

The Concept of Sin in Judaism

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In Judaism, it is believed that all humans enter the world free of sin. This makes the Jewish view of sin quite different from the Christian concept of original sin, in which it is believed that humans are tainted by sin from conception and must be redeemed through their faith. Jews believe that individuals are responsible for their own actions and that sin results when human inclinations go astray.

Missing the Mark

The Hebrew word for sin is *chet*, which literally means "missing the mark." According to Jewish beliefs, a person sins when he or she strays away from making good, correct choices. It is believed that a person's inclination, called *yetzer*, is an instinctual force that can send people astray and lead them into sin unless one deliberately chooses otherwise. The principle of *yetzer* has sometimes been compared to Freud's concept of the id—a pleasure-seeking instinct that aims at self-gratification at the expense of reasoned choice.

Definition

For Jews, sin enters the picture when bad instinct leads us into doing something that violates one of the 613 commandments described in the Torah. Many of these are obvious transgressions, such as committing murder, injuring another person, committing sexual transgressions, or stealing. But there are also a considerable number of sins of omission—transgressions that are defined by NOT acting when a situation calls for it, such as ignoring a call for help.

But Judaism also takes a somewhat matter-of-fact view of sin, recognizing that being sinful is part of every human life and that all sins can be forgiven. Jews also recognize, though, that every sin has real-life consequences. Forgiveness for sins is readily available, but it does not mean people are free from the consequences of their actions.

Three Classes

There are three kinds of sin in Judaism: sins against God, sins against another person, and sins against yourself. An example of a sin against God might include making a promise you don't keep. Sins against another person might include saying hurtful things, physically harming someone, lying to them, or stealing from them.

Judaism's belief that you can sin against yourself makes it somewhat unique among major religions. Sins against yourself may include behaviors such as addiction or even depression. In other words, if despair prevents you from living fully or being the best person you can be, it can be considered a sin if you fail to seek correction for the problem.

Sin and Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur, one of the most important Jewish holidays, is a day of repentance and reconciliation for Jews and is held on the tenth day of the tenth month in the Jewish calendar—in September or October. The ten days leading up to Yom Kippur are called the Ten Days of Repentance, and during this time Jews are encouraged to seek out anyone they might have offended and to sincerely request forgiveness. By doing this, the hope is that the New Year, Rosh Hashanah, can begin with a clean slate.

This process of repentance is called *teshuva* and it is an important part of Yom Kippur. According to tradition, prayer and fasting on Yom Kippur will provide forgiveness only for those offenses committed against God,

not against other people. Hence, it is important that people make an effort to reconcile with others before participating in Yom Kippur services.