

# Return, O Israel: The Value of Repentance

Analysis of Piska 24 of the Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna

by Edward M. Cottrell

*“Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall. Take words with you and return to the LORD.”*

Hosea 14:1-2 NIV

## Introduction

Piska 24 of Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna focuses on God's call to Israel for repentance, as spoken by Hosea.<sup>1</sup> This piska is relevant to Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement for sins, which is discussed in section 2, and may have been used as source material for sermons delivered orally at that time, or even as a collection of sermons, compiled after their delivery. Yom Kippur differs from every other day of the Jewish liturgical year in its emphasis on repentance from sins committed against God and those against other people. Piska 24 emphasizes repentance as well, in its unifying verse, Hosea 14:2<sup>2</sup>, "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall." This statement fits the command to repent on Yom Kippur, and thus would be logical Scripture to discuss at that time.

The key ideas presented in Piska 24 are the validity and necessity of repentance; that is, any sincere repentance is acceptable to God, and Israel must repent to find favor with Him. These two ideas are the focus of most sections of the Piska, specifically sections 1 through 8 and 13 through 15, which show that God accepts all repentance, but punishes the unrepentant severely. Section 5 expresses the idea of prayer and repentance as acceptable sacrifices, while section 8 deals with the importance of confession in repentance. These two sections are central, since they deal with these two primary topics of the entire piska.

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<sup>1</sup> Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna. William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, trans. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975. pp. 363-84.

<sup>2</sup> Verse numbers will be given as they are used in the Piska itself, when possible. When other verses are quoted, however, the numbering in the New International Version (NIV) will be used and noted.

### Section 5: “The sacrifices of God”

Section 5 of the piska opens with comments from several rabbis on the verse, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:19). “One commentator,” apparently Zabdi bar Levi,<sup>3</sup> sees the verse as spoken by David as a request of God. In this view, David says to God, if He will accept David because of his repentance, then Solomon, David's son, will certainly build the Temple and an altar and offer sacrifices to the LORD. Thus, God will “do good unto Zion” and “have occasion for delight in the sacrifices of righteousness . . . for then [children of Israel] will offer bullocks upon Thine altars” (Ps. 51:20-21). This interpretation may be suggested by the heading of the Psalm, which tells us that the passage is David's prayer of repentance for his adultery with Bathsheba.<sup>4</sup>

Another individual, probably R. Jose bar Petros, claims that the verse from Hosea does not refer solely to David, but to any repentant individual, and that this esteems the individual in the eyes of God as much as if he or she had built a Temple in Jerusalem and carried out the other above acts of Solomon. The rabbi draws his support from Psalm 51:20, “Then it will be, as though Thou hast already in Thy favor done good unto Zion, and already hast delight in the sacrifices of righteousness.” The actual explication of this verse is not given, but the interpretation in use is that the broken heart of the individual is as good an offering as the act of building the Temple. This understanding shows in the different ways the verses are given, reflecting what is being “read into” the Psalm by a given midrashist.

The other rabbis differ, interpreting Psalm 51:19 as a reference to the prayers of the reader before the Ark of the Covenant, prayers for the rebuilding of the Temple, and the restoration of the sacrificial system. The rabbis then deduce from this view the rule that the

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<sup>3</sup> Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna. pp. 367-8.

reader before the ark must bow while praying for these events. This view is distinctively post-70 AD, and imposes upon the ancient Biblical text a level of meaning only applicable long after the composition of the Psalm, and thus reflects the free and inventive nature of midrash.<sup>5</sup> There are two proof-texts given by different groups, the first being the blessing from the prayerbook, the *Ḥamidah*, "O our God, favor us, come to dwell in Zion the city where Thy children will serve Thee with offerings, and in Jerusalem where we shall bow down to Thee." The other rabbis cite Ps. 51:20 itself, but with the rearrangement "[When praying for] the sacrifices of God, the spirit must be bowed and broken." This is the interpretation cited in Leviticus Rabbah 7:2.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Abba bar Yudan notes the contrast between animal sacrifice and the sacrifices of a "broken and contrite heart," noting that the LORD rejects animals which are "blind, or broken, or maimed, or having a wen" (Lev. 22:22), but finds the broken state of the human heart acceptable and pleasing. Rabbi Alexandri continues this line of thought, saying that if a human uses a "broken vessel, it is taken as a reflection upon him." However, "*The LORD is nigh unto them that are of broken heart* (Ps. 34:19); *Who healeth the broken in heart* (Ps. 147:3)," and "a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:19).<sup>7</sup>

The section concludes abruptly with the admonition of Hosea 14:2, "Return, O Israel," with the implication that Israel's repentance is an acceptable sacrifice by the arguments offered above. This would likely have served in a sermon to lead into the Scripture reading for Yom Kippur on the Sabbath of Repentance. Thus, the rabbis connect the acceptability to God of "a broken and contrite heart" in Psalm 51 to the plea of Hosea by demonstrating that the sacrifices acceptable to God are not difficult to give. Such sacrifices require only a troubled and humbled

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 368.

<sup>5</sup> This is not the only interpretation of the verse, obviously, but an application to the situation at hand.

<sup>6</sup> *Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna*. p. 368, notes 9 and 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna*. pp. 368-9.

conscience, which results from Israel's downfall through sin (Hosea 14:2). Moreover, the unspoken consequence of failure to repent is found in Hosea 13:3 and 16b:

"They will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window." "They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open" (Hosea 13:3, 16b NIV).

Thus, while repentance brings forgiveness and restoration into God's graciousness (Hosea 14:4-9 NIV), waywardness and stubborn hearts bring utter and violent destruction, through God's divine justice.

The midrash itself in section 5 poses the interesting question of in whom and how "a broken and contrite heart" is an acceptable sacrifice to God. Based on the argument in the remainder of the piska, it would seem that the rabbis agree that repentance is an acceptable manner of obtaining forgiveness and that no other sin offering is necessary. For example, the rabbis note that Joel 2:13 advises, "rend your hearts, so that you will not need to rend your garments." Thus, a torn heart is sufficient to obtain God's forgiveness and no other action is necessary. More specifically, torn hearts and repentance prevent the necessity of tearing garments in grief for one's children, who might die atoning deaths for one's unconfessed sins.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the rabbis disagree on the subject of the Psalm's statement, particularly in verses 19-21. If David is the subject and speaker of the Psalm, as one rabbi argues, then the verse takes on a special meaning in David's plea and Solomon's act of building the Temple, but may not apply to those who do not already have God's favor; this topic is not broached within the midrash. On the other hand, another commentator argues that the verses apply to all repentant sinners, and that God values an act of repentance by any sincere individual as greatly as

Solomon's act of building the Temple and the altar. In this case, the verses function differently, offering God's blessing to all. The third interpretation, that the verse refers to the reader before the Ark and prayers for the temple and sacrificial system, is much more limited in scope, and reflects an interpretation that makes sense only after the destruction of the second Temple. Thus, the question is raised whether or not God despises a broken heart in ordinary individuals. As section 11 demonstrates, though, God accepts the repentance of even the most sinful and least sincere individuals and nations.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we can conclude that, although the verse may be especially applicable in certain circumstances, "a broken spirit; [and] a broken and contrite heart" are acceptable "sacrifices of God" from all individuals.

#### Section 8: "He that covereth his transgressions"

Section 8 of the piska extends the idea in section 5, beginning with Proverbs 28:13a, "He that covereth his transgressions shall not prosper," but leaving at first unwritten the second half of the verse, "but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." (Prov. 28:13b NIV). This verse introduces the main theme of the section, that God punishes the unrepentant as well as the wicked for their sins. Both Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi cite Rabbi Simeon ben Halafta, who noted that the nut tree is unique in its ability to survive with uncovered roots, and its failure to survive with covered roots. This metaphor shows that, while most creatures do not need repentance, humans cannot possibly find favor with God and thrive unless they repent. This could also be interpreted as referring to Israel, as compared to other nations, since the LORD is

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 374.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 371.

the God of Israel in particular and the universe in general. Thus, while many nations prosper while hiding their sins, Israel alone must expose her sins to thrive. Indeed, the nut tree is a symbol for Israel, so this interpretation of the rabbis' comments seems especially likely.<sup>10</sup> The rabbis also note an element of ancient justice applicable here: the accused is flogged when protesting innocence, but merely sent to prison when he confesses. In contrast, God condemns the unrepentant, but forgives and releases the confessed sinner.<sup>11</sup> Thus, as the proverb says and Rabbi Judah observes, "He that covereth his transgressions shall not prosper, [but] whoso exposes his transgressions by confession, intending to forsake them, shall obtain mercy" (Prov. 28:13). This proverb also contains a definition of true repentance; to confess alone will not win mercy, but confessing sins with the intention to forsake them will do so. Again, the nut tree is an apt metaphor, since it suffers when its roots are covered, yet prospers with them exposed, although this is not exploited in the piska. Thus, the rabbis conclude the section with Hosea's admonition, "Return, O Israel," since to fail to repent means receiving a "written verdict [that condemns him to prison]" from God, referring by "him" to the entire nation of Israel.<sup>12</sup> Although the midrash does not mention the next verse (Prov. 28:14), which cautions against hardening one's heart and advises fear of the LORD, it also has relevance. These two verses are in fact parallel, so its ideas are included in the discussion automatically, though the rabbis do not deal with the verse explicitly. The purpose of quoting the proverb is to show that if one has a hardened heart, one will suffer in God's punishment, yet a God-fearing man escapes this. That is, if Israel would fear the LORD and repent, both confessing her sins and abandoning them, as she is

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<sup>10</sup> *Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna*. p. 369, footnote 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 369-70. The text contains a reference to a "written verdict" in both cases, possibly a veiled reference to warnings against sin in the Scriptures, and definitely a reference to God's punishment of sinners.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 370

instructed for Yom Kippur, she would be blessed and prosper, but by hardening her heart and refusing to confess or cease her sinning, she will suffer, as described in Hosea 13.

### Conclusions

Piska 24 of Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna contains numerous ideas on repentance, but the most prevalent, as expressed in sections 1 through 8 and 13 through 15, is that repentance brings mercy and forgiveness, but hardened hearts and refusal to repent bring destruction and afflictions brought by God in righteousness.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, even short-lived, half-hearted or private repentance, even if brought about by impending doom, will secure God's forgiveness and acceptance, as shown in sections 9 through 12 and 19. Thus, the rabbis show that Hosea's plea to "Return, O Israel" is hardly an unreasonable request. Rather, Israel's return to God through repentance is the only logical path for her to follow: prosperity is guaranteed through repentance, but impossible without it. If the piska indeed consists of a sermon or pieces of sermons delivered at Yom Kippur, it serves well to stress the value of periodic repentance. One who stores up sins for many years without repentance will likely suffer God's vengeance for much of his or her life. Thus, Yom Kippur serves as a reminder and an opportunity to offer God repentance, and thereby avoid God's punishment. As section 1 shows, God's plea through Hosea is a "shofar of warning" and an appeal. If such a warning is given, "and the people do not tremble, then if evil befall the city, the LORD hath not done it" (Amos 3:6), yet God says, "Seek ye Me, and live" (Amos 5:4). Thus, God both warns the people of the consequences of their behavior and appeals to them to stop it, much as a parent both warns a disobedient child and pleads with it to behave, to avoid the

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<sup>13</sup> Pēsikta de-Rab Kahāna. p. 365.



unpleasant necessity of punishing a loved one. Indeed, "As I live, saith the LORD God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek. 33:11).<sup>14</sup> Thus, God's punishments of sinners come not from vindictiveness or vengeance for disobedience, but from both God's perfect justice and His desire to bring sinners to repentance through punishment. Again, this bears similarity to a parent who hates punishing a child, yet knows that doing so will show the child the error of its ways and allow it to become a better adult. The LORD says, "I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My first-born" (Jer. 31:9). The argument of Piska 24 is best expressed by Rabbi Levi, who cites Psalm 95:7, "We [Israel] would be the people of His pasture, and the flock of His hand, if only for but one day you would hearken to His voice."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pesikta de-Rab Kahana. p. 365.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 378.

Bibliography

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