only after this first collective and spontaneous act of repentance that the king of Nineveh “got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat down in ashes” (v. 6). He then issued a decree asking “everyone [to] call aloud to God, turn from his evil ways and violence” (v. 8; emphasis added). Then we have the resolution of God’s “repentance” (see R9) as turning away from his vengeful thoughts: “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he regretted the evil that he had threatened to bring upon them and did not carry it out” (v. 10; emphasis added). Thus from this account it seems that collective repentance is “valid” if and only if everyone partakes in it—not just the king or the prophet (or in this case, despite the reluctant prophet) or a handful of “righteous” citizens, but every single individual in the community.

10 Indeed, if

8. It must be noted, however, that mercy and the chance for repentance are already implied in the postponement of punishment and in the prophecy itself. Otherwise, why would God bother to send a prophet and then wait for forty more days?

9. Slightly different from the English translations, both the Einheitsübersetzung (1980) and the Lutherbibel (1984) emphasize the repentant symbolism of putting on sackcloth (Bußgewänder/Sack zur Buße).

10. Again if we recall the case of Josiah (where the king led the way while the people appeared only to be “following orders”) and the case of Ezra (where the people responded spontaneously), as mentioned in note 29 in R4, further credence is accorded to this interpretation.
the Bußpsalmen are taken as a whole, it is glaringly obvious that they are primarily expressions of personal repentance; only scant and secondary references with a collective or representative nature can be found (e.g., Ps 51:20; 130:7). “God has no grandchildren,” it is popularly said.\(^{11}\) So one can also say, “Repentance has no proxy.”\(^{12}\)

How are we to resolve this apparent contradiction between the “absolute minority rule” in Genesis and the “absolute totality rule” in Jonah? And what can we then say about “collective repentance,” if there is such a thing at all? For Maimonides, these questions hinge not only on the numbers of the righteous/repentant vis-à-vis the wrongdoers/impenitent but also on the “dimensions” of the acts, and the prerogative to judge rests with God alone. Explicating the case of Sodom and Gomorrah and other related passages, Maimonides said: “The assessment of sins and good deeds is not according to the number, but to the dimensions of these. . . . The weighing can only take place in the wisdom of the omniscient and omnipotent one. He alone knows how the good deeds and the sins are to be compared.”\(^{13}\)

Furthermore, as already noted, logical consistency and statistical accuracy are not the primary concerns of relational speech, whose sole consideration is the relational directions of God and human, and between human and human—that is, whether they are turning to each other, or away from each other. God is willing to “repent,” that is, to turn to and to restore the sinners, to turn from destructive wrath to loving patience, exercising his freedom to be merciful to the full (and the sinners are asked to imitate him, when the time comes). But if the sinners abuse this mercy and think a handful of “righteous/repentant” ones will be enough to save all, then they are not doing their own “repentance,” that is, turning to God and away from their evil ways; instead, they’re turning away

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11. See also Ezekiel 18:4.
12. As Maimonides noted, even at times when the high priest could offer atone-ment sacrifice in the Temple for all of Israel, “only those who had taken this opportunity to do repentance could partake in the pardon,” thus emphasizing the primacy of personal repentance in the collective, symbolic act. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 411–13.
from him. That is why Maimonides advises individual human beings to think of the whole community/world as half just and half guilty; thus if a person commits a sin or makes a good deed, the scale will be tilted toward the ruin or salvation of the world.\textsuperscript{14} Thus those attuned to the spirit of repentance in the biblical tradition are sensitive to those who are being spoken to through the Bible: The sinners before God? Or the wrongdoers before their fellow human beings? The “victims”? Or the “perpetrators”? As we have seen in “repentant disagreement” in R8, the issue of audience and the problem of “contradictions” are integral to the biblical conception of repentance, and hence also to the issue of representativeness.

\textbf{R11: Justice between Abused Perpetrators and Abusive “Victims”}

Psalm 38:20–21 My foes are many and mighty; they hate me for no reason; they pay me evil for good and treat me as an enemy because I seek good.

Psalm 102:9 All day long I am taunted by my enemies; they make fun of me and use my name as a curse.

Psalm 143:1 O Lord, hear my prayer; in your truthfulness, listen to my cry; in your justice, answer me.

Jeremiah 30:15–16 Why cry out for your plight and your wretched suffering? I have done these because of your immense guilt and your many sins. But all those who devoured you shall be devoured, and all your oppressors shall be taken captive; who plundered you will be plundered, and I will make those who preyed upon you a prey.

It is not true that the Bußpsalmen concern only the perpetrator and his God in a binary mode. Many references point to relationships with others, friends as well as foes. Some of these relationships are wounded because of the perpetrator’s own wrongdoing, as explored in R2, but some others are wounded by the wrongdoing

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 433.
of other perpetrators: “They hate me for no reason; they pay me evil for good and treat me as an enemy because I seek good” (Ps 38:20–21). Some other fellow human beings take advantage of the perpetrator’s perhaps well-deserved suffering as a consequence of his own sins: “All day long I am taunted by my enemies; they make fun of me and use my name as a curse” (Ps 102:9). The Bußpsalmen thus, like other biblical passages (e.g., Jer 30:15–16), recognize the reality that perpetrators may be victimized by other perpetrators, and their pleas to God, not from a self-righteous heart but from a broken one, that is, one that recognizes their own part in contributing to their suffering, will be heard (Ps 102:18).

The most peculiar inclusion in the Bußpsalmen is perhaps the seventh, Psalm 143. For unlike the other six, which first and foremost implore God for “mercy” (Gnade/Barmherzigkeit) and “peace” (Frieden), Psalm 143 asks God to exercise “truth” (Wahrheit) and “justice” (Gerechtigkeit) instead. Why would a perpetrator want his God to do that? Would not a judge upholding truth and justice above all be disadvantageous to the accused? It is clear that this psalm, taken as a whole, speaks of one besieged by perpetrators. But unlike other “lamentation psalms” (e.g., Ps 44), this is a psalm by one who also identifies himself as a perpetrator: “Do not bring your servant to judgment, for no mortal is just in your sight” (v. 2); “Show me the way I should walk. . . . Teach me to do

15. A corollary of this triangular vision of guilt is the important idea that guilts do not cancel each other out: the perpetrator’s guilt is not canceled out by the victim’s or the abuser’s guilt, and vice versa. Regardless of the recognition or rejection of the “just punishment” thesis by the perpetrator (see R4), each of the three is reminded by this vision that they will have to face the one judge to account for their own wrongdoing per se. In view of this, it is only logical that the biblical paradigm also rejects the idea of interhuman retaliation or vengeance (see R13)—for no guilt is “evened out” in the process; the total guilt is only increased.

16. It is thus characteristic of sin as relational sickness (R2): it drags love relationships into victim-perpetrator relationships in which nobody “gains” and everybody suffers. Repentance, in this sense, promises to break apart precisely this dragging force: so that not only the perpetrator is redeemed, but also the victim, for the “chain reaction” of sin is broken.

17. There is, of course, wide variation in the translation of these biblical terms. The Buber-Rosenzweig version, for example, uses Treue (faithfulness) and Wahrhaftigkeit (truthfulness) instead.
your will. . . . Let your Spirit lead me on a safe path” (vv. 8–10).

These are familiar expressions of repentance in other Bußpsalmen.

Given the “vulnerability” (R6) of the repentant perpetrator, abuse by fellow perpetrators or even the victims (aside from those whose claim to “victimhood” is dubious) is only to be expected. And the biblical tradition is not oblivious to this. Besides the Bußpsalmen, in which we hear the complaints of the repentant and the promise of a “truthful” and “just” God, in Kings there is an instructive story (already mentioned in R3) about someone trying to gain from a vulnerable, repentant perpetrator: the story of Naaman and Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the prophet (2 Kgs 5). Struck by both the power to heal and unconditional mercy, Naaman, the commander of a foreign army hostile to Israel, “returned/repented/converted” (v. 15). Meanwhile, disappointed by his master’s mercy and justifying his greed, Gehazi contrived an implausible lie to extort “silver and clothing” from Naaman. The new man (v. 14), true to the spirit of repentance, that is, vulnerable and willing to risk possible injustice/harm to himself in the course of atonement, gave Gehazi the benefit of the doubt, even giving double what was asked—a spontaneous sign of a repentant with overflowing gratefulness from his circumcised heart (R6) for the mercy received. The “man of God,” Elisha, knew everything all along, and he gave Gehazi a chance to confess (v. 25). But the servant did not seize the opportunity for repentance, and hence was made to suffer the punishment that was originally Naaman’s (i.e., leprosy).

All in all, one may conclude, then, that the repentant perpetrator is encouraged to exercise vulnerability and not to be thwarted by possibilities or even actual incidents of being “abused.” “Truth” and “justice” (Ps 143:1) are assured to him (just as they are to other victims); he does not even need to worry about defending himself against animosity amid just accusations, for God himself will be the judge (Ps 38:14–16). Victims or pseudovictims, on the other

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18. The layers of mercy in this account of course go beyond Elisha’s refusal to accept “gifts in return” (v. 16); they extend also to the unnamed young Israelite girl, who, despite her real victimhood of having been kidnapped and reduced to servitude, proactively pointed the way to healing to Naaman (vv. 2–3).
hand, are reminded that they, too, will have to give an account to God as to how they deal with the repentant sinner. Exploiting a neighbor’s shame for one’s own benefit belongs, according to Maimonides, to those sins that threaten “partaking in the future life.”  

R12: The Sin of the Fathers as Cross-Generational Guilt

Psalm 51:7 See, I have been guilt-ridden from birth, a sinner from my mother’s womb.

Psalm 51:16 Deliver me, O God, from the guilt of blood; you who are my God and savior.

Psalm 102:20–21 From his holy height in heaven, the Lord looks on the earth, he hears the groaning of the prisoners and sets free the children of death.

Deuteronomy 5:9–10 For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing mercy unto the thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Ezekiel 18:2–3 What’s that for a proverb you use in the land of Israel: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? “As I live,” said the Lord God, “none of you shall use this proverb again.”

In collective reconciliation, some of the most relevant questions asked across nations and cultures concern generational guilt and generational responsibility: To what extent are the (grand)children of perpetrators guilty of the wrongdoing of their forefathers? Is it justified at all that later generations of the victims should demand “apology” and/or “repentance/atonement” from later generations of the perpetrators, who were not even born when the atrocity took place? What are the responsibilities of the subsequent generations of the victims? And of the perpetrators?

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The Bußpsalmen, as a whole, express an awareness of both the cross-generational “properties” of sin, as exemplified by Psalm 51:7 quoted above, and the ability (and eagerness) of God to break the chain of condemnation (i.e., the “blood-debt” in Ps 51:16 and those condemned to death in Ps 102:21). Indeed, the “guilt of the fathers” is a frequent motif in the Bible (e.g., Ex 34:7; Nm 14:18; Dt 5:9), and sons (and daughters) are encouraged to confess (i.e., to uncover) and to learn from their former generation’s wickedness in order to reform themselves and their present society (e.g., 2 Kgs 22:13; Neh 1:6–7). The commandment to “honor father and mother” (Ex 20:12) does not seem to have precedence over the demand to turn away from them when they have sinned: the “sons of Levi” responded to Moses’s call to engage in a violent purge against even their closest relatives after these had turned to a false god (Ex 32:26–29).20 We have already dealt with the “repentant disagreement” concerning generational guilt in the God-human relationship (see R8); we will continue here to explore its implications for victim-perpetrator and intraperpetrator relationships.

When a generation “confesses” the sins/wrongdoings of the former generation (e.g., Neh 1:6–7), they recognize both the cross-generational longevity of sin (e.g., in human nature, customs, and institutions) and the cross-generational consequences of sin (e.g., natural and social disasters).21 By this very act of recognition, they are also exercising the freedom to break away from wrongful practices and frames of mind, and shouldering the responsibility for the aftermath of crimes and wrongdoings. As Jeremiah exclaimed in the face of such responsibilities, “Mine is this affliction; I must bear it” (10:19),22 so is the attitude of a

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20. Whether this text can be cited in support of intergenerational violence against apostasy is of course highly controversial. In the relevant text itself, one does not find an explicit demand from Yahweh to Moses for such a drastic measure. Rather, God was shown, before and after, to be willing and ready to “turn away from anger” and to “change his mind” (Ex 32:11–14).

21. Natural degradation because of previous exploitation, and the loss of social trust following totalitarian regimes, are only two of the more obvious examples.

22. Compare the rather unusual translation from the Lutherbibel (1912)—“Es ist meine Plage; ich muß sie leiden”—with more contemporary versions.
repentant generation. But when a man acts as a judge and con-
demns entire families/communities/nations for the sins of one or
some among them, he in effect denies them such freedom and
hence, by extension, negates real personal responsibility (see the
biological causality of the proverb condemned by both Jeremiah
31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2). Or when a person blithely thinks that
simply by virtue of being born late and having the benefit of his-
torical hindsight, he is “free from the guilt/sinfulness” of his for-
mer generation(s), he is in fact blind to the cross-generationalities,
that is, the presentness of sin, and hence fails to make the nec-
essary turning. This blindness also often misleads a person to
consider himself a “victim” in having to deal with the “unfair”
consequences at all.

In the victim-perpetrator relationship, then, reconciliation seems
to hinge on the particular configuration of “repentant disagree-
ment”: whether on the “generational punishment” side, there is
generational confession in the “perpetrator-nation” that seeks re-
pentance and responsibility, or generational condemnation in the
“victim-nation” that seeks perpetual blame and punishment; and
whether on the “generational absolution” side, there is repentance
aversion in the “perpetrator-nation” that bespeaks reluctance and/
or indifference, or repentance acceptance in the “victim-nation”
that assumes the fundamental redeemability of human beings.
Again, “mutual-turning” requires nothing less than deliberate
“repentant disagreement” of a particular kind—a kind that the
biblical tradition appears to advocate. After all, in the book of
Jeremiah, it is the prophet who speaks of generational condem-
nation when “representing” the “perpetrator-nation” to face God
(14:20), while it is Yahweh who responds with generational abso-
lution when proclaiming restoration (31:29–30).

R13: Remembrance for Life as Cross-Generational
Responsibility

Psalm 143:5 I remember the earlier days; I reflect on what you have
done and speak of the work of your hands.
Psalm 38:13, 16 Those who seek my life lay snares for me; those who wish to hurt me speak of my ruin. . . . But I put my trust in you, O Lord; you will answer for me, Lord God.

Psalm 102:19 Let this be written for future generations, and the Lord will be praised by the people he will form.

Psalm 40:11 I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and your help. I do not remain silent about your kindness and truth before the great community.

In biblical repentance, if the intraperpetrator relationships (i.e., in this context, the intergenerational relationships within a perpetrator-nation) are “difficult,” for coming to terms with “the sin of the fathers” can only be discomfiting, to say the least, the intravictim relationships are no less demanding. The later generations of the victims also have to deal with the set of questions related to the perpetrators and the later generations of the perpetrators, and also those related to the dead, the survivors or remnants, and the generations that are yet to come. We have already discussed the generational aspects of the problem above; we’ll now turn to the responsibilities of later generations of the victims with regard to justice for the victims, vengeance/revenge and remembrance.

“The Lord Yahweh will wipe away the tears from all cheeks and eyes,” declares Isaiah (25:8). Thus the restoration of the victims, especially the dead, for whom the living can apparently do no more than commemoration, is assured. This is of course not to replace human justice, or more precisely, the endeavor for justice as much as humanly attainable, 23 but rather, to complete it, especially where it fails or where it is impossible to fulfill. To employ the prophetic vision of human sins as relational wounds (R2) once again, it is clear to anyone who has dwelt with any adequate depth on human atrocities against each other that the wounds are beyond human cure (Jer 14:19, 15:18)—even in the case of “perfect” justice with the most complete compensation and punishment as humanly possible. In this sense, if the ultimate duty of the victims’

23. After all, to do justice is a fundamental duty of the believer (Mi 6:8).
descendants/compatriots is to achieve full justice for them, disappointment seems inevitable. “Our entire justice is like a piece of filthy clothing” (Is 64:5). It is with this understanding of the “not-nearly-enough” quality of human justice—all the more so, the more heinous the iniquity—that the hope for full restoration and retribution is placed, in the biblical tradition, in God and God alone. For even as God also speaks of the incurable wounds, he has promised to heal them as well (30:12, 17).

Unlike in some other traditions, human vengeance is not elevated to a moral duty in either Judaism or Christianity. “Vengeance is mine,” declares the Lord, who will give justice to his people in his own way and time (Dt 32:35–36). Seeking revenge is expressly prohibited to the victims (and their later generations) (Lv 19:18). Rather, the later generations’ attention, as we have seen in part, is deflected from enemy hatred and self-pity to self-critique: to reflect on their own (and their fathers’) possible sinfulness as the “original cause” in their national calamity, whether it be foreign invasion, captivity, or oppression. As exemplified in Ezra’s prayer in Nehemiah (9:6–37), three times it is mentioned that it was God who had “handed the [Israelites] over to their enemies” because of their unfaithfulness, thus orienting the victim-perpetrator relationship staunchly within the God-victim-perpetrator triad.

In this three-dimensional vision, it is not just justice and mercy that have acquired different meanings (i.e., as compared to the unilinear victim-perpetrator-only relationship), but also remembrance. Whereas memory can—and often does—become a servant of intercommunal hatred, it is by and large employed in the Bible to serve the God-human relationship. “Thou shalt remember . . .” is a frequent formulation in the Torah. Invariably, the faithfulness of God and the destructiveness of sin are the two major themes of this remembrance, under which the memory of the perpetrators themselves is subsumed, as captured also in the Bußpsalmen verses above. “Remember that when you were a slave in the land of Egypt,” reads a “reasoning” in the Decalogue in Deuteronomy (5:15); yet it does not follow that the Egyptians are the ones to be remembered, for “it was the Lord your God who brought you out with a mighty hand and a stretched-out arm.” And as if to
counter the prevailing and powerful culture of mutual justification of wrongdoings, the centrality of the God-Israel relationship is cited as the only “remembrance reason” for Jewish victims of oppression and slavery and their subsequent generations to refrain from imitating the Egyptians in their own relationships with their others. “You should love him [the stranger] like yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God” (Lv 19:34). The “mighty hand” and “stretched-out arm” that freed Israel can also turn against him, should he venture to become “like the nations” in their idolatry and wickedness (Ez 20:32–33).

It is true that the Lord “forgets not,” but his nonforgetfulness is not the same as a human grudge. “Can a woman forget her child, a mother her own son? Even if she might forget him, I do not forget you” (Is 49:15). Furthermore, as Maimonides emphasized, remembrance is not to serve the purpose of shaming: “It is also a great sin to say to the repentant: Remember your former actions, or to bring him to the memory of these, just to shame him. . . . All this is forbidden and prohibited in the general commandments of the Torah.”24 In other words, a loveless reminding that does not serve the purpose of turning is incompatible with the biblical precept of remembrance.

We will take a closer look at but one other biblical example to illustrate the intricacies of this triangular relational structure of memory, into which the details of the past are placed and from which their meanings are derived: the “remembrance of Amalek” (Ex 17:14–16; Dt 25:17–19).25

According to tradition, the Amalekites attacked the wandering Israelites after the latter had found a new source of water. With the help of Yahweh, the attackers lost, and Moses was instructed by God himself to “write this in a book as something to be remembered . . . that I will wipe out the remembrance of Amalek

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25. I am grateful to Rabbi Pesach Schindler for pointing me to these passages by linking them to Simon Dubnow’s entreaty to the Jewish survivors to “record accurately all the tragic details of the Holocaust.” See Schindler, Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1990), 1, 139.
from under heaven” (Ex 17:14). Moses then took this to mean that “Yahweh is at war with the Amalekites from generation to generation” (v. 16). In Deuteronomy, this incident is recounted with two instructions: “Remember what Amalek did to you when you were on the road, coming out of Egypt. He went out to meet you on the way and when you were weak and tired attacked all who were left behind. He had no fear of God” (25:17–18); “You shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget” (v. 19).

The probable confusion on the part of the reader is well justified: What is not to be remembered? And what is not to be forgotten? Or what does it mean to not forget to wipe out remembrance? The key to a possible interpretation pertinent especially to our relational viewpoint is highlighted in italics in the quoted scriptures above: the “I” of Yahweh God and the “you” of the Israelites in the wiping out of “the remembrance of Amalek.” One must ask, indeed, if Moses’s interpretation was all there was to understand, then what could be left for the Israelites to wipe out? And if everything should be wiped out, then what could be left to remember?

That Yahweh’s faithfulness—all the more important in these times of fratricidal treachery—is the main theme and content to be remembered has already been mentioned above. In fact, the monument erected by Moses right after the war was not called “Victory against Amalek” or “The Accursed Amalekites,” as one might have expected, but was an altar with the name “Yahweh My Banner” (v. 15). What is also to be remembered seems not the Amalekites themselves or their name, for only the righteous are worthy of remembrance (Prv 10:7), but their wrongdoings (the taking advantage of the weak strangers, the tired, and the left behind) and their “godlessness,” which the Israelites are called to remember so as not to commit the same themselves (Ex 22:20; Dt 26. According to tradition, Amalek was a grandson of Esau—the brother of Jacob/Israel (Gn 36:12).

Indeed, the immediate verses preceding the instructions concerning remembrance of Amalek in Deuteronomy speak clearly of this danger: holding one set of standards against oneself, and another against the “others,” the “enemies” (Dt 25:13–16). The Amalekites themselves had been victims of foreign oppression (Gn 14:7), yet they not only failed to remember the good that Abram/Abraham had done for them (i.e., by subduing their conquerors), but also committed the same or even worse crimes against others, even their benefactors, Abraham’s descendants. On the other hand, the victory of the Amalekites & Co. over the Israelites was presented elsewhere in the Bible as the (reluctant) divine response to the repeated mis-turnings of the latter (Jgs 3:12–14).

All in all, the injunctions concerning the “remembrance of Amalek” could be the following: to remember God’s faithfulness, to remember sins and wrongdoings, and to make an effort in overcoming the natural remembering of the perpetrators in one’s heart—for

28. Rabbi René-Samuel Sirat has raised a complementary point when interpreting the text of 1 Samuel 15:18, in which he points out that the Hebrew text did not say “to destroy the Amalekite sinners,” but “to destroy sins (of which Amalek is but a symbol).” See Sirat, “Judaism and Repentance” (paper presented at the Religions and Repentance Conference: Growth in Religious Traditions, Facing a New Era, Elijah Interfaith Institute, Jerusalem, 21 Mar. 2000). Indeed, the apparently divinely sanctioned violence against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, in which the prophet Samuel told Saul the king to kill every single Amalekite, including children and infants, has always been problematic in biblical theology. At one extreme, it seems as if the “wiping out of remembrance” meant genocide (1 Sm 15:2–3). However, a counterexample of the vengeful Gibeonites (2 Sm 21) used by Maimonides points to the problem of this interpretation (“Lehre von der Buße,” 427). Furthermore, with the Abrahamic plea for Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis already mentioned (R10), one might ask whether even in the event of a clear and direct divine order of violence, one should not actually be bold enough—like Abraham—to disagree with God and try to placate him, instead of simply offering an “obedience” that is indifferent to the injustice inherent in any indiscriminate punishment. It is thus legitimate to ask whether both Saul and Samuel had in fact failed the “Abrahamic test” (Gn 22:1), and whether God regretted (1 Sm 15:11) that Saul had failed to kill all, or that he had just spared the strong and the useful, instead of having compassion for the weak and those of “no value” (15:9). For relevant exegetical possibilities, see Louis H. Feldman, ‘Remember Amalek!’ (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 46–53.
it is the only place “under heaven” where God needs the victim’s “help” in wiping out the remembrance of the perpetrators. Yet this inner wiping out takes time and is, like other turnings, not to be accomplished under force (R3). Hence it is only with peace and security that this active and selective remembrance and forgetting are to be achieved (Dt 25:19).

R14: Reconciliation as Turning to Each Other through Turning to God

Psalm 51:11 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my offenses.

Psalm 102:3 Do not hide your face from me when I am in trouble. Incline your ear to me; make haste to answer me when I call.

Psalm 32:5 I said: “I will confess my wrongdoings before the Lord.” Then you forgave me the guilt of my sins.

Psalm 143:7 Answer me quickly, O Lord, for my spirit is dying. Do not hide your face from me, so that I will not be like those who go down to the pit.

Psalm 80:20 Turn to us, O Lord, God of hosts; let your face shine so we can be saved.

The Bußpsalmen repeatedly express the repentant perpetrator’s/sinner’s wish to seek God’s face, that is, for “divine turning”: from being fixated on the sins and wrongdoings to turning toward the perpetrator himself. It is as if sin (given birth into reality by the sinner) has effected a double turning-away: the sinner’s turning away from God, and God’s turning away from the sinner. Correspondingly, when repentance as “(re)turning” is spoken of in the Bible, it is meant to be “mutual-turning,” in which it is invariably the God-victim who makes the turning first—in the various forms of mercy (R3), in the enabling of and participation in the sinner’s repentance (R6), and not the least in repenting himself (R9). The various turnings on God’s side implored—as opposed
to being demanded—by the sinner are expressed in concrete actions: “incline your ear,” “answer,” “carry away,” “hide (not),” “cast out not.” In this last section, we will review some aspects of mutual-turning in light of further examples of interhuman reconciliation in the Bible, in order to bring out certain elements that are obscured or overlooked in our exploration of repentance in the God-human relationship (R1–R9).

Interpersonal Reconciliation between Joseph and His Brothers (Genesis 37–50): The Link between Confession and Curative Mourning

Genesis 42:21, 24 They said among themselves, “Alas! We are guilty toward our brother! For we saw the fear of his soul when he pleaded with us, but we did not listen; that is why this misery has come upon us. . . .” And Joseph turned and wept.

In the book of Genesis, Joseph, son of Jacob/Israel, who had been betrayed and sold into slavery by his brothers, wept seven times. Two instances of particular importance were occasioned by his brothers’ confessions. The first time he wept was after the internal confession among his brothers, in which they drew the link between their present predicament (i.e., being imprisoned) and their past sin against their brother Joseph, hence recognizing the punishment as just (see R4). The third time, in which he “wept aloud” and finally revealed himself to his brothers, after testing their resolve of repentance, was upon Judah’s public confession of sin.

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29. Divine turning is not a matter of “right” that the sinner can demand from God. It is rather always a matter of divine initiative in the dead-end situation in which the sinner rightfully finds himself.


32. Why would Joseph keep first Simeon and then Benjamin, but let his other brothers go? It is possible that he wanted to see whether his brothers had really learned and turned: Would they let Simeon, their brother of the same mother (Leah), languish in slavery, as they had done to Joseph? Would they do that to Benjamin, regarded not as their brother but only their “father’s son”—as Joseph was regarded (Gn 37:32)—of their mother’s rival (Rachel)? In other words, were they still constrained by a narrowly defined notion of kinship love? As Maimonides has
Judah said: “God has found out the iniquity of your servants” (Gn 44:16). Rather than pleading their actual innocence of theft, Judah attempted to shoulder all the guilt by substituting Benjamin (44:34). Finally, seeing that his brothers were still burdened by the fear of retribution and a conception of guilt that enslaves, Joseph wept for the seventh time and “comforted” them (50:17, 21).

Hence, although in the Bible one does not read of divine “tears of joy,” but only God weeping for our sins (see R5), we can see at least from this example of interhuman reconciliation the curative potential of confession. That is, even though past wrongdoings cannot be undone, even though a confession may not reveal anything that is not already known—in other words, even though a confession “does nothing”—by confessing a sinner/perpetrator still has much to contribute to healing—not only of the wounded relationship but also of the wounded victim.

International Reconciliation between the Israelites and the Edomites (Genesis 25–33): The Difference between Reconciliation and Integration

Genesis 33:10, 16–17 Jacob answered [Esau]: “... I saw your face, as if I was seeing the face of God...” Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. And Jacob went to Succoth.

Perhaps the most relevant and direct question with regard to the original intention of this biblical investigation is, Where are the examples of “collective reconciliation” in the Bible? With our conceptual preparation up to this point, we shall now finally deal with this question squarely, by looking at the story of Israel (or the Israelites) and Esau (or the Edomites) in Genesis 25:21–33:20. This story is assuring in one sense and “surprising” in another. It is assuring because conflicts between “nations/peoples” (25:23) are framed within the triad of relationships (R2), pointing to the shared origins said, the test of “complete repentance” (vollkommene Buße) is when the sinner is given a chance to commit the same sin again but does not sin even though he can. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 417. Judah, who had led the group in selling Joseph into slavery (37:26–27), also took the lead in passing both of these tests.
of the conflicting parties (first through Rebekah their mother but ultimately to Yahweh-God, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac). It is also assuring that the “causes” of these conflicts are not conceived as “black and white,” or in terms of a good-versus-evil or us-versus-them kind of historiography; rather, natural disparities (25:23) and parental favoritism (25:28) are cited, alongside the conflicting parties’ own respective sinful behavior (R1), that is, Jacob’s lying and Esau’s disregard for the sacred right of the firstborn, for instance. It is also assuring that the Israelites were in effect taught through this particular scripture to see themselves not as “pure and innocent” (R11) in their conflicts with the Edomites; rather, Jacob (Israel) had every reason to repent and to proactively seek reconciliation with Esau (Edom), just as Esau did with Jacob. And for Jacob to be “motivated” to do so, the only thing he could and did count on was God’s mercy and power (32:10–13), rather than his own “self-power” of “self-transformation” (R3 and R6), of overcoming past mistakes and their consequences. Indeed, even before he met Esau, he was already made a new man, “Israel” (32:28). Finally, it is assuring that in international reconciliation, the “forgetting and anger-self-dissipating” approach is judged not reliable (R13); the guilt-bearers have to turn to their victims, who in turn have to be willing to “face again” their former perpetrators and their shared—yet differentiated—guilt and pain (33:3–4). They both have to face their God and see each other (33:10) if reconciliation is to take place between them. It is only “surprising” that the story does not end with “And they lived happily ever after,” as we might have expected. Instead, the two still parted ways (33:16–17).

33. See also Obadiah 1:10, 15.
34. Rebekah told Jacob to flee until Esau forgot what Jacob had done to him and his anger “turn[ed] itself away from him” (Gn 27:44–45). It didn’t happen.
35. The same occurred in Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers: first, when he turned to them as a “God-fearing man” (Gn 42:18); then, as he took away their guilt by accusing God of delivering him to the Egyptians in order to save the entire family (Israel) from famine (45:5–8). The entire human act of fraternal betrayal was thus enveloped and interpreted in a greater act of divine “culpability” and, ultimately, mercy, which is typical in the biblical paradigm (e.g., Ps 105:25; Ex 11:10).
All of this shows, on the one hand, the challenges for those seeking inspiration for collective reconciliation from the Bible, and on the other, the challenges for the conception of “reconciliation” itself. Does it have to mean “integration,” as in intermarriage, similar schooling and worldview, same language and laws, and so on? Does it mean “world peace,” in which not only are past relational wounds healed but future wounds are also forestalled, which immediately renders “reconciliation” unattainable as the problem is intractable? Does it mean “going back to the past when things were good,” which brings to the fore both the impossibility of “going back” and the paucity, if not outright absence, of the “original state of good relationship” between communities? Or can it mean a “renewal of relationship,” in which wounds are being tended to while a new relationship of a new liveliness (still under the ever-present threat of new wounds and illnesses) that has never been (Is 43:19) is coming into being?

The question of interhuman reconciliation therefore does not have to be burdened with unrealistic expectations on the one side, and is not to be confused with social integration on the other. As Yahweh commanded Jeremiah, “If you return, I will return to you. . . . Let them return to you, but do not return to them” (Jer 15:19). It is repentance to God rather than reconciliation with one another per se that stands at the core of mutual-turning efforts. In the biblical vision, for both the human victims and the perpetrators, drawing closer to God (both themselves and each other) takes precedence over merely drawing closer to one another; should both be turning to God, then no contradiction will arise from their turning to each other. In fact, as we have seen, both—but especially the perpetrator—benefit from the other’s efforts in turning to God. But should interhuman mutual-turning give rise to the danger of turning away from God, as in “compromises” in issues concerning

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36. As implied by a common Chinese formulation that is used to express “reconciliation”: 和好如初 (literally, “harmonious and good as in the beginning”).

37. In this single verse, the verb “repent/return” appears four times—possibly no other verse in the Bible contains more instances of turning. That even God “repents/turns” is not, as we have seen in R9, an alien notion in the Bible. Cf. Zechariah 1:3.
truth and justice, then such “reconciliation” in the human sphere, according to the scripture cited above, is to be rejected in favor of repentance to God.

But can one simply choose to repent only to God—that is, without turning to the human victims, who can be much more difficult, if not impossible, to restore than the merciful, ever-ready-to-turn God? From the experience of Jacob, this “sidestepping” of the human victims is to be refuted, for even as the new man, Israel, was already formed before facing Esau, his wronged brother, he had to meet him nonetheless, bearing the full risk of rejection—or even abuse (R11)—of his genuine repentance. Indeed, such is the high price for human iniquity: a double healing is necessary for the double damage of divine-human and interhuman relationships (R2). Had the reconciliation with God alone sufficed, then the Lord would not have to bring famine to the Israelites, his people, in order for them to face the Gibeonites, to atone for Saul’s “guilt of blood,” through which he annihilated the non-Israelites “in his zeal for Israel and Judah” (2 Sm 21:1–14). It is as if God will not allow himself to be reconciled to the sinners unless they have made at least earnest attempts—so long as these are still humanly possible—to repent also to their human victims. For when the prophet proclaimed, “For the wound of my people I am wounded,” it was indicative of the “divine pathos” (Heschel) when relationships among the children of God remain damaged. Hence according to Maimonides, the Jewish “Day of Atonement/Reconciliation” (Versöhnungstag) is a time for all to repent, as

38. See, for example, the problems of premature “healing/reconciliation” and “unjust peace” in Jeremiah 6:13–14.

39. The need to seek reconciliation with the victims of one’s own sinful acts before seeking reconciliation with God is also stressed in the Gospels. For if the victims are asked to leave their gifts at the altar to go and face their siblings who had done wrong against them (Mt 5:23–24), shouldn’t the perpetrators have all the more reason to summon up the courage to seek the face of their human victims—rather than just seeking absolution from the confessors?


41. Yom Kippur is usually translated as “Day of Atonement” in English (see, e.g., Lv 23:27), but the common German translation, “Versöhnungstag,” can also mean “Day of Reconciliation.” This is probably due to the etymological
individuals and as a community. But “repentance, and the Day of Reconciliation as well, only have the power to forgive sins that man has committed against God. . . . The injustice that a man has done to another . . . will never be pardoned until he compensates his neighbor, to the extent he is guilty toward him, and placates him. . . . and begs him for pardon.” And should the victims be dead before pardon can be asked for, the guilty ones are to make a public confession before an audience in front of the graves of the dead victims: “I have sinned against the Eternal One, the God of Israel, and against so-and-so; in this and that way I have done injustice against them.” To seek the face of the victim—irreplaceable and unrepresentable—is thus liturgically enforced in Judaism. Before the face of God, on the other hand, the victim is also reminded of his own sinner-hood (Eccl 7:20–22). And though it is his prerogative to withhold forgiveness for his victimizer, nevertheless it is not recommended that he do so toward the repentant one.

Toward the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph’s brothers feared that the death of their father, Jacob, would remove the inhibition of Joseph’s revenge against them. And so they put words in the mouth of the deceased to request forgiveness from Joseph: “Forgive your brothers . . .” (Gn 50:17). But Joseph did not utter that one word they were seeking. Instead he answered: “Am I in the place of God?” (v. 19). It is one thing to consider oneself capable of issuing forgiveness yet withholding it; it is another not to consider oneself to be “in the place” to issue forgiveness, as in the case of Joseph, who, although the undisputed victim of his brothers’ wrongdoings, considered himself indebted to God, who had turned the evil intentions of men and his misery into salvation for many (v. 20).

43. Ibid.
44. Maimonides went so far as to claim that if even after repeated attempts on the part of the repentant to seek forgiveness privately and publicly from his victim, who nonetheless is unwilling to grant it, the guilt will then rest with the unforgiving victim. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 427.
Instead of forgiveness, Joseph offered his brothers much more: care, comfort, and companionship (v. 21).

Conclusion: A Review of Biblical Repentance

The common translation of the Hebrew word *tshuvah* as “repentance/penitence/penance” in English and “Buße” in German (which derives from “Besserung,” or “betterment”) has its pros and cons. The most obvious loss of connotation in these translations is the mutuality of turning. For the immediate import of the close linguistic proximity between *tshuvah* and *turning, returning, restoring*—turning away from one’s evil ways, turning back to God, turning on the part of the sinner as making amends (Jer 26:13), turning as “re-facing” the sinner (Ez 39:29), and turning as restoring (relationally as well as geographically) on the part of God—is that “repentance” is very much a mutual act, involving both the perpetrator and the victim (in this case, God himself). Although there are crucial differences between what each side needs to turn from and to (re)turn to, hence an *asymmetry*, the overall “structure” of biblical repentance is one of “mutual-turning,” rather than a unilateral turning to be “accomplished” by the sinner alone. In other words, if God did not turn to the sinner in the first instance—to offer him the chance (and guidance/encouragement/admonishment) for repentance—the sinner would have


46. The problem with mutual-turning, one must never fail to remember, is when it becomes a “requirement” by the perpetrator of the victim, as when the French intellectual Pascal Bruckner demands “absolute reciprocity,” in terms of official apologies, from the victims of French colonialism. See Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton, NJ/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 43.
no recourse to turning at all. To borrow Franz Rosenzweig’s formulation, repentance is in essence an “evented event” (ereignetes Ereignis).47

The words “repentance” and “Buße” convey at best only the sinner’s side—indispensable nonetheless—of tshuvah, that is, of regret, of self-bettering. At worst, they convey only punishment, as, for example, Bußgeld (a fine) or büßen (to suffer). Although all these elements (including the Greek metanoia, roughly, “change of mind”), as has been demonstrated in this part of the book, belong to the conceptualizations of “turning” in the Bible, none alone “defines” what biblical repentance means. The one advantage “repentance” has over “turning” is its religious specificity: not all turnings correspond to biblical repentance, as is shown in the example in Jeremiah 34:15–22 (see R6). In cultural contexts where the word “turning” does not enjoy an intuitive link with penitential “turnings” as meant in the Bible, the imperfect translations are necessary compromises. In this sense, although Umkehr (turning back) most resembles tshuvah in its non-closed-endedness, it suffers from the same nonspecificity as “turning” in English, as in umgekehrt (conversely) or Umkehrung (reversal).

The problem of biblical repentance does not lie in its imperfect translations into German and English alone, which is a general problem with all cultural borrowings and is not insurmountable with careful clarification. More significant for the purpose of this investigation is the problem of relational transference. To what extent can the God-human relationship be the “model” for the interhuman one? What are the limits of this “trans(re)lation”?

To begin with the obvious, the victim is not, by virtue of the wrongdoing and the resultant victimhood, the perpetrator’s “god”;

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47. This term is used in the context of love in revelation. Franz Rosenzweig, Der Stern der Erlösung (Frankfurt a.M.: J. Kauffmann Verlag, 1921), 203. See also Bernhard Casper, “Transzendentale Phänomenalität und ereignetes Ereignis: Der Sprung in ein hermeneutisches Denken im Leben und Werk Franz Rosenzweigs,” in Der Stern der Erlösung, by Franz Rosenzweig (Freiburg im Breisgau: Universitätssbibliothek, 2002).
rather, in the biblical paradigm, they both have the one God to face, who acts as the judge between them (1 Sm 2:25). This seemingly insignificant point is in fact of crucial significance if we consider the problems of interhuman reconciliation, when the perpetrators feel beholden to the victims’ demands for “repentance”—even those totally uncharacteristic of the spirit of biblical repentance (see R11)—as if the latter were now also the “God-victim.”

Secondly, the issue of power is also problematic. Whereas in the God-human relationship, power and mercy on the part of God often come hand in hand (whether as the power to punish or as the power to heal), this does not always correspond to the interhuman. Not all victims are in a position to ponder judgment or clemency, punishment or magnanimity. Quite often, they are still locked in a semidependent, underprivileged relationship with the perpetrators. One cannot exercise mercy, so to speak, if one cannot not exercise it. In this sense, the “restoration of the victims” is of primary importance in interhuman reconciliation, although unnecessary in the God-sinner relationship.

Finally, if God’s mercy is the beginning of repentance, temporally and ontologically, as we have demonstrated (R3) that the repentant sinner/perpetrator seems to be able to overcome the obstacles to the “circumcision of the heart” (R6) only by counting on it, where is the promise of turning in the interhuman? It is not mercy as automatic impunity—this we have seen is not the biblical idea of mercy (R4)—but mercy as the promise to restore, that is, to “face again,” to hear and speak to again, in short, to reenter into relation with. And if there is no such “guarantee” from the human victims’ side, but in its place the possibility—if not already the reality—of permanent condemnation, regardless of whether one repents or not, then where can another motivational force be found?

“Repentance is the most optimistic device,” Rabbi Schindler told us at Yad Vashem. We did not know what he meant until he referred to the biblical texts about remembrance (“For you were strangers in the land of Egypt”) and then turned to the present-day Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, without such optimism, difficult
questions regarding one’s own or one’s nation’s past and present can be much harder to come to terms with, if at all. Turning to the next chapter, we shall look at how this “device” has been at work—insofar as it is visible—in the history of German Vergangenheitsbewältigung.