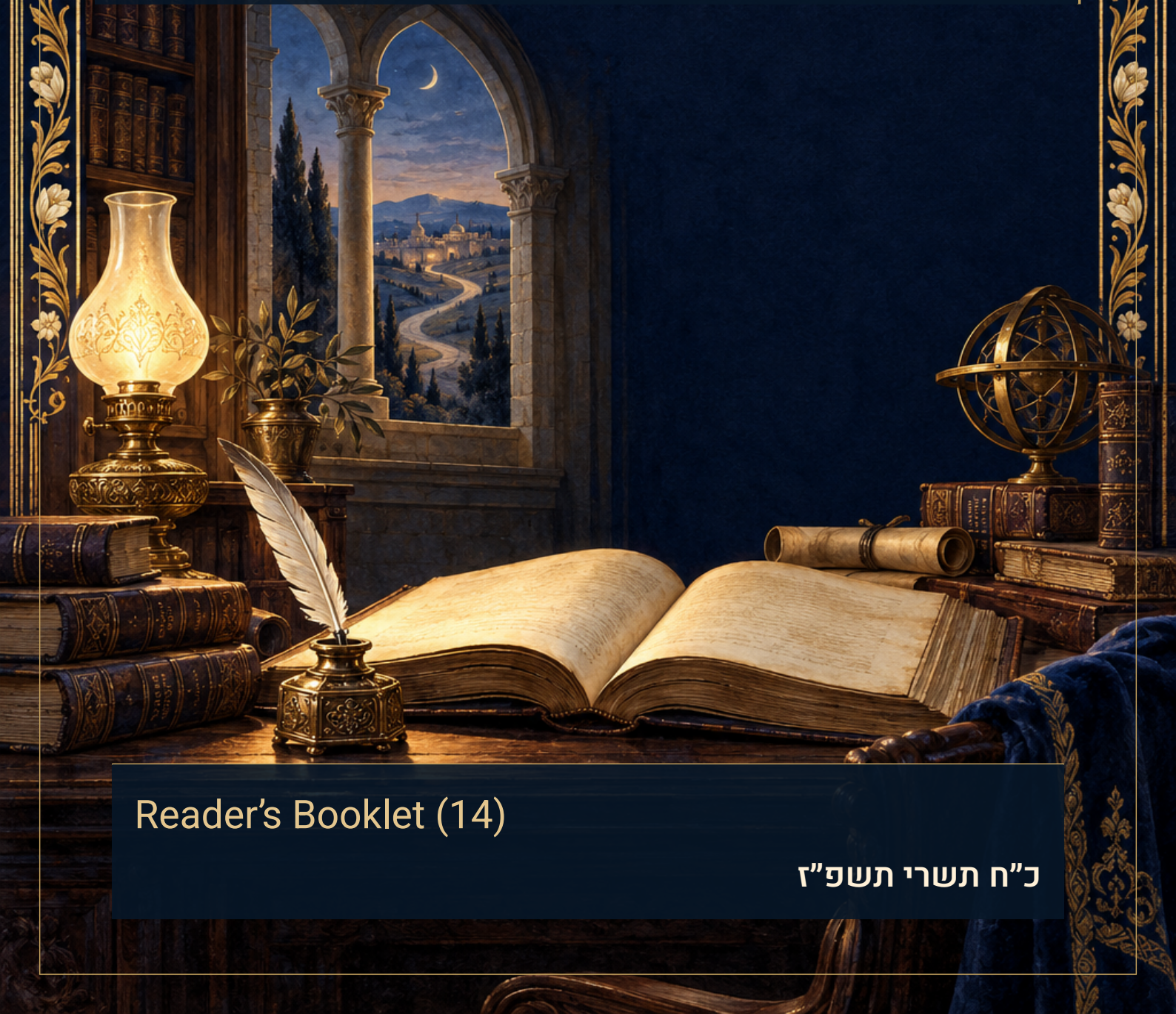


Beit Midrash YeshivahAI

Who First Opened the Way to Repentance?

A Study of Midrash, Commentaries, and Hasidic Teachings

From Adam and Cain to Reuben, David, and Hosea



Reader's Booklet (14)

כ"ח תשרי תשפ"ז

Preface · How Many Times Can Someone Be First?

Reuben returns to the pit, and Joseph is gone. Within the painful story of Joseph's sale, the Midrash records a surprising declaration by God to Reuben: "You were the first to open the way to repentance." Yet Adam lived many generations before him. Cain, too, sinned and repented, and even told his father about the power of repentance. In what sense, then, was Reuben first?

The difficulty does not end with Reuben. King David is said to have established the "yoke of repentance," and Rashi explains: "He repented first and provided a way for those who repent." The prophet Hosea, identified by the Midrash as Reuben's descendant, is also described as opening the way to repentance. How can a path that has already been opened be opened again? If a later figure opened something new, does the repentance of earlier figures cease to count?

This booklet invites us to study these questions step by step. It is easy to give each figure a label and conclude that "each was first in his own sphere," but that slogan skips the work. We will read what the sources say, hear each commentator's explanation, and examine what it resolves and what remains open. Along the way, a fundamental point about repentance itself will emerge: genuine return can be accepted even when everything lost is not immediately restored, and a higher level revealed later does not cancel what has already been achieved.

This is a study of Beit Midrash YeshivahAI, under human leadership and rabbinic supervision. ChatGPT, Claude, and Grok assisted in collecting, comparing, and reviewing

material. Conclusions rest on the sources, rather than the tools' agreement. The research booklet preserves the correction log and comparison of reviews, so that the tools' contributions and the editor's decisions can be examined. This booklet presents the argument in plain language; its notes refer to the full research booklet and its units.¹

What will emerge at the end? A positive answer within clear limits. A later designation as "first" does not by itself invalidate an earlier person's repentance. Maharal explicitly mentions Cain and Reuben as having repented before David, yet attributes the opening of a path to David and Israel. In his explanation of Reuben, the Lubavitcher Rebbe acknowledges Adam's and Cain's repentance while distinguishing Reuben's choice. What has not been found is a single interpretation that reconciles every version of the Midrash and every commentator. The Midrash's forceful wording remains a difficulty, and several disagreements among commentators remain intact. The next page sets out the questions, together with what has been answered and what remains open.

The Questions and the State of the Answer

The table presents the questioner's concerns in a form suited to study, the identified interpretations, and their limits. It is not a division into categories formulated by the Midrash itself.

1. For the research introduction and answer: V40 (p. 44). Research, p. 2; Research, p. 44

Question	What emerged	Chapters
Cain repented, and Adam learned from him. How can someone later be called "first"?	Evidence and disagreement. Cain teaches Adam. Maharzu calls him "the first from whom others learned"; the completeness of his repentance is disputed.	1-2
Reuben came after Adam and Cain. In what sense did he "open repentance first"?	Identified interpretations: initiative, recognition of a fault, type of commandment, responsibility for the future, preparation, and spiritual level. Open: no interpretation was established as the sole answer; the motive of Ishmael's earlier repentance is unknown.	3-6
Judah "caused Reuben to acknowledge" his sin, although Reuben had already repented. How?	Answer within its limits: repentance came earlier; public acknowledgment followed. Open: how to read Or HaChaim on confession.	7
David "repented first and provided a way for those who repent," after all these figures. What did he open?	Answer within its limits: a precedent for an individual, a general path in Maharal, the power of love in R. Tzadok, and higher repentance in the Rebbe's discourses: four distinct concepts. Open: authors disagree about whether initiative is love.	8-10
Hosea "opens repentance," but Moses had already said, "You shall return to the Lord your God." What did Hosea add?	Identified interpretations: revealing its virtues, teaching how to address God, and repair affecting others. Hosea does not precede Moses in time.	11
What about Moses? If he repented, had no one repented before him?	Not found: a source calling Moses "the first to repent." There is therefore no such title to reconcile. The sources present Moses as teaching repentance before Hosea.	11
Why does earlier repentance supposedly "not count"? What are repentance's limits?	Answer within its limits: the sources recognize earlier repentance. Repentance that is not of the highest quality still works; atonement need not restore everything lost. Open: no single resolution covers every statement of priority.	12-15

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1 · First, Read the Difficult Sentence

Reuben Returns to the Pit

The Torah relates that Reuben sought to rescue Joseph from his brothers and return him to his father. When he returned to the pit, he found it empty. Bereishit Rabbah asks where Reuben had been and gives two opinions. The following is the wording in the scholarly edition prepared by Yehudah Theodor and Chanoch Albeck; the square brackets occur in that edition:

"R. Eliezer said: He was occupied with his sackcloth and fasting. When he became free, he went and looked into that pit, as it is written, 'Reuben returned,' etc. R. Yehoshua said: All the household duties had been placed upon him. When he became free, he went and looked [into that pit], as it is written, 'Reuben returned to the pit,' etc. The Holy One, blessed be He,

said to him: Never has a person sinned before Me and repented, and you opened repentance first. By your life, your descendant will arise and open repentance first. Who is this? Hosea: 'Return, Israel, to the Lord your God.'"²

According to the first opinion, Reuben was engaged in sackcloth and fasting: sorrow and repair for his conduct in the episode involving Bilhah. According to the second, he was absent because the household duties rested on him. In this version, God's words follow both opinions. Their content clearly fits the opinion about sackcloth and fasting, but the Midrash does not explicitly attach them to that opinion alone. We will therefore retain both.

The sentence does more than say that Reuben added a virtue. It says: "Never has a person sinned before Me and repented." This is forceful wording, and we should not soften it in advance. In *Sechel Tov*, a medieval collection of Midrash and Torah commentary, it is stronger still: "From Adam until now, no person has sinned before Me and repented."³ In the next chapter we will encounter a Midrash in which Adam initially refused to return. We might have thought the denial here refers only to that stage. But *Sechel Tov* extends it as far as Reuben's time, so that explanation alone is insufficient.

Do All the Sources Say the Same Thing?

No. Parallel works and quotations of the Midrash vary. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* and *Midrash Aggadah* describe Reuben's opening without the sentence denying earlier repentance. *Lekach Tov* omits both that sentence and "first"; *Maharal* and *Reshit Chochmah* cite the denial without "first." Furthermore, within the textual tradition of *Bereishit Rabbah* itself, the

2. *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:19, Theodor-Albeck edition. V7 (p. 6). Research, p. 6

3. *Sechel Tov*, Genesis 37:29. V7 (p. 6). Research, p. 6

scholarly edition's apparatus records that the denial is absent from two manuscripts, and "first" does not occur in every witness.⁴ We do not know which wording is earlier and cannot simply choose the most convenient one.

This matters: not every commentator necessarily confronted the same wording. When we suggest that the Midrash means a particular kind of repentance, we will identify this as a commentator's interpretation rather than present it as already written in the sentence. That lets us take a resolution seriously without weakening the question it seeks to answer. We begin with the figures who preceded Reuben: Adam and Cain.

2 · Cain and Adam: Repentance Does Not Erase the Story

The Son Reveals Repentance's Power to His Father

Bereishit Rabbah relates that Cain leaves God's presence, meets Adam, and answers his father's question about his judgment: "I repented, and my sentence was mitigated." Adam responds: "Such is the power of repentance, and I did not know!" He then recites "A psalm, a song for the Sabbath day." In this interpretation, Cain's repentance reveals to Adam something he had not known about the power of return.⁵

What had Adam not known? R. Tzadok, in Pri Tzadik, offers two explanations. In one, Adam learned that repentance aroused by suffering can also be accepted. In the other, the question is how someone can return when he can no longer face the same circumstances in which he sinned: Adam had been expelled from Eden, and the earlier test was no longer

4. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Shuvah; Midrash Aggadah; Lekach Tov; quotations in Maharal and Reshit Chochmah; textual apparatus of Theodor-Albeck. V7 (p. 6). Research, p. 6

5. Bereishit Rabbah 22:13. V2 (p. 9). Research, p. 9

available in the same form. Inability to return to the same test does not mean the path of repentance has closed. There is no demand here to recreate the sin in order to repent of it.⁶

We can now turn to a further question, distinct from both explanations in Pri Tzadik: must acceptance of repentance also restore everything that was lost? Cain cannot bring Abel back to life. Yet the Midrash describes his repentance and the mitigation of his sentence. To understand this, we must distinguish a person's return from all the consequences of his act. We will examine that distinction through the word *nitpasharti*, "my sentence was mitigated."

What Does "My Sentence Was Mitigated" Mean?

Vayikra Rabbah mentions Cain in a discussion of repentance's and prayer's power to annul a decree. According to one opinion, repentance cancels half the decree, with Cain as the example: he was sentenced to be "a fugitive and a wanderer," yet Scripture says he "dwelt in the land of Nod." In this context, *nitpasharti* means mitigation of judgment. It does not mean that every consequence of the murder vanished, or that no repentance occurred.⁷

We distinguish two questions: did the person return, and was everything he lost restored? The answer can be "yes" to the first and "no" to the second; the Midrash about Cain prepares us for that distinction. But it does not establish a rule that every repentance works only halfway. The Midrash itself contains several opinions about the power of repentance and prayer.

Ramban reads Cain's "My iniquity is too great to bear" as acknowledgment of his sin and the justice of his sentence,

6. Pri Tzadik, Vayelech and Shabbat Teshuvah 13. N2 (p. 46). Research, p. 46

7. Vayikra Rabbah 10:5. V3 (p. 10). Research, p. 10

together with a request for protection from harm beyond the punishment decreed. On his reading, asking for mitigation does not show that Cain failed to recognize his sin.⁸

Cain: "First" in What Sense?

The questioner suggested that Cain was the first to repent and that Adam learned from him. There is a basis for this.

Bereishit Rabbah, in R. Chanin's name, describes Cain as "a sign for those who repent." Maharzu, R. Ze'ev Wolf Einhorn, a commentator on Midrash Rabbah, explains that according to this opinion Cain repented completely and was "the first from whom others learned."⁹ This is an explicit designation as "first," but it belongs to the commentator, not the Midrash's wording itself.

The same commentator identifies another opinion in which Cain's repentance was incomplete. Other interpretations in the same Midrashic chapter describe his departure from God as deceitful. We therefore cannot base the entire answer on Cain alone. A further point matters: in Pesikta de-Rav Kahana's section called "Shuvah," acceptance of Cain's repentance is used as evidence that Israel's repentance will also be accepted.¹⁰ Already in the Midrash, then, Cain serves as a precedent for others, rather than merely someone who returned for himself.

What About Adam Himself?

Eruvin describes Adam as "a great pietist," who fasted for 130 years after realizing that death had been decreed as a consequence of his sin.¹¹ Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer recounts his repentance in the days after his expulsion from Eden,

8. Ramban, Genesis 4:13. V3 (p. 10). Research, p. 10

9. Bereishit Rabbah 22:12 and Maharzu there. V2 (p. 9); V21 (p. 25). Research, p. 9; Research, p. 25

10. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, later in Shuvah (section 24 in Mandelbaum). V27 (p. 31). Research, p. 31

11. Eruvin 18b. V4 (p. 11). Research, p. 11

following the first Sabbath: he asks that his repentance be accepted so future generations will learn that repentance exists, and his request is granted.¹² Bereishit Rabbah, however, describes a stage at which God opened a path to repentance for Adam and he refused.¹³

Refusal at one stage and return at a later one can coexist within a story. Midrash Tehillim relates that Adam refuses, Cain repents, and Adam learns from him and recites a psalm; Adam's repentance is not explicitly stated there.¹⁴ We should not assemble all these traditions into an unproved chronology, since each has its own context. There is no basis for erasing Adam's repentance to explain Reuben's distinction. Both Adam and Cain appear in sources as teachers of others. David's teaching of repentance therefore cannot be made unique merely by asserting that before him everyone repented only for himself.

We turn to Reuben with two facts in hand: repentance already existed before him, and people had already taught it to others. Any interpretation of his priority must explain what he added without erasing Adam's and Cain's stories.

3 · Reuben: Begin Before Circumstances Compel You

What Awakens a Person to Return?

Yefeh To'ar, a commentary on Midrash Rabbah, suggests as a possibility a distinction between Adam and Cain, who returned under pressure and punishment, and Reuben, who returned on his own. The Shelah, Shnei Luchot HaBrit, develops the theme of initiative: God aroused the earlier

¹². Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 20. V6 (p. 12). Research, p. 12

¹³. Bereishit Rabbah 21:6. V5 (p. 11). Research, p. 11

¹⁴. Midrash Tehillim 100. V21 (p. 25). Research, p. 25

figures, whereas Reuben began himself. On this explanation, Reuben's priority does not erase their repentance; it is an opening from within.¹⁵

There is a difference between someone who begins to reflect because reality hurts him and someone who stops to examine his actions without waiting for an external blow. Both may return, while the second displays the virtue of initiative. This provides a substantive explanation of "you opened," but it is the commentators' interpretation, rather than something written in the Midrash's words.

Four questions help clarify the distinction: **What awakened me? What motivates me now? What am I changing? What has the repair achieved?** An event, a motive, an action, and a result are different things. A crisis may begin the examination, followed by a person's freely accepting responsibility. The initial event alone does not reveal the entire process.

The Rebbe's Explanation: From Distress to Recognition of the Sin

In Likkutei Sichot, volume 30, the Lubavitcher Rebbe discusses Joseph's brothers, who acknowledge their guilt in a time of distress, and Reuben's response reminding them of his earlier warning. The explanation shows Reuben seeking to deepen their repentance: to recognize not only the connection between distress and sin, but their responsibility for the sin itself. Note 28 explicitly mentions Adam and Cain as repenting after "punishment and rebuke," in contrast to Reuben's choice without an extraneous cause.¹⁶

¹⁵. Yefeh To'ar on Bamidbar Rabbah 13:18; Shelah, Toldot Adam, Remezei Otiyot 19. V8 (p. 13); V10 (p. 15). Research, p. 13; Research, p. 15

¹⁶. Likkutei Sichot 30, Miketz 2, pp. 198-203, especially notes 28 and 30. V9 (p. 14); V34 (p. 38). Research, p. 14; Research, p. 38

The note explicitly says that Adam and Cain repented. What it distinguishes in Reuben is the completeness of choice. The sichah defines repentance "from the person himself" as repentance without an external cause that compelled or induced it, citing Rambam's description of complete repentance: "not out of fear and not because of failing strength." Here "fear" means fear of an external factor. Chapter 9 introduces an author who uses the term differently. None of this establishes that repentance begun through hardship is void. The sichah emphasizes the virtue of choice, while other sources teach that an opening through distress can also be accepted.

Is repentance "on one's own" necessarily repentance "out of love"? The expressions are related but distinct. "On one's own" describes who initiated the return; "out of love" describes its motive and level. In note 30, the sichah connects freely chosen repentance with uprooting the sin from its beginning and refers to Rashi on repentance out of love. There is a clear connection to love. Yet the sichah does not call Reuben's repentance "repentance out of love." Chapter 9 presents two authors who read "Return, Israel" in opposite ways: one regards human initiative as repentance out of love, the other as repentance out of fear. We must therefore ask what each author himself says.

The Limit: What Do We Know About Ishmael?

Bava Batra states that Ishmael repented during Abraham's lifetime, before Reuben. The Gemara does not specify his motive. The explanation about Adam and Cain therefore addresses the comparison the commentators actually make, but does not prove that everyone before Reuben waited for punishment. Nor has the reverse been proved: that Ishmael

already began with the same initiative. That is the limit of our knowledge; the explanation concerning Adam and Cain stands within it.¹⁷

4 • Repenting of What We Thought Was Right

A Good Intention Can Conceal a Fault

The Sages say: "Anyone who says Reuben sinned is simply mistaken." The same discussion explains that he disturbed his father's bed.¹⁸ According to this opinion, the Bilhah episode should not be read as literal intercourse. Yet it does not deny that a fault requiring correction occurred. The Shelah explains that Reuben sought to honor his mother and needed to recognize that he had harmed his father's honor.¹⁹

Repentance in such a case is difficult precisely because a person can defend himself: I wanted to do good. The achievement is the ability to examine even that good justification and ask whether the act was actually right. This repentance is not regret for a genuine mitzvah; it corrects an error in judgment and in identifying the act.

Yismach Moshe, by R. Moshe Teitelbaum, interprets Hosea's call similarly: a person may regard his actions as closeness to God even when they contain a fault.²⁰ He thereby connects Reuben and his descendant. The resemblance to the Shelah helps our study, but does not prove that all authors offered exactly the same interpretation.

Another Interpretation: Positive Commandments

Reshit Chochmah, the ethical work of R. Eliyahu de Vidas of Safed, proposes another distinction: Adam and Cain repented

17. Bava Batra 16b. N1 (p. 46). Research, p. 46

18. Shabbat 55b. V11 (p. 16). Research, p. 16

19. Shelah, Toldot Adam, Remezei Otiyot 19, on good intentions. V11 (p. 16). Research, p. 16

20. Yismach Moshe, Vayechi 18, subsection 3. N4 (p. 48). Research, p. 48

of prohibitions, whereas Reuben repented of violating a positive commandment, honoring his father. A positive commandment requires an action; a prohibition forbids one. Reshit Chochmah uses this distinction to show that neglecting a positive commandment must not be taken lightly, with Reuben's sackcloth and fasting as evidence.²¹

The Shelah cites this distinction and considers it strained. His reason is that honoring parents was "equated" with honoring God: the Torah compares the two. He prefers the distinction between Reuben's own awakening and his predecessors' being awakened by a hint or prompting from above.²² We therefore should not write that Reuben was "the first to repent on his own of a positive commandment," as though two elements formed one agreed explanation. These are conflicting interpretations of the Midrash. Preserving their disagreement shows why one proposal does not resolve everything.

5 • Before the Consequence and Before the Mitzvah

Beit HaLevi: Responsibility for a Future Harm

Beit HaLevi, by R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik of Brisk, explains in two stages why Reuben was repenting precisely when Joseph was in danger. Reuben initially repented immediately of his impetuous conduct in the Bilhah episode. Later, seeing Joseph in mortal danger, he feared a more serious consequence: Joseph's death would leave a tribe missing. In Beit HaLevi's interpretation, disturbing the bed is linked to a son who might have been born to Jacob but was not. If a tribe

²¹. Reshit Chochmah, Sha'ar HaTeshuvah 3. V10 (p. 15). Research, p. 15

²². Shelah, Toldot Adam, Remezei Otiyot 19: rejection of the distinction and its reason. V10 (p. 15). Research, p. 15

now disappeared, Reuben's earlier act would contribute indirectly to that lack. Reuben therefore also repented of his responsibility for the harm he feared was about to occur.²³

Joseph did not die, and the feared harm did not occur. This does not claim that Reuben knew the future, or that his only sin was something that never happened. "First" here means returning before the future harm arose. The interpretation broadens responsibility from an isolated act to what it may produce. It rests on a particular homiletical connection, absent from the foundational Midrash. In the same passage, Beit HaLevi explicitly asks why Hosea is called an opener after Moses and answers that Hosea also rebukes people for harms emerging later from earlier actions. The same concern for consequences governs both.

Be'er Mayim Chaim: Preparing Myself to Do Good

Be'er Mayim Chaim, by R. Chaim of Czernowitz, proposes a different approach: Reuben repented in preparation for the mitzvah of rescuing Joseph. "First" means repentance before performing the commandment. He connects this to Hosea, who teaches an opening through return before accepting the yoke of Heaven in Torah, mitzvot, and prayer.²⁴

The difference matters. Beit HaLevi examines responsibility for a possible harm; here the focus is preparation for serving God. The same work, in Naso, offers a third interpretation: returning to the root of sins, back to Adam's sin.²⁵ "First" therefore appears in several homilies, without their constituting one answer.

A practical question immediately arises: can self-correction

²³. Beit HaLevi, Vayeshev, on Genesis 37:29; also the question of Hosea after Moses. V13 (p. 18). Research, p. 18

²⁴. Be'er Mayim Chaim, Genesis 12:1. V14 (p. 19). Research, p. 19

²⁵. Be'er Mayim Chaim, Numbers 5:7. N3 (p. 47). Research, p. 47

delay rescuing another? The homily must not be turned into an instruction to postpone rescue for ascetic practices. Be'er Mayim Chaim notes that a genuine thought of repentance also helps as preparation when complete repentance like Reuben's cannot be performed at that moment. Responsibility for the mitzvah includes the person awaiting our help.

6 • When "First" Is the Highest Level

Bnei Yissaschar: Lower and Higher Repentance

The author of Bnei Yissaschar, R. Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov, himself asks how Reuben is called first after Adam and Cain. His answer rests on two levels: teshuvah tata'ah, lower repentance, and teshuvah ila'ah, higher repentance. He calls the higher level "repentance first" because it heads the order of levels from above downward. "First" is read according to spiritual order as well as chronology.²⁶

In his homily, he connects "he lay" with a blemish in the covenant and its repair at the higher level. This is his homiletical reading, distinct from the Shelah's reading of the act. He interprets Reuben's opening as the first appearance of higher repentance in the Torah. He, too, thus makes a claim of priority, but defines it by level: Reuben is first in higher repentance. This level is linked in his system to Binah, a level within the spiritual structure he expounds, rather than ordinary intellectual understanding. One need not master the entire system to grasp the main point: a later person can inaugurate a spiritual level not previously revealed.

Bnei Yissaschar also offers a second interpretation, involving initiative: with Adam and Cain, God opened first to awaken them, whereas Reuben opened himself. He connects this to

26. Bnei Yissaschar, Tishrei, discourse 4:9; also Kislev-Tevet, discourse 14:3. V15 (p. 20). Research, p. 20

Hosea's call for Israel to return without waiting for an opening from above.²⁷ These are two interpretations by one author and must not automatically be merged into a single statement.

His works also explicitly identify higher repentance with repentance out of love. This occurs in Agra de-Kallah, another work of his, when explaining Reuben's opening, and in Bnei Yissaschar when explaining Hosea's verse.²⁸ It is an explicit connection within his system and should be studied as such. It cannot be transferred without examination to every author using "higher" or "love." Chapter 9 presents an author who distinguishes them differently.

The same author teaches that someone who does not know how to reach the higher level begins with sincere confession, regret, abandoning the sin, and commitment for the future; God then opens the gate for him.²⁹ The higher achievement does not make a simple beginning worthless.

Sefat Emet: Do Not Hide Behind Justifications

Sefat Emet deepens Reuben's "And I, where shall I go?" Even a righteous person who fails does not absolve himself by arguing that most of his life was good. He recognizes that the fault concerns him, until he finds no place for himself; from that recognition, a place is granted to him from above.³⁰

Sefat Emet deepens our understanding of the returning person's character. He is not resolving chronology, nor claiming that Adam and Cain never felt this way. We should distinguish a source that answers the difficulty from one that deepens what we have already learned.

27. Bnei Yissaschar, Tishrei 4:18. V15 (p. 20). Research, p. 20

28. Agra de-Kallah, Permutations of Bereishit 147; Bnei Yissaschar, Tishrei 4:39. V15 (p. 20); N17 (p. 57). Research, p. 20; Research, p. 57

29. Bnei Yissaschar, Kislev-Tevet 14:3, later in the discourse. V15 (p. 20). Research, p. 20

30. Sefat Emet, Vayeshev 5664. V16 (p. 21). Research, p. 21

7 · Reuben and Judah: Return, Confess, and Acknowledge Publicly

Reuben repented at the time of Joseph's sale; Judah acknowledged his fault later in the Tamar episode: "She is more righteous than I." How did Judah cause Reuben to acknowledge his fault? Tosafot distinguish the two: repentance came earlier, while public acknowledgment followed Judah.³¹

We must separate three questions:

	What it is	In Reuben's case
Repentance	Return: abandoning and recognizing the sin	Already during Joseph's sale: sackcloth and fasting
Confession	Expressing acknowledgment of sin before God	Chizkuni: earlier, privately; Or HaChaim: after Judah. Open
Public acknowledgment	Taking responsibility before others	After Judah (Tosafot), to remove suspicion from his brothers (Sotah)

The three need not occur at the same time, and public acknowledgment is not the only possible confession.

Sotah explains why Reuben needed to acknowledge publicly: so his brothers would not be suspected.³² He takes responsibility for the act instead of letting others bear suspicion that does not belong to them. This does not teach that everyone who repents must publicly acknowledge every sin. The circumstances and type of sin matter.

A Disagreement We Must Not Blur

Chizkuni explicitly describes Reuben's earlier private acknowledgment. Or HaChaim, however, contrasts earlier

31. Tosafot, Bava Kamma 92a and Makkot 11b. V12 (p. 17). Research, p. 17

32. Sotah 7b. V12 (p. 17). Research, p. 17

repentance with a confession not uttered until Judah's acknowledgment. One may suggest that he means public disclosure alone, but this restriction is not written in his words. A reading that denies an earlier confession creates a real tension with Chizkuni.³³

Tosafot themselves speak of earlier repentance and later public acknowledgment. They do not explicitly settle every question about private confession. We therefore cannot use their answer automatically to decide every other interpretation. We have learned a clear distinction, with a defined question remaining alongside it.

Repentance Does Not Guarantee Every Role

In Likkutei Sichot, volume 15, the Rebbe examines why kingship was given to Judah. The depth of Reuben's personal repentance is not the only criterion: kingship demands responsibility and actually rescuing another. Reuben's virtue is not canceled, but does not require that every role remain his.³⁴

This distinction connects the story to the broader theme. Failure to regain family or public standing does not by itself prove that repentance failed. We must also examine what the role demands and what was done for another person. Self-repair does not replace responsibility for consequences.

8 · David: A Way for Those Who Return, Not the Invention of Repentance

What Does Rashi Say?

The Sages interpret David's "the man raised on high" as establishing the "yoke of repentance." Rashi in Mo'ed Katan

³³. Chizkuni, Deuteronomy 33:7; Or HaChaim, Genesis 49:4. V33 (p. 36). Research, p. 36

³⁴. Likkutei Sichot 15, Vayechi 3, pp. 439-446. V26 (p. 30). Research, p. 30

explains: "He repented first and provided a way for those who repent." This is real language of priority; we cannot dismiss the question by saying David was never called first.³⁵

Within Rashi's words, priority is linked to providing a path. Avodah Zarah presents two precedents: David for an individual, and Israel's sin of the Golden Calf for a community. Why are both needed?³⁶

If we learned only from the community, an individual might say: a multitude has a special power to seek mercy; perhaps what helped them will not help me alone. If we learned only from an individual, a community might think the reverse: our sin was public, and perhaps that makes acceptance harder. A precedent is therefore required for each situation.

A precedent adds to the general knowledge that repentance exists. It answers someone who thinks: I know others can return, but perhaps my case is outside the rule. David and Israel open a path in the face of that fear too. This does not establish that no individual repented before David.

Maharal Recognizes the Earlier Figures

Maharal asks explicitly: Cain, Reuben, and others already repented. He does not erase them. His explanation is that Israel and David are "fundamental in the world," a central community and individual through whom repentance appears as a general path in the world's order.³⁷

We can explain this as more than another person's successful return: a path gains a general standing. "General" does not mean everyone performed exactly the same act. It means the possibility becomes manifest as a foundation for those who

³⁵. Mo'ed Katan 16b and Rashi. V17 (p. 22). Research, p. 22

³⁶. Avodah Zarah 4b-5a. V18 (p. 23). Research, p. 23

³⁷. Maharal, Netiv HaTeshuvah 4; Tiferet Yisrael 48. V19 (p. 23); V20 (p. 24). Research, p. 23; Research, p. 24

follow. Maharal distinguishes the existence of repentance as a possibility from the actual appearance of its level.

"David became more famous" therefore does not exhaust his explanation. Adam and Cain also taught others, according to sources we have studied. Maharal's innovation is deeper than publicity: the figures' place within the world. He also connects repentance to returning to the beginning, to God from whom existence comes. Reuben as firstborn, David as the beginning of Judah's kingship, and Israel at its beginning as a community fit, in his system, the opening of such a return.

This is Maharal's interpretation, rather than a table the Sages provided on behalf of every opinion. Its strength is that it explicitly recognizes both earlier repentance and a later opening at once. It gives positive evidence, rather than merely a possibility invented to avoid contradiction.

Minchat Ani proposes another order of evidence: Adam and Cain represent the world at its beginning in his homily; Israel at the Calf represents a multitude; David as king also has a public dimension. This leaves room for the message that repentance applies to an ordinary individual too. It does not claim David lived before Reuben: the homily's order of proofs is not chronological. Nor is the premise that a king counts as a community accepted by the author without qualification in all his writings. An additional explanation emerges without altering chronology to make it fit.³⁸

9 • What Does David Open According to R. Tzadok?

The Power of Love That Transforms Sins into Merits

Yoma distinguishes repentance out of fear from repentance

³⁸. Minchat Ani, Vayelech 13. N16 (p. 56). Research, p. 56

out of love: with fear, deliberate sins become inadvertent ones; with love, they become merits.³⁹ R. Tzadok HaKohen says explicitly in Takanat HaShavin:

"The first to awaken the power of repentance out of love, so that [sins] become merits, is David."⁴⁰

To understand this, we must know how he distinguishes fear and love. He treats the beginning of return from the human side as repentance out of fear. This applies even to a great person whose return arises not from fear of punishment but from "awe of God's exaltedness," recognition of His greatness. Such repentance therefore transforms deliberate sins into inadvertent ones alone. He calls the beginning of human effort "lower repentance," and the return assisted from above "higher repentance from the blessed God." The love that transforms sins into merits follows that assistance.⁴¹

We can now understand why, for R. Tzadok, "the person initiated repentance" is not equivalent to "repentance out of love": human initiative belongs specifically to fear. We also understand his precise wording about David: David "awakens the power of repentance out of love," opening that power for those who follow. He does not claim that no one before David repented out of love. As we saw, Bnei Yissaschar identifies Reuben's opening with higher repentance and love. We need not erase either author; we must preserve the precise question each addresses.

Two Authors, One Verse

The disagreement becomes sharper in the verse with which

³⁹. Yoma 86a-b. V34 (p. 38). Research, p. 38

⁴⁰. Takanat HaShavin 11:12. V23 (p. 26). Research, p. 26

⁴¹. Takanat HaShavin 11:7 and 11:11. V23 (p. 26); N17 (p. 57). Research, p. 26; Research, p. 57

we began: "Return, Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled through your iniquity."

In Eretz Chemdah, Nitzavim 21, a person's opening without awaiting an awakening from above is described as repentance out of love, transforming deliberate sins into merits.⁴² On that reading, return through human initiative is repentance out of love. The passage cites Nachalat Binyamin, but does not clearly mark where the quotation ends. We therefore say: "Eretz Chemdah, citing Nachalat Binyamin or continuing its explanation."

R. Tzadok reads the same verse in the opposite way. "Return, Israel ... for you have stumbled" depends on the person and is therefore repentance out of fear, making deliberate sins inadvertent. Only the prophecy's continuation, "I will heal their backsliding," describes attaining love with assistance from above.⁴³

Both authors agree that Hosea calls on the person to begin. They disagree about what this beginning achieves: love and merits, or fear and inadvertent sins. This is a real disagreement about how to define the terms. We cannot simply say "initiative is love," or "initiative is not love." We must ask: according to whom?

Forgiveness and the Revelation of Forgiveness

R. Tzadok also distinguishes forgiveness itself from when others learn of it. In Shabbat, David is told he has been forgiven, but that forgiveness becomes visible to everyone

⁴². Eretz Chemdah, Nitzavim 21, citing Nachalat Binyamin or continuing its explanation; Nachalat Binyamin itself was not examined. N17 (p. 57). Research, p. 57

⁴³. Takanat HaShavin 11:2; Hosea 14:2-5 (Hebrew verse numbering). V23 (p. 26); N17 (p. 57). Research, p. 26; Research, p. 57

only in Solomon's days.⁴⁴ Later public knowledge does not prove that repentance was accepted only then.

In the same work, Judah is called "the initiator of confession and acknowledgment of sin." R. Tzadok does not add "in public" there. We should not replace his wording with Tosafot's distinction merely because the combination seems convenient.⁴⁵ In every source, we must ask anew what opening is at issue: a change of heart, verbal expression, revelation to others, or a particular power of repair.

What Is the "Yoke of Repentance"?

Maharsha, R. Shmuel Eliezer Eidels, interprets the expression through the olah, the burnt offering, which atones for thought. According to the interpretation that there was no literal act of adultery here, a fault in thought still remained and required repentance. This explains the content of David's repentance; it does not assert that he was the first to repent of a thought. An important interpretation need not answer every part of the question.⁴⁶

10 · Higher Repentance in Chabad Teaching

Repair the Fault and Deepen the Return

Chabad teaching describes lower and higher repentance. In Iggeret HaTeshuvah within Tanya, by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the foundation of repentance is abandoning the sin. Higher return is also described as renewed closeness and attachment to God through Torah, awe, and love. Higher repentance is not merely more intense regret, nor is it intended only for a more serious sinner.⁴⁷

⁴⁴. Shabbat 30a. V23 (p. 26). Research, p. 26

⁴⁵. Takanat HaShavin 11:4. V23 (p. 26). Research, p. 26

⁴⁶. Maharsha, Chiddushei Aggadot, Avodah Zarah 5a. V22 (p. 26). Research, p. 26

⁴⁷. Tanya, Iggeret HaTeshuvah 1; 4; 8-9. N12 (p. 53); N17 (p. 57). Research, p. 53; Research, p. 57

An illustration may help: a person can work within his ordinary faculties to change a habit, correct his behavior, and abandon something undesirable. Another kind of service addresses the depth of his bond with God beyond the local reckoning of that habit. This illustrates the explanation; it does not replace the sources' detailed definitions.

In the Rosh Hashanah 5719 (1958) discourse, the Rebbe defines: "Lower repentance is the service through one's internal faculties to correct one's undesirable matters, and higher repentance is the service from the encompassing faculties." Internal faculties function within intellect and emotion as grasped by the person. Encompassing faculties describe a bond and service beyond that limited framework. The distinction therefore concerns the soul's functioning faculties rather than the intensity of regret. The same discourse states that someone unable to achieve lower repentance may begin with higher repentance.⁴⁸

In the Shabbat Teshuvah discourse of the same year, which refers to the Rosh Hashanah discourse, the Rebbe asks: why must repentance be learned from David if it is already explicit in the Torah? He answers that David opened a path for all Israel in higher repentance, including its highest level.⁴⁹

Tanya also describes progression from lower to higher repentance. We should not construct one rigid sequence for every person and every work; these descriptions must be read in context. Two points about the sources themselves matter: the 5719 discourses are unedited listener transcriptions, summaries written by listeners that the Rebbe did not edit. They also do not explicitly compare David with Reuben.

48. Torat Menachem 24, Rosh Hashanah 5719, Shir HaMa'alot MiMa'amakim, p. 8; unedited listener transcription. V24 (p. 28). Research, p. 28

49. Torat Menachem 24, Shabbat Teshuvah 5719, Amar R. Shmuel bar Nachmani, p. 17 onward; unedited listener transcription. V24 (p. 28). Research, p. 28

Opening a Path and Realizing It

In the Sukkot 5724 (1963) talk, the Rebbe distinguishes David, who opened a path "potentially and in concealment," from the returnees from Babylon, who realized it openly. "Potentially" here means a possibility not yet realized, rather than psychic power in the sense of strength. In the talk's context David's repentance is described as "from a condition of ample well-being," whereas the Babylonian returnees' repentance follows sin and exile.⁵⁰

Here priority is not the sole measure of excellence. One person opens a possibility; others reveal it under later circumstances. The talk even identifies a particular advantage of the Babylonian returnees. It is a distinction within the subject being discussed, rather than an overall ranking of everyone who repents.

We may compare the explanation of Reuben with the explanations of David and see that initiative, level, and revelation are distinct questions. But that comparison is ours, based on the sources. We will not attribute to the Rebbe an overall table he did not formulate, or treat every occurrence of the same word as proof that two authors meant the same thing.

11 • Hosea After Moses: What Else Can Be Opened?

The Descendant Returns the Children to Their Father

When the Midrash moves from Reuben to Hosea, the action changes: Reuben returns, while Hosea calls Israel to return. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana gives two reasons for the reward. In

⁵⁰. Torat Menachem 38, Sukkot 5724, pp. 85-86 and 98; unedited listener transcription. V25 (p. 30). Research, p. 30

one, Reuben sought to return Joseph to his father; his descendant will therefore return Israel to their Father in Heaven. In the other, Reuben's opening in repentance earns him a descendant who opens repentance.⁵¹

The reasons are related but distinct. One emphasizes rescuing another; the other, personal return. The Pesikta itself connects Hosea to Reuben's tribe. But what is new in his teaching? Moses had already said, "You shall return to the Lord your God," and prophets before Hosea also called for return.

Yefeh To'ar asks this explicitly. He explains that Hosea revealed particular virtues of repentance: it reaches the Throne of Glory, and deliberate sins become inadvertent ones. Notice: here **inadvertent sins**, not merits. We must not substitute one for the other to connect Hosea quickly with R. Tzadok's David.⁵²

Not Only "Return," but How to Address God

Pesikta Rabbati offers another emphasis: Hosea also teaches Israel how to approach God, "Take words with you." This is more than a demand to return; it is the speech through which a person approaches God anew. The instruction gives the returning person a way to begin.⁵³

It does not mean confession did not exist before Hosea; we have already seen earlier figures acknowledging their sins. The innovation concerns the form of instruction. The Rebbe's Shabbat Shuvah 5730 (1969) discourse likewise asks why Hosea emphasizes speech, "Take words with you," when repentance's essence is in the heart. According to the

51. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Shuvah 9 (section 24 in Mandelbaum). V27 (p. 31). Research, p. 31

52. Yefeh To'ar on Bereishit Rabbah 84:19; Yoma 86b. V28 (p. 32). Research, p. 32

53. Pesikta Rabbati 44. V29 (p. 33). Research, p. 33

discourse, speech repairs the fault's "body," while regret repairs its interior, "because the coming into being of the body precedes the soul, and action is the main thing."⁵⁴ The priority here is the body's before the soul, not Hosea's before all prophets. The discourse is an unedited listener transcription, and its ending is missing.

Further Connections Between Reuben and Hosea

Several authors explicitly connect Reuben and Hosea, each emphasizing a different aspect:

- **Be'er Mayim Chaim** sees repentance as preparation for a mitzvah in both (chapter 5).
- **Yismach Moshe** sees examination of an act that seemed to be a mitzvah in both (chapter 4).
- **Bnei Yissaschar** sees a human opening without waiting for an awakening from above in both (chapter 6).
- **Beit HaLevi** sees repentance for harm that may yet arise from an earlier act in both (chapter 5).
- In **Midbar Shur**, Rav Kook distinguishes repairing a person's soul from repairing a fault outside that soul affecting others. In his account, Reuben and Hosea both concern repair extending beyond the person himself.⁵⁵

These are bridges the authors themselves built, rather than our own combination. They do not say Moses failed to teach repentance, or that Reuben succeeded in rescuing Joseph. Each homily illuminates another aspect of the connection; we need not choose a single interpretation among them.

⁵⁴. Torat Menachem 58, Shabbat Shuvah 5730, pp. 56-59 and 62-64 (the reason at p. 63); unedited listener transcription with its ending missing. V38 (p. 42). Research, p. 42

⁵⁵. Midbar Shur, homily 20. N14 (p. 55). Research, p. 55

The Beginning of Prophecy and the Beginning of Repentance

On "The beginning of the Lord's speaking through Hosea," the Gemara in Pesachim asks whether there were no prophets before Hosea. It answers that he was the first of four prophets who prophesied during the same period.⁵⁶ Bereishit Rabbah places "firstborn in repentance," Reuben, beside "firstborn in prophecy," his descendant Hosea.⁵⁷ The juxtaposition is real, but does not prove that priority in repentance is likewise limited to that group of prophets.

We have learned to ask, "First in relation to whom?" Yet we should not transfer the answer from the discussion of prophecy to the interpretation of repentance as though the Gemara had already done so. As for Moses, the sources show that he taught repentance before Hosea: "You shall return to the Lord your God." They do not give him the title of the first person to repent of his own sin. Such a source was not found; there is therefore no such title to reconcile.⁵⁸

Josiah teaches a further limit. Shabbat records a disagreement about his return, and Rav calls him "the greatest of those who repented in his generation."⁵⁹

"Greatest," "in his generation," and "first" are different titles. Not every returning figure is a candidate for "first," and not every "he did not sin" means there was nothing to correct.

12 · Repentance of Lesser Quality Still Works

Truth Does Not Require Every Virtue at Once

Rambam describes complete repentance: the same test

⁵⁶. Pesachim 87a. V30 (p. 33). Research, p. 33

⁵⁷. Bereishit Rabbah 82:11 and Maharzu. V30 (p. 33). Research, p. 33

⁵⁸. Deuteronomy 4:30; 30:2. V28 (p. 32); N7 (p. 50). Research, p. 32; Research, p. 50

⁵⁹. Shabbat 56b. N18 (p. 59). Research, p. 59

returns, the person can sin, and he refrains because of repentance. In old age or when strength has failed, that test is not present in its fullness. Nevertheless, Rambam writes explicitly: "Although it is not repentance of the highest quality, it benefits him, and he is a penitent."⁶⁰

This sentence is decisive for our question. A virtue found in Reuben or David does not imply that earlier returning figures are not penitents. We can distinguish validity from completeness. Rambam is not interpreting the Midrash about Reuben here; he teaches us not to turn differing levels into a false assertion about repentance's basic value.

Manasseh also provides an important test. In the Pesikta, he turns to God in distress, and God accepts him so as not to close the door to those who repent. The Torah itself says, "When you are in distress ... you shall return to the Lord your God." A return begun in crisis is therefore not disqualified merely because of that beginning. Reuben's initiative can be a virtue without turning crisis into a locked door.⁶¹

What Is Required Beyond a Change of Heart?

Repentance includes abandoning the sin, regret, commitment for the future, and confession. Nevertheless, Hilchot Teshuvah distinguishes stages in completing atonement: sometimes it is immediate; in other cases Yom Kippur, suffering, or death is also required. A remaining consequence or stage of atonement does not prove that repentance has not occurred.⁶²

Sins against another person also entail responsibility toward the injured party: repaying what is owed and seeking

⁶⁰. Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1. V31 (p. 35). Research, p. 35

⁶¹. Deuteronomy 4:30; Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Shuvah 11; Sanhedrin 103. N9 (p. 51). Research, p. 51

⁶². Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 1-2. V32 (p. 35). Research, p. 35

reconciliation. Renewed closeness to God does not erase a debt to someone harmed. Conversely, responsibility for the past does not license humiliating the penitent. Rambam forbids recalling his earlier deeds in order to degrade him.⁶³

Ascetic practices are not the sole definition of return. Tanya's *Iggeret HaTeshuvah* distinguishes repentance's foundation, abandoning the sin, from fasts and supplementary repairs. Adam's 130 years of fasting and Reuben's sackcloth should not be read as instructions to imitate their practices. Our study seeks to understand the sources and return, not create a practical ascetic regimen.

Acceptance That Already Occurred and a Promise for Generations

Divrei Yoel distinguishes the acceptance of Adam's and Cain's repentance before the giving of the Torah from an eternal promise to accept the repentance of Israel, the Torah's recipients. He recognizes the earlier acceptance; he does not say repentance did not exist before Sinai. The distinction is between acceptance at a favorable moment and an enduring promise for generations. Within his homily, he connects this to Reuben's concern for Joseph and his reward through Hosea.⁶⁴

Here, too, we must not replace one question with another. A later promise does not cancel an earlier acceptance, or prove Reuben was the first to act without a promise. We have learned another axis of inquiry alongside motive, level, and the consequences of return.

⁶³. Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:9; 7:8. V32 (p. 35); N12 (p. 53). Research, p. 35; Research, p. 53

⁶⁴. Divrei Yoel, *Vayeshev*, discourse 40. V35 (p. 38). Research, p. 38

13 · Atonement Does Not Always Restore What Was Lost

What Are We Asking to Have Restored?

"Was repentance accepted?" can conceal several questions: was the sin atoned for, did the person draw closer to God, was a spiritual level restored, and did he regain a role or standing he lost? The answers need not all be the same.

In the Vilna Gaon's commentary on Tikkunei Zohar, David's distinction appears within a discussion of restoring levels of souls.⁶⁵ The Leshem, R. Shlomo Elyashiv, develops a sharp distinction: the sin can be atoned for through repentance even though a lost level does not return now. He adds that not every sin, or every person, suffers a loss of level.⁶⁶

This is an identified kabbalistic discussion and must not become a single rule governing every consequence of every sin. Yet it provides clear evidence that lack of restoration need not mean lack of atonement. If a fuller aspect appeared with David, earlier repentance is not reduced to nothing.

In Pachad Yitzchak, by R. Yitzchak Hutner, the comparison focuses on states that returned or did not return. Adam did not return to Eden; Israel did not receive the original Tablets again; Saul did not regain kingship; David's kingship, however, returned to him.⁶⁷ This comparison, too, does not say every consequence of David's sin vanished.

Not Every "Repair" Is Repentance During a Person's Lifetime

The Leshem also mentions the repair of Er and Onan through

⁶⁵. Vilna Gaon on Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 58, 106b. V37 (p. 40). Research, p. 40

⁶⁶. Leshem, Sefer HaDe'ah, part 2, Derush 4, branch 24, section 1. V37 (p. 40). Research, p. 40

⁶⁷. Pachad Yitzchak, Yom Kippur 11:3, as identified by the examined source-sheet heading; the continuous discourse in an identified edition was not examined. V37 (p. 40). Research, p. 40

Perez and Zerah, in a process of rebirth. This is not an account of repentance they performed during their lives. Adding them to a list of people who repented and using them to correct chronology would equate different things. We must study the kind of repair before deciding what it proves.

The principle encountered with Cain returns: repentance can work genuinely even when the story has not returned to its starting point in every detail. Acceptance of the penitent, completion of atonement, and restoration of standing require separate examination; they are not synonyms. The distinction lets us recognize genuine repair without promising the restoration of every status, and does not furnish a universal test for ranking every penitent.

14 · Is There a Limit to Repentance's Opening?

A Fundamental Possibility Is Not Permission to Sin

The Sages list repentance among the things that preceded creation. This is not an early date in Adam's or Cain's life; it describes repentance's place in the order of existence. A later person therefore cannot be portrayed as inventing the possibility of return itself. He may open a way to reveal and realize it.⁶⁸

On the other side, the Mishnah warns against saying, "I will sin and repent."⁶⁹ A story showing a path opened through sin is not an invitation to sin. Maharal preserves responsibility in two ways. First, God did not prevent the sin, but did not compel it either. Second, the world needs repentance to become manifest, but that does not decree that a particular person must sin: had these figures not sinned, the path would

⁶⁸. Pesachim 54a. V36 (p. 39). Research, p. 39

⁶⁹. Mishnah Yoma 8:9. V36 (p. 39). Research, p. 39

have appeared through others.⁷⁰ Choice and responsibility do not disappear within the general function.

Obstruction of the Way and Prevention of the Way

Rambam says that obstacles to repentance do not prevent its acceptance if a person returns. In another chapter, he describes a more severe possibility: preventing repentance itself as punishment, including Pharaoh's case. We must not soften the second description into ordinary difficulty, or infer that we can assign such a judgment to a particular person today.⁷¹

A heavenly voice declared concerning Elisha ben Avuyah, whom the Gemara calls Acher: "Return, wayward children, except Acher." Yet R. Meir continues urging him to return. Rabbenu Chananel explains that God knows Acher will not return completely, and that the opening is not locked against someone who genuinely returns. This is a particular interpretation, and does not erase the Gemara's difficulty.⁷²

The statement that a fourth time is not forgiven is not the same as the four categories of atonement. According to Raavad, the first three transgressions from the beginning of a person's liability for punishment receive complete forgiveness, if he repents, even without the supplementary stages ordinarily needed for serious sins. The fourth lacks this special allowance. This does not mean repentance is rejected, but that there is no longer exemption from those supplementary stages. It concerns the way atonement is completed, not a quota of three opportunities to return.

70. Maharal, Netiv HaTeshuvah 4, on choice and responsibility. V36 (p. 39). Research, p. 39

71. Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 4:6; 6:3. N10 (p. 52). Research, p. 52

72. Chagigah 15a and Rabbenu Chananel. N11 (p. 52). Research, p. 52

Raavad disagrees with Rambam in interpreting these discussions.⁷³

Tanya emphasizes repeated forgiveness for genuine repentance and distinguishes it from planning to sin in reliance on repentance. There is no simple numerical quota of opportunities. Our conclusion is not that every difficult statement disappears, but that its scope and interpretations must be studied without using it to close the way before another person.⁷⁴

15 • The Answer, from Beginning to End

What Emerged?

We began with a sentence that sounded like the erasure of all earlier repentance. We found that sources do treat Adam and Cain as repentants, and preserve their role as examples for generations. Maharzu even calls Cain, according to the favorable opinion, "the first from whom others learned." We then studied identified interpretations of Reuben's opening: initiative without waiting for punishment, recognizing a fault concealed by good intentions, the type of commandment, responsibility for a future harm, preparation for a mitzvah, and a higher level. Each stands in its own context, rather than on a ladder provided by the Midrash itself.

Turning to Judah, we saw that earlier repentance and later public acknowledgment can coexist. With David, we learned about a precedent for an individual, a general opening in Maharal, awakening the power of love in R. Tzadok, and a path in higher repentance in Chasidic discourses. Hosea teaches the virtues of return and how to address God;

⁷³. Yoma 86b; Raavad on Hilchot Teshuvah 3:5. N11 (p. 52). Research, p. 52

⁷⁴. Tanya, Iggeret HaTeshuvah 11. N12 (p. 53). Research, p. 53

commentators explicitly connect him to Reuben in several ways.⁷⁵

A positive answer follows: **a later title of priority does not prove that earlier repentance is void.** Maharal says this while explicitly recognizing the predecessors; the Rebbe's note on Reuben recognizes Adam's and Cain's repentance; in the Pesikta, Cain serves as a precedent for Israel's acceptance. Rambam distinguishes repentance of the highest quality from repentance that still works, and the Leshem distinguishes atonement from restoration of a level. These distinctions rest on sources, not merely a desire to arrange the stories neatly.

What Remains Open?

We have no single interpretation proved for every version of the Midrash and every commentator. The forceful denial in Bereishit Rabbah and Sechel Tov remains a difficulty requiring interpretation. Several disagreements also remain:

- The Shelah disputes Reshit Chochmah.
- The completeness of Cain's repentance is disputed.
- Eretz Chemdah and R. Tzadok read "Return, Israel" differently: one sees love in human initiative, the other fear.
- The relationship between early confession and public acknowledgment in Or HaChaim has not been resolved.
- Ishmael's motive for repentance is unknown.

Nor do initiative, love, higher repentance, atonement, and revelation form one dictionary for every work. Where an author connects them, we study his connection. Where another positions them differently, we preserve his words too.

⁷⁵. Full map and answer: V39 (p. 43); V40 (p. 44); V41 (p. 45); N17 (p. 57). Research, p. 43; Research, p. 44; Research, p. 45; Research, p. 57

Agreement manufactured by exchanging terms is not agreement.

Hosea does not cancel Moses' teaching, and David does not cancel Reuben's repentance. Instead of ending with "each is first in his sphere," we can now ask precisely: **Who interpreted it this way, what opening occurred, and what does the source allow us to infer?** This is how plain language preserves depth.

Return and Hope

The story is not a competition among penitents. It teaches that a person can return, discover new depth in that return, accept responsibility, and open a path for others. We need not attain every virtue before recognizing a genuine change's existing value. Nor may personal excellence become an excuse to abandon repair toward the injured party.

The opening can be revealed more than once because the possibility of return is richer than the question of who acted earlier. Every opening requires examination; every return requires truth. Hope thus remains connected to responsibility, and responsibility does not become despair.

Concepts for Review and Further Study

Term	Meaning in this booklet	Chapters
Teshuvah, repentance	Return to God: abandoning sin, regret, commitment for the future, and confession (Hilchot Teshuvah). More than sorrow or fasting.	2, 12
Confession	Expressing acknowledgment of sin before God.	7, 12
Public acknowledgment	Acknowledging sin before people, a question distinct from confession itself.	7
Initiative, "on one's own"	Who begins the return: the person, without waiting for punishment or an awakening from above.	3, 6, 9

Term	Meaning in this booklet	Chapters
Repentance out of fear and love	Two motives and levels. In Yoma, fear makes deliberate sins inadvertent; love makes them merits. "Fear" may mean fear of punishment or awe of God's exaltedness, depending on the author.	3, 9
Tata'ah and ila'ah	Lower and higher repentance. Authors define them differently: Bnei Yissaschar through the order of levels; R. Tzadok through human effort and divine assistance; the Rebbe's discourses through internal and encompassing faculties.	6, 9, 10
Power; potential	Three senses: repentance's power to work (Cain's Midrash); love's power to transform sins into merits (R. Tzadok); a possibility not yet actualized, "potential" versus "actual" (the 5724 talk).	2, 9, 10
Atonement and restoration of a level	Atonement concerns repair of sin. Restoration concerns regaining lost standing, role, or spiritual level. One can occur without the other.	7, 13
Homily	An interpretive exposition connecting verses and rabbinic sayings to one idea.	5, 8, 11
Unedited record	A listener's written record of the Rebbe's words that he did not edit.	10, 11

Further Study in the Sources

The list suggests studying sources inside that deepen the argument, arranged by periods. The full comparisons and the status of source verification appear in Research V6.

Scripture: Genesis 4; 35:22; 37:29; 38:26; Deuteronomy 30; Hosea 14.

Mishnah Yoma 8:9: Study "I will sin and repent" and the distinction between sins against God and sins against another person.

Bereishit Rabbah 21:6; 22:12-13; 82:11; 84:19: Repentance's opening, Cain and Adam, Reuben's priority, and Hosea's reward.

Avodah Zarah 4b-5a; Mo'ed Katan 16b: David and Israel as precedents for an individual and a community; Rashi's "repented first."

Yoma 86a-b: Repentance's virtues, love, and fear.

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Shuvah 9 and 11; Pesikta Rabbati 44: Reuben and Hosea, Cain as a precedent for Israel's acceptance, Manasseh's acceptance, and "Take words with you."

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 20; Tosafot, Bava Kamma 92a and Makkot 11b: Adam's repentance as an example for generations; Reuben's repentance before his public acknowledgment.

Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1-2; 4:6; 6:3; 7:8: Validity and completeness, obstacles and prevention, and respect for the penitent.

Chizkuni, Deuteronomy 33:7: Early private acknowledgment; compare the unresolved tension with Or HaChaim in chapter 7.

Yefeh To'ar on Bamidbar Rabbah 13:18 and Bereishit Rabbah 84:19; Reshit Chochmah, Sha'ar HaTeshuvah 3; Shelah, Toldot Adam, Remezei Otiyot 19: Examine each explanation of Reuben's priority and where the Shelah disagrees.

Maharal, Netiv HaTeshuvah 4; Tiferet Yisrael 48: What does opening a path mean when repentance already existed?

Or HaChaim, Genesis 49:4: Examine acknowledgment of sin and confession separately, preserving the difficulty with Chizkuni.

Vilna Gaon on Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 58, 106b: Study the levels of souls and David's distinction.

Tanya, Iggeret HaTeshuvah 1; 4; 8-9; 11: Repentance's foundation, lower and higher repentance, repeated forgiveness, and the difference from planning to sin.

Be'er Mayim Chaim, Genesis 12:1; Bnei Yissaschar, Tishrei 4:9, 18, 39 and Kislev-Tevet 14:3: Repentance before a mitzvah, initiative, and level.

Agra de-Kallah, Permutations of Bereishit 147: Identification of higher repentance with love in the author of Bnei Yissaschar; a supplementary source for chapter 6.

Eretz Chemdah, Nitzavim 21; Beit HaLevi, Vayeshev, Genesis 37:29; Takanat HaShavin 11; Pri Tzadik, Vayelech and Shabbat Teshuvah 13: Responsibility for future harm, the power of love, and acceptance of repentance through suffering or inability to face the same test again.

Minchat Ani, Vayelech 13: The order of evidence concerning individual and community; note the qualification of treating a king as a community.

Sefat Emet, Vayeshev 5664 (1903): Personal responsibility for a fault even when one can rely on earlier merits.

Divrei Yoel, Vayeshev, discourse 40: A promise for generations versus an acceptance that already occurred before the giving of the Torah.

Midbar Shur, homily 20: Repairing the soul and repair affecting others; an explicit bridge between Reuben and Hosea.

Leshem, Sefer HaDe'ah, part 2, Derush 4, branch 24, section 1: Read the end too: atonement without immediate restoration and the limits of loss of level.

Pachad Yitzchak, Yom Kippur 11:3: Restoration of David's kingship; the evidence is a photographed excerpt in a compilation, not the continuous discourse in an identified edition.

Likkutei Sichot 15, Vayechi 3, pp. 439-446; 30, Miketz 2, pp. 198-203: Rescue and kingship; initiative, choice, and responsibility for sin.

Torat Menachem 24, pp. 8 and 17; 38, pp. 85-86 and 98; 58, pp. 56-59 and 62-64: A way to higher repentance, potential and revelation, heart and speech.

Map of the Explanations · What Each Distinction Changes

Topic · chapters	Distinction and limit
Adam and Cain Ch. 2	Repentance and mitigation do not erase all consequences. Both teach others; a commentator calls Cain "the first from whom others learned." Explicit wording; completeness of Cain's repentance disputed
Reuben Ch. 3-6	Initiative, corrected judgment, commandment type, preparation, future responsibility, or level: identified interpretations rather than a Midrashic division. Authorial interpretations; Shelah versus Reshit Chochmah; Ishmael's motive open
Judah Ch. 7	Repentance, confession, and public acknowledgment are examined separately. Later acknowledgment does not erase earlier return. Explicit in Tosafot; Or HaChaim open
David Ch. 8-10	Individual precedent, general opening, awakening love's power, and a way to higher repentance: distinct concepts. Maharal recognizes predecessors. Authorial interpretations
Initiative and love Ch. 3, 9	Eretz Chemdah identifies human initiative with love; R. Tzadok with fear, while love comes through assistance from above. Disagreement
Hosea Ch. 11	He does not precede Moses. His contribution is explained as revealing virtues, teaching an approach to God, and repair affecting others. Authorial interpretations
Value of repentance Ch. 12-14	Repentance of lesser quality works. Atonement, repair toward the injured party, and restoration of standing are separate. Explicit in Rambam and Leshem
The answer Ch. 15	A later opening does not alone cancel earlier repentance. No single interpretation reconciles every wording. Conclusion within its limits

For further study: the notes refer to the full research booklet.