

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## REPENTANCE FOR REPEATED SINS: PRACTICE, PRACTICE... (uh oh)

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Seven Talmudic passages cite the following statement:

Said Rav Huna:

Once a person has transgressed a transgression and repeated (shanah) – it becomes permitted to him.

Six of those passages immediately provide a radically deradicalizing reinterpretation.

“It becomes permitted to him” –

Do you really think he meant that?!

Rather, say: It becomes to him as-if permitted.

Rav Huna’s statement is thus converted from daring theology to conventional psychology.

On Bava Kamma 28a, the Talmud turns a similar statement into a theological pretzel. Rav Yosef interprets Habbakuk 3:7 to mean that when G-d saw (at Sinai) that the nonJews were not observing the Seven Noachide Commandments, “He arose and permitted them to them”. The Talmud objects that this violates the principle that one cannot gain a legal advantage by disobeying the law (shelo y’hei chotei niskar). Several steps later, the conclusion is that nonJews are punished as commanded persons, but rewarded only as-if volunteers (eino metzuvah, v’oseh). A counternarrative is then cited to establish a theological “fair wages” principle, and Rav Yosef’s true meaning is left a mystery. But what if we put Rav Yosef and Rav Huna together?

The issue here parallels the dispute between descriptive and prescriptive grammarians. For descriptivists, the third instance of a deviation from a rule makes it a legitimate idiom. For prescriptivists, repeated errors remain errors, just ones that become almost impossible to stamp out.

Also, while Rav Huna claims only that the previously illicit becomes licit, scholars sometimes go him one better. The academic equivalent of turning a repeated transgression into a lawful act is turning repeated misreading into a theory of the text. The newly ‘permitted’ transgression becomes the standard by which all future actions are judged.

Like repentance out of love, new theories don’t just decriminalize past misreadings; they turn them into virtues. Or do we only imagine that they become virtues? How can we tell?

Could Rav Huna have been a moral descriptivist? Surely not. But it is nonetheless true on a national level that minhag Yisroel can overturn at least some laws.

The need to state an interpretation reflects an anxiety that the text itself is not clear, an awareness that other readers might not

understand it the way we do. If Rav Huna were obviously not a moral descriptivist, there would be no need to say that he wasn’t. The Talmud has a form for this:

Peshiyta!? This is too obvious to bother saying!?

(No, it isn’t.) Mahu d’teima? What would I have said otherwise? That . . .

Ka mashma lan (that what I would have said was wrong.)

Talmud Yoma 87a takes Rav Huna as far opposite his literal meaning as possible. Repeated sins do not become permitted; rather, they become ineligible for repentance.

(Mishnah:) One who says “I will sin and repent, I will sin and repent” –

they do not give him the capacity to repent.

(Talmud): Why must it say “I will sin and repent, I will sin and repent”, twice?

(The Mishnah is best explained) along the lines of Rav Huna . . .

But does the Talmud really mean that?! Almost all repentance is for repeated sins – that’s why on Yom Kippur we recite the identical confession year after year. Very few sins are original.

Perhaps the Talmud understands Rav Huna to mean that repentance is possible only so long as one sins without cynicism. When we sin repeatedly, yet retain the consciousness of wrongdoing and plan to repent – that is the 50th level of impurity which makes repentance impossible.

But would G-d really prefer that we lost our knowledge of good and evil, and sinned with our consciences clear? Or that we despaired of repenting?

Perhaps investigating the basis for Rav Huna’s statement will help us understand it.

(Vilna) Talmud Yoma 86b seems to say that Rav Huna derived his statement from Proverbs 26:11.

A beraita:

Transgressions that he confessed this Yom Kippur

–

he must not confess them on a subsequent Yom Kippur.

But if he repeated the transgressions –

he must confess them on a subsequent Yom Kippur.

But if he did not repeat them, and returned to confess them anyway:

Regarding him Scripture says:

Like a dog returning to his vomit, a fool who repeats (shoneh) his iniquity/.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov says:

He is all the more so praiseworthy!

As Scripture says:

Because I acknowledge my malefaction, and my sin is before me constantly.

How can Like a dog etc. be sustained in light of Rav Eliezer ben Yaakov?

In accordance with Rav Huna . . .

But here the Vilna text is impossible. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov was a Tanna who lived centuries before Rav Huna (whichever of the Talmud's many Rav Hunas we attribute this statement to). So the correct text must be, following many mss.:

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov says:

He is all the more so praiseworthy!

As Scripture says:

Because I acknowledge my malefaction, and my sin is before me constantly.

How can Like a dog etc. be sustained in light of Rav Eliezer ben Yaakov?

This is when a person transgressed a transgression and repeated (shanah) it,

in accordance with Rav Huna . . .

So Rav Huna does not derive directly from like a dog etc. We might instead read Rav Huna as a supercommentary providing a rationale for Rabbi Elazar ben Yaakov's exegesis, in which case it would be obvious that he never meant his statement literally. But the language of "in accordance with" indicates that Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov is following a principle that Rav Huna worked out independently.

What then is Rav Huna's source? One possibility is Yirmiyah 22:10, cited on Talmud Moed Kattan 27b, which is the only sugya that presents Rav Huna as a direct participant.

(Do not weep for the dead, nor grieve for him;)

Weep, weep for him who goes, for he will not return ever and see his native land

Said Rav Yehudah:

This refers to one who 'goes' without children.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would not visit a mourning house except for those who 'went' childless,

as it is written:

Weep, weep for him who goes, for he will not return (yashuv) ever and see his native land.

Rav Huna said:

This is when a person transgresses a transgression and repeated (shanah) it.

Rav Huna is consistent with his reasoning elsewhere, for Rav Huna said . . .

The initial statement of Rav Huna here is identical with the one that the ms. of Yoma 86b attributes to Rabbi El'azar ben Yaakov, and the Talmud's language again makes clear that the cited verse is not the direct source of Rav Huna's claim about repeated transgression.

I suggest that it may be the indirect source. How does Mishnah Yoma know that "One who says "I will sin and repent, I will sin and repent - they do not give him the capacity to repent"? Yirmiyah 22:10 writes weep, weep, and then states that the one for whom one weeps repeatedly lo yashuv od = will not return ever". Perhaps the Mishnah understood the weeping to be for the one who goes on transgressing, because that one will never repent (lo yashuv od). Rav Huna then explains why they will never repent – because they no longer realize that what they are doing is wrong.

If this is Rav Huna's true meaning, then interpreting him literally would simply be an error. The Talmud bothers to exclude it only because this sort of absurd misunderstanding is exactly the kind of theory that repeated sinners develop in order to armor themselves against repentance.

The problem is that the sinful imagination plays by Freudian rules. The more you protest that something is impossible, the more it points out that if it were peshitta, you wouldn't waste your time rejecting it.

And of course Talmud Sotah 22a simply cites Rav Huna as-is:

Fear Hashem, my son, and the king;

But with shonim do not intermingle.

Said Rabbi Yitzchak:

This refers to those who teach (shonim) halakhot.

Peshiyta!?

What would I have said? That it refers to those who repeat (shonim) their sin,

in accordance with Rav Huna, for Rav Huna said:

Once a person has transgressed a transgression and repeated (shanah) –

it becomes permitted to him –

Kamashma lan.

Let's be clear – the Talmud here cites Rav Huna's statement in a form that makes clear in advance that it will be rejected. Moreover, the sugya has many components that seem a little odd – for example, I am not yet aware of another case where the Talmud uses peshiyta with reference to a Biblical interpretation; and in what sense is it obvious that one ought not mingle with those who teach halakhot? (Presumably this doesn't mean all teachers of halakhot!) Finally, there is an ms. that inserts the usual "Do you really think he meant that?!".

A bias toward radical interpretations, and against deradicalizing interpretations, is almost certainly a vice. But repentance is hard. So I confess that I would love to hear a reasonable explanation of Rav Huna's statement that understands him literally, and welcome your suggestions.

Shabbat Shalom!

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