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A Phenomenology of Return: Forgiveness and Atonement in Emmanuel Levinas and Abraham Joshua Heschel

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In 1958, Emmanuel Levinas responded to a talk given by Jesuit Father Jean Daniélou on the common—Jewish and Christian—foundations of a Mediterranean civilization. Levinas was “very comforted” by the “objective terrain of coexistence and collaboration” Daniélou was anticipating as the ground and vision of Vatican II’s *aggiornamento* Catholicism. Nevertheless, as a way of encouraging further debate and exploration, Levinas drew attention to a lacuna in Daniélou’s considerations: “Father Daniélou completely left out [in his presentation] the element that remains essential to those of us who are Jews: the constitution of the Talmud.” Levinas went on to say to Daniélou,

...Rabbinical Judaism, in the centuries that preceded and followed the destruction of the Second Temple, is the primordial event in Hebraic spirituality. If there had been no Talmud, there would have been no Jews today (It certainly would have saved the world a lot of problems!) Or else, we would have been the survivors of a finished world. This is the suggestion that, in spite of everything, persists in Catholic thought. We reject, as you know, the honor of being a relic.¹

The Talmudic commentary on 2 Samuel 21, presented by Levinas, on the understanding of atonement and repentance, critically complements the International Theological Commission’s interpretation of “Old Testament” forgiveness as presented in the document, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*. Furthermore, Levinas’ concern, originally addressed to Daniélou, is arguably significant today. *A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in*

¹ NB: The Levinas text, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, (trans.) Sean Hand (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), hereafter *DF*, does not provide reference to the name of the conference or the paper of then Fr. Jean Daniélou (named Cardinal in 1969 by Pope Paul VI). Also in 1958, the same year as the conference referred to above, Daniélou published *Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme* (Paris: Desclée & Cie, 1958), 175-177, here 175.

Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People reminds us, “Christians cannot fully understand Judaism apart from its post-biblical development, which can also enrich and enhance Christian faith.” And this living Jewish tradition may enrich the present dialogue between Christians and Jews.²

Section 2.1 “Biblical Approach: The Old Testament,” of the document *Memory and Reconciliation* attempts to “clarify,” that is to say, frame the limits of Jewish atonement. For example, the document argues that Jews of the “Old Testament,” “did not feel the need to address requests for forgiveness to present interlocutors for the sins committed by their fathers...”³ The “extensive body” of Jewish interpretation challenges the delimiting claims of this conclusion.⁴ Levinas’ reading of both the Hebrew Scripture and the *Talmud* challenges the above hypothesis of the commission. Specifically, Levinas’ consideration of 2 Samuel 21 and *tractate Yebamot* challenges the claim that “present interlocutors” did *not* attempt to make amends for “the sins committed by their fathers.”⁵

We will therefore examine the claims of *Memory and Reconciliation* through what I call a critically minded, teshuva hermeneutic as proposed by Emmanuel Levinas. In reading *Memory and Reconciliation* through the living tradition of the

² The Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, *A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People* (1 September 2002): <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/sites/partners/csg/Sacred_Obligation.htm> accessed on March 18, 2008.

³ International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (The Vatican: 1999): <www.vatican.va> accessed on February 4, 2008, and the following quotes in this section unless noted otherwise; *italics* added.

⁴ *Sacred Obligation*.

⁵ *Memory and Reconciliation*.

talmud and *midrash*⁶ we may come to a renewed appreciation for how Jewish texts, far from being a relic, may challenge Catholicism towards a deeper understanding of Jewish forgiveness for the benefit of the larger Christian-Jewish dialogue.

While it is arguable that Levinas is primarily a *Jewish* philosopher rather than, as some argue, a scholar of the Talmud, his insights on atonement and forgiveness are informed from the tremendous heterology of loss and suffering: in 1940 Levinas was imprisoned in *Fallingsbotel*, a labor camp, and his Lithuanian relatives were murdered by the Nazis. How could these experiences not inform his philosophy, which, as he contends, is preeminently an ethical approach? Furthermore, how could it not inform his prophetic response to the crimes of the twentieth century? It strikes us that the “ethical” response to the call of the other with the words *Hineni* (Here I am!) is a “teaching” (*torah*) and a “learning” (*talmud*).⁷

⁶ *Talmud*: (lit. ‘Learning’) a comprehensive term for *Mishnah* (codification of the Jewish law) and *Gemara* (the traditions, discussions and rulings of the Rabbis); *Midrash*: a collection of statements, commentaries that propose to be a discovery of meanings other than the literal one in the Bible.

⁷ Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82: “As a philosopher Levinas wants to bring divergent views to bear on the traditional study of the Jewish sources, while as a Jewish commentator on the Talmud he is concerned with maintaining the particularity of Judaism and its concept of God revealed through the ethical. The two roles are not contradictory, for Levinas tells us that he is simply following one of the great teachers of nineteenth-century Lithuanian *yeshiva* Judaism, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn, who wrote that ‘a Jew is accountable and responsible for the whole edifice of creation.’ This responsibility for the other is the witness the Jew bears before the world.” Quoted from: Levinas, *DF*, 50-51. Also see: Hayyim ben Isaac of Volozhyn, *Nefesh he’Hayyim* (*Soul of Life*), translated by Benjamin Gross, with an introduction by Levinas, into French (*L’Âme de la Vie*, Paris: Editions Verdier, 1986).

In the first half of this article, we will begin to appreciate with Levinas how *addressing present interlocutors* radicalizes atonement, where *teshuva* may become a necessary precondition for constructing an “objective terrain of coexistence and collaboration” between Jews and Christians. This “terrain,” the place of dialogue, may become an empathic locus wherefrom we may “feel our way into” the sanctity of the other.

These considerations on repentance and atonement with Levinas will, therefore, in the second half of this article, be set against the horizon of the contemporary considerations of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s commentary *Heavenly Torah: as Refracted Through the Generations*. Heschel’s considerations may “open the question” for us on why *teshuva* is important in a twenty-first century post-Shoah context of our continuing search for how the depth of holiness mysteriously reaches out and dialectically relates Jewish and Christian traditions to one another. Our methodology of considering Heschel on prophetic praxis (*vis-à-vis* the example of Moses) may provide a lesson for how we may engage in the practice of a more reflective, ethical, mystical, and prophetic way of being in the world as Jews and Christians.

Let us first turn our attention to consider section 2.1 of *Memory and Reconciliation* before (re)reading the text *vis-à-vis* Levinas’ commentary.

The International Theological Commission’s “clarification”: “Biblical Approach: The Old Testament”

In section 2.1, “Biblical Approach: The Old Testament” of the International Theological Commission’s “clarification,” *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, the commission, under the leadership of the then Cardinal Ratzinger, attempted to frame Pope John Paul II’s project of purifying memory through the confession of past sins. *Memory*

and Reconciliation asks the question, “[w]hat background does the testimony of Sacred Scripture furnish for John Paul II’s invitation to the Church to confess the faults of the past?” In regards to the Hebrew Scriptures, the document argues that “requests for forgiveness can be found throughout the Bible—in the narratives of the Old Testament, in the Psalms, and in the Prophets,” and these requests may be divided into “two principal categories of ‘confession texts’...a) confession texts of individual sins, and b) confession texts of sins of the entire people (and of those of their forebears).” The document, in elucidating the latter category, and its exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, reveals the following three ‘groupings’ of confessional practice:

- A first series of texts represents the entire people (sometimes personified as a single “I”) who, in a particular moment of its history, confesses or alludes to its sins against God without any (explicit) reference to the faults of the preceding generations.
- Another group of texts places the confession—directed to God—of the current sins of the people on the lips of one or more leaders (religious), who may or may not include themselves explicitly among the sinful people for whom they are praying.
- A third group of texts presents the people or one of their leaders in the act of mentioning the sins of their forebears without, however, making mention of those of the present generation.
- More frequent are the confessions that mention the faults of the forebears, linking them expressly to the errors of the present generation.

By contrast, the document concludes the following from this particular exegesis of Hebrew Scripture: “from the testimonies gathered that in all cases where the ‘sins of the fathers’ are mentioned, *the confession is addressed solely to God, and the*

sins confessed by the people and for the people are those committed directly against him rather than those committed (also) against other human beings...”⁸

The document leaves theologians and others with the following query: “[t]he question arises as to why the biblical writers did not feel the need to address requests for forgiveness to present interlocutors for the sins committed by their fathers, given their strong sense of solidarity in good and evil among the generations (one thinks of the notion of ‘corporate personality’).” *Memory and Reconciliation* proposes the following “hypotheses” as to why the Israelites did not ask for forgiveness from their “present interlocutors”:

- (i) there is the prevalent theocentrism of the Bible, which gives precedence to the acknowledgment, whether individual or national, of the faults committed against God...
- (ii) [t]he experiences of maltreatment suffered by Israel at the hands of other peoples and the animosity thus aroused could also have militated against the idea of asking pardon of these peoples for the evil done to them.

Another reading of the Hebrew Scriptures through the Jewish and Talmudic hermeneutic may challenge these concluding hypotheses (i-ii) of *Memory and Reconciliation*.

Tractate Yebamot: Asking for Forgiveness from ‘Present Interlocutors’

Levinas reveals, in both his exegesis of 2 Samuel 21:1-6 and his explication of the Talmud *tractate Yebamot*, a radical

⁸ *Memory and Reconciliation*, italics added.

example of Israel asking for forgiveness from “present interlocutors.”⁹ Let us first consider 2 Samuel 21:1-6 and then Levinas’ commentary:

David Avenges the Gibeonites

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. The Lord said, “There is blood-guilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.”² So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. (Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.)³ David said to the Gibeonites, “What shall I do for you? How shall I make expiation, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?”⁴ The Gibeonites said to him, “It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put anyone to death in Israel.” He said, “What do you say that I should do for you?”⁵ They said to the king, “The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel—⁶ let seven of his sons be handed over to us, and we will impale them before the Lord at Gibeon on the mountain of the Lord.” The king said, “I will hand them over.”

There was a three year famine in the land and “[King David] asked the Eternal about it and found out that ‘this was because of Saul...and because he put the Gibeonites to death’...the Gibeonites were a Canaanite tribe mentioned in the Book of

⁹ Levinas, “Toward the Other: From the *tractate Yoma*, Pp. 85a-85b,” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 22-29, hereafter *NT*; the following quotes in this section are from pp. 25-29, unless otherwise noted.

Joshua...” The Gibeonites were slaves in Israel, and Saul “sought to strike at them in his zeal for Israel.” When David asked God there was a famine in the land, God responded that the famine was the result of an “unredressed” injustice: namely, the extermination of the Gibeonites by Saul. Atonement therefore needs to be done for the injustice and violence done by Saul to the Gibeonite people (2 Samuel 21:1). David decides to rectify the situation. Levinas tells us, by way of his commentary, “[The Gibeonites] complained to David that King Saul had made their presence on the land of Israel impossible, that he had persecuted them and had tried to destroy them. They want neither gold nor silver. No compensations!” But what they do ask for is far more dramatic: “seven of Saul’s descendants...they will put them to death by nailing them to the rock on the Mountain of Saul. And David answers: I shall give them.”

What insights from the Talmudic commentary on 2 Samuel 21 may help us understand the lesson behind such a radical gesture? Levinas reports: “[b]ut here is what the Talmud has to say about it (*tractate Yebamot*, pp. 58b-59a)—after searching the land for signs of “idolatry” and “debauchery” there seems to be a “more secret” reason for the famine. David concluded, “[t]here must be a political wrong here, an injustice not caused by private individuals” but a wrong committed by a nation against a community of stranger(s). Levinas explains,

The Talmud also knows the fault of Saul toward the Gibeonites, for which we cannot find a trace in the Bible...[i]n executing the priests of Nov, Saul left the Gibeonites who served them without a means of subsistence. The Midrash affirms that the crime of extermination begins before murders take place, the oppression and economic uprooting already indicate its beginnings, that the laws of Nuremberg already contain the seeds of the “final solution.”¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

Genocide's originary act of destroying otherness—religious, ethnic, and otherwise—is the imposition of limitations by the state on basic human rights, especially of a minority community. Whenever the state engages in such behavior they reduce themselves to totalitarianism.

Against this horizon, Levinas leaves us with the question, in regard to the princes of Saul's household who were given over to the Gibeonites, "does one have the right to punish children for the faults of their parents?" The Talmud's answer: "it is better that a letter of the Torah be damaged than that the name of the Eternal be profaned." Yet is this not a subtle return *lex talionis*?¹¹ Levinas would want to conclude by way of the Talmudic commentary: "[t]o punish children for the faults of their parents is less dreadful than to tolerate impunity when the stranger is injured. Let the passerby know this: in Israel, princes die a horrible death because strangers were injured by the sovereign. The respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the name of the Eternal are strangely equivalent."¹² Malice towards the stranger blasphemes the name of the Other; befogging with hatred the *imago Dei* of all and in all.

¹¹ Talion: "(*lex talionis*, 'law of retaliation') is a term for a punishment equal to the offense. It is derived from Genesis 9:6, 'Whoever sheds a man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.' Most talions were abolished in Talmudic times (*BK* 8. 1) on the grounds that 'an eye for an eye' is only superficial justice, i.e., an eye for an eye may be stronger than the other, but nonetheless it was ultimately accepted that the measure by which man measures is the measure by which he will be measured (*Sat.* 1. 7)." From John Bowker, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 944: <www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/t/talion.html> accessed on March 27, 2012.

¹² Levinas, *NT*, 25-29.

***Teshuva*: The Relevance of 'Return' for Dialogue**

As we may recall, *Memory and Reconciliation* proposed the following "hypotheses":

- (i) there is the prevalent theocentrism of the Bible, which gives precedence to the acknowledgment, whether individual or national, of the faults committed against God.
- (ii) [t]he experiences of maltreatment suffered by Israel at the hands of other peoples and the animosity thus aroused could also have militated against the idea of asking pardon of these peoples for the evil done to them.¹³

These above hypotheses are based on the presupposition that Jews of the "Old Testament" did not "feel the need to address requests for forgiveness to present interlocutors" for the sins committed by their leaders. Our reading with Levinas of 2 Samuel 21 and *tractate Yebamot* challenges hypotheses (i) and (ii).

The very presupposition from which the above hypotheses are derived is problematic. When David finds out from the Eternal that the cause of the famine has something to do with the injustice done to the "strangers" he *directly addresses* his "present interlocutors" as a way of both (a) ending the famine and (b) doing atonement. In so doing, David—the leader of that present generation—does *teshuva* with both God and a foreign people. He makes amends for the sins of their father and leader, Saul, by directly engaging with his "present interlocutors" the Gibeonites.

¹³ *Memory and Reconciliation*.

In regards to hypothesis (i) while it may be argued that there is a prevalent “theocentrism” our readings tell us that there is also a rather dominant anthropocentrism: a concern for the rights and justice of the stranger. Again, God prompts David to leave the Temple and engage in the project of *teshuva*: “David said to the Gibeonites, ‘What must I do for you and how must I make atonement that you may bless the inheritance of the LORD?’ (2 Samuel 21:3).”

In regards to hypothesis (ii) there clearly exists animosity in the relationship between the Israelites and the Gibeonites. After all, the Gibeonites are not necessarily the most honest interlocutors. Let us recall, from The Book of Joshua: the Gibeonites went to Joshua at Gilgal, and falsely represented themselves as “friends of the Lord” from distant lands rather than revealing their status as Canaanites. Joshua hastily took their word, and swore by the Lord God an oath with the Gibeonites. In so doing they gained the protection of Israel from the other Canaanite kings and armies. When the Gibeonite deception was discovered, Joshua still honored his agreement, for the Lord expected Joshua to honor His name by honoring the agreement (Joshua 9). The Gibeonites remained under the protection of Israel but they remained as indentured servants within the sanctuary, working for people like the priests of Nov. Later on in the relationship, for reasons unknown to us, Saul first strikes down the priests of Nov (*tractate Yoma*), and then “exterminates” the Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:5).

In contradistinction to *Memory and Reconciliation* there appears to be grounds for concluding that a healthy level of “animosity” exists between the two peoples that “militated against the idea” of Israel “asking pardon” from the Gibeonites. And yet, David recognizes a wrong done to a people by the nation, and in a rather dramatic scene, Israel “gives up” its own princes, to be crucified to a rock, for the faults perpetrated by Saul:

[The Gibeonites] said to the king, as for the man who was exterminating us and who intended to destroy us that we might have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven men from among his descendants be given to us...[t]he king replied, ‘I will give them up’ (2 Samuel 21:5-6).

Our contemporary milieu, theological and otherwise, rightly condemns the *lex talionis* of retributive justice, and one will please excuse the graphic nature of the above example. Yet, when set against the *tremendum* horizon of the *Shoah*, where “good and evil, that were once as real as day and night, have become a blurred mist,”¹⁴—against such a backdrop, one is required to come to a more sober appreciation of what is at stake when society is heedless to both the sanctity of the stranger and the importance of atoning for wrongs done against both strangers and friends. The Jewish doctrinal tradition radicalizes atonement wherein, as Levinas argued, “the respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the name of the Eternal are strangely equivalent.”

The Talmud (and Midrash) is therefore accomplishing two very important tasks for our reflections: it continues the process of handing down the Biblical story into the present time, while concomitantly revealing for post-*Shoah* Jews and Christians how this narrative-memory, and our empathy with this narrative, may have a dialogical relevance.

Catholicism has been challenged in recent years to acknowledge the “sins of the fathers” in its relationship to Judaism. What is constitutive to this acknowledgement for a Post-*Shoah* Jewish-Christian dialogue? A return to empathy may be part of this acknowledgment. Empathy means a dialectically

¹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, from “*The Meaning of this Hour*,” in *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (Santa Fe, NM: Aurora Press, 1998), 147-151, here 149.

sensitive way of relating sameness to otherness for, as Jodi Halpern considers, “[t]he work of empathy is precisely trying to imagine a view of the world that one does not share, and in fact may find it quite difficult to share.”¹⁵ But “even this element of distinctiveness and mutual exclusiveness, even this distancing,” Levenson argues, “can be a source of closeness in its own paradoxical way. For the Jewish and the Christian midrashim, different as they are in so many ways, also have profound points of contact.”¹⁶

It strikes us that in a *dialogue of atonement* not every word needs to be a constant apology. Yet, the ‘I’m sorry’ only becomes authentic in the deed.¹⁷ The deed of the righteous welcome of the interreligious other, the “face-to-face” that issues forth in *tiqqun ‘olam*, may be a profound point of contact with holiness. This way of dialoguing may mean fewer words, humbler words—where my “welcome” of the other is conveyed in a willingness to listen. Yet this return (*teshuva*) to dialogue is the practical work of empathy.

Returning to the Face of the Other

Heschel, in further sharpening our considerations with Levinas on *teshuva*, tells us that the “accepted view” in Jewish

teaching is that “the pardon of sins” consists “of two elements, repentance and atonement, each distinct from the other. Repentance was a human responsibility” while atonement is God’s responsibility. Repentance is a necessary “precondition to atonement” for “one cannot achieve atonement unless he first repented.” Heschel reports that the prophets are “unanimous” on the link between repentance-atonement: “atonement cannot be achieved without repentance. Hosea’s call to Israel was: ‘Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God’ (Hosea 14:2).”¹⁸

Heschel situates the question of repentance and atonement by reflecting with an *aggadah* (wisdom-story teaching) on the theophany of Exodus 33:22-23.¹⁹ The question is: how may we “use the terms ‘back’ and ‘face’ when referring to God? Is it not written, ‘I fill heaven and earth, said the Lord’ (Jeremiah 23: 24) or ‘His glory fills the whole earth’ (Isaiah 6:3)? How can we reconcile such lofty prophetic concepts with ‘seeing God’s back but not his face?’”²⁰ Rabbi Akiva “did not doubt that Moses saw God’s likeness.” Indeed, the Akivan school of interpretation holds that “when Moses declaimed the Torah, he was in heaven; and that the divine glory descended upon Mount Sinai.”²¹

The following ninth-century *aggadah* from the text *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* attempts to respond to, and elaborate on, the

¹⁵ Jodi Halpern, Harvey M. Weinstein, “Rehumanizing the Other: Empathy and Reconciliation,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 26 (2004): 561–583, here 581.

¹⁶ Jon D. Levenson, “Can Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation?” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, 1 (2005): 170-185, here 179: <<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol1/iss1/art19>> accessed on February 1, 2008.

¹⁷ Edward Kessler, “Less Sinned Against Than Sinning,” *The Tablet* (September 26, 2009): 8-9, here 9: “True repentance is no mere momentary spasm of remorse to be proclaimed in front of the cameras. Repentance must influence and leave its mark in terms of character, action and life. True repentance ends with a life change which must be based upon a real transformation rather than a flimsy but eloquent public apology.”

¹⁸ Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: as Refracted through the Generations (Torah min ha-shamayim be-aspaklaria shel ha-dorot)* hereafter *TMH*, ed. and trans. with commentary from Gordon Tucker and Leonard Levin (New York: Continuum, 2007), 181.

¹⁹ Exodus 33: 22-23: (v. 22) When my glory passes I will set you in the hollow of the rock and will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. (v. 23) Then I will remove my hand, so that you may see my back; but my face is not to be seen.

²⁰ *MI Shirata* 4, in Heschel, *TMH*, 306.

²¹ Heschel, *TMH*, 307.

theophany of God's revelation to Moses on the Day of Atonement (Exodus 33:23):

Moses said that on Yom Kippur he will see the glory of the Holy and Blessed One. How did Moses know this? He said, "Master of the Universe, show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18). Whereupon God answered, "You cannot see My glory, lest you die...[but] because of My name which I made known to you, I shall agree to your request. Stand at the entrance of the cave and I shall cause all my ministering angels to pass before you, as it is written, 'I will make all My goodness to pass before you.' When you hear the Name that I have made known to you, I shall be standing there before you. Exert all your strength and stand firmly, do not be afraid." When the angels heard this, they spoke up before the Holy and Blessed One. "We minister to You day and night; yet we are not permitted to see Your glory! Yet this man, born of woman, dares to demand to see your glory!" The angels rose in anger and dismay against Moses to kill him. He was near to death when the Holy and Blessed One appeared in a cloud, covered him with the palm of his hand, and saved him. When the Holy and Blessed One had passed, He drew back His hand, and Moses saw the back of the Shekinah.²²

Set against the horizon of Yom Kippur, the *aggadah* conveys a sense of God's desire to show mercy for the "sin of the calf"²³ as a healer and saver of life. Having heard the

²² *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* [hereafter *PRE*] 46 in Heschel, *TMH*, 307.

²³ Footnote 24 in Heschel, *TMH*, 307-308: "The reference to Yom Kippur in this *aggadah* is based on the idea—bolstered in several rabbinic texts by a (nearly, but not quite, exact) chronology of Moses' three forty-day stays on Mount Sinai—that Moses descended from the mountain for the third time on the tenth of Tishri, carrying the second tablets and announcing God's forgiveness of the sin of the calf. That day became Yom Kippur, because it was

repentant cries of Moses for the sin of the people (Exodus 32), God desires to draw near to Moses on the day of atonement: "I shall be standing there before you." This incites the jealousy of the angels. The would-be ministers of the Lord's "goodness" become envious: "we are not permitted to see Your glory! Yet this man, born of woman, dares to demand to see your glory." The angels attack Moses; unable to "stand firmly," he collapses and is near death. God's response is one of protection and healing: "the Holy and Blessed One appeared in a cloud, covered him with the palm of his hand, and saved him." In healing and forgiveness, God honors Moses over and against the murderous intent of covetous angels, thus elevating the personhood of Moses to sanctity, a sanctity extending to all of Israel.²⁴ The Lord is made known to those who take seriously the project of *teshuva*.

The revelation of God's will is the very "face" of the Other. Heschel's perspective is disarming in how it presupposes the divine-human proximity of Moses with God that is intimate, restorative and empowering of the *being-sanctified* prophetic witness: "Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Judah, and Rabbi Simeon were all

the first act of forgiveness by God for the people as a whole. Moses' beholding God with immediacy on the first Yom Kippur can be seen as being reenacted to some extent by the High Priest entering behind the veil of the Holy of Holies on subsequent Yom Kippurs."

²⁴ Heschel, *TMH*, 309: "The superiority that Moses had over the angels, in that he was privileged to behold the Divine Presence, was shared by the people of Israel. In various midrashim it is pointed out that when the ministering angels sang their hymns of praise to God they did so in a loud voice. Why because they were a great distance removed from the Holy and Blessed One and did not know where He was, as it is written, 'Blessed is the Divine Glory in His Place' (Ezekiel 3:12). But when the people of Israel stand in prayer they know that God is near to them, as it is written, 'He stands at the right hand of the needy' (Psalm 109:31)."

quoted as saying, 'The righteous are greater than the ministering angels.'²⁵

There is an ethical heightening of humanity's status in the near-moment of coming "face-to-face." The prophetic witness is called to be God-like in recreating God's righteousness for others. In turning to Maimonides, Heschel concludes:

[W]e are required to be more scrupulous with the commandment of charity than with any other positive commandment, for charity is emblematic of the righteous descendants of Father Abraham, as it says: "for I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just" (Genesis 18:19). Jewish sovereignty and the true faith itself can only endure through charity, as it says: "you shall be established through righteousness" (Isaiah 54:14). Through charity alone will Israel be redeemed, as it says: "Zion shall be saved by her justice, her repentant ones by righteousness" (Isaiah 1:27).²⁶

Heschel tells us that what charity means in this instance (lest it be viewed through the lens of Christianity's *caritas*) is *tzedakah*.²⁷ *Tzedakah* accomplishes the righteous act. The righteous (or saintly) person, the "Tzaddik" responds to the call of

²⁵ *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* (ed. Enelow) p. 292; *Midrash Haggadol to Genesis*, (ed.) Margaliot, pp. 571ff., in Heschel, *TMH*, 777-778.

²⁶ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws Concerning Gifts to the Poor," 10:1, in *TMH*, 777-778.

²⁷ Danny Siegel, *Tzedakah: A Time For Change*, ed. Karen L. Stein (New York, NY: United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2007), 124: "Tzaddik (m) ... Tzadeket(f) is often translated as 'righteous person.' Actually it frequently means a 'good person,' a Mensch.' Grammatically, 'Tzedakah' and 'Tzaddik/Tzadeket' are from the same Hebrew root ... The language itself shows that there is an intimate connection between the Tzedakah-act and the person-doing-Tzedakah at any given moment."

justice by responding to the Other in need. As Heschel concludes with the insight from Rabenu Asher, "The Holy and Blessed One values more those commandments through which the needs of people are satisfied than those that are strictly between a person and the Creator."²⁸

This *righteousness* is made superbly explicit through the event of *teshuva*. It is grounded in the empathic movements of renewing solidarity with others through a repentance that threatens all that is hateful. The prophet's face-to-face encounter with God may necessarily mean "returning to a country" in the midst of violence: "Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said, 'Just as Yom Kippur atones for man's sins, so does the death of the righteous.'²⁹ Righteousness and atonement are intimately linked—giving us a way of proceeding with others in dialogue and friendship.

Levinas reinforces Heschel's perspectives on the ethical significance of *teshuva* with the following commentary on the *Mishna*:

- (i) The transgressions of man toward God are forgiven him by the Day of Atonement;
- (ii) The transgressions against other people are not forgiven him by the Day of Atonement if he has not first appeased the other person (*Tractate Yoma* pp.85a-85b).

Levinas says in regards to (i), "my faults toward God are forgiven without my depending on his good will!" as long as one fulfills the ritual requirements of *Yom Kippur*. Transgressions

²⁸ Rabenu Asher [thirteenth-fourteenth century, Germany and Spain], *Commentary on Mishnah Peah* 1:1, in Heschel, *TMH*, 778.

²⁹ *Leviticus Rabbah* 20:12, in *TMH*, 181.

against God by an individual is a matter to be taken up between God and that person. On the day of atonement, this God who is “other, par excellence, the other as other, the absolutely other” is also the God of all mercy and forgiveness for the one who desires to atone for his transgressions against the Other. In this sense, “my standing with this God depends only on myself. The instrument of forgiveness is in my hands.”³⁰

In contradistinction to (i) however, Levinas interprets (ii) in the following way: “my neighbor, my brother, man, infinitely less other than the absolutely other, is in a certain way more other than God: to obtain his forgiveness on the Day of Atonement I must first succeed in appeasing him. What if he refuses? As soon as two are involved, everything is in danger.” Gillian Rose argues, in “[t]his face to face” what becomes “expressed” is nothing less than “the *trace* of God which is discernible in the countenance of the neighbor.” For Rose, it is this “proximity of the stranger—near and far—that reveals the exaltation and height of God and, equally, it reveals the command to expunge or assuage the suffering of the Other.”³¹

In the moment of asking for forgiveness one enters the place of *dia*-logue. It is an unnerving place for at the moment of interchange “*everything is in danger*”: there exists the possibility of *non*-reception to the question, “*Will you forgive me?*” All the more reason why, especially in the area of interreligious dialogue, we need to dialogue with the sanctifying intention of *teshuva*.

Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, in a lecture at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin, eloquently reminds us that the work of

³⁰ Levinas, *NT*, 16.

³¹ Gillian Rose, “Is there a Jewish Philosophy,” in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 11-24, here 16.

dialogue will have to be about the work of healing memories, for we have brought with us into the twenty-first century “wounded memories,” and we need to initiate a process for “undergoing a release from this woundedness.”³²

Levinas reveals for us through his commentary on the text how a lack of empathy between strangers and the absence of a compassionate concern for others is nothing less than a forgetfulness for the divine. Judaism appreciates how this *apathia* towards the Other shows itself through a disregard for the other(s) through the ‘real-time’ exigencies of injustice, bias, hatred and ultimately murder. Indeed, the “taking into account the suffering of the others, the suffering of the foreigner” is, as Metz argues, the foundation of atonement: “the basis of a universal responsibility” that is necessary for remembering and redressing injustices.³³

What does this have to do with *teshuva*? It strikes us that making a return (*teshuva*) to the other through welcoming the other is a form of atonement whereby repentance means “direct[ing]...penitential energy towards acts of goodness.”³⁴ In this sense, the fulfillment of atonement is already contained within genuine acts of repentance. And genuine acts of repentance are ratified through the authentic action of righteousness towards others.³⁵ This fulfillment of the covenantal responsibility

³² Samuel Kobia, “*Hope and the Healing of Memories*,” notes taken from a lecture given at The Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College (Dublin: April 30, 2007).

³³ Johann Baptist Metz, “In Memory of the Other’s Suffering,” in *The Critical Spirit: Theology at the Crossroads of Faith and Culture, Essays in Honour of Gabriel Daly*, eds. Andrew Pierce, Geraldine Smyth (Dublin: Columba Press, 2003), 179-188, here 181.

³⁴ Kessler, “Less Sinned Against Than Sinning,” 9.

³⁵ *Sifra Emor* 102a: “The sin offering, the guilt offering, death, and Yom Kippur do not bring atonement without repentance”; *BT Berakhot* 23a: “Be not

in justice and right relationships aids in the repair of a fragmented world (*tiqqun 'olam*). Rabbi Meir, a follower of Rabbi Akiva, teaches, "So great is the act of repentance, that if but a single person repents, God pardons not only him but the sins of the world."³⁶

Concluding Remarks

Far from being a relic, Jewish scriptural exegesis and commentary is a "living present-tense memory." To intimate that Jews do not ask for pardon from "present interlocutors" would obscure a hermeneutics of empathy and return. It would be a way of distancing ourselves from the one call; from that fundamental memory of a sanctifying covenant that is mysteriously built upon the pathos of an atoning love.

A living Jewish tradition is a "system" worthy of respect and recognition in and of itself.³⁷ It reminds Catholics, and all

like those fools who sin and bring their offerings but do not repent," in *TMH*, 181.

³⁶ *BT Yoma 86B* in *TMH*, 180-181.

³⁷ Levenson, "Can Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation?," 173: "...[W]e cannot deny that both the classical Jewish and classical Christian interpretations depend on the conventions of reading of their times, that both are, in a sense, midrashim, not simply the literal or plain sense (what Western Christians have traditionally termed the *sensus literalis* and Jews, the *peshat*). This means that these two systems of interpretation derive from a type of interpretation that is to some degree at odds with those types that strive to place the passage within its most immediate literary or historical context. The implication is that what validates interpretation is 'the vision of their respective faiths,' [*The Jewish People*, §62] and not simply the intentions of the biblical authors themselves, authors who, I must stress, lived before the emergence of either Christianity or rabbinic Judaism. This, in turn, implies that Judaism and Christianity are *systems*, and one cannot turn to this verse or that in order to score points for one's own religion at the expense of the other. Instead, the systemic reality, the archi-tectonic structure, of each tradition must be a given for its interpreters of sacred scripture."

Christians, that our way of doing atonement springs forth from a shared memory of being concerned with the suffering of others. Furthermore, this living tradition may correct and extend a one-sided Christian exegesis while concomitantly encouraging Jewish-Christian dialogue towards a new depth.

At Vatican II, the Catholic Church publicly acknowledged that the Church's way of "remembering" itself with the suffering other is "in continuity and communion" with Judaism. It strikes us that if the Church's memory and remembering-structure is shared with Judaism, then any mission to the Jews, as *Nostra Aetate* promulgates, is challenged by a more expansive remembering that opens up, in even more radical terms, the possibility of a shared eschatological future through the recognition of a sanctifying righteousness that is living in our religions.³⁸ The *mystery* of a shared Jewish-Christian future only becomes a possibility through an empathic, *teshuva*-filled dialogue: "[i]n dialogue and encounter we are moved from 'eschatology' where we tend to hide our weaknesses, to 'humility' where our weaknesses become our only true title, because all the rest is gift."³⁹

During a debate on *Nostra Aetate*, Cardinal Lercaro said that the Church's desire for a new relationship with Judaism is

³⁸ Carlo Maria Martini, "Reflections Towards Jewish-Christian Dialogue," in *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People*, 29-38; 37: "[i]f we Christians believe that we are in continuity and in communion with the patriarchs, those exiled to Babylon, and the Maccabean martyrs, it is necessary that this communion be realized in all possible ways. This includes communion with those Jews who began to codify the Mishnah at Yavneh and redacted the Talmud at Babylon, and with those Jews who were persecuted by the Crusaders..."

³⁹ Adolfo Nicolás, "Christianity in Crisis: Asia. Which Asia? Which Christianity? Which Crisis?" *Concilium* (2005/3): 64-70, here 70.

...[m]uch more due to inner impulses which have come to maturity at the deepest, supernatural core of the life and consciousness of Christ's Church, quite apart from any external event and stimulus...she has only now attained a deeper insight into certain aspects of the mystery of her existence...everything that the Church has she inherited from the Jewish people...⁴⁰

A collapsing of distance into the depths of humility raises a necessary proviso for Christian theologians, all believers, and all people of good will: the assumption that I already (or may ever) comprehensively know the other may never be the starting point for dialogue. In our study, we have been specifically exploring how Christian holiness is deeply rooted and grounded in the holiness of Jewish otherness: *"everything that the Church has she inherited from the Jewish people."* This mysterious inheritance that we approach with "humility"—from beyond the intent of a malicious and arrogant *cogito*—allows us to give Heschel the final word: "[h]umility and contrition seem to be absent where most required—in theology. But humility is the beginning and end of religious thinking, the secret test of faith. There is no truth without humility, no certainty without contrition."⁴¹

⁴⁰ John M. Oesterreicher, *The New Encounter between Christians and Jews* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1986), 203-204.

⁴¹ Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," [originally given as inaugural lecture as Harry Emerson Fosdick Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York, and appearing in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 21/1, part 1 (January 1966): 117-134] in ed. Susannah Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 245. Also see: Stanisław Obirek, "The Jewish Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel as a Challenge for Catholic Theology" in *Friends on The Way: Jesuits Encounter Contemporary Judaism*, ed. Thomas Michel (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007), 71-82.