

# Hebrew Meaning of Sin

By Rabbi Jeffrey Leynor

There are about 20 different Hebrew words which denote sin in the Jewish Scriptures. The three words that are used the most often are HET, PESHA, and AVON.

The root HT occurs 459 times and the original meaning of the verb HATA is "to miss" something, "to fail." It signifies a failure of mutual relations and corresponds to the modern idea of "offense" rather than the theological concept of "sin."

One who fulfills the claims of a relationship or an agreement is righteous, ZADDIQ; one who does not, offends (sins). The one who fulfills the agreement is innocent, while the one who does not is guilty.

The Jewish Jesus taught the Hebrew meaning of sin, which is very different from the later Christian theological view of sin. A sinful act is a matter between two parties. The one who does not fulfill his obligations in relation to the other is a sinner with regard to the latter – "he sins against him" – and so gives the other a claim upon him.

The root PESH' occurs 136 times and is also found in the early texts of Genesis and Exodus. Its basic meaning is that of the "breach of a covenant." Acts of this type are said to dissolve the community or break the peaceful relations between two parties, as in cases involving international treaties.

The word AVON basically expresses the idea of crookedness.

When God "forgives" one's sin, He "covers" or "hides" it. He "does not remember" it. He "bears" it Himself. The sin is forgotten, covered, not imputed to the sinner, God's forgiveness of sins is identical with the curing of the man and with the regeneration of his strength.

The rabbis rarely speak of sin in the abstract. They usually speak of specific sins. There are sins of commission and omission. They also divided sins into light and heavy (sever) sins.

The three most serious sins for the rabbis are murder, idolatry, and adultery and incest. The rabbis also taught that one who causes others to sin is worse than one who slays him, because the murderer only excludes his victim from this life, while the one who causes another to sin excludes him from life in the world to come.

The question of why people sin was of great interest to the rabbis. Their conclusion was that sin is caused by the YEZER HARA (evil inclination), the force in man that drives him to gratify his instincts and ambitions. The name "evil" inclination is misleading because even though it can easily lead man to wrongdoing, it is essential to life in that it provides life with its driving power. Without it a man would not marry, or have children, or engage in commerce, the rabbis taught.

The subject of how a man can rise above sin is addressed a number of times in the Talmud.

But the study of the Torah and the practice of the precepts are the best method of avoiding sin (Sot. 21a).

God says, "My children! I created the evil inclination, but I created the Torah as its antidote; if you occupy yourselves with the Torah you will not be delivered into [the inclination's] hand" (Kid. 30b).

The bottom line is that the person that commits a sin is viewed as being "good," and the sin is viewed as a stain that must be removed.

Ritual purity was the primary concern while the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing. Sin could render one ritually impure and thus keep him from participating in Temple rituals.

Visit my webpage at <http://biblicalheritage.org> for other lessons.  
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SHALOM my friends.

**SOURCES:**

Encyclopedia Judaica  
Jewish Encyclopedia

