

Notes from the 2015 seminar on “Sin and Forgiveness”

CCJWA’s August seminar on “Sin and Forgiveness” clarified Christian and Jewish perspectives on the subjects by outlining two positions (Rabbi Adi Cohen, Jewish, and Rev Steve Francis, Christian) without succumbing to accommodating the other’s view by trying to anticipate it. This gave listeners, CCJWA members and guests, clear reference points from which to pose questions. With about 40 in attendance at the Temple David Function Centre, the evening of August 27 thus proved to be a refreshingly assertive event.

Acknowledging the considerable variations in both traditions’ views on the subject, the representatives, distinct in their roles (Rabbi Adi representing Reform Judaism, and Rev Steve Francis the moderator of the Uniting Church), unequivocally referred to strong traditions in each of these two faiths.

Rabbi Adi began with a Jewish perspective on these twin subjects. With good humour, he noted that he could spend 3 hours on the subject but that would be a sin! Maimonides, he added, suggests that basically we are all sinners. In Judaism, there are no saints. One can be a just person, or a villain. Most of us are neither. Indeed, we should choose the middle way, and not be too extreme. Each day the Jew wakes without a burden of sin, because he prays, first thing, “my God the soul you have given me is pure.” Ps Berakot 60b. The next thing to ponder is how will I conduct myself today? Conducting is not about thoughts but the emphasis is on deeds. In terms of cultic sacrificial practices, there are 76 definitions of sin, however these are ancient; we no longer sacrifice and none are relevant today!

As we approach *Yom Kippurim*, a time of forgiveness, it’s appropriate we look at *Cheyit*, “to miss the point!” Sin can be classified under types. First of all, there is the sin of looking away, the sin of not attending to what needs our attention. For example, we might be so immersed in the Torah that we didn’t hear our child crying. In this case, our engagement with the Torah is worthless. The greatest command is: Thou shalt not look the other way. We must either give help ourselves, or find help for that person. Hence, we should give donations to services such as the Flying Doctor.

Avon refers to a flawed personality: such as doing things I shouldn’t do. For example drinking too much. I have a responsibility to change. Instead of pointing to causes (with three fingers pointing back to myself), I should take responsibility.

Pesha indicates rebellion. We should try to behave according to the norms. Behaving rebelliously (such as eating a bacon sandwich on the steps of the synagogue on a holy day – Yom Kippur) means to tease or to provoke.

There are transgressions toward God and transgressions toward people: 40 days plus one. Forty days for making peace and for forgiving others, and one day for making peace toward the heavens. It’s harder to do this toward each other than it is toward God. First, we should acknowledge what we’ve done. This means acknowledging my wrong to myself, then to the one whom I’ve wronged, followed by the resolution to change. However the person may refuse to forgive. This needs to be done three times. It’s a process. No-one *wants* to do this. The result may be forgiveness, or no

forgiveness. The other isn't obliged to forgive. The point is that I should find myself in the process of resolving to improve my ways.

Aveira is, in a sense, opposite to the mitzvot, or the good work. A sense of not wanting to do the good – opposite to Halacha – to walk – to progress.

T'Shuvah is forgiveness. The question may be asked: can we hold onto a state of refusing forgiveness till we are seventy, or very old, and only then conceding we were wrong? Yes, it is the turn-around which counts. Forgiveness involves us amending our way or attitude toward God and others. This is the important point. The gates of repentance are always open.

Mi ha-ish (Ps 34:12) Can we avoid sin? Psalm 34:13-15, speaking about speech, states: don't just do good; also refrain from evil! In this case: guard your speech! Don't intend to deceive. In relation to this, Rabbi Adi asserted: observing the Jewish faith doesn't include venerating saints. All are imperfect, including Moshe and David. We shouldn't look up to these, asking 'what did they do?' but, rather, 'how can I best follow my own path?' We never have a clean slate. With humour he said: as 'Rabbi Bruce Lee' put it: *our only sin is to aim too low!*

Steve Francis then took the podium and embarked from a different perspective. He began with the shame in Spanish history, the sin of the Christian Church in mistreating Jewish persons. He was a great admirer of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. But he wondered why he'd been invited to speak as he wasn't a scholar but a pastor of the Nedlands, University, Uniting Church Parish; his concern with sin was generally from a pastoral perspective rather than intellectual. In his capacity of pastor, he would probably, rather than begin with the issue of sin, start with the concept of grace.

The NT is a response to Jesus' life and to human frailty. Sin is 'falling short' and 'missing the mark' as noted in the NT. Christians believe in the universality of sin, and would go so far as to say that there's a condition. Rev Francis noticed once that an Anglican vicarage kept a sign in front of it. 'Welcome' ... followed by a topic; amusingly one week there was a sign that stated, 'Welcome: Sin'.

For St Paul, sin was deviating from the will of God. This distorting or twisting the will of God is not a mere neurosis, but a virus that separated us from God and one another. The person who commits sin is "a sinner." Jesus intentionally hangs out with "sinners," but these were not just persons who sinned, but persons branded as "sinner". Some persons went so far as to even avoid looking at those who might convey sin, by virtue of their "sinning", to avoid contamination. Some points Jesus made: 1. He called not the righteous but the sinner. His kind of saving was freeing people from the hold that sin has over them. 2. He declared that one ought not be proud of not being in an adulterous relationship, but guard one's thoughts about such-like. 3. Jesus alone made the audacious claim that he could forgive. This claim, considered God-like, was felt to be scandalous. 4. Jesus stated that sin is sometimes personal, but can also be systemic – as part of being in human society – we are called to reorientate ourselves and repent. As we see in the story of Zacchaeus, a change of behaviour is expected. In the case of the woman caught in adultery, she is not blamed but asked to change.

The NT claims that Jesus was without sin. The text regarding Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, states that Jesus has nothing to confess, a big claim about sin – he was tempted in all things but did not sin. Ultimately Christian people view the special contribution of Jesus is not just in his example and teaching, but his death and resurrection is considered to be a solution in reuniting humanity with God. God the unapproachable moral judge, the Holy One (for Christians), through Jesus restores persons to that perfectly holy one. The “act of the cross” demonstrates God's abundant love in self-sacrifice. Pastorally, this can be most symbolised in the way couples express love for the other – they can express forgiveness.

“Original sin” can be described in the example of how the first immigrant Australians mistreated our first peoples of the land. We still need to repent of how we treated the environment. In his work in the prison system, Steve witnesses inmates realizing how serious their action was, and turning away from their past.

Adi, in reply to Steve, clarified that religious impurity does not correspond to/qualify as sin. (Steve noted in reply to a question: neither does being mistaken qualify as a sin). For Adi life cannot, for the Jew, be divided into holy and the profane, or into body and soul. Reflecting on what Steve mentioned in his speech, Adi observed that Jesus was just being the observant Jewish boy that he should be.

Responding to Adi, with respect to saints, Steve noted that saints in Christianity were imperfect... He then asked Adi, where would a Jewish person put emphasis, on deeds or thoughts, as both were mentioned. Adi replied: here on earth, deeds, because how one conducts oneself is more obvious, thus matters more than thoughts. Doing the right thing trumps how we feel. There are levels: e.g., giving grudgingly is better than not giving.

For Adi, the concept of mediator was not necessary. In the end the hardest person to forgive is oneself (how does a mediator help in this?) He asked: how can the Church forgive in the name of God?

Steve had a lower view of the human person – humans as very remote from God; a bridge has to be produced to allow humans to be reconciled to a perfect God.

Responding to a question from the floor about original sin, Steve commented that Christians believe we are made in the image of God, but also flawed – where we are at once angel and demon. We have the potential to worship the wrong or the right thing. Adi's response was that Eve didn't sin – she made a choice. The idea that God cannot be bad is a late medieval idea.

Following the presentations, the speakers, members and guests then mingled for another hour, further discussing the topics over refreshments.

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