RELIGIOUS ACTIONS EVALUATED BY INTENTION:  
ZOROASTRIAN CONCEPTS SHARED WITH JUDAISM

Shaul Shaked

It is the merit of Yaakov Elman to have sought to demonstrate that the connection between the religious world of the Babylonian Talmud (BT) and that of Sasanian Zoroastrianism goes deeper than a certain number of loan words and phrases, or some odd customs, such as those relating to nail-paring, and that the two religious cultures are close to each other in some important aspects of legal practice and theory. He has managed to show that there are striking affinities between the two religious traditions, and has encouraged others to look for further parallels.

The following notes aim at pointing at another area of possible connection, or at any rate of affinity, between rabbinical legal thinking and Zoroastrian religious practice.1 Other shared concepts which have not yet been fully explored exist, among them the distinction made by both the Jewish and the Zoroastrian legal systems between duties to be performed

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1 This article is based on materials accumulated and analyzed within the Middle Persian Dictionary Project (MPDP), supported by the Israel Science Foundation, grant No. 670/10. The passages quoted here are borrowed from the database accumulated for the dictionary project. They are usually based on previous editions and translation of the texts, which are gratefully acknowledged, but deviate from them occasionally. The symbols used in the present paper follow the conventions established for the dictionary project. Thus, a vertical stroke (|) indicates that the following word was supplemented by the editor; a tilde (~), that the following word was suppressed by the editor; a plus sign (+), that the following word was modified by the editor. I am most grateful to my friend Professor Yaakov Sussmann for help with the Talmudic problems.

Abbreviations:

AW = Ayādgār ī Wuzurgmihr
AWn = Ardā Wirāz nāmag;
Dd = Dādestān ī dēnig;
Dk 6 = Dēnkard Book Six.
MX = Mēnōg ī xrad.
PhIT = Pahlavi Texts.
PRDd = The Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān ī dēnig.
RAF = Rivāyat of Āturfarnbag and Farnbag-Srōš
ŠnŠ = Šāyast nē Šāyast.
ŠnŠ Suppl. = The supplementary texts to the Šāyast nē-Šāyast
WZ = Wizidagīhā ī Zādspram
towards the deity and those that are between members of the community.
In Judaism this is expressed by the contrast between עברות שבין אדם ל מקום as against עברות שבין אדם לחברו; in Zoroastrianism the terms employed are wināh ī ruwānīg, sins pertaining to the soul, and wināh ī hamēmārān, sins pertaining to (one’s) associates.

The theme to be explored in the present paper is that of the importance of inward concentration, of mental intention, to do a good deed (or, in the case of a sin, that of having a mental desire or intention to commit a sin, and of awareness of the sin committed). In the Jewish rabbinical discussions, this is expressed by the term kavvana “intention”. In the post-Talmudic period this term became a key concept in certain trends of Judaism for expressing the power of inward concentration, in prayer as well as in other domains of the religious life. In the Talmud, the issue comes up under the heading of the question: “Is it necessary to have kavvana for the mitzvot (to take effect)?” This question of principle is a theme that comes up explicitly in the BT, but the idea of intention as a religious category is mentioned also in the Talmud Yerushalmi (PT).

This question is never raised or discussed to my knowledge in the extant Zoroastrian writings, but there is clear awareness of the idea behind it, as will be seen further on. The Zoroastrian writings often refer with emphasis to the presence or absence of mental intention, and it is quite certain that this notion is important for the evaluation of the merit of good deeds or of the weight of blame accrued by the sins committed.

In the Pahlavi Zoroastrian literature, the two terms that express this idea most clearly are forms of nouns derived from the verbs nigerīdan, literally “to look, observe”, and mēnīdan “to think”.

In one of the prominent passages where the distinction between deliberate and accidental sin is made, the speaker declares:

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2 A brief allusion to this can be found in Shaul Shaked, Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion, XVI; London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994), 109, n. 53, where further references are given.

3 Some representative examples for this theme are: bBer 13a–b; yBer 12, 21, with prominent Palestinian sages, such as Bar Qappara and R. Yose, quoted. A discussion of this topic appears in Ephraim E. Urbach, The Sages. Their Concepts and Beliefs (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 395–399.