

# **Teshuvah and the Return to Goodness: Emmanuel Levinas' Concept of Forgiveness in the Religious Dimension**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores Emmanuel Levinas' concept of Teshuvah or Forgiveness in the Religious/ Judaic Tradition. Levinas wrote the idea of forgiveness in two distinct occasions, in different writings. While the other concept of Forgiveness is named as "pardon" that is written in his major work *Totality and Infinity*, this paper explores the notion of Teshuvah from the commentary he made in the colloquium organized by the *Ecole Normale Israelite Orientale* in 1963. In addition to the discussion, while the paper is focused on understanding the notion of Teshuvah, it will also highlight Levinas' ethical responsibility as his form of critique and reevaluation of the Teshuvah from its prescriptive and conditional nature, towards an ethics that is for-the-Other. The discussion of the paper will be as follows, first, it will introduce the main text where Levinas' mentions the idea of Teshuvah in *Towards the Other* as to understand how it is written and interpreted by Levinas. Second, is to retell the stories from the Talmud where the lesson on Teshuvah is found and what the ideas are that stem out of it. Third, is to expose Levinas' critique and commentary of each story. And finally the paper shall conclude as to how the concept of Teshuvah can be understood in a better light as it is complimented with Levinas' analysis on Ethical Responsibility.

**Keywords:** Levinas, Teshuvah, Forgiveness, Justice, Goodness, Ethics

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## Introduction

Whenever a talk on forgiveness is brought up as an ethical question, with no doubt, Levinas has a place on the discourse. Any talk on forgiveness would in a way, presuppose an act of violence that is inflicted from one person to another. If one understands that Levinas' ethical responsibility is an assertion against the prevailing backdrop of violence, then his notions on forgiveness is worth paying attention to. As a philosopher who asserts the ethical as the primordial question that philosophy should answer, and coming from his experience during the Holocaust, his thoughts and ideas are formulated from the harsh experience and the willingness to never allow such event may happen again. This affirms his rightful place in the discourse of forgiveness as ideas that are worth listening and reflected upon.

His 1963 lecture with the French-Jewish intellectuals is where he made a dramatic statement about Martin Heidegger. Ironically, one can argue that while Levinas has a say on forgiveness, he, however, finds it difficult to forgive his former mentor, Martin Heidegger, and thus it may put him out of his place.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to this argument, Michael Morgan asserts that his statement during the lecture that he gave, he used the word "difficult" rather than the word "impossible."<sup>2</sup> In as much as difficulty is concerned, there are events in Levinas' subjective life where he also faced difficulty in seeking forgiveness while standing firm in his ethical theory. According to Richard Cohen in his introduction of Levinas' book, *Humanism of the Other*, Levinas was said to have taken part in exhibiting the debate of Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer. What is worth noting that in the passing of time after the debate and the Holocaust, Levinas was said to have sought forgiveness to the wife of Cassirer because there is a sense of guilt for siding with Heidegger during that time.<sup>3</sup> This would perhaps give another reason for the difficulty of forgiveness when it comes to Heidegger because he himself was faced with the difficulty to ask forgiveness. Another event is during an interview where he was asked if whether an officer of the SS has a face, he would painfully reply, *very disturbing question which calls, to my opinion, for an affirmative answer. An affirmative answer which is painful each time!*<sup>4</sup> Despite how it may seem that Levinas finds himself within the crossroads of being responsible, and otherwise, this should not necessarily downplay his place in talking about forgiveness. Coming

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 25.

<sup>2</sup> Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Not only did Levinas regret siding to Heidegger during that time but also mocking Cassirer during the farcical play of the Davos Debate. See Richard Cohen, "Introduction" in Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, tr. Nidra Poller, (2003, University of Illinois Press, Urbana); xxxvi.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins, (2001, Stanford University Press, Stanford); 208.

from his experience during the war, one cannot blame him for the difficulty. Rather, it poses a challenge that arises from the difficulty to forgive. The radical challenge to forgive as a way to become responsible for the Other.

It is the attempt of this paper to make one realize the disinterestedness of forgiving despite the difficulties within the lens of the Judaic notion of Teshuvah. The reason why I chose to use the term “Religious Dimension” is inspired by Annette Aronowicz’s introduction in the *Nine Talmudic Readings*. While Levinas delves within Judaism, and participating in its discourse with the Talmud, she finds the term religion as more of matters of relations between the living beings. And the term “living” would emphasize on the interaction between human beings. The Religious Dimension, therefore, as I framed it within the Teshuvah, is to show how Levinas elucidates the philosophical in the Talmudic Commentaries.<sup>5</sup> Levinas’ interview with Richard Kearney also endorses this distinction between the religious dimension and the phenomenological dimension, yet they have a common source of inspiration.<sup>6</sup> This is also to simply differentiate it from the phenomenological or the philosophical dimension of forgiveness as Pardon in Levinas’ magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>7</sup>

### **Levinas’ Lecture, the Mishna and the Gemara**

Levinas gave a talk about forgiveness within the context of the Talmud in a colloquium of French-Jewish intellectuals. The writing of *Toward the Other* from the book, the *Nine Talmudic Readings*, is Levinas’ analysis on forgiveness within the context of the Talmud.<sup>8</sup> What perhaps made his lecture popular, and at the same time controversial among the intellectuals is because of his background as a Jew, and as a survivor of the Holocaust. Accordingly, Levinas discussed on forgiveness in the same way as how the Talmud is constituted, with the *Mishna* and the *Gemara* being discussed with each other. To define the terms, the *Mishna* is the “teaching,” and the *Gemara* is the “commentary” of the *Mishna*.<sup>9</sup> Levinas’ way of commentary consists of analyzing the Talmud beyond its theological language. Here, Levinas insists that the

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, tr. Annette Aronowicz, (1990, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis); xxvii-xxix.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, Ed. Richard Cohen, (1986, State University of New York Press, New York); 18.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis, (1961, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh); 283.

<sup>8</sup> In 1963, an Annual colloquium of French- Jewish Intellectuals by the *Ecole Normale Israelite Orientale* dedicated on the topic of forgiveness, wherein Levinas gave a lecture of forgiveness within his analysis on the Talmud while relating it to German Guilt. See Gary D. Mole, *Cruel Justice, Responsibility and Forgiveness: On Levinas’s Reading Of the Gibeonites*, A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience, Vol. 31 No.3 (October 2011); 258 see also Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 12.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *In Times of the Nation*, (1994, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indiana); x.

extrication of the theological text of the Talmud is by means of understanding God in the human praxis and how it appeals to the moral experience of the human being. With this being said, the manifestation of God within the human praxis does not separate the experience of the Divine and the experience of which philosophy it tries to examine.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore in the moral experience where Levinas finds a common ground between philosophy and the Divine.

The teaching or the *Mishna* is in reference to the Day of Atonement as it is collected in the writings of Rabbi Judah Hanassi, and for the *Gemara* are excerpts from the writings of Rav Ashi and Ravina. Levinas reaffirms the function of the Day of Atonement or *Yom Kippur* as the day where the faithful seek forgiveness from God for their faults committed towards Him. The *Mishnah* states that:

“The transgression of man towards God are forgiven by Him by the Day of Atonement, the transgressions against other people are not forgiven by Him by the Day of Atonement if He has not first appeased the other person.”<sup>11</sup>

And the *Gemara* entails the different stories that comments on the *Mishnah*:

On the Story of Rav and the Butcher:

Rab once had a complaint against a certain butcher and when on the eve of the Day of Atonement he [the butcher] did not come to him, he said: I shall go to him to pacify him. R. Huna met him and asked; Whither are you going Sir? He said, to pacify so and so. He thought: Abba is about to cause one's death. He went there and remained standing before him [the butcher] who was sitting and chopping an [animal's] head. He raised his eyes and saw him [Rab], then said: You are Abba, go away, I will have nothing to do with you. Whilst he was chopping the head, a bone flew off, struck his throat, and killed him.<sup>12</sup>

On the story of Rav and Rav Hanina:

Once Rab was expounding portions of the Bible before Rabbis, and there entered R. Hiyya, whereupon Rab started again from the beginning; as Bar Kappara entered, he started again from the beginning; as R. Simeon, the son of Rabbi entered he started again from the beginning. But when R. Hanina b. Hama entered he said:

<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 15.

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 13.

So often shall I go back? And he did not go over it again. R. Hanina took that amiss. Rab went to him on thirteen eves of the Day of Atonement, but he would not be pacified. But how could he do so, did not R. Jose b. Hanina say: One who asks pardon of his neighbor need not do so more than three times? - It is different with Rab. But how could R. Hanina act so (unforgivingly)? Had not Rab said that if one passes over his rights, all his transgressions are passed over (forgiven)? - Rather: R. Hanina had seen in a dream that Rab was being hanged on a palm tree, and since the tradition is that one who in a dream is hanged on a palm tree will become head (of an Academy) he concluded that authority will be given to him, and so he would not be pacified to the end that he departed to teach Torah in Babylon.<sup>13</sup>

On the story of David and the Gibeonites in 2 Samuel 21:1-6:

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." 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.) 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?" 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?" 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— 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."<sup>14</sup>

The Day of Atonement is a day reserved especially for repentance, and forgiveness in order to appease for one's repentance. The occasion aims for the betterment of the people insofar as forgiveness does not separate itself from

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<sup>13</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, (1974, Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); 175, see also, NTR 13.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Redfield Palmisano, *A Phenomenology of Return: Forgiveness and Atonement in Emmanuel Levinas and Abraham Joshua Heschel*, *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, Vol.7 (2012); 5, see also NTR 25-26.

contrition and repentance. According to Levinas, faults towards God are those that involve non-honoring of the Sabbath day, transgressions of prohibitions and ritual commandments, and idolatry and despair, and from which, God forgives Man without depending on his Goodwill for He is the absolute Other, the Other par excellence, and the Other as Other. Therefore, in contrast to transgressions towards man, obtaining forgiveness from God simply needs to repent for oneself in order to be a forgiven being.<sup>15</sup>

### **Violence and the Conditions of Teshuvah**

While Levinas primarily acknowledges a difference between transgressions to God and the transgressions to man, this part focuses on the other side, on transgressions against man. On the one hand, acts that involved harm against one's neighbors either materially or morally, or verbal offenses are considered transgressions against man. On the other hand, those of transgression of prohibitions and ritual commandments, idolatry and despair, even of non-belief of the triumph of good, failure to honor the Sabbath, and the laws concerning food are considered offenses towards God.<sup>16</sup>

However, transgressions against man in reference to the *Mishna* presupposes the structure where one can only be forgiven by the Other before God can forgive him. With this being said, Levinas notes that the refusal for the Other to forgive, results with having both parties being in danger. Transgressions that harm the Other can either be materially or morally. Verbal offenses for one, is a form of transgression against man. Therefore, as a way of seeking forgiveness towards the Other is by the notion of Teshuvah or return. There is a form of seriousness when it comes to the notion of Teshuvah that it demands the will of the two people involved in the transgression in order to gain its reconciliation. Teshuvah requires the personality of all people involved to participate in the event for no one can take his place.<sup>17</sup> Levinas opens two more conditions for forgiveness, (1) the full awareness of the offender, and (2) the good will of the offended.<sup>18</sup> These conditions deepen the difficulty towards forgiveness insofar that it demands a form of inwardness to the self. In order therefore to gain reconciliation from one's transgressions, it requires that the offender should be fully aware of his sins, and his forgiveness also depends on the good will of the offended who is willing to forgive him. Should either of these conditions be unfulfilled implies the impossibility of forgiveness.

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<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 16.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 16.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 17.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 19.

Meanwhile, Levinas is particular to the seriousness of the verbal offenses as a form of transgression. The seriousness lies in the very notion that speech is a commitment to the Other. What Levinas emphasizes within the context of speech is how when one gives his word to the Other, he is solely responsible for whatever he says to him. And giving one's word to the Other does not just signify a responsibility to the Other, but allows oneself to be subjected to the Other as well. Insofar as Levinas would say that the essence of language is responsibility, speech as a form of responsibility is not limited to discourses between private individuals, rather, it would also involve the entry of the Third. Therefore, speech also allows one to speak on the Other's behalf.<sup>19</sup> With this being said, we can see how speech becomes a serious offense against the Other in the story of Rav and Rav Hanina.

### **Teshuvah or the Return**

Levinas examines a deeper dimension of guilt where it has the capacity to destroy oneself in, and after the act of transgressions. Transgressions that are made towards God and man are due to himself becoming the source of his own cruelty, harmfulness, and because of his self-indulgences that eventually lead to destroy himself in the process<sup>20</sup> Therefore, there is the demand of the interiority of the person that needs forgiveness for his appeasement. Understanding that the person is in need of reconciliation is not only to oneself but also to God and the Other. This willingness to heal one's moral conscience is found in the act of *Teshuvah* in order for the re-establishment of his moral conscience, and thus making the notion of forgiveness as an internal act for the self and a relation with God and of Others. Anya Topolski notes that in defining the Teshuvah by translating it into "forgiveness" might lose its significance of understanding it as a form turning towards goodness.<sup>21</sup> Thinking with Topolski understanding Teshuvah as the return already implies the Levinasian interruption of putting emphasis on the return towards the good in the Other.

To supplement the dynamic of Teshuvah, David Blumenthal's exposition on the notion of Teshuvah can be understood in the five elements on the side of the offender: (1) there is a recognition of one's sins. The offender is aware of his action through his intellectual and moral conscience that analyzes that the action done is from one's motivation from the darkest part of his being; (2) There is an element of remorse where it refers to the feeling of regret and the sense of anguish

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<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 20-21.

<sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 17.

<sup>21</sup> Anya Topolski, *The Ethics and Politics of Teshuvah: Lessons From Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt*, *Journal for Jewish Thought*, Vol.2 (2013); 3.

of being alienated from God; (3) There is a need to desist from sin as a praxis ceases this certain attitude to do sinful activities; (4) To retribute is to make up the damage that has been done; and, (5) Confession, either by ritual of requiring one to perform liturgies of confession and acts of prayers or personal where he inserts individual prayers of which are specific in the liturgy during designated moments.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Levinas would talk about remorse in the context of Pardon where in the moments of remorse comes the possibility of redemption. A redemption for the past time to be modified or effaced.<sup>23</sup> The penitent who participates in such event must keep in mind these steps as they are said to be the preliminary to Teshuvah. He performs Teshuvah in the hope and motivation of the transformation of one's character. The following of these elements is considered to be a *Repentance rooted in Love*. Thus, it is only in the recognition of sinfulness wherein one is aware that it is a deep dimension within the human existence that demands all of one's spiritual, intellectual, moral, and emotional resources.<sup>24</sup>

Forgiveness according to Blumenthal can be categorized into three kinds, *Mechila* or the foregoing of the Other's indebtedness, *Selicha* or the forgiveness as an act of the heart, and *Atonement* or purification. *Mechila* grounds itself on the condition that it requires the offender to correct the transgression done, and the offended party's will to forego of the sin he has committed. This requirement is said to be strict that it indeed requires the offender's repentance in the five elements in order to correct his sins against the offended. Therefore he gains a Jewish "Yes" in the process, however, in reverse, a Jewish "No" is considered if he fails the practice of such. The end of *Mechila* is by understanding that it foregoes the debt from the offender, relieving him of the burden. However, the crime remains. *Selicha*, is an act of empathy that one goes further in understanding the sinner by recognizing him as a human person who also deserves sympathy. *Atonement*, lastly, is understanding that one's sins are totally wiped away by God, considering it as the ultimate forgiveness as it is an existential cleansing.<sup>25</sup> Blumenthal's work gives one a broader understanding of Teshuvah as it focuses on its prescriptive and formulaic nature, especially as to how it is listed with five elements. Teshuvah in this light provides a procedural approach towards attaining forgiveness. Levinas does not necessarily touch these dynamics in *Towards*

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<sup>22</sup> David Blumenthal, "Repentance and Forgiveness," *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (2005) p; 69-75; 70-71.

<sup>23</sup> Pardon is another description of forgiveness within his major work of *Totality and Infinity*. The idea of Pardon is the very possibility of allowing the violent past within time to be purified into an ethical present. It allows the idea of redemption for the past of the person to be renewed and given hope. This discussion however is beyond the limit of this paper. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*; 281-284.

<sup>24</sup> David Blumenthal, "Repentance and Forgiveness;" 71-73.

<sup>25</sup> David Blumenthal, "Repentance and Forgiveness;" 72-74.



*the Other*, however, the elements resemble the conditions for forgiveness regarding the full awareness of the offender and the good will of the offended.

Michael de Saint Cheron delves the idea of Teshuvah deep in its universal concept within the Judaic tradition. Saint Cheron notes that Teshuvah is a form of ritual and a unique form of vocation. It is a ritual insofar as it is done by the person to remind him of his temporary divine mark. This temporary divine mark also requires its renewal, and to renew of such is to become part of Israel, to become a Jew. The renewal of the temporary divine mark is possible through the “gates of Teshuvah.” It is a unique form of vocation that being a Jew does not necessarily mean that one forgives only towards his own kind, but rather, forgiveness extends towards humanity. For it is through Teshuvah that one has to take on the responsibility towards humanity for the salvation of man, to remind everyone of their temporary divine mark for its renewal.<sup>26</sup> And to reecho Levinas, he says that being Jewish is not something exclusive to Jews, rather, it is a universal responsibility towards humanity insofar that man is elected to become responsible despite undergoing persecution.<sup>27</sup>

In order to see how Teshuvah becomes a universal act, and a sign of one's Jewishness, Anya Topolski's analysis on Levinas' notion on the Teshuvah focuses on the act of Teshuvah as a double movement that involves one turning towards the Other, and a turn towards goodness. She emphasizes that the relationship between the subject, the Other, and God is a horizontal structure rather than a vertical structure of God and the subject. She points out that in the horizontal relationship, there is a form of significance that the Other is far more important than that with God within the notion of Teshuvah. It, therefore, signifies an interhuman relationship in one's relationship with God in the very involvement with the Other. Insofar as the subject who needs forgiveness of forgiveness, she reverberates Levinas by saying that acquiring forgiveness from the Other is necessary in order to be forgiven by God. She also adds the notion of the Trace of God wherein the subject's willingness to change for himself through Teshuvah, his encounter with the Other in the process allows him to also have a relation with God. God is present to the return to itself.<sup>28</sup>

To synthesize, understanding Teshuvah and its conditions emphasizes on the human responsibility to forgive the Other who has wronged you, or to seek forgiveness to the person whom you have committed transgression to. The very

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<sup>26</sup> Michael de Saint Cheron, *Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas 1983-1994*, (2010, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh); 115-118.

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *From the Rise of Nihilism to the Carnal Jew in Difficult Freedom*, tr. Sean Hand, (1997, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore); 225.

<sup>28</sup> Anya Topolski, *The Ethics and Politics of Teshuvah: Lessons From Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt*, *Journal for Jewish Thought*, Vol.2 (2013); 3-5.

process of Teshuvah, this structure of forgiveness between the subject, the Other, and God marks an anthropocentric view of forgiveness. Anthropocentric in a sense that forgiveness from God does not occur within the confines of human solitude, rather forgiveness from God also requires the subject to be responsible to the Other to whom he has transgressed. This is why Topolski's interpretation on the horizontal structure makes a clearer interpretation of the relationship between man, the Other, and God. The notion of God manifests in the human moral conscience, and therefore, is materialized into human praxis. This anthropocentric view exemplifies Levinas' assertion that when God is referred as "Elohim," in the bible verse of *If a man offends another man, Elohim will reconcile*, the term Elohim is translated into a Judge. Forgiveness is done within an earthly tribunal to create justice; God does not intervene in this tribunal rather he only intercedes to remove the faults of the offender in Teshuvah.<sup>29</sup> This non-interference manifest is what Michael de Saint Cheron calls "God's Supreme Humility."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Teshuvah becomes solely an affair between humans as it denotes a mode of sociality. Forgiveness becomes a strictly human affair that God does not intervene towards it. It is recentered towards the ethical where such act is possible in the face-to-face encounter. However, it is important to note that understanding forgiveness in this light is not because it is directed towards one's appeasement or his liberation from his suffering. Rather, forgiveness as a disinterested act is always directed towards the Other. This is in consonance with Robert Bernasconi's idea that forgiveness [pardon] is not in the virtue of the one who forgives, but towards the one who is forgiven.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Ethical Interruption of Teshuvah: Levinas' Commentary**

This part of the paper is where Levinas evaluates the idea of Teshuvah using his ideas on ethical responsibility. Here, I argue that Levinas comments on the stories by insinuating his ethical responsibility that exposes the limits of Teshuvah from its conditional and prescriptive nature. To insinuate his ethics in Teshuvah, I argue that this can be seen as a form of interruption or a system. That instead of forgiving the Other because of the reasons laid down by the Talmud, it is because forgiving is the very spirit of one's religiosity through becoming ethical for the Other.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 18-19.

<sup>30</sup> Michael de Saint Cheron, *Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas 1983-1994*, (2010, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh); 139.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Bernasconi's work is more directed towards the idea of pardon in the philosophical works of Levinas. However, the remarking idea that Bernasconi espouses is the inversion of the Hegelian Reconciliation where forgiveness starts not from oneself, but for the Other. See Robert Bernasconi, "Hegel and Levinas: The Possibility of Forgiveness and Reconciliation" in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, (2005, Routledge, New York); 66.

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics and Spirit," *Difficult Freedom* 3-10.

The story on Rav and the Butcher refers to how Rav, the offended party took, the responsibility to forgive rather than the offender, the butcher, who should have the obligation to seek forgiveness. It has been established that the offended party should be the one to seek forgiveness in accordance with the conditions, as an act of *Teshuvah*. Levinas notes that there is a reversal of obligation from Rav that he felt that it was his duty to forgive. This reversal gave Rav a sense of worry in place of the butcher who has offended him and a certain premature confidence in the humanity of the Other.<sup>33</sup>

The story of Rav and Rav Hanina entails the conflict of the verbal offense. Rabbis came in late and Rav had to repeat the reading from the beginning every time a rabbi comes in. When Rav Hanina came in last, Rav complained how many times he must return to the text, and thus did not go back and left Rav Hanina offended. For thirteen years during *Yom Kippur*, Rav went to seek forgiveness from Rav Hanina but he refused to forgive. As the dictate of the conditions of forgiveness is concerned without the goodwill of Rav Hanina, Rav cannot be forgiven, and therefore no forgiveness ever occurred.<sup>34</sup>

However, Levinas noted different aspects on this text by highlighting the analysis of the decision of Rav Hanina for not forgiving Rav. Levinas gave a caveat of the conditions of the Teshuvah with the statement by Rav Jose Bar Hanina that the offender is freed from the burden of his sins if he has been refused three times by the offended party.<sup>35</sup> There are nuances within the story as Levinas points out. One is how Rav Hanina refused Rav's request for forgiveness thirteen times. Levinas revisits *Gemara* further as he illustrates that Rav Hanina dreamt of a time when Rav was said to be hanging from a palm tree. The dream is a symbolism or perhaps a premonition that whoever was said to be in the dream is destined to sovereignty. Therefore, Rav Hanina was able to foresee the future that Rav will become the head of the academy. As Rav Hanina decides not to forgive him, Rav had decided to leave and teach in Babylon.

Levinas reevaluates the notion of the good will of the offended as part of the conditions through Rav Hanina's subjectivity. Levinas wonders how Rav Hanina could not forgive Rav for thirteen times. He finds that Rav Hanina could not forgive Rav because of his dream that Rav will become the head of the academy. However, Rav could not know of such dream, thus in essence he was unaware of such ambition. Rav simply transgressed out of aggression, and due to the lack of his attention. Therefore,

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<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 22-23.

<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 23.

<sup>35</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 21-22.

Levinas points out that one can still forgive if pressed to the limit, for those who have spoken unconsciously.<sup>36</sup> Levinas provides perhaps a way out of such quandary. That actions done out of aggression could mean a lack of attention, and therefore, one can still forgive if pressed to the limit. However, Levinas still considered that Rav knew of such ambition, therefore Rav Hanina would not forgive Rav in that circumstance.

It is in this part of the lecture that Levinas relates his experience with Nazism. He finds it difficult to forgive his mentor, Martin Heidegger, because of his Nazi affiliation and his awareness of the transgression. Levinas recognizes that the Colloquium to some extent would point out and acknowledge the Holocaust. But for Levinas, being a scholar and philosopher who gave a talk on forgiveness, the topic puts him in a controversial spot that it centers on the discourse of forgiving Heidegger which intrigues those who attended especially knowing that Levinas was under the tutelage of Heidegger. But what is worth noting in the statement is how Levinas says that it is difficult rather than impossible. Seeing the situation through the lens of the Talmud, the conditions would not satisfy for forgiveness because Heidegger never sought for forgiveness despite being aware of his Anti-Semitism.<sup>37</sup> This is how Michael Morgan assessed the problem of the “impossibility of forgiveness” because of the emphasis on the word “full” in “full awareness of the offended party.” Morgan emphasized that debates regarding forgiving Heidegger opens the problem as to whether one can forgive a person who is fully aware of such. For Levinas, as Morgan argued, if Heidegger was fully aware of his actions, then it is not impossible for Levinas to forgive him, however it is difficult.<sup>38</sup>

Colin Davis, on the other hand, made an analysis of Levinas’ theory of forgiveness within the context of the story of Rav and Rav Hanina. He noted that in the realm of psychoanalysis, the role of the unconscious reveals the nuance of the story by trying to point out the real offender. In this case, Rav Hanina since he has dreamt of the ambition of Rav being the head of the Academy, without Rav knowing of such, it is possible that Rav Hanina’s act of not forgiving Rav for thirteen days is his very unconscious. Davis points out that Levinas was too rash in concluding the good will of Rav Hanina. He points out that when Rav Hanina dreamt of Rav becoming the next head of the school, it reveals his unconscious “murderous” desire, thus the decision of not forgiving Rav for thirteen times and forcing him to leave was an actualization of his unconscious desire. Davis points out the very drama of

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<sup>36</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 23-25.

<sup>37</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 25.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*; 37-39.

the notion of forgiveness within the conditions of the good will when it becomes complicated when he points out that Rav Hanina may have been the real offender. He exposes the inability to determine who is the real offender in certain situations. Therefore, acting within the conditions of Teshuvah may be “relatively simple but impossible in practice” as Davis points out. Thus, he insists that despite the inability to determine the real offender, one must be prepared in answering for the fault of other people for it is in the condition of one’s exposure to the Other.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, Levinas notes that it is better to avoid sin than to be granted forgiveness, and to not offend rather than fixing the damage that has been done after the act of transgression.<sup>40</sup> The story of Rav and Rav Hanina would indeed pose an undeterminable problem between the offender and the offended. Nevertheless, Levinas gives a way out of such quandary that one can forgive if pressed to the limit. My take on this discussion is that Levinas was right to point out the limits of such prescriptive and formulaic nature of forgiveness by seeing how some acts of transgressions could also entail a lack of attention. Therefore, there is still a possibility to forgive. Morgan and Davis were correct to point out that there is a nuance in determining the fullness awareness of the offender, how problematic it is when the offended has the upper hand. To move out from such impossibility is to reconcile the difficulty to forgive. If one is indeed pressed to the limit, one can forgive despite how difficult it can be.

The last story is about the problem of the Gibeonites. During his reign, famine had become one of the problems King David had to solve as the ruler. The cause of such atrocity to the land was said to be of a political wrong according to Levinas in his analysis to the story of David and the Gibeonites in 2 Samuel 21 of the Bible. Famine struck the land and the political wrong referred to here is King Saul’s transgression against the Gibeonites. As David sought for God, it was revealed to him that such bloodshed done by Saul was the reason for the famine to last for three years. This analysis of the “Political Wrong” can be understood as a form of transgression that was not a concern between an individual with another individual, rather, a transgression of an individual against a society. Moreover, the atrocity done by Saul was the execution of the priests of Nov who provided means of subsistence to the Gibeonites. Similarly, Levinas points out that the removal of the source of the means of subsistence can be related to the Nuremberg Laws where the laws were said to do the same thing towards the Jews. For extermination does not necessarily

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<sup>39</sup> Colin Davis, *Levinas on Forgiveness: On the Intransigence of Rav Hanina*, PMLA, Vol. 117 No.2 (Mar 2002); 301-302.

<sup>40</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 24.

start through killings but uprooting economic factors and the oppression to society, where it will eventually lead to the Holocaust.<sup>41</sup>

For David to seek for forgiveness from God, he must then seek it from the Gibeonites insofar as the conditions dictate. However, a problem arises when both Saul and the forefathers of the Gibeonites have passed away. This opens the dynamic of forgiveness in forgiving on behalf of their generation. As David sought forgiveness to the Gibeonites, however, they demanded the heads of the children of Saul. Levinas pays close attention to David's disposition as he turns in the children of Saul to the Gibeonites, and to the events that came after.

Levinas analyzes the question whether children should be punished for the transgressions of their parents. The problem arises since Saul and the ancestors of the Gibeonites are dead, the conditions of Teshuvah that require both the offender and the offended to perform Teshuvah would seem impossible. Therefore, the answer is found in the Talmud by saying that "a letter from the Torah be damaged than the name of the Eternal be profaned,"<sup>42</sup> therefore it was simply right to punish the children by the sins of their parents so as to not tolerate the transgression against the stranger. There is a suspension of the conditions in order to carry out a form of reparation, as performed by David and the present Gibeonites. For the respect towards the strangers is equivalent to the sanctification of the Name of the Eternal. There is a connection between the Eternal and the stranger that the idea when people are to respect other people also becomes a form of respect towards God.

While David is said to have performed Teshuvah in surrendering the children of Saul to the Gibeonites, Levinas raises a suspicion when David spared a few of Saul's children. David spared Mephisbosheth, a son of Saul, and Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, Saul's Concubine. Levinas paid close attention to this intention of David sparing these children. It is said that David took pity or mercy, on both children due to the inherent cruelty of the law. And Levinas would argue that the objective conditions should not necessarily leave out the role of individual. Therefore, "there is no reason without a heart, and a heart without a reason."<sup>43</sup>

David's pity opens the dimension of analyzing the conditional notion of forgiveness from the humanistic standpoint in deviating from its rational order. Forgiveness, therefore, should coincide with Justice to gain the sense of mercy of "*Rahamim*." This showcases that a person should see beyond the strict nature of justice

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<sup>41</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 27.

<sup>42</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 27.

<sup>43</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 27-29.

in the Law. Levinas would argue that justice that is acquired from the Talion Law of *eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*, which lacks the human and ethical nature. In order for one to be a Jew, justice that is acquired in the law must have its disinterested goodness, humility, and pity. The justification as to why Gibeonites were aggressive in seeking justice is precisely because Gibeonites were of the Amoreans, and not of Israelian descent. Therefore, to be part of Israel is to have humility and pity. Forgiveness then, coincides with the notion of justice that embraces the ideas of humility, pity, and disinterested goodness to be part of Israel, as a Jew.<sup>44</sup>

At this point, Levinas assesses that forgiveness has a political aspect as it needs the idea of justice. For Levinas, justice answers the quandary of choosing between two equal Others through thematizing, weighing, and comparing of Others in equal footing in the court of justice.<sup>45</sup> In this case, David had to choose between sparing the children of Saul as demanded by the Gibeonites, or surrendering them for their disposal in the accomplishment of Teshuvah. Justice works here in the arbitration of the state where the court must decide between two others, and this is a necessary violence as Levinas says. However, Levinas clarified that despite such necessity for violence in the act of justice, justice is watched over with love in order to re-direct it towards the ethical.<sup>46</sup> The whole story of David and the Gibeonites resembles the political aspect of Levinas' Teshuvah inasmuch there is a necessity of the state and a conflict between two parties.

Gary Mole's work examines a comprehensive discussion on the third story of David and the Gibeonites while interconnecting it within the political dynamic of Levinas in the coming of the Third and the idea of justice and love. He connects the religious dimension, or the confessional works to the philosophical in his attempt to explain forgiveness in its political dynamic. Mole provides a comprehensive historical background with regards to the Gibeonites. He shows that there were said to be deceivers during King Joshua's reign until eventually they were discovered and turned into water bearers and wood cutters. This supplements Levinas' brief discussion.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*; 28.

<sup>45</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis, (1978, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania); 157.

<sup>46</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy Love Justice," in *Entre Nous Thinking of the Other*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (1998, Columbia University Press, New York), 105-107.

<sup>47</sup> The Gibeonites are part of the Hivvite people from the Land of Canaan before Joshua's Conquest. They resisted Israelite conquest by deceiving Joshua's camp in Gilgal by pretending to be exhausted travelers from a far non-Canaanite land. Joshua formed an alliance within them until the deception was revealed, in the fear of extermination, they were given occupations as servants, being woodchoppers and water drawers after appealing for their defense. See Gary D. Mole, *Cruel Justice, Responsibility and Forgiveness: On Levinas's Reading of the Gibeonites A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 31 (3): 253-271; 254.

He discusses further that the removal of the letter from the Torah does not only entail allowing the sons of Saul to be surrendered to the Gibeonites. Rather, Mole also exposes that when the Talmud prescribes that the dead bodies are to be left displayed overnight, the bodies can be left displayed for six months so as to show how God condemns those who take advantage of the poor and the powerless. This removal of the letter from the Torah or the suspension of it exposes a form of horror in the conditions of forgiveness for it gives the offended party the power to assert justice out of his own. And this also shows how the Old Testament is prevalent of themes of vengeance and retribution. Mole reaffirms Levinas' assertion that as the Gibeonites would seek to demand justice for themselves, they did it out of retribution. And their retribution is justified through the Talion Law. Therefore, it illustrates that the Talion Law has an inherent cruel element that lacks its humanistic side. The Gibeonites simply show their cruel demand for justice.<sup>48</sup> Mole concludes that the story of the Gibeonites can be understood within the light of German Guilt as it can be related to the Holocaust and Nazism. He would heavily assert the notions of Justice, Responsibility, pity, the Other, the Stranger and reassert the very humanistic side of the Law as it should govern the sphere of society. From there, these reflections can arguably be extended and pondered in matters of conflicts and in regard to terrorism.<sup>49</sup>

To give an example in the contemporary time, Joseph Palmisano's work uses the ethics of forgiveness in the Teshuvah, particularly the story of David and the Gibeonites as to reconcile the Catholic Church' past faults in the present. Palmisano uses Levinas' commentary on the Teshuvah as a way to challenge the Catholic Church's *Memory and Reconciliation*. Performing Teshuvah, therefore, is an act of empathy as Palmisano describes that seeking forgiveness is a return to dialogue. And such dialogue is done through the face-to-face encounter. He concludes that the Catholic church can learn a lot about forgiveness coming from Judaism as its spiritual brother. Palmisano emphasizes that the church should heed to this value of responsibility in remembering its faults throughout history, and to atone for such in Teshuvah.<sup>50</sup> What is promising in Palmisano's article is how uses the Levinasian idea of Teshuvah as to challenge political and religious structures to remember their faults, and to value the idea of dialogue through empathy and humility. While it is promising to think of it this way, however, it should be noted that Levinasian responsibility is not guided under values such as empathy nor humility. Just as responsibility is not

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<sup>48</sup> Gary D. Mole, Cruel Justice, Responsibility and Forgiveness: On Levinas's Reading of the Gibeonites; 257-265.

<sup>49</sup> Gary D. Mole, Cruel Justice, Responsibility and Forgiveness: On Levinas's Reading of the Gibeonites; 260, 267.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Redfield Palmisano, A Phenomenology of Return: Forgiveness and Atonement in Emmanuel Levinas and Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, Vol. 7, (2012); 1-13.



conflated with duty, obedience, nor pity, “responsibility is responsibility through and through.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Forgiveness as The Return to the Good, to the Other: A Conclusion**

Despite the struggle in understanding the Talmudic texts, Levinas still provides a comprehensive and significant contribution in revisiting the theological nature within the Judaic language and retranslating it in the phenomenological, through ethics. It is in the human praxis of becoming responsible to the Other where Levinas would emphasize the need for Judaism to be relevant in the contemporary society and being open to the world. Therefore, the “religious” in the Religious Dimension of Teshuvah is therefore emphasized. Teshuvah as much as it has its relation from its Judaic roots, the religiosity that Teshuvah should also emphasize is its capacity to enter human relations. Therefore, as Teshuvah or forgiveness requires one’s disposition to enter a relationship with the Other, in attaining his forgiveness, marks the notion of forgiveness to be truly ethical, and at the same time religious. Teshuvah as it takes the character of becoming a responsibility for the Other is a mark of the spirit of religiosity in Judaism,<sup>52</sup> and the exemplification of its “austere humanism.”<sup>53</sup>

But to assert the very religious side of Teshuvah would also require its overturning. Levinas while commenting within the Talmud, would also give a criticism to the conditional and prescriptive nature of Teshuvah. From the three stories that Levinas comments, each one of them can be questioned by asserting different circumstances in regard to forgiveness. Levinas points out their limits. One can see the reversal of responsibility of the offended (Rav) who chose to visit his offender (the butcher), and not the other way around. It is not often that the offended would garner the strength and courage to forgive his offender, but the gesture shows how the subject becomes for the Other. An exemplification of being towards goodness, a disinterestedness. For it is in the modality of becoming “disinterested” that the subject does not revert itself as an ego, but rather in devoting itself in giving, in expression, towards the suffering of the Other.<sup>54</sup> It shows that even for the offended, there is still a glimpse of the ethical when he chooses to come for his offender, in order to be forgiven by God.

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<sup>51</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height” in *Basic Philosophical Writings* ed. Adriaan Peperzaak, Simon Critchley, Robert Bernasconi, (1996, Bloomington Indiana University Press); 17-19.

<sup>52</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and Spirit” in *Difficult Freedom*; 10.

<sup>53</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Loving the Torah More Than God” in *Difficult Freedom*, 145.

<sup>54</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis, (1978, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania); 50-51.

Levinas points out the nuance of the “good will” of the offended as he suspects the possibility of Rav Hanina as the offender in his own event. It exposes the possibilities where the offended might have the upper hand against his offender. Relying on the good will of the offended could perhaps be not enough. As Davis points out these conditions and its nuances, forgiveness may be simple, but impossible to practice. However, despite such difficulty or impossibility that these conditions dictate, forgiveness is a form of bearing the suffering of oneself in order to still forgive despite how difficult. As Levinas says, the suffering and the violence that one must undergo in election is redeemed by the Good.<sup>55</sup> While we must pass over in silence as to how Levinas finds it difficult to forgive Heidegger, he would still pose the challenge for man to forgive despite the difficulty.

And one can see how Levinas would argue on Teshuvah as it is related to justice. Understanding it in the light of justice implies that forgiveness enters a political realm. Levinas describes his politics as “justice as the necessity for thematization, weighing, comprehension of two Others in equal footing in the court of justice.”<sup>56</sup> His commentary on the Gibeonites extends towards the discourse on the notion of justice where it should be questioned according to its spirit. Forgiveness became the medium where achieving justice could be possible, but Levinas would contend that if justice does not coincide with dis-interested goodness, it has the possibility to be retributive.

Levinas examines those conditions for forgiveness implies limits to its actualization. Teshuvah or forgiveness in Levinas’ philosophy is rich in interpretation especially how scholars choose and expound on the different dimensions of Teshuvah within the context of the three stories. Indeed, in the three stories, the Gemara exposes the different situations where the prescriptive and formulaic nature of Teshuvah is pushed to its limit. Without a doubt, these scholars do a fine job in providing comprehensive discussions to enrich the fullness of Levinas’ commentary in exposing the impossibilities of forgiveness and how one overcomes it through Levinas’ philosophy.

Therefore, one can see that the very assessment of Levinas by insinuating the ethical would prove that certain limitations of the conditions of forgiveness can be answered through his ethical responsibility. To understand that in reassessing the conditional nature of forgiveness would simply mean that Ethics could happen any time. Robert Bernasconi would point out that whenever Levinas would talk about his ethics, he is not prescribing a method, or a certain form of action, rather he describes

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<sup>55</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*; 15.

<sup>56</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*; 157.

what happens.<sup>57</sup> To affirm the very religious side of Forgiveness is not simply to have a notion of God, or being prescribed religious practices. Rather, it is to be reminded how the praxis in itself should always be directed towards the Other. And in this sense, Teshuvah should be understood not simply as an act that is prescribed nor a ritual only to be done during Yom Kippur, but rather an act of dis-interested goodness, a return to the Other, as it is also a return to God. To return to the Other means putting oneself into discourse, to respond to the Other, in allowing him to be appeased to the suffering he experiences despite the difficulty.**PS**

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Bernasconi, "Levinas' Ethical Critique of Levinasian Ethics" in *Totality and Infinity at 50*, (2012, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania); 255.

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