Contrasting Conceptions of Teshuvah: Between “Repentance” and "Atonement"

A case study of the Beta Israel community (Ethiopian Jews)

# Introduction

The agonies of the absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel has seared itself into their collective consciousness. When they arrived, they did not know its language, could not conceive of its pace of life, and did not understand the logic of its habits. They did not choose where they would live and did not find an education that would help them bridge between their past and the state’s present and future. The Judaism for which they were martyred in Ethiopia was considered incomplete. It seemed that the land they had longed for questioned the legitimacy of their longings.

The Jews of the Beta Israel community faced an additional, unique challenge, unprecedented in Jewish history: On one hand, this community maintained its Jewish identity and devotedly upheld observance of the *mitzvot* for many generations, in the face of grave physical and spiritual difficulties and unrelenting attempts to get them to abandon their religion. On the other hand, their tradition of mitzvah-observance diverges significantly from the Rabbinic tradition that has been accepted by all other Jewish communities, from the times of the Mishnah and Talmud, through the *Shulḥan Arukh* and its latter-day commentaries.

The commonly accepted view is that the Ethiopian tradition reflects an ancient *halakhah* whose connection to the Oral Torah familiar since the days of the early Rabbis is tenuous at best. Many of the Ethiopian Jews who immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia and grew up in Ashkenazic *yeshivot*, felt that the customs and practices they learned in their parents’ home formed a barrier between them and their peers. One of the differences that always left them feeling deeply shaken was the difference between the idea of repentance familiar from the customs of Ethiopian Jewry and the idea of repentance familiar from the customs of the Rabbinic tradition. They always sensed that there are significant differences between the atmosphere surrounding the days of penitence in Israel, where, as in the Rabbinic tradition, they are called “Days of Awe,” and the atmosphere surrounding the days of penitence in Ethiopia, where they are called “Days of Joy.” The Yom Kippur prayers in Ethiopia made their heart dance; the Yom Kippur prayers in Israel made their heart tremble. These differences between the two traditions caused them to reflect that they were living their life torn between their oath to uphold their heritage, which would brand them as different, and their yearning to join the majority culture as an equal. What feelings should they manifest during these days? Reverence or love? Dread or joy? Should they emphasize “me” or “we”? And I wondered about the source of the differences between these two traditions.

During a conversation with Prof. Avi Sagi on the day before Yom Kippur in 2018, he uttered the following sentence: “Surely you know that repentance (*teshuvah*) is not atonement (*kapparah*) and atonement is not repentance.” I asked him to clarify, and he offered several examples to explain the difference between the idea of “repentance” and the idea of “atonement.” He then offered to send me a manuscript he drafted which begins as follows:

We commonly merge the terms “repentance” and “atonement” into a single concept. This merging is not straightforward and cannot be easily understood. **Repentance is not atonement and atonement is not repentance.** Repentance is a human act. The individual initiates it and is responsible for it. Atonement is a metaphysical occurrence, beyond human capacity. A person cannot atone; it hinges on that which is beyond him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Despite the close relationship between repentance and atonement, and despite the tendency of many to conflate repentance and atonement, they are, as Sagi claims, two distinct concepts.

Without exaggeration, when I heard this, I got the chills. I was so excited I could barely breathe. I felt that this distinction between repentance and atonement could serve as the basis and explanation for the disparity in atmosphere between the “Days of Awe” of the Rabbinic tradition and the “Days of Joy” of the Ethiopian tradition. In this essay, therefore, I wish to raise the possibility that now, for the first time in Jewish history, there is an encounter between two types of Judaism, two paradigms. On one side is Ethiopian Jewry, which is closer to the Biblical model that grew out of an atonement-based consciousness, and on the other is the Rabbinic tradition, closer to the Talmudic model and grew out of a repentance-based consciousness.

In the second part of the article, I will attempt to explain the circumstances that brought about the development of the idea of repentance as it crystallized in Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature. I will try to identify the event that forced the Sages of the Talmud to reexamine the idea of repentance and return. It is worth noting that my interpretive starting point in this study is not from the accepted conceptual world of sociology, social anthropology, or *halakhah*, but from a discursive realm that is closer to the discipline of Jewish philosophy. I will conclude the discussion by positioning the religious culture of Ethiopian Jews as a legitimate tradition within the evolution of the Oral Torah, unmediated by the Mishnah and the Talmud. From this vantage point, I will examine the fundamental question of how the discourse about the place of Ethiopian Jewish religious culture has been conducted thus far, and how it should be conducted in the future.

One caveat is worth noting here. In this essay, I have chosen to contrast the repentance paradigm of the Rabbinic tradition with the atonement paradigm of the Ethiopian tradition. In particular, I use the writings of Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and David Hartman to develop one of my central contentions, namely, that the Rabbinic paradigm emphasizes the individual, whereas the Beta Israel paradigm emphasizes the collective. I am aware that the Rabbinic tradition (unlike the Beta Israel tradition) cultivated a strong culture of dispute (*mahloket*), which allowed for multiple ideas, attitudes, and paradigms to exist side-by-side, and that Soloveitchik and Hartman – 20th century, Western-educated, Lithuanian-inflected thinkers writing for mostly American, Ashkenazic audiences – are among the most emphatic elaborators of the individual dimension of *teshuvah* and not representative of the Rabbinic tradition itself. The mere fact that the Rabbinic liturgy for Yom Kippur is almost entirely formulated in the plural suffices to demonstrate the presence of a collectivist element. By the same token, it is possible that individuals and even groups within the Ethiopian Jewish community have absorbed individualist elements into ideas about return and atonement. Nevertheless, I believe that, on balance, my central contention concerning the individualist emphasis of the Rabbinic tradition and the collectivist emphasis of the Beta Israel tradition is borne out by both the experience of Yom Kippur within the different traditions and by the (oral and written) explanations of the significance of these experiences.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Yom Kippur in Ethiopia: Between Collectivism and Individualism

For many of the emigrants of Ethiopian Jews who grew up in an Ethiopian village, where the holidays where enveloped in an atmosphere of joy, attending an Ashkenazic yeshivah, where the “Days of Awe” were filled with dread, was a dramatic change that is hard to describe. Yom Kippur in Ethiopia filled the heart with calmness, serenity, and reverence, whereas in the Ashkenazic yeshivah, Yom Kippur filled the heart with fear and trembling before the terrible day of judgment. The fear reached its peak in the Ashkenazic yeshiva with the recitation of “*U-netaneh Tokef Kedushat Ha-yom*” (“Let us Describe the Power of the Sanctity of the Day”) on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This liturgical composition describes panicked angels, illustrates how the verdicts of the day will determine, “who will live and who will die…who will experience tranquility and who will suffer….” It concludes by describing the insignificance of human beings, who “are made of dust and will return to dust.” This is not to say that such descriptions do not exist in the Ge’ez prayers of Ethiopian Jews; there are plenty of descriptions of human beings’ insignificance. Nevertheless, something felt different. What was it?

Yom Kippur is called “*Asteray*” (the Festival of Seeing) or “*Be’al Yosef*” (the Festival of Joseph), for on this day, Jacob received the news that his son, Joseph, had been killed by a wild beast. The basis for this is a tradition from the Book of Jubilees:

For this reason, it has been ordained regarding the Israelites that they should be distressed on the tenth of the seventh month – on the day when (the news) that made (him) lament Joseph reached his father Jacob – in order to make atonement for themselves on it with a kid – on the tenth of the seventh month, once a year – for their sins. For they had saddened their father’s (feelings of) affection for his son Joseph. This day has been ordained so that they may be saddened on it for their sins, all their transgressions, and all their errors; so that they may purify themselves on this day once a year. (Jubilees 34:18-19)[[3]](#footnote-3)

There is also an oral tradition, which I heard from my grandfather, Abba Djan Mengesha, as well as from Kes Mentsnot, that the date of Yom Kippur was also the day when Jacob and Joseph were reunited after their long separation.

This day, indeed, has many names, and different meanings can be derived from each.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yosi Ziv notes that the most common name for Yom Kippur is *Asteray*, which means “shown,” for “on this day, the brothers showed Jacob the coat of his son Joseph, which had been immersed in blood. The harm to Joseph and the lie to Jacob are an eternal sin that must be atoned each year on Yom Kippur.” Ziv cites testimony from Kes Amhah Neghat that gives additional meaning to the festival of atonement: “The second Tablets of the Covenant that Moses brought down was on the day of Yom Kippur…. For that reason, the day is called ‘*Asteray*,’ so that He shows us the Torah He gave us for a second time.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Kes Mentsnot noted that Yom Kippur is a day of forgiveness that harbors rejoicing that God atones us and forgives us. There is no mention of a day of awe, as it is described in the Rabbinic tradition. There is no fear and dread over the judgment of Yom Kippur, only joy and desire to arrive at this day, as Ziv describes in his book: “Yom Kippur. Everyone yearns to reach Yom Kippur. It is the greatest festival of the year. Sigd as well. These are the most prominent days.”[[6]](#footnote-6) And this is how Faitlovich describes, in 1904, the joyous atmosphere of this day:

The Yom Kippur prayers were recited with great feeling. Men, women, and children all displayed their building excitement. They sang from sunrise to sunset, and to my astonishment, they were cheerful songs. Occasionally they went out to perform beautiful dances. The men, young and old, danced together, as did the women and maidens.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Still, on that day, everyone fasted; even children were required to fast, starting at age seven. As Ethiopian sage Daniel Mengesha notes, when people approach Yom Kippur from within a collective, communal consciousness, the day takes on a different meaning. A person does not come alone to the courthouse but arrives with the entire community. The community, together, stands before the Holy One, the merciful God. Under these circumstances, the day is not ominous; it is not awful and terrible. On the contrary, it is joyful. The Ethiopian Yom Kippur thus has two opposing meanings: On one hand, it is a day of forgiveness and atonement, fasting and deprivation, but on the other hand it is an exceedingly joyful day, a day whose arrival everyone awaited and anticipated. The experience was that the individual stands for the good of the community, and the community feels that it stands as a whole for the good of the individual. Spiritual accounting is on the communal level, not the individual level. Prayer is accompanied by special dancing, unique to Yom Kippur, that involved hopping from side to side as the prayers of the *kessim* are heard in the background. The following prayer is from the beginning of the Yom Kippur liturgy:

May the Lord, God of Israel be blessed…. May the Lord, God of Adam and Seth be blessed. May the Lord, God of Noah and Shem be blessed. May the Lord, God of Abraham and Isaac be blessed. May the Lord, God of Jacob and Israel be blessed…. May the Lord, God of the righteousness of Azariah be blessed. May the Lord, God of the word of Baruch and Abimelech be blessed. May the Lord, God of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah be blessed…. May the Lord, God of Zion and Jerusalem be blessed. May the Lord, God of the priests and the prophets be blessed….[[8]](#footnote-8)

That is, among the prayers that comprise the Ethiopian Yom Kippur liturgy, many reinforce the idea of God’s actions – His kindness, His forgiveness, and His atonement. Collective consciousness, as still expressed in Ethiopian Jewish religious life, promotes a political philosophical approach that emphasizes the sovereignty of the community, trains adherents to live without anxiety, concern about change, fear of commitment, or worries about difficulty working and earning a livelihood. The difference between collective consciousness and subjective consciousness does not find expression only in the psychological and social realms, but also in the theological realm and in halakhic decisions.

Either way, here we see the profound difference between the holiday atmosphere in Ethiopian Jewish religious culture and that of the atmosphere of these holidays in the Rabbinic tradition. In the next lines I will claim that the root of the differences between the two traditions is rooted in the question of how the day is perceived: as a day of atonement or as a day of repentance.

## From the fundamental idea of atonement in Scripture to the emphasis on repentance in Talmudic literature

The term “*teshuvah*” (repentance), Sagi explains, “does not appear as a noun in Scripture. As Ephraim Urbach noted,[[9]](#footnote-9) the term was coined by the Rabbis.” In Scripture, repentance is a precondition for atonement, but, Sagi claims, “it, in itself, does not bring about repair and change. Only atonement does…. The Scriptural tradition contains no attestation to the power of repentance to affect complete repair. There is a need for atonement and forgiveness, beyond the act of repentance.” In fact, Sagi claims, whereas the principle of atonement, which is a metaphysical occurrence, out of human control, was developed in the Biblical era, the principle of repentance took form in the Talmudic tradition and post-Talmudic literature.[[10]](#footnote-10) Despite the close relationship between repentance and atonement, and despite the tendency of many to conflate repentance and atonement, they are, it seems, two distinct concepts. In Sagi’s words:

**Repentance is not atonement and atonement is not repentance.** Repentance is a human act. The individual initiates it and is responsible for it. Atonement is a metaphysical occurrence, beyond human capacity. A person cannot atone; it hinges on that which is beyond him.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Sagi contends that in Scripture and during Temple times, the priests would perform the atonement ceremony. The priests atone without any other action. In contrast, after the destruction of the Temple, Yom Kippur, about which it is said, “Yom Kippur atones,”[[12]](#footnote-12) this atonement is conditioned on repentance.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses did not turn to the people and exhort them to repent. Rather, he sought atonement: “Moses said to the people, ‘You have been guilty of a great sin. Yet I will now go up to the Lord; perhaps I may win forgiveness for your sin’” (Exodus 32:30). “Turn from Your fierce anger, and renounce the [plan to] punish Your people” (*ibid*. 12).

In his petition to God, Moses does not mention repentance as a human phenomenon. He says to God: “You, God, can ‘turn’ and ‘renounce.’ People cannot. For people, only the path of atonement is open.” That is, according to Sagi, in this episode, God is the repentant party, not humans. This holds true all through the Hebrew Bible. The generation of the Flood, the generation of the Tower of Babel, and the people of Sodom are all sinful and wicked, but they are not called upon to repent. Sagi claims that the idea of atonement runs like a scarlet thread through every event in Scripture.

Likewise, we find a pattern recurring throughout Moses’s plea to God to allow him to cross the Jordan River: “I pleaded with the Lord at that time…. ‘Let me, please, cross over and see the good land….’ But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me” (Deuteronomy 3:23-26). Moses “understood that the only way to alter his fate in the wake of the sin was to petition God; he does not mention repentance at all.” That is, “God can forgive and pardon, and His forgiveness enables the alteration of human fate. It is God’s grace – not repentance!” Indeed, the Rabbis of the Talmud allude to this Scriptural view, which did not recognize the power of repentance to affect change:

They asked the Torah: The sinner – what is his punishment? She said to them: He shall bring an offering and be atoned. They asked Prophecy: The sinner – what is his punishment? She said: “The person who sins – shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4). They asked David: The sinner – what is his punishment? He said: “May sinners disappear from the earth” (Psalms 104:35). They asked Wisdom: The sinner – what is his punishment? She said to them: “Misfortune pursues sinners” (Proverbs 13:21). They asked the Holy One, blessed be He: The sinner – what is his punishment? He said to them: He shall repent, and I will accept it. As it is written: “Good and upright is the Lord, [therefore he shows sinners the way] (Psalms 25:8).” (*Y. Makkot* 2:5)[[13]](#footnote-13)

Repentance is not found in the Torah, Prophecy, or Wisdom. Nevertheless, Sagi notes, “The Torah, as mentioned, recognizes atonement, yet the term ‘*kapparah*’ (atonement), like the term ‘*teshuvah*’ (repentance) does not appear in Scripture in the nominal form.”[[14]](#footnote-14) That is, atonement emerges as an act of God, Who, in His kindness, ignores and conceals sin. God purifies and completely removes sin from a person. Repentance is a human act.

A clear expression of this view of atonement, and the difference between atonement and repentance, is espoused by Rabbi Judah the Prince in the Talmud. According to other Rabbis, repentance is a precondition for the atonement of Yom Kippur (and specifically of the casting away of the scapegoat). According to Rabbi Judah, though, “For every transgression in the Torah, whether one repented or not, Yom Kippur atones” (*B. Yoma* 85b).

This dispute is important for our discussion, as it illustrates “the gap between repentance and atonement: repentance hinges on human effort. Atonement is not so conditioned. People cannot atone for themselves, because atonement accomplishes something different from repentance.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

In contrast to the image that emerges from Scripture, Talmudic literature places paramount emphasis on the act of repentance:

Rav says: All the [predicted] ends [of days] have passed, so the matter depends entirely upon repentance and good deeds. And Samuel says: It is sufficient for the mourner to endure in his mourning [i.e., and when the term of mourning is complete, the end of days will arrive, even without repentance].

This [dispute is analogous to] a Tannaitic dispute. Rabbi Eliezer says: If Israel repents, they are redeemed, and if not, they are not redeemed. Rabbi Joshua said to him: If they do not repent, will they not be redeemed at all? He said to him: The Holy One, blessed be He, will place a king over them whose decrees are as harsh as Haman’s, and this will restore them to the right path. (*B. Sanhedrin* 97b)

Repentance, and repentance alone, is the path to repair and redemption – not atonement ceremonies or priests performing atonement rituals, but the actions of the individual human being. Sagi notes that this transformation of consciousness, the transition from a paradigm of atonement to one of repentance, took shape in Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature. As he writes:

The sages of Israel after the destruction are who innovated and emphasized this idea, liberating the notion of repentance from any ritual context, including atonement. The sages of Israel did not eliminate the idea of atonement, for it was part of the tradition of Israel. However, in their typical fashion, they imbued it with new meaning. [[16]](#footnote-16)

It seems that we also encounter the idea of repentance in Scripture, and the best example would be the Book of Jonah, whose reading the Rabbis instituted, not coincidentally, on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. The book, at first glance, emphasizes the idea that God’s grace, without human effort to improve one’s actions, is no formula for canceling God’s punishment. Did Jonah not understand why God forgave the sinful people of Nineveh? Did he not understand the link between their deeds of repentance and God’s mercy? Jonah believed that mercy and compassion for the sinful is a cosmic error. Sin has an effect on the world, so how can it be atoned? This is indeed the answer that Jonah received from God when he posed the question:

God saw what they did, how they had turned back from their evil ways. And God relented from the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out. (Jonah 3:7)

God answered Jonah’s questions: He indeed forgives, but human repentance is the reason why God forgives. It is repentance that succeeds in changing a person’s state and canceling out the evil wrought by sin. It seems to me, therefore, that Jonah does not accept an idea of atonement that is detached from repentance.

Sagi claims, to the contrary, that repentance is, in face, irrelevant to Jonah. Ultimately, the question is **whether** God will forgive, not **why**. Forgiveness, not repentance, changes a person’s state. In Sagi’s words:

The story of Jonah is based precisely on the presumption that there is no way to repair human action without God’s forgiveness. Like Moses before him, Jonah knew that there was a chance that God would forgive the people of Nineveh. He announces to them that in another forty days, the city would be “overturned.” He posits this as a *fait accompli*, because sin has definite effects. Justice is not only a normative system, but the organizing principle of the world itself.[[17]](#footnote-17)

I tend to agree with Sagi, but only from the perspectives of the Ninevites themselves, not from the perspective of the prophet, Jonah. The transformation of the idea of atonement into the idea of repentance was not instantaneous. Rather, it is a long process that began in Scripture itself, as I will explain.

Sagi, as mentioned, claims that Moses “understood that the only way to alter his fate in the wake of the sin was to petition God.” In Jonah’s time, the people of Nineveh, like Moses, espouse the atonement paradigm, according to which only God can forgive and pardon, and His forgiveness enables the alteration of a person’s fate. God’s grace, not repentance, is what brings change. Explaining the verse, “The people of Nineveh trusted in God” (Jonah 3:5), Sagi writes:

Throughout Scripture, the term “*emunah*” denotes confidence, certainty, and reliability. It is not belief in a set of claims, but trust in a benevolent God. They, not Jonah, trusted God, saying to themselves, “Who knows whether God will turn back, relent, and repent from His wrath, so that we do not perish” (3:9). It is neither repentance nor improvement that can affect this turnabout, only the grace of God.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Contra Sagi, I maintain that while the Ninevites continue to espouse the idea of atonement, Jonah does not. Jonah understands that the people are stuck in the paradigm of fatedness and worries that he will be unable to persuade them to undergo a transformation in consciousness. This is why he flees initially:

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved…. “That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live.” (Jonah 4:1-3)

Jonah claims before God that the entire conceptual framework of atonement should not work. Grace and compassion toward sinners are a cosmic error. Sin has effects on the world, and these can only be atoned through the human action of repentance, not just by God’s compassion and grace. That is, in the era of the prophets, the people were deeply entrenched in the paradigm of fate and therefore inclined toward the idea of atonement. The prophetic leadership, however, wished to change this conception, as Sagi may allude:

With Jonah we already find human action, improvement, the foundations of repentance, if you wish, but these alone are insufficient. A person’s repentance does not effect change; God’s grace, which follows repentance, does. Moreover, human repentance sometimes eliminates the sin, but not its punishment.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In my view, the resolution of the tension between the idea of repentance and the idea of atonement in the story of Jonah does not lie in the difference between Jonah’s perspective and God’s perspective, as Sagi claims, but between the perspective of the prophet Jonah, who espouses the idea of repentance, and the perspective of the Ninevites, who continue to espouse the ideological framework of atonement. Thus, the story of Jonah is part of a transformative process from the Scriptural paradigm of a “prophetic community” to the Talmudic paradigm of a “covenantal community.” The Rabbis could not completely eliminate atonement, but they limited its power. Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein addresses the distinction between atonement and repentance, writing:

Despite the tight, reciprocal relationship between [repentance and atonement], they are two distinct concepts. Repentance involves improving character and deeds (“Repent [*shuvu*], repent from your evil ways”) and/or drawing near to God (“Return [*shuvah*]to Me, and I will return to you”). In contrast, the idea of atonement is forgiveness and pardoning of sin. Of course, one of the main ways to gain atonement is to abandon sin and draw near to God, but ultimately, they remain two distinct concepts. Thus, it is possible to have a situation wherein a person forsakes his wicked ways, yet not achieve atonement; he will have to pay the price for his evil deeds, whether at the hand of God or the hands of man, even though he expressed his remorse for his sins. Conversely, it is possible to gain atonement without repentance; a person can be saved from punishment for his sins even as he clings to his wicked ways.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Lichtenstein emphasizes that both of these components are themes of Yom Kippur. On one hand, “Yom Kippur is a day for perfecting one’s actions, for expressing remorse over the sins of the past, and for resolving to abandon sin in the future. It is a day that falls entirely under the banner of ‘Let us search and try our ways and turn back to the Lord’” (Lamentations 3:40). On the other hand, it is a day of atonement and forgiveness, and the power of the day itself brings atonement. This dovetails with Sagi’s claim that, on one hand, “The sages of Israel after the destruction are who innovated and emphasized this idea, liberating the notion of repentance from any ritual context, including atonement,” and on the other hand, “The sages of Israel did not eliminate the idea of atonement, for it was part of the tradition of Israel. However, in their typical fashion, they imbued it with new meaning.” Yet Sagi does not explain the circumstances that led to the development of the idea of repentance in Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature. Why did the Rabbis after the destruction innovate and emphasize this idea? Why does the idea of repentance barely exist within Ethiopian Jewish religious culture, which recognizes only the idea of atonement?

## The principle of atonement, not repentance, in Beta Israel customs

The present article, like my other articles, is mainly based on documentary anthropological work with *shimageloch* (Beta Israel sages) and the spiritual leadership, the *kessim*. In meetings with those sages, I asked how they explain the fact that the obvious connection between God and His people, as reflected in Scripture, became, over time, a vague connection. In the words of David Hartman:

The image of the visible, triumphant Lord of History had to be rethought as a result of the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of political sovereignty. How does a community sustain loyalty to God under political conditions that suggest a defeated rather than a victorious God? How do you make God’s presence and Torah to be seen as a living reality when the ongoing direct involvement of God in history is no longer evident?[[21]](#footnote-21)

Without a doubt, addressing this question within the Ethiopian world will help sharpen the differences between the Ethiopian tradition and the Rabbinic tradition.

I asked this question to Daniel Mengesha, a Beta Israel sage. I also asked whether the lack of miracles in Jewish history is perceived as evidence of divine wrath, and, if it is, what God’s remoteness signifies. Can it be claimed that the absence of prophecy is a sign that God has abandoned the community and is no longer available in the sense of having a connection and a relationship?[[22]](#footnote-22) Daniel listened to my question with impatience – which is out of step with Ethiopian custom. In his answer[[23]](#footnote-23) I understood why. He responded in astonishment: How could one even entertain the idea that God abandoned Israel and is therefore no longer responsive? This is a brazen claim. What is the meaning of His silence? Why did God stop communicating with the prophets? Why did God stop performing miracles? His silence expresses our lack of understanding of His way of running this world. God’s ways and deeds are hidden. God has not disconnected or become distant from us. He is present at every step in our lives. The fact that God does not speak with His prophets, as in Biblical times, indicates hiddenness, but not distance. And hiddenness is a result of sin.

I asked: “What sort of sin? Of one person against another, or between a person and God?” Daniel was surprised to hear this division between interpersonal transgressions and transgressions against God:

Sins are only between one person and another. The test is only with respect to one’s dealings with other human beings. Deceit, trickery, hatred – only these sins cause God’s hiddenness (though they do not make Him remote). Who do you think protected us in Ethiopia for thousands of years? Who do you think brought us from Ethiopia to Jerusalem? Who do you think protected us throughout the perilous journey? Certainly it was God.

Thus, according to Daniel the absence of miracles in history does not indicate distance, but hiddenness. According to him, God never abandoned the community of Israel, but His absence is seen as evidence of our sins, the problems in our interpersonal relationships. God did not leave; He is present. Silence and hiddenness express God’s closeness to the community. According to the Ethiopian sage, God’s hiddenness does not attest to the withdrawal of His presence from the world, but is a sign that human beings must withdraw into themselves and live with a greater sense of submissiveness. This demand is not meant to be like standard religious conceptions that expect human beings to go against their desires, feelings, needs, and wants; on the contrary, according to the Ethiopian sage, within this framework, human beings are expected to hear and heed the desires, feelings, needs, and wants of others. Indeed, the sense of submissiveness occupies an important place in the religious sensibilities of Ethiopian Jews.[[24]](#footnote-24) Hartman, whose view contrasts with that of Daniel, claims that the cessation of prophecy was an invitation to the participants in the covenant to become more active in it, as sages instead of prophets:

The absence of miracles in Israel’s history is not taken to imply divine anger or rejection. It is as if God’s historical distance is an invitation to His covenantal partner to take the initiative in the development of the Torah. The Rabbis respond to the diminishing signs of God’s visible power by seizing that initiative and utilizing the study of Torah to mediate His living presence.[[25]](#footnote-25)

According to Hartman, the notion that God withdrew after the destruction of the Temple was God’s call to human beings to rise up and take initiative. According to Hartman:

A revision of traditional theology began with a new reading of the language of divine power. “Who is as mighty as God?” (Exodus 15:11), the line sung when Israel crossed the sea, is midrashically taken to mean “Who is as silent as God?” “Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty [*elim*]?” (Exodus 15:11) — “Who is like You among the dumb ones [*ilmim*]; who is like You that beholds the humiliation of his children and keeps silent?” (*Mekhilta*, *Shirah* 8)[[26]](#footnote-26)

In other words, this novel interpretation of the Scriptural text by the Rabbis of the Talmud creates a transformative process that leads from a paradigm of prophecy, in which God dictates history, to the paradigm of the sage, in which human beings takes God’s place.[[27]](#footnote-27) Hartman claims that the sage, whose authority derives from intellectual ability, rises to an unprecedentedly high level, higher even than that of a prophet, whose authority derives from miraculous signs from God.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Rabbi Avdimi of Haifa says: “From the day that the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the sages.” Is that to say that a Sage is not a prophet? This is what he is saying: Even though it was taken from the prophets, it was not taken from the sages. Ameimar said: And a sage is greater than a prophet, as it is stated: “And a prophet has a heart of wisdom” (Psalms 90:12). Who is compared to whom? You must say that the lesser is compared to the greater. (*B. Bava Batra* 12a)

What is the significance of the cessation of prophecy, according to the Rabbis? Did God stop speaking, or did the Rabbis boldly stand up and demand, “Stop speaking with us”?

One might contend that the absence of prophecy signifies that God has abandoned the community and is no longer available for a relationship or connection. Hartman makes the opposite claim: “The absence of prophecy does not signal rejection of covenantal man on the part of God, but rather, the call for him to become the active partner in the relationship…the movement from the prophet to the rabbinic sage of the *beit midrash….* God does not initiate the intensity of relationship, but seeks that it be initiated by the covenantal partner.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Elsewhere, Hartman describes how a Torah scholar is a reflection of God:

Although based on divine revelation, the Torah became inseparable from the vast body of material generated by Talmudic interpretation. The rabbinic scholar rather than the prophet became the mediator of the Torah; his intellectual skills of analysis and interpretation elevated him to an unprecedented position of importance in determining the content of revelation.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Thus, the Rabbis slowly reshaped Jewish consciousness from one of fate to one of destiny,[[31]](#footnote-31) through a historical, theological process in which the sage, a human being, becomes an autonomous partner in the interpretation of the divine text and in the transition from a prophetic community to a covenantal community.

According to Hartman, and contra Daniel’s view, the cessation of prophecy during the Second Temple era constitutes a formative moment in religious theology. There is a change in the nature of divine revelation. God no longer appears as a warrior, as during the Exodus, and His power no longer manifests in the quick defeat of Israel’s enemies. For that reason, the Rabbis of those generations turned to reinterpretation of Scripture. This was the transformation from the Scriptural paradigm of a “prophetic community” to the Talmudic paradigm of a “covenantal community.” Daniel, the Ethiopian sage, would claim that God never withdrew from the world. He is present in every corner of the world, and in our lives. The real historical world is God’s realm of activity in every era.

Here lies the difference between Hartman and Daniel. Unlike Hartman, who claimed that God removed Himself from the world out of recognition of the value and abilities of human beings – that is, human beings did not drive God out of the world, rather, God withdrew Himself from the world for the benefit of human beings – Daniel claims that God’s hiddenness is not a sign that God recognizes human worth, but rather of God’s acknowledgment of sins on an interpersonal level. The individual person must limit himself out of absolute submission to God.

The theological difference between these two views is readily discernible. One reflects the consciousness of submission embodied in the figure of the prophet; the other reflects a consciousness of dignity embodied in the figure of the sage. The difference between these two forms of consciousness has implications for the conception of God, human beings, and their relationship:

Both forms of consciousness recognize the existential gap between God and human beings, but they view it in a different light…. The consciousness of dignity produces within the inferior side the need to lift itself up, so that it is worthy of encountering the greater party. The inferior side – in this case, humanity – must artificially, temporarily attain a state of respectability, so it can bridge the gap between itself and God and become worthy of encountering Him. In contrast, consciousness of submission generates with the inferior party the need to appear meeker and emphasize the gap between itself and the greater party. Through its lowliness and self-effacement, the inferior party demonstrates its dependence on the other. Only by emphasizing this dependence can the inferior stand before the superior.[[32]](#footnote-32)

I believe that the distinction between these two forms of consciousness, the consciousness of submission embodied in the figure of the prophet and the consciousness of dignity embodied in the figure of the sage, leads to the identification of the Beta Israel community as a community that espouses a paradigm of submission, whereas Rabbinic Judaism espouses a paradigm of dignity. In my view, this distinction parallels Hartman’s distinction between the “covenant of the Exodus” and the “Sinai covenant.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Following his teacher, Hartman distinguishes between the “covenant of the Exodus” and the “Sinai covenant”:

The difference between the two models is that the Exodus model makes Jewish activity in history dependent upon a perception of direct divine intervention, whereas the Sinai model holds that God has conferred responsibility upon the Jewish people to decide for themselves when they have found realistic opportunities for involvement in history – with all the risks involved.[[34]](#footnote-34)

According to Hartman, the covenant of the Exodus is theocentric, and it has room for divine providence and messianic hope. In contrast, the Sinai covenant is anthropocentric, and in it, the ethos of reason plays a major role in shaping history. Humanity does not lead, but is led. In contrast:

The giving of the Torah at Sinai can be understood as constituting a radical shift in God’s relationship to human history…. This may be seen as a shift by God away from influencing human history through direct miraculous intervention, since He now began to influence it through the continuing historical existence of a normative community. Just as Maimonides considered that God founded the orderly processes of nature at the moment of creation and made them into a vehicle of His directive influence in history…. The *mitzvot* given at Sinai represent divine self-limitation for the sake of expanding the range of human responsibility….[[35]](#footnote-35)

As I described in my doctorate, dialectic is the core of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s thought.[[36]](#footnote-36) Therefore, whereas for Rabbi Soloveitchik the two covenants – “the covenant of the Patriarchs” and “the covenant of Sinai” – dwell side-by-side as two distinct chambers of the heart of Israel, Hartman explicitly expresses his preference for the Sinai covenant:

My reason for preferring the Sinai model is that I do not wish to divide my world into two separate realms, one of which is characterized by autonomous action based upon human understanding of the divine norm and the other by anticipation of and dependence upon divine interventions. I prefer to see God’s will for Jewish history, just like God’s will for Jewish communal life, as channeled exclusively through the efforts of the Jewish community to achieve the aims of the Torah given at Sinai.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Hartman indeed prefers the Sinai covenant, though he agrees that a combination of the narratives Exodus and Sinai narratives shaped Jewish historical consciousness:

The synthesis of the Exodus and Sinai narratives shaped the historical consciousness of the Jewish people. They gave expression to its national identity as a free people…. Egypt points the way to Sinai…. The integration of Sinai and Egypt as national symbols protected us from falling victim to self-pity. At Sinai we discovered who we were and what we are expected to become. We were a community of slaves charged with the task of embodying hope in its life. A slave is enslaved in the moment. He has no history, memory, or aspiration.[[38]](#footnote-38)

That is, in Hartman’s view, the Sinai covenant is primary because it sanctifies the ethos of human reason, according to which God gave to the Jewish people at Sinai the Torah, by means of which they can guide history.

Returning now to the Ethiopian sage, it is certain that he does not revere the Sinai covenant as Hartman does. For the Ethiopian sage, this idea would be deemed impossible, illogical, even absurd. The Ethiopian sage gives primacy to relying on and expecting divine intervention. Reducing or limiting God’s presence in the world is impossible – it simply cannot happen in reality – according to the Ethiopian sage.

The inexorable conclusion is that we must distinguish between two theological conceptions. Beta Israel espouses the Exodus model, whereas the Rabbinic movement espouses the Sinai model. For one who adopts the covenant of the Exodus, redemption is the result of absolute submission to God’s commandment. In contrast, for one who adopts the Sinai covenant, redemption is the result of complete lack of submission to God’s command. As Sagi noted:

The destruction of the temple caused a profound, mind-altering transformation beginning at the time of the Rabbis. Recall that atonement is not addressed at all by Saadia Gaon or Rabbi Jonah of Gerondi. Maimonides wrestles with and is troubled by atonement…. I do not agree with everything, because traces of repentance independent of the Temple can clearly be found in the prophetic works – not coincidentally in the books of Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and, above all, Jonah. Still, the leaders of the repentance revolution and the transformation of the concept of atonement was the Rabbis.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Given this background, a question emerges: What about the Beta Israel Jewish community, which was not part of this transformative process that occurred after the destruction of the Second Temple? In my earlier studies, I claimed that Beta Israel is not similar to any of the groups that comprise the mosaic of Talmudic Judaism. That is, the Beta Israel community has traditions that reflect the Scriptural heritage without Talmudic alterations. On one hand is a Judaism closer to the Scriptural model, constructed within a theocentric model of faith, which emphasizes the principle of atonement, and on the other is Rabbinic Judaism, constructed from within an anthropocentric conception of faith, which emphasizes the principle of repentance. We can now understand why, in the theological world of Beta Israel, “repentance is not atonement and atonement is not repentance.” Indeed, while the Talmudic sages played up the principle of repentance, as Sagi demonstrates in his article at length, the Beta Israel community continued to espouse the principle of atonement, thus perpetuating the experience of the Scriptural era. In interviews with community leaders, it emerges that Ethiopian Jewry spoke of atonement and not repentance. This conceptualization has implications for the atmosphere of the holidays. Repentance, in Beta Israel, is much closer to the vague notion of “introspection.” This enables a paradoxical action: on one hand, the ability to plumb the depths of our personality and trace the source of our sinful behavior, and, on the other hand, internalization of the notion that, in Sagi’s words, “Atonement is a metaphysical occurrence, beyond human capacity. A person cannot atone; it hinges on that which is beyond him.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Moreover, in the Biblical conception, as still reflected in the Ethiopian tradition, the element of collective consciousness is a fundamental element of worship of God.[[41]](#footnote-41) Given this, it seems that the element of collective consciousness, which endures in Ethiopian culture, can indicate, *inter alia*, a key difference between these two traditions. Collectivism, on one hand, promotes a philosophical, political, religious, economic, and social worldview that emphasizes the interdependence of people. On the other hand, individualism promotes a political philosophical approach that emphasizes the sovereignty of the individual over his life. That is, the question is whether the individual is perceived as an independent, autonomous, distinct unit, in which case the community is not the center, but rather the individual person is the center, or whether the opposite is the case, and each person determines the right thing to do in relation to the goals and objectives of the collective, in which case the community is more important and significant. Which is more correct? What is freedom of thought? Does the good of the community take priority over the good of the individual, or does the good of the individual supersede the good of the community? The Ethiopian sage Daniel Mengesha said, aflame with passion:

In Israel (that is, in Judaism), in our religion, there is no such thing as individual introspection. A person is not alone. He is always part of something, of a community. In Ethiopia, when it is time to eat, everyone eats from one plate. Here in Israel, everyone has their own plate. Everyone thinks he is God. In Ethiopia, we lived with faith that “there is none but Him.” Only God is great.[[42]](#footnote-42)

According to Daniel, the Ethiopian sage, this lifestyle allows us to feel alone. Loneliness and solitariness of human existence are the source of fear’s energy. Lack of fear, in contrast, is the secret that enables people to expand their love for fellow human beings, to fill themselves with compassion, and to be impartial. Paradoxically, a consciousness of submission leads an Ethiopian away from diminished, fearful consciousness toward a consciousness imbued with profound serenity and completely liberated from fear: from a consciousness that lives and experiences itself in a diminished state to consciousness that lives and experiences itself in its fullness; from consciousness that lives its life in relative slumber to a fully alert consciousness. Ethiopian Jewry, which, as noted, continued the Jewish tradition rooted in Scripture and the experience of the Temple, seems to emphasize, in its religious world, the principle of collective consciousness more than that of individual consciousness.[[43]](#footnote-43) Collective consciousness can provide confidence in the ontological existence of humanity. That is, paradoxically, it seems, the absence of the concept of the individual personality can prevent feelings of alienation, and the stronger the consciousness of individual existence, the more profound the sense of estrangement.[[44]](#footnote-44) In the Ethiopian world, as mentioned, a person does not come alone to court, but is accompanied by the entire community. The entire community stands together before God, Who is merciful. Under such conditions, the day is not threatening. It is not a day of awe, but a day of joy.

It therefore seems that given the situation of the Ethiopian migrant society in the State of Israel, there is, for the first time, an encounter between two difference consciousnesses of Jewish faith. The encounter between Israeli Jews and Jews of Ethiopian origin is not only an encounter between new immigrants and veteran immigrants, between Blacks and Whites, sharing a slice of this world and fighting over resources, but also an encounter between diametrically opposed models of Judaism. This conclusion contains significant implications for the encounter between those of Ethiopian origin and the reality dictated to them from the ideological, organizational, and halakhic base of the Israeli rabbinic establishment. This finds expression in the meaning that Yom Kippur has within the two traditions: the Rabbinic tradition, based on a Talmudic conception and animated by the “covenant of Sinai,” and the Ethiopian tradition, rooted in a Scriptural conception and animated by the spirit of the “covenant of the Exodus.”

1. Avi Sagi, “Between Repentance and Atonement” (a manuscript that at the time was at the beginning of writing and is now forthcoming, to be published by Carmel Publishing. I received special permission from the author Prof. Avi Sagi for the purpose of writing this article. I thank him for that. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Translations from: James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary on the Book of Jubilees* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is worth noting that in Ethiopia it was customary to give multiple names not only to holidays, but to people as well. In general, an Ethiopian has at least four or five names. From these names we learn the different meanings that this person had for relatives. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Yosi Ziv, *Festival and Holiday in the Ethiopian Jewish Tradition of Beta Israel* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2017), p. 139 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jacques Faitlovich, *A Journey to the Falashas* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1959), p. 84 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Translation based on A. Z. Aescoly, *Sefer Ha-Falashim* (Jerusalem: Mass, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1969), p. 408 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sagi (n. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *M. Yoma* 8:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is the version of this passage as it appears in a Cairo Genizah fragment (MS Kaufmann 229.2) held the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sagi (n. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Moshe Lichtenstein, “Repentance and Atonement: The *Haftara* of Yom Kippur”. Based on the translation of David Strauss, available at <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/holidays/yom-kippur/repentance-and-atonement-haftara-yom-kippur> (accessed September 2, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. David Hartman, *Love and Terror in the God Encounter: The Theological Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2001), p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See *ibid*., p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ethiopian custom is to answer with a story, *midrash*, or metaphor. In keeping with this, Daniel began with a *midrash*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See, at greater length: Sharon Shalom, “The Encounter Between Two Opposing Worldviews in Jewish Philosophy”, *Daat* 87 (2019), pp. 657-682 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. David Hartman, “Expanding the Covenant”, in: Walzer, Lorberbaum, and Zohar, *The Jewish Political Tradition*, *Volume I: Authority* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid*. 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The Talmud’s story of the Oven of Akhnai (*B. Bava Metz’ia* 59b) is the text that Hartman is commenting on in the essay cited and a key to understanding his view. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Above, n. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Above, n. 22, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. David Hartman, *A Living Covenant* (New York: Free Press, 1985), p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Noam Zohar (in *The Jewish Political Tradition* [above, n. 26], pp. 278-9) likewise describes theological processes that can reshape a consciousness of destiny. Commenting on Rava’s comment that those who rise before a Torah scroll but not a Torah sage are foolish:

If Rava’s dictum is put in theological terms, it attains a striking boldness. People ought to show greater respect to the Rabbis, because the Rabbis’ law is better than that originally given by God! This elevated conception of the midrashic enterprise, which may well have been shared by many of the classical sages, certainly calls for some explanation. Perhaps nothing less than such boldness could support fidelity to Torah in the face of the powerful critique — expressed saliently in Paul’s epistles — that fulfilling the demands of God’s law is incompatible with human weakness. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. U. Ehrlich, “Modes of prayer and their significance in the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud”, Ph.D. dissertation (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 252 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Above, n. 31, pp. 229-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid*., p. 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid*. pp. 231-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In my doctorate I called for “a systematic reconstruction of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s thought, which, at its base, is not so…. Rabbi Soloveitchik systematically addresses two typologies, a typology of fate and a typology of destiny, which reflect two fundamentally opposing channels.” See also: Alan Brill, “Dialectic Theology and Rabbi Soloveitchik on Culture”, in: A. Rosenak and N. Rothenberg (eds.), *Rabbi in the New World: The Influence of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik on Culture, Education and Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011), pp. 118-144 [Hebrew]; A. Schweitzer (Sagi), “The Loneliness of the Man of Faith in the Philosophy of Y. D. Soloveitchik”, *Daat* 2-3 (1978-1979), 247-257 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Above, n. 31, pp. 231-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. David Hartman, “Sinai and Exodus: Choosing Life in Midst of Uncertainty”, in: A. Sagi and N. Ilan (eds.), *Jewish Culture in the Eye of the Storm: A Jubilee Book in Honor of Yosef Ahituv* (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2002), pp. 388-395 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Sagi (n. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Sagi (n. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. As Rabbi Reuven Tal Yaso, a Torah scholar of Ethiopian origin, meticulously demonstrated, the principle of repentance in the Biblical era is anchored in collective, public consciousness, whereas the principle of repentance in the Rabbinic period is anchored in individual, private consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. This conversation took place in Beersheba several months before Daniel’s death. There is a great, important storehouse of knowledge; we must interview and document the elders of the community to preserve this knowledge, or it will be lost. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Michael Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jewry* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998); Sharon Shalom, *From Sinai to Ethiopia* (Jerusalem: Geffen, 2016); Ziv (above, n. 4). See, at greater length: Shalom (above, n. 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See: Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)