



Reinventing the Self

Ideas on the Reinvention of the Self

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From the Biblical narratives of the post-diluvian recreation of the world, to the profound doctrines of repentance and self-repair as they developed over the centuries, to the rejuvenation of Jewish culture in the modern State of Israel, the notion of reinvention has been a signature feature of Jewish thought for thousands of years.

Now, as we think about the human future in a rapidly changing world characterized by shifting assumptions about both technological and social realities, the question of what it means to change—to be remade—has become more pressing than ever before.

I am therefore pleased to present a series of multi-disciplinary resources from wonderful scholars from across our institution on the issue of “Reinventing the Self.”

From Self-Absorption to Self-Reflection: The *Nazir* as a Paradigm for Repentance

Rabbi Elchanan Adler, Rosh Yeshiva, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary



The notion of repentance is one of the most profound and powerful concepts within Judaism. The Sages of the Talmud extol the many virtues of repentance [*teshuva*] and describe its import as reaching the cosmos (see Tractate Yoma 86a-b). The process of repentance is transformative, and the seeds of this transformation germinate within the psyche of the prospective penitent.

We may gain insight into the transformative nature of repentance by exploring the Torah's depiction of the *nazir*: an individual who vows to abstain from all grape derivatives, cutting one's hair and coming into contact with a corpse in an effort to draw closer to God. As understood by the Sages (Tractate Nedarim 2b), the prime motivation for becoming a *nazir* is to curb an excessive sense of pride and hedonism. By adhering to these ascetic guidelines for the duration of the vow, the *nazir* is deemed "holy," a title that highlights his newly acquired status.

Additionally, the *nazir*'s transformation is characterized by a psycho-spiritual milestone, which should ideally be everlasting. Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (d. 1926), in his classic work *Meshech Chochma* [*The Value of Wisdom*], discerns this in a verse describing the rituals associated with the formal conclusion of the period of being a *nazir*: "This shall be the law of the Nazarite; on the day his abstinence is completed, **he shall bring himself** to the entrance of the tent of meeting" (Numbers 6:13). On the surface, the expression "he shall bring himself"—a literal rendering of the Hebrew "*yavi oto*"—is linguistically awkward. As constructed, the phrase implies a bifurcation between the person engaged in the act of bringing and the person who is being brought. Seemingly, it would have been more natural for the verse to state "*yavo*"—"he shall come"—rather than "*yavi oto*"—"he shall bring himself."

Rabbi Meir Simcha explains that the peculiar phraseology aptly captures the unique nature of the *nazir*'s transformation. At the outset, the prospective *nazir* possessed a narcissistic mindset and was enamored with material pleasures. These inclinations dominated his personality, hampering his ability to introspect and develop critical self-awareness. As has been documented by psychological research associated with a phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance, addictive tendencies create psychological "blind spots" that prevent a person from honest self-evaluation. However, through undergoing an ascetic regimen of life-style changes (with the prescribed length of time dictated by the degree of need for psycho-spiritual rehabilitation), this flawed individual gains a renewed ability to self-reflect. By avoiding temptation, and engaging in rigorous self-discipline, the *nazir* is released from the myopia stemming from his narcissistic personality and can be said to "bring himself"—as a detached "other"—to the tent of meeting, ready to return to an earthly existence, empowered by a newly discovered ability to introspect perspicaciously and with broadened horizons.

The process of repentance entails neutralizing negative tendencies and shattering the limitations that these impose upon us. Like the *nazir*, waging a successful battle against such forces requires enormous willpower and an ironclad commitment to avoid circumstances and environments that

are likely to reinforce old habits. Oftentimes we vow to change—and sincerely intend to—but do not give sufficient thought regarding how to best restructure our lives, thought processes and behavioral patterns in a practical, consistent and meaningful way. This forethought is vital if we are to create lasting personal growth. Coupled with Divine assistance, our conscious efforts can help us reap the benefits of heightened self-awareness, placing us on a path toward actualizing all our God-given potential.

The Change in Ourselves

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It's that time of year again when many Jews around the world begin to look at themselves in hopes of change. With the new year approaching, the season of introspection is in full swing.

In addition to my job at Wurzweiler School of Social Work, I maintain a private practice where my specialty is addiction, trauma, and couples and family counseling. The world of addiction and recovery encourages self-introspection on a daily basis. Once the individual afflicted with the disease—yes, disease of addiction—begins the slow, arduous task of recovery, the layers and layers of shame, guilt, anger and resentments begin to be peeled away, leaving an individual that many do not recognize, an individual bathed in gratitude, love, living amends and service to others. The transformation is stunning and real. The

individual's entire countenance—their language, actions and emotions—emerge, much like the phoenix from the ashes.

It occurs to me as we close out this year and move hopefully to a year of good health, peace and prosperity to all that perhaps there is more self- introspection needed—not by the recovering addict, however. The introspection in this case needs to be done in my opinion by society.

The disease of addiction is a severe and very real one that exacts damage on every level of society: micro, macro, and mezzo. From the individual afflicted to their family members (addiction is a family disease) and the greater society at large, our nation is one that is afflicted. Addiction costs our country hundreds of billions of dollars every year, the largest part sadly spent in the forensic domain. Health care costs and lost productivity contribute largely to this number, and yet sadly, the amount of money allocated to treatment woefully falls behind. And so, in the name of self-reflection as a community, we must begin to ask ourselves “Why?”

Why is it a disease so prevalent is still yet so ignored and shunned? To begin, we must look at the way those afflicted with addiction are portrayed within society. Vernacular terms such as “druggie,” “junkie,” “coke-head,” “stoner” and “drunk” abound, and none of these are flattering. To the untrained eye, addicts portray some of the worst individuals who lie, manipulate, steal (and often worse) in a never-ending quest to obtain the substances for their bodies and minds. As a professional, I can understand how the behavior of an addicted individual at any level can justifiably engender severe negative emotions.

Yet, despite all of the above, the need for change is long overdue. We have tried for many years now to penalize, punish, and incarcerate those with addiction. And we have failed. Our modus operandi of shunning and shaming the addict have not met the goal of eliminating the addict; if anything, the numbers of addicted individuals continue to rise and swell.

I propose the following. As substance abuse appears to be here to stay (from the story of Noah becoming drunk to the current opioid crisis), perhaps the community at large should begin to understand the process of addiction: simple yet powerful psycho-education into what addiction is, how it affects the mind and body, and what we together as a community are able to do.

Furthermore, perhaps the most difficult task for our community is to immerse itself in understanding why we persist in harshly judging those with addiction. This can be accomplished through 12-step meetings and readings as well as opening up our hearts and minds to new ideas, new concepts and a willingness to accept major differences in what we once held dear.

It is oh so easy and convenient to blame the addict. After all, just look at the behaviors. But as any individual in recovery (the term for managing addiction one day at a time) will attest, addiction is a family disease, with each member playing and responsible for their role.

The principle that “all of Israel is responsible for one another” (Tractate Shevuot 39a) is at the cornerstone of our religion. We are one family, one unit. It is long overdue for our community to begin the slow painful process of not pointing wagging fingers at the addict but rather at ourselves. Stigma and shame have been proven great failures. Genuine love and understanding are our only line of defense. Lennon and McCartney were right: “All you need is love.”

Does Our Speech Define Us as Individuals?

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When one thinks about individuality and the self, we often think about our genetic variation, or the genetic composition that make each of us unique. However, from the perspective of speech-language pathology, a discipline focused on the evaluation and treatment of communication disorders, our speech is equally as unique as our genetic code.

Idiolect is an individual's distinctive and unique use of speech and language which differs from the more familiar term "dialect," defined as a common set of linguistic characteristics shared among a group of people. Coined by the linguist Bernard Bloch, it is etymologically related to the Greek prefix "idio," meaning own, personal, separate or distinctive. Encompassing one's vocabulary, grammar, and speech pronunciation, idiolect is the variety of language that is truly unique to

each individual.

One can argue that the most important part of life is our ability to use words to express our thoughts and ideas. Words *do* define us: they define our lives, they define our values, they define how the world perceives us. They are intertwined with our personality and individuality. The character of our words is the character of our personality, so we must be careful, thoughtful and watchful with our words. We *are* defined by our words as they are a direct expression, a reflection, of who we are.

The start of a new academic year serves as an opportunity for self-discovery and self-reflection. We should ask ourselves, how do we want the Yeshiva University community to perceive us as we forge new relationships with students, faculty and administrators alike? Perhaps this semester, we should consider leading with our words.

Artificial Intelligence and the Self

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Avi Giloni

Artificial intelligence, or AI, has already been impacting the way we live for several years. It's unthinkable to be juggling a printed map while steering our cars when we can simply turn on GPS, which is a mature AI that uses data science to compute driving routes. And many of us no longer physically deposit checks at a bank branch or ATM; instead, we digitally beam them over using mobile apps powered by AI.

It's natural to feel threatened by AI and the data science behind it. People generally are unfamiliar with the key principles of data science and hence do not understand how AI works. Even people creating these products, at times, do not fully grasp the inner workings of their inventions. Our fear of AI reflects an incomplete knowledge of this emerging phase of technology innovation, a lack of transparency where knowledge is available and an instinctive response to over-the-top hype when it is disappointed by actual experience.



Kaiser Fung

Businesses are investing heavily in AI and data science technologies. This tsunami of money is transforming not just the way we live but also the types of careers we will have. Big change always creates opportunities for advancement in your career and financial status, and this AI wave will be no different.

How AI and data science impact your job depends on the extent your job responsibilities include using discretion or making decisions. AI is best at performing repetitive, well-formed tasks with an efficiency that no human can match.

If your current job consists of performing repetitive tasks that can be diagrammed on a flowchart, your job will eventually be replaced by automation and AI. Yet, there exist opportunities for you to use the AI revolution to alter and ultimately further your career. You need to identify how and where in your current job automated procedures would fail because those areas require human discretion and decision-making. In addition, if you have an aptitude for coding and analytics, you will discover new and exciting roles in software development, algorithm design and operations.

For example, a check-deposit app replaces one of the primary responsibilities of a bank teller. While it brings more convenience and saves time, the app also has downsides, namely, it leads to fraud more easily. As banks roll this technology out, they must create a new fraud detection technology based on AI and data science that is more advanced than the one needed when checks are presented physically, which leads to a re-engineering of the check verification process. As a result, new jobs will appear in the risk, operations and data science teams. Meanwhile, fraud analysts must adapt their jobs because while the nature and frequency of cases will have changed, human discretion and decision-making is still required to make judgment calls.

Even if your current job is not reducible to rubrics, you should brace for changes in your job responsibilities as AI gets integrated into business operations. If you become literate in these emerging technologies, you can become a leader in this new ecosystem.

Everyone should become familiar with AI and data science technologies in order to compete in the world changed by them. There is no reason to fear. Rather, you should embrace this change and instead of letting technology run your lives and careers, you should aspire to lead this transformation and use discretion on how AI and data science should be best incorporated.

Repentance and its Critics: a Jewish Response

Dr. Daniel Rynhold, Professor in Modern Jewish Philosophy at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies and Director of the Revel Doctoral Program



There is, for want of a better word, a “traditional” view of repentance, embodied in many of the prayers recited throughout this period and discussed at length in Rabbi Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi’s (1180-1263) classic 13th-century work *Sha’arei Teshuvah* (*The Gates of Repentance*), a book to which many will turn in the month preceding the high holy days.

This view is centered around the concepts of guilt and atonement. If one sins, one incurs a level of guilt that requires a corresponding punishment. More than that, in the work of Rabbi Jonah, it seems as if one can never express sufficient sorrow and regret over one’s guilt since “although he may have suffered and wept much, he must tremble and fear that he may have sinned over and against this and that with all of his suffering,

weeping and fasting, he has not paid his debt” (*Gates of Repentance*, I:16).

In addition, for Rabbi Jonah, considering the punishment for one’s sins—helpfully listed in the third “gate” of his work—is one of the main ways to motivate one to repent.

In sum, “the levels and degrees of repentance correspond to the magnitude of bitterness and the intensity of sorrow” (*Gates of Repentance*, I:13). The underlying idea here seems to be that since we have sinned, and nothing can change that fact, we are to throw ourselves on God’s mercy in the hope that He will—for no good reason—forgive us. For all that we may weep and fast, the deed has been done, and thus only a miraculous act of forgiveness by God can possibly commute the punishment that we deserve.

While such punitive views of repentance are clearly acceptable—possibly even prevalent—within the Jewish tradition, they were often also the target of modern critiques, such as those levelled by Spinoza and Nietzsche, the latter of whom writes, “Just ask doctors who work with the insane what a methodical application of penitential torments, contrition, and cramps of redemption always brings on” (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, III: §21). And he adds, “Guilt before *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture for him. . . . This is a kind of madness of the will in psychical cruelty that has absolutely no equal: the *will* of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to the point that it cannot be atoned for” (ibid., II: §22).

Many will simply dismiss such criticism and wonder what a 19th-century German atheist could possibly know of such things. It is all the more notable, therefore, that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in *Halakhic Man* writes that if one views repentance “only as a guard against punishment, as an empty regret which does not create anything,” then it is “an empty and hollow concept,” such that “Spinoza and Nietzsche—from this perspective—did well to deride the idea of repentance” (Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 113-14).

According to Soloveitchik, the punitive aspect of repentance, which he terms *kappara*, is merely “peripheral,” for the central halakhic concept of repentance is that of self-creation, an act that he

goes as far as to tell us “is not supernatural but psychological” (Soloveitchik, “Sacred and Profane,” in J. Epstein (ed.), *Shiurei Harav*, 28).

Here, rather than torture oneself for the sins that one has committed, Soloveitchik speaks of the sinner’s ability to “change the past” by understanding one’s sin such that it is no longer an indelible stain upon one’s conscience but rather something that the sinner “strives to convert ... into a spiritual springboard for increased inspiration and evaluation” (ibid).

For Soloveitchik, this *tahara* [purification] aspect of repentance quite literally becomes a method of reinventing the self through a creative psychological process, one that, if undertaken seriously, is no less challenging than the traditional process in its requiring serious and harrowing levels of self-assessment.

But Soloveitchik’s *tahara* process is directed towards a positive and life-affirming outcome. Of course, there might be sins so grievous that such total “recovery” is not possible for the human psyche. But for most of us, should we find that the modernist critique of repentance resonates, Soloveitchik finds that the Jewish tradition has the resources for the creation of a counter-concept of repentance that is creative and life-affirming.

The Surprising High Holidays Message Found in Cognitive Science and Plato's *Republic*

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The history of cognitive science is intimately tied to the history of computer science. Both emerged at the same time and both influenced each other. Cognitive scientists were eager to try out their theories about how human reasoning worked by modeling those theories on computers, and computer scientists looked to human reasoning for insight into how best to program computers to complete tasks.

One of the early attempts to apply computer science to learning and education was reported in an article by John Seely Brown and Kurt VanLehn called “Towards a generative theory of ‘bugs’.”¹ The authors created a very simple computer model of the reasoning students used while learning multi-digit subtraction. After testing this model on many children in real-world classroom settings, the authors felt that they could

accurately predict every mistake students would make (thus the label, “a *generative* theory of bugs”).

What they discovered, and then built into their computer model, was that in very procedural and rule-based tasks like subtraction (for example, “first start in the right column and subtract that column,” “once finished with a column proceed to the column on the left” and “if the top number is smaller you must borrow from the next column,” and so on), student mistakes were often the result of missing one of the rules, such as the need to borrow. When faced with a dilemma caused by that missing rule, students would try to “fix” the problem, either by skipping the column altogether, switching the top for the bottom, or some other innovative repair, which of course only made things worse. They designed their computer model to capture all these mistakes.

This study reminded me of something that struck me deeply when I first studied Plato's *Republic*. People tend to think of the *Republic* as a work of political philosophy, but it is first and foremost a deep exploration of the human psyche and how an individual's psychology is shaped by its interaction with different cultures or societies. Plato describes different forms of government other than that of his ideal city, each of which represents different psychological temperaments in an individual. He shows how each government structure, since it is not perfect, has some flaw that causes strife and discord. A new generation of people grow up in the city and attempt to correct the flaw, but, ultimately, each fix leads to a worse government (or temperament in the case of the individual) until finally pure tyranny reigns.

In cities, in souls and indeed in problem-solving such as subtraction, the same principle holds: Sometimes the repair is worse than the problem itself. So what hope is there, if the cure is worse than the disease? Are we doomed to be stuck with our flaws forever?

Let's think about the Brown and VanLehn study: What do we do when math students learning subtraction miss part of the procedure? We start from scratch and make sure they understand the procedures correctly from the ground up. We do this by making sure they understand the

conceptual meaning behind their actions (what it means to borrow, for example), thus helping them avoid needing a fix to begin with.

This is our answer as well. As we come to the High Holidays and the ten days of repentance that precede them, we reflect on our flaws in an effort to improve. We need to be sure, however, that our solutions are foundational and comprehensive rather than myopic and superficial. When a situation is not right at its core, every attempt to improve it will only take us backwards, since these attempts never address the underlying problems. Instead of looking at one flaw in isolation, we have to see ourselves in totality and holistically address who we are from first principles, only thinking of the fix as part of a broader change in how we understand ourselves. If we can do that, then instead of descent into a tyranny of the soul, we can conquer our flaws to become fully integrated servants of God.

1) Brown, J. S. and VanLehn, K. (1983). Towards a generative theory of "bugs". In T. P. Carpenter, J. M. Moser and T. A. Romberg (Eds.), *Addition and subtraction: A cognitive perspective* (pp. 117-135). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum).

The American Prison System and Rehabilitation

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I first walked into a prison almost 20 years ago, as a third-year law student on my way to meet a client for the first time. Walking with my law school clinic partner through multiple security gates to reach the solitary confinement unit within the prison in which our client was confined, I could not call to mind any experience like the combination of terror and outrage that rose within me. The terror was not associated with the people housed in that prison—some of them had surely done awful things before entering prison, just as some of them had surely done nothing at all.

But as Bryan Stevenson had taught me early on as a law student, few of us would survive unscathed if we were judged based solely on the worst things we have ever done. No, the terror was the prospect of being confined in a place that excelled in dehumanization over all other values. And the outrage was rooted in the realization that outside of these walls, so few people questioned our penal practice.

I sat with our client for many hours that day (and, over the course of the year, visited him again and many other people held in New York State prisons). For the first 45 minutes, I had to fight down my visceral instinct to flee, to escape those confines and breathe freely on the other side of the high prison walls. I could not focus on anything else during that time. But slowly I came out of my shell and was able (I hope) to be of service to our client.

When I look back on that encounter, with nearly 20 years of work behind me as an advocate on behalf of people held in prisons and jails, one thing always strikes me: the ability of our client, having human contact with another person for the first time in six months, people whom he had never met before, to engage on a deeply personal level with us about an extremely traumatic event that occurred in prison. I would experience this cognitive dissonance throughout my career: the capacity of people, under some of the most dehumanizing conditions imaginable, to demonstrate resilience.

This is not rehabilitation. American prisons are not currently sites of rehabilitation. They are sites of social control, warehouses, symptoms of a larger disease in a criminal justice system founded on and perpetuating class- and race-based inequality. Far too many people are placed in prisons and jails every day for far too long, and poverty and discrimination play central roles in determining who spends their lives behind those walls. Indeed, precisely because discrimination is fostered and reflected by mass incarceration, one should be careful before assuming that most people in prison are in need of transformation. Nonetheless, people can transform themselves in prison, can reinvent themselves. Some of my clients over the years managed to do so—not because of what prisons had to offer but more in spite of what prisons inflict. And of course, prisons can also be transformative in a profoundly negative way; they have the potential to bring out some of our worst characteristics whether we work or are confined there. One has to find a way of surviving the combination of violence, boredom, idleness and the pain of being forgotten.

I think it is an open question whether prisons can ever be designed for transformation, can ever be sites of pro-social intervention. In our country's history, penal practices have sometimes been informed more by rehabilitative ideals than by retributive ones, but even they led to brutally inhumane systems as well. Models from New York and Pennsylvania that were held up as exemplars for 19th-century penal practice were experiments that, as the Supreme Court observed in 1890, literally drove people insane. But the prisons of the last 50 years have been punitive from the ground up. Built to isolate people from their communities and from each other, they are places to do hard, not meaningful, time.

Even when reforms have been geared towards rehabilitative ideals, they can have pernicious impacts. Take the move towards alternative sentencing such as drug courts; touted as a way to keep people out of prison, they have a dark side. If people flunk out of the alternative programming, they can receive even greater punishment in prison than they otherwise would have received. Our system's disappointment in the failure to rehabilitate leads to the need for retribution. And when people leave prison, they face barriers to housing and employment that make any in-prison transformation very challenging to maintain.

The criminal justice system simply can't lead to pro-social transformation in isolation. People who leave prison need support, not restrictive laws that interfere with what work they can do, where they can live and what benefits they can receive. People in prison need to have ways to maintain contacts with their communities, not to be held in isolation far from their home communities. And perhaps what is the source of the most cognitive dissonance, if we expect prisons to be sites of transformation, sometimes it will be necessary to expend significant resources on those who have incurred the greatest costs on our society.