Repentance for the Holocaust
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The Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuvah*, means *return*. Yet it also means *answer*. Return to God is an answer to Him. For God is not silent. . . . The stirring in man to turn to God is actually a “reminder by God to man.” . . . The most precious gifts come to us unawares and remain unnoted. God’s grace resounds in our lives like a staccato. Only by retaining the seemingly disconnected notes do we acquire the ability to grasp the theme.¹

Abraham Joshua Heschel

In the two previous chapters on biblical repentance, we have sought to delineate the salient features of “repentance” in the biblical texts, deriving conceptions for interhuman, collective “mutual-turning” chiefly through transference from repentance between God and human. Moving forward from this textual analysis, we will now seek to concretize this biblical paradigm with realities created in dealing with the German guilt situation. We will look at a selection of responses from those affected or burdened by Nazi atrocities—that is, the victims, the perpetrators, the bystanders, and their respective later generations—and attempt to establish their correspondence with the biblical paradigm of repentance.

The idea is not to trace individual motivation, nor to describe general trends of public or intellectual opinion. Rather, the aim here is to highlight the *formal resemblance* between such words and deeds and the biblical conceptions of repentance. In fact, these responses were often “minority opinions,” expressed by individuals who were upheld and castigated at the same time by their respective communities. Yet, as we shall see, this “minority” was not confined to a particular segment of society, namely, the “religious professionals” who are experts in the biblical paradigm and are religiously motivated. The broad distribution of the samples of this “minority” thus proves nothing regarding the broad *acceptance* of their opinions; it indicates rather the broad *presence* of the biblical paradigm.

For want of adequate preestablished categories, one might call this minority the “turners,” for they all sought in effect to turn their respective audiences to or away from certain viewpoints, attitudes, and behavioral patterns, which were in unison or conflict with the biblical paradigm of repentance. Needless to say, it is the spoken word, not the speaker, that bears validity, that is, not everything a “turner” says necessarily corresponds with repentance; rather, it is always contingent upon the particular expression identified to be in correspondence with biblical turning that a turner is named as such in this study. It is also never the intention to evaluate particular individuals as whole persons, but to recognize their particular contribution to mutual-turning.

In the following chapters, these “turning” responses will be organized according to the ideational framework established in part 1 of this book (e.g., P6 contains historical expressions corresponding to the theological positions in R6). In each chapter certain phrases appear in boldface for convenient navigation.