

Retroactive Atonement:

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707 – 1746), also known by the Hebrew acronym RaMChAL, was a prominent Italian Jewish rabbi, kabbalist, and philosopher. He is very much revered today, though in his own time he was rejected by most of his Jewish peers. Luzzatto believed himself to be a reincarnation of Moses and ascribed to himself the role of redeeming Israel and so he spent some time studying redemption and atonement and made some incredible claims.

There is no doubt that he had some great insights and wisdom to share. For example, he wrote:

"The world was created for our usage. But we stand in the midst of a great balance: should we be attracted to the world and distanced from our Creator, both we and the world with us would be damaged; but if we would master ourselves and clutch onto our Creator, and make use of the world's things to help us in our Divine service, both we and the world with us will be elevated". - Messilat Yesharim (Ch. 1)

The challenge he describes here of being **'in the world'** but not **'of the world'** is well known to readers of the New Testament (see Yochanan 17).

Below are some of his comments on atonement in his book 'The Way of God' (translated from the Hebrew by Aryeh Kaplan):

"For it was also decreed that an individual can reach a level where he can partake of perfection and be included in this Community as the result of his association with a more worthy individual." -

"... As a result of this principle, suffering and pain may be imposed on a tzaddik [righteous Person – the 'more worthy individual'] as an atonement for his entire generation. This tzaddik must then accept the suffering with love for the benefit of his generation, just as he accepts the suffering imposed upon him for his own sake. In doing so, he benefits his generation by atoning for it, and at the same time is himself elevated to a very great degree. For a tzaddik such as this is made into one of the leaders in the Community of the Future World, as discussed earlier."

"... Such suffering also includes cases where a tzaddik suffers because his entire generation deserves great punishments, bordering on annihilation, but is spared via the tzaddik's suffering. In atoning for his generation through his suffering, this tzaddik saves these people in this world and also greatly benefits them in the World-to-Come. ..."

"Beyond that, the merit and power of these tzaddikim [plural i.e. many righteous] is also increased because of such suffering, and this gives them even greater ability to rectify the damage of others. They [Completed Tzaddikim] can therefore not only rectify their own generation but can also correct all the spiritual damage done from the beginning, from the time of the very first sinners."

It would appear here that Luzzatto is not only arguing for vicarious atonement to those who are associated with a righteous person, but further for all those in the time that the righteous person lived and **even more, the potential for this atonement to reach back in time to the beginning of humanity, to Adam and Eve.**

I term this **'retroactive atonement'** and I personally reject it. I think the clear inference of retroactive atonement is not at all warranted. Either Luzzatto confused himself and/or he is being misunderstood, or perhaps more likely, he has been mis-translated and Aryeh Kaplan has embellished what he actually wrote in Hebrew (an apparently common practice in Judaism).

One of the main reasons for rejecting it is based on first noting that Luzzatto and other Rabbi's, as well as the Apostle Paul, make it clear that vicarious atonement comes through association.

For example, consider the first quote I gave of the Luzzatto's above:

*"For it was also decreed that an individual can reach a level where he can partake of perfection and be included in this Community as the **result of his association with a more worthy individual.**"*

As well as these quotes:

"Moses spoke before the Holy One Blessed be He, Will not a time come when Israel will have neither Tabernacle or Temple? What will happen to them (as regards atonement)?" He replied, "I will take a righteous man from among them, and make him a pledge on their account, and I will atone for their iniquities. (Exodus Rabbah 35:4) When Moses said to God, in connection with the incident of the golden calf, 'Blot me, I pray thee, out of Thy book,' (Ex. 32:32) he offered his life as an atonement for the sin of his people. (Sotah 14a) - Everyman's Talmud, Abraham Cohen , pp. 117,118

And *"RaDaK ... The simple meaning of this passage proves that the concept that a righteous Tzaddik has the power to atone for others in his lifetime and through his death is soundly based in Torah prophecy."* From: "Know Your Bible, Isaiah 53, The Suffering Servant," at <http://www.azamra.org/Bible/Isaiah%2053-54.htm>

And: "... **Since I am attached to the Tzaddik**, the Tzaddik must come to take me out. He cannot remain, "for You do not wish him to see Gehennom." Thus my attachment to the Tzaddik is my after-life insurance policy against Gehennom (Likutey Halakhot, Hashkamat HaBoker 4:4). - Crossing The Narrow Bridge, Chaim Kramer, pp. 342,343.

In all these quotes we see the need to have an association or relationship of some sort with the righteous man, the Tzaddik. Consider similar quotes that highlight this in the New Testament:

1 John 1:

7 But if we are walking in the light, as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of his son Yeshua purifies us from all sin.

8 If we claim not to have sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

9 If we acknowledge our sins, then, since he is trustworthy and just, he will forgive them and purify us from all wrongdoing.

10 If we claim we have not been sinning, we are making him out to be a liar, and his Word is not in us.

1 John 2:

1 My children, I am writing you these things so that you won't sin. But if anyone does sin, we have Yeshua the Messiah, the Tzaddik, who pleads our cause with the Father.

2 Also, he is the kapparah for our sins — and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world.

3 The way we can be sure we know him is if we are obeying his commands. ...".

Romans 8:1-2

1 "Surely then, at this point, no disparaging criticism remains for those associated with Mashiach Yeshua.

2 In reality, the principle of the choice of the life identified with Mashiach Yeshua, releases you away from the principle of the choice to rebel, and its consequence of death as well".

All these Rabbis and the NT (where there are many more examples) speak of being **associated** with the Tzaddik (in the NT, that Tzaddik is Yeshua). There needs to be a knowledge of the Tzaddik and even further as association with him if he is to, in any way, help **'cover our sins from ourselves'** (that is, bring us atonement).

So given the clear need to have an association (either living or at the very least with someone we know of) how do we, or how can we possibly make the leap of faith, without evidence, to atonement being provided for those who don't know the Tzaddik and even more, are not associated with him, because they lived and existed before the righteous person in question?

I don't think we can, but we can easily be guilty of missing the use of Hebraisms and in particular hyperbole.

When the Apostle Paul stated, "... **And in this way ALL Israel will be saved ...**", he was not referring to every single Israelite that ever lived. He was using hyperbole. This is very common through the Bible.

Similarly, when Luzzatto states that: **'All Israel are responsible for one another. As a result of this, each individual is bound to everyone else, and no man is counted separately. ...'**, he also is speaking of a responsibility to the tribe around you. I don't believe he is referring to all Israel for all time. It is also appropriate to recognize that as a Kabbalist, the RAMCHAL was often not speaking in actual literal terms but uses metaphor to try to explain spiritual concepts in a more concrete way¹.

I see his emphasis on association confirmed in the same passage as he goes on to state next:

"God's Attribute of Good is the stronger, however, and if the guilt for sin is shared by others, this must certainly be true of the merit associated with good deeds."

You can't share something with someone who lived hundreds or thousands of years before you.

Rather here, he is speaking of others of the same time, the same generation.

And I would argue that when he speaks of atoning for the *'entire generation'* he is also speaking of everyone in that time period who associates themselves with the Tzaddik he is referring to. There needs to be a relationship, an association of some sort, so that this symbolic and psychological covering can be at all effective.

It is also vital to appreciate the prophetic perfect tense, both in terms of what it does say and what it doesn't – please see my article on the Prophetic Perfect tense: <http://circumcisedheart.info/Prophetic%20Perfect.pdf>

What about some of the New Testament verses that may appear to in some sense perhaps support full retroactivity.

¹ Kabbalist Principle: Delve into your life story by seeing the masks you wear as metaphors for understanding your life choices.

For a start **John 14:6**:

In the common way this is translated, we read that Yeshua is the only way to Yehovah, and some assume that the 'only' applies to all people for all time, despite their being no concrete evidence to support this very broad interpretation.

But the whole passage has been mis-translated to start with! Here is a much more accurate translation from the earliest Greek extant version:

"Yeshua replied, "I represent [i.e., live-out, personify or animate] that pathway [of the Writings] along with the legitimacy [or genuineness, validity or integrity of the Torah]. And on that path of life, none WILL [or can] appear adjacent to [or to the right of, or before] Ha'Ahv [i.e., the Father] except for me."- Translation of Yochanan by Uriel ben-Mordechai (not yet published).

He makes the critical point that the Greek "ee'mee" used here normally means "I stand for, am a figure of, or represent ...". That is, Yeshua represents The Way (of Torah) but he is not stating here that he is some **exclusive** and singular "Way".

Rather, the context of the exclusiveness of the '*except for me*' is that Yeshua is telling his disciples that where he is going, they cannot come, and only he can go to sit to the right of HaShem.

1 Corinthians 14:21-22

21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also came through a man.

22 For just as in Adam all die, **so also in Messiah all will be made alive. ...**

This does not mean all who have ever died will be made alive and live forever. It is an analogy, a comparison to juxtapose the failure that Adam brought versus the restitution that Messiah brings.

For a start it is not actually true that all born from Adam's line have died. Rather, it primarily speaks of Yeshua as the Second Adam, the first made alive and able to enter the New Creation (as opposed to the old). In the New, people are made alive as opposed to seeing death. There is no intended meaning of total Universalism here - again, I discuss this dangerous doctrine in my Doctrinal Pitfalls book - here is a short version <http://circumcisedheart.info/Universalism.pdf>

1 Corinthians 14: 45

"So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living person"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."

Again, this is an analogy - it simply does not imply any retroactivity to the beginning of humanity.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

18 And it is all from God, who through the Messiah has reconciled us to himself and has given us the work of that reconciliation, 19 which is that **God in the Messiah was reconciling mankind to himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.**

Reconciliation can only occur between parties that know each other. Yes, all of humanity that comes to know Yeshua can be reconciled via their association with him, but there is no implication here that those who don't or never knew him will be. In fact, the famous sheep and goats story indicates that even some who thought they knew him (or at least thought they did) and therefore had an association with him will not find atonement and entry into the Kingdom.

In conclusion, if the RAMCHAL, after speaking of the need for an association with the Tzaddik, then expands this to apply retroactively to any and all without that association, then I can't see any evidence for this and it really also contradicts his initial comments. As most of the many other Rabbinical scholars I have researched do accept the association/relationship argument but not the retroactive back to Adam one, I suspect Aryeh Kaplan's translation of Luzzatto's Hebrew may be mis-interpreting and embellishing the RAMCHAL's words and intentions.

So, I believe that all those who associate or attach themselves to Yeshua are able to find atonement through this relationship, in the here and now (please see my article² on how **atonement** is a '**covering of our sins from ourselves**' that allows us to restore our relationship with Yehovah). And also on the Great Day, the Yom Kippur at the beginning of the Olam Ha Bah (the World to Come), when he will be our Kohein HaGadol, our High Priest. But I cannot see that this atonement, especially as defined in the article on 'covering our sins' can be retroactive in any way, shape or form.

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² - <https://globaltruthinternational.com/2020/06/20/atonement-covering-our-sins-from-ourselves/>