

THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF *TESHUVAH*: LESSONS FROM EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND HANNAH ARENDT

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Abstract

One of the unique aspects of *teshuvah* is its intrinsic movement of turning (*shoov*). While the process, or enactment, of *teshuvah* certainly calls for forgiveness, a turn away from a past wrong-doing, *teshuvah* calls for another turn, one towards the *yetzer-tov*. While both Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) were thinkers on the margins between the Western philosophical tradition and the Judaic, they clearly valued the two-fold movement of *teshuvah*. What more, their shared experiences, led both to interpret *teshuvah* as a turn from the violence of singularity towards the *tikkum olam* of alterity.

For Levinas this meant going *beyond being* towards ethics and the Talmud, whereas for Arendt it meant going beyond philosophy towards the plurality created between human beings. While their respective methods of thought take divergent and often conflicting paths, Arendt and Levinas are nonetheless connected by a fundamental commitment to *teshuvah*.

Keywords: Levinas, Arendt, *teshuvah*, ethics, politics, alterity, responsibility, plurality.

Introduction

Take a moment to consider these two accounts of the twentieth century.

Two world wars in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions, followed by no peace treaty for the vanquished and no respite for the victor, have needed in the anticipation of a third World War between the two remaining world powers. This moment of anticipation is like the calm that settles after all hopes have died. Under the most diverse conditions and disparate circumstances, we watch the development of the same phenomena—homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth. Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted.¹

That history of a peace, a freedom and well-being promised on the basis of a light that a universal knowledge projected on the world and human society – even unto the religious messages that sought justification for themselves in the truths of knowledge – that history is not recognizable in its millennia of fratricidal struggles, political or bloody, of imperialism, scorn, exploitation of the human being, down to our century of world wars, the genocides of the Holocaust and terrorism; unemployment and continual desperate poverty of the Third World; ruthless doctrines and cruelty of fascism and national socialism, right down to the supreme paradox of the defence of man and his rights being perverted into Stalinism.²

The weight of Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) and Emmanuel Levinas' (1906-1995) personal, political and philosophical accounts of these horrors should not be taken lightly. Yet, we today must all too often don an emotionally resistant raincoat in order to simply 'make it through the day' while being constantly bombarded by such accounts in newspapers and journals, in public and in private, and concerning the past, present and future. If we allowed the weight of these words to have their full impact we would not be able to wake-up every mornings to do our jobs, let alone enjoy life. Nonetheless, if we wish to ensure that the future is other than the past described by Arendt and Levinas, we must make it our responsibility, as citizens of the world, to divest ourselves of emotional resistance even if only for brief, albeit unbearable, moments.

What strikes one is how meaningless life must have seemed after the experience of the Shoah, and how hollow the hope for peace must have felt. Novels such as those written by Primo Levi help one understand that even greater than the struggle to survive the Shoah was the struggle afterwards not to give in to despair. As such, it is remarkable that neither of these thinkers succumbed to these emotions and allowed themselves to wallow in depression or be overcome by hate. They could have decided that life after Auschwitz was simply too much to bear. They could have declared that humanity could never

¹ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973) .vii.

² Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 32.

recover its ‘soul’ in light of the Nazi genocide. But they didn’t. It is their inspirational choice to believe in humanity’s potential—to see beyond humanity’s inhumanity—and find a way for humanity to perform *teshuvah*, that motivates this reflection. While I refuse to reduce their ethical and political contributions to the Shoah, the significance of this event changed their lives to such a degree that neither could continue along philosophical path they had embarked upon prior to the war. Both sought to help humanity transform itself by means of *teshuvah*. For both this meant first, turning away from errors and, secondly, learning how to better the world. In this contribution, I intend to show that for Levinas this meant going *beyond being* towards ethics and the *Talmud*,³ while for Arendt it meant going beyond the singularity of philosophy (by redefining the meaning of political philosophy⁴) towards the plurality created between human beings in the *polis*. Thus while their thought takes divergent, and often conflicting paths, Arendt and Levinas both view *teshuvah* as fundamental to their respective projects and to their shared hope for humanity’s ability to repair the world. Before I begin to explore the distinct paths each took in response to this promise, it is important to acknowledge how their life stories help situate their comments on *teshuvah*. Although their intellectual paths often crossed it was only once, towards the end of their lives, that they themselves met.

Intersecting Life Stories

Before turning to their thought, I would like to begin by presenting snippets of their life stories, exemplary of many Jewish intellectuals in the twentieth century. Born in 1906 in central Europe, both studied, for different periods of time, in Germany. More specifically, both studied in Heidelberg with Heidegger, whose words and deeds forever left their mark. Arendt and Levinas did in fact share the same classroom in the 20’s and yet it was for different courses.⁵ Confronted by rising anti-Semitism, both Arendt and Levinas were forced to dramatically re-orient the course of their lives. Interestingly, while both sought refuge in Paris in the 30’s and traveled in the same philosophical, cultural, and Jewish circles, there is no sign that they met. Soon after the war broke out in Europe, Levinas found himself in a POW camp at the same time as Arendt was being held in an internment camp. Against all odds, both survived the war—more than one can say for most of their friends and families.

After the war Levinas returned to France, while Arendt remained in the United States and became an American citizen. Both quickly returned to the only means they had to make sense of what had happened—by thinking and writing—and returned, each in their own fashion, to the phenomenological tradition that both had inherited from Heidegger. Unlike Arendt, who forgave Heidegger for his activities during the war and praised him publicly at his eightieth birthday celebrations, Levinas was never able to forgive his old mentor. What is interesting about this difference is that both Arendt and Levinas prioritize forgiveness in their writings and associate it with ethics. Levinas, a practicing Jew, was much more aware of the traditional meaning of *teshuvah* and as such never forgave Heidegger, who had never asked to be forgiven (which would have required that he admit his error) or committed himself to doing *teshuvah*. Arendt was also familiar with the Judaic concept of *teshuvah*⁶ and yet she clearly did not feel that it was necessary for Heidegger to make a public apology for what she interpreted as a private matter. Prior to the Shoah, neither had responded to the rising tide of anti-Semitism by seeking answers in the Judaic tradition.⁷ It was only after the war that both re-dedicated themselves with vigor to Judaism, although in very different ways. While Levinas turned to the Talmud, perhaps as a result of the esoteric education he received from Monsieur Chouchani, the death of Arendt’s teacher of Judaism, Walter Benjamin, meant that her education remained incomplete.

While it seems that their paths diverged from this point on, with Arendt defining herself increasingly as a political thinker and Levinas defining himself more and more as an ethical thinker, there were

³ Elisabeth Weber, *Questioning Judaism*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 8

⁴ For an excellent analysis of this Arendtian tension, see Martine Leibovici, *Hannah Arendt (1906–1975): La Passion De Comprendre* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000), 142.

⁵ Arendt and Levinas’ signatures’ signatures are both present on attendance sheets from the university, though on different pages.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken, 2008), 42.

⁷ In my usage of the term Judaic, I seek to draw an analytically useful albeit artificial distinction from both Judaism, the religion, and Jewish(ness), the cultural heritage. While this distinction can only be synthetically maintained, it is nonetheless an important one. The Judaic represents the voice of an ancient tradition, almost brought to an end by the *Shoah*, a tradition which inhabits the intellectually rich space between faith and philosophy (for more, see Anya Topolski, “A Judaic Political Ethics of Intersubjectivity: Between Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas.” Springer International Academic Publishers, [under review].

those, like Jean Wahl, who saw the resonance in their thought as early as 1947.⁸ Thus while their ideas crossed paths in the 1940's, it was not until a quarter-century later that they themselves met. By this time both had found fame, of sorts. Levinas had been welcomed into the French academic circles and had even become a sort of ethical celebrity, while Arendt, no stranger to controversy, had become a household name in America, albeit not always an appreciated one. For this reason, in 1970, the Jesuit University of Loyola chose to honour both of these Jewish thinkers with doctorates and it was on stage, in Chicago, that they met. By one account at least, neither was particularly impressed with the other at this meeting.⁹ While they may not have been impressed with each other, I have been profoundly impressed by both their lives and writings. It is for this reason that I chose to engage them in an intellectual dialogue on the notion of *teshuvah*, a subject that plays a central role in their respective projects.

Levinas' Turn To The Talmud

One of the greatest difficulties faced by anyone seeking to understand Levinas' unique notion of ethics as first philosophy is how to read his so-called confessional texts. As I have argued elsewhere, the failure to consider the discourse, and differences, between his philosophical and so-called confessional texts leads to a misunderstanding, not only of the importance of the Judaic for Levinas, but also of the meaning of certain philosophical terms.¹⁰ In the case of the notion of *teshuvah*, the common translation of *teshuvah* as "forgiveness" fails to communicate the double-movement of this process, losing a layer of the active meaning of responsibility that is the cornerstone of Levinas' ethics. *Teshuvah* goes beyond recognising one's wrongs and asking for forgiveness, it is equally a process of turning towards goodness (for example, by means of *mitzvot*).

In "Toward the Other," a Talmudic reading included in the collection *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Levinas interprets the part of the *Mishnah* found in tractate *Yoma* 85a-b, a central text in terms of the Judaic.¹¹ This tractate is central to an understanding of the notion of *teshuvah* within the Judaic and focuses on the particular holiday, *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement. By analysing Levinas' reading of this passage from the *Mishnah*, I intend to develop the relationship between *teshuvah* and justice.¹² What is clearly stated in tractate *Yoma* 87a is that humans must first ask each other for forgiveness before approaching God, individually and communally, and engaging in the process of return called for by for *teshuvah*. Once one has recognised ones wrongdoing and asked another for forgiveness, one must dedicate oneself to altering one's actions and seeking to repair the harm done to all others. Levinas' reading focuses on the asymmetrical inter-human relationship of responsibility that forms the basis of his notions of ethics and justice.

He begins by reminding his audience of his previous Talmudic reading in which he deconstructed the "Messianic Texts" as a way to consider the tension between personal and divine responsibility for political injustice. For Levinas, who "mis"translates *teshuvah* as forgiveness, reading the Talmud is a moral experience of universal dimensions (15). For the rabbis, the question of responsibility is related to the specific question of whether the coming of the messianic age is conditional on some form of *teshuvah*, or depends simply on the performance of *mitzvot*. As is clear from his previous Talmudic reading, for Levinas, responsibility is a question of human freedom:

The phenomenon of Haman (or Hitler) [a comparison often made on Purim] is placed in the perspective of messianism. Only repentance can cause salvation, but objective events of a political character produce this repentance which is both a manifestation of human freedom and a product of an external cause.¹³

This is a very important indication of Levinas' understanding of how concrete historical events are related to *teshuvah*. In this context, *teshuvah* requires both an external non-divine cause and human freedom. Thus the salvation associated with messianism is an entirely human affair, possible only

⁸ Jean Wahl included both of their works in his journal, *Deucalion* (n°2), published in 1947. Arendt's article, entitled 'La philosophie de l'existence', Levinas' 'L'Autre dans Proust' upon which Arendt comments in a footnote to *Origins* saying "Compare the interesting remarks on this subject by E. Levinas" (80).

⁹ This is the report of Françoise Collin, a student of Levinas' who worked on Arendt and was present at the meeting.

¹⁰ For more on this see: Anya Topolski, "Listening to the 'Language of the Other,'" in *Radical Passivity: Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas*, Ed. Benda Hofmeyr (Springer International Academic Publishers, 2008), pp. 180–208.

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Toward the Other" in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 12–29. The text Levinas uses is from the Babylonian Talmud.

¹² This is a topic that Arendt also explores in several of her writings and which she defines as an example of an ethic appropriate to the political realm. This topic is also of great significance for attempts at Jewish-Christian reconciliation after the *Shoah*.

¹³ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 72.

insofar as we are (each) responsible for the world. It is also clear from his reference to Hitler (who was much more proximate to his audience than Haman) that this responsibility is of particular relevance to the political context within which he speaks. Levinas connects his reference to the Shoah to what was perhaps the most difficult question facing the Jewish community in Europe (and throughout the world), that of forgiveness. He continues, pointing out that when one human commits an offence against another, *teshuvah* is necessary. Thus, if political violence, which is not acceptable in messianic politics, stems from inter-human offences, it must be resolved before (and separately from) the coming of the messianic age.¹⁴ For Levinas, events such as the Shoah have human sources and must be addressed by human beings, a position that Arendt shares in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann. A consequence of promoting an absolute sense of freedom as a condition for absolute ethics is that it also necessitates the possibility of absolute immorality, eliminating any guarantee of a ‘promised’ messianic age.¹⁵ It is an inter-human responsibility to make this dream a reality. There are no guarantees—no metaphysical certainties—but there is hope, based on the idea that messianic politics is “grounded” on human participation and freedom. Levinas and Arendt both see freedom and hope as central to recovering the world after the Shoah.

Returning to his reflection on tractate *Yoma*, Levinas once again reminds us that we as individuals are responsible for justice in that “the instrument of forgiveness is in my hands.”¹⁶ Levinas’ interpretation begins with the *Mishnah*’s teaching on the relationship between the other and God (or Other). Levinas describes this relation—between the self, other, and Other—as a triangle fundamental to the Judaic. This “triangle” is a symbol of the relational of alterity to divinity in the Judaic. He explains that while the relationship between the self and other is asymmetrical, it is also horizontal, unlike the relation between the self and divinity. Concretely, it signifies that *teshuvah* is first and foremost an inter-human process and thus fundamentally horizontal. I must seek the pardon of other(s) whom I may have injured (which requires that I complete the process of *teshuvah*) in order to begin to be forgiven by God. Although it might seem that in such a relation the other is a means to an end (the Other), the other’s pardon is an end in itself and much more important than the latter. In this sense, Levinas transforms a vertical relation into a horizontal one, although the end goal is to experience these relations as intertwined. “It is well understood that faults toward one’s neighbours are *ipso facto* offences toward God.”¹⁷

Levinas’ understanding of both responsibility and justice, which also form two corners of the relational triangle within which the self is always struggling, is clearly rooted in the notion of *teshuvah*. My relation to alterity, in the form of substitution, is central to my responsibility to the other, or to justice for all others. Although Levinas does not develop the concept of substitution in the Talmudic readings, the language and concepts exemplify the correspondence between his philosophical terminology and his interpretation of the meaning of *teshuvah* for the Judaic. What defines the self as ethical is the choice to respond to the call or face of the other, a response that requires taking responsibility for that other. This is done by means of substitution, and for Levinas, “the ego ... is this original expiation.”¹⁸ Taking responsibility means to apologise for prioritising my being over that of the stranger. Reversing this ontological prioritisation means to recognise how the other transforms “me” into an “I.” In this sense, the other constitutes the self.

Given how different Levinas’ terminology seems from Arendt’s, it is worth noting the parallel between this claim and the role plurality plays in her work defining the “who” in the public realm. Without others, the question “who am I” could not be answered. In this sense Arendt also recognises that plurality constitutes subjectivity. What more, Arendt here seems—without perhaps intending to—to be repeating an essential aspect of *teshuvah*. As declared in tractate *Yoma*, wrongs committed toward another human being must be repented in public. Yet another point of intersection arises in relation to the importance of the notions of forgiveness and responsibility in the constitution of the self. Consider for example, the process of expiation according to Jewish thought, central to Yom Kippur. Without forgiveness from others, the self cannot forgive itself nor can the self ask God for forgiveness. For this reason, responsibility is asymmetrical. It is not meant to be equally distributed, and as my particular burden, it must be suffered in singularity. The weight of responsibility, for Levinas like Arendt

¹⁴ Interestingly enough inter-human is a term that returns in Levinas later work. It is suggested that because of the criticism he received from feminists he could no longer refer to fraternity, which is its synonym. In ‘Peace and Proximity’, Levinas explains that the most significant question concerning the inter-human is the question of justice, an idea that is already present here. For more on this see Hilary Putnam, “Levinas and Judaism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 51.

¹⁵ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 77.

¹⁶ Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 118.

(following the Judaic tradition), is the unbearable weight of the world inscribed at the heart of the subject.¹⁹

Each individual ... is called to leave in his turn, or without awaiting his turn, the concept of the ego ... to respond with responsibility: *me*, that is, *here I am for the others*.²⁰

In referring to the immense responsibility of substitution, Levinas makes clear that ‘no one can take my place.’²¹ This was one of the reasons why Levinas felt he could never return to Germany after the Shoah. As many others had not survived to make this choice, Levinas felt it was wrong to act as if he could take their place. An analogous experience is shared by Simon Wiesenthal in *The Sunflower*.²² Forced by the Nazis to sit by the bedside of a dying soldier who asked for forgiveness, Wiesenthal—knowing his life was at risk—refused to grant him this; in accordance with the principles of the first aspect of *teshuvah* (which concern turning away from one’s wrongdoings by asking for forgiveness), this must be done by bringing ten witness’ to the grave of the murdered (which in this case was impossible) and asking publically for forgiveness. In other words, Wiesenthal could not grant forgiveness in the name of those whom the soldier had so brutally murdered. While he did attempt to comfort this dying young man, who sincerely wished to repent, Wiesenthal sought to make him understand the difference between their traditions, a difference that did not permit him to forgive the soldier for acts committed to another. Had Wiesenthal granted forgiveness, it would have suggested that both all Jews, and all the people that the soldier had murdered, are the same, precisely contrary to the ethics of the Judaic that Levinas defines as first philosophy.

While Levinas’ notion of *teshuvah* certainly prioritises the horizontal relation to the other, God is present in the self’s return to itself. *Teshuvah*, which is a reversal, an acceptance of my responsibility followed by a change in my actions which demonstrates to the other that I have been ‘touched’ by my encounter, is for Levinas an action that brings one into relation with God. It is God’s trace that marks *teshuvah* as central to ethics in that it is only with the possibility of forgiveness that one can accept the infinite weight of such responsibility for the other.

The effort the moral conscience makes to re-establish itself as moral conscience, *Teshuvah*, or Return, is simultaneously the relation with God and an absolutely internal event.²³

Another aspect of justice, as presented in Levinas’ interpretation of *teshuvah*, is its relation to a community. *Teshuvah* (a necessary prerequisite for justice both in its relational triangle and in its focus on responsibility for others) is—contrary to ‘common-sense’ understanding—not a solitary undertaking. A fundamental precept of the Judaic is that people are always in relation to the other and to the world shared with others—even prior to one’s birth and after one’s death. Not only is this precept central to both Arendt and Levinas’ thought, it is also a bridge between their distinct ethical and political notions of responsibility. What this means is that a person is always responsible for the wrongs committed by their community, which can be defined minimally, as their family, or maximally, as humanity. While Levinas “supports” this view in his so-called philosophical writings by referring to Dostoyevsky, he recognises its Talmudic origin. In tractate *Sotah* 37b, it is written:

What is the issue between them [the different rabbis debating this issue]? — R. Mesharsheya said: The point between them is that of personal responsibility and responsibility for others because it is held according to the Rabbis that each Israelite is responsible for the conduct of the rest.²⁴

The inter-subjective aspect of justice is one of the unique elements of Levinas’ view, as well as that of the Judaic in general. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks also comments upon the horizontal and communal nature of Judaic responsibility and justice in his reading of *Parsha Devarim*, reminding us that some of Judaism’s most important prayers are to be said in a *minyan* (a group of at least ten people) and that God cannot be approached alone.²⁵ The structure of prayer thus reaffirms the basic principle that people are always responsible for one other, an idea that is expressed both by Arendt and Levinas but cannot exist

¹⁹ David Banon, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Paul Ricœur. *Emmanuel Lévinas: Philosophe Et Pédagogue* (Paris: Editions du Nadir de l’Alliance israélite universelle, 1998), 25.

²⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 185.

²¹ Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 17.

²² Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (New York: Schocken, 1998).

²³ Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 17.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "Ideology and Idealism," in *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Sean Hand (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989), 245.

²⁵ For example, the standing recitation of the Amidah and reading from the Torah scrolls, as well as the recitation of the mourner’s Kaddish, all require the presence of ten full members of the Jewish community.

without the possibility of *teshuvah*. Jonathan Sacks repeats this position which he describes as the “intense *peoplehood* dimension of Judaism”

Today’s secular culture is highly individualistic Nowadays we often think that G-d is about *me*, not *us*. Nor is this new. Religion has often been thought of as a private engagement of the soul. ... Judaism holds the precise opposite. ‘It is not good for man [*adam*, which has no gender in Hebrew] to be alone.’²⁶

According to Sacks, “So deep does this idea go that the word for human ‘life’ in Judaism – *chayyim* – is in the plural, as if life alone were not a life.” What Sacks here describes as central to Judaism, its external plural orientation, is exactly what Levinas (and Arendt as we will see shortly) believes the world needs after the Shoah. Not only must we, humanity, recognise the mistakes made, we must also recognise our responsibility, and relationality, for the other. It is this double turn that makes *teshuvah* a unique process. While for Sacks, the Judaic is a faith of plurality rather than singularity, Levinas goes beyond the Judaic to make a moral claim of universal relevance. Nonetheless, it is clear that both see the importance of emphasising the Judaic element of alterity, as expressed in community and plurality.

The person concerned has committed no sin - except that of holding himself apart from his people. Yet that is sufficient to rob him of the world to come. Judaism is a collective faith - the faith of a community, a people, a nation. This is all the more striking because Judaism is a faith that ascribes radical value to the individual. ‘One who saves a single life is as if he had saved an entire universe.’²⁷

It is clear that for Levinas, like Sacks and Arendt, justice is tied to collective or social responsibility, something which was clearly lacking during, and after, the Shoah.²⁸ In the final pages of this reading Levinas speaks of the extent of justice by relating the story of Saul and the Gibeonites to the events of the Shoah. According to the *midrash* (narrative) of this biblical story,

In 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, that oppression and economic uprooting already indicate its beginnings, that the laws of Nuremberg already contain the seeds of the horrors of the extermination camps and the “final solution.”²⁹

In modern political terms, Levinas is speaking here of the relationship between crimes of omission, such as leaving a community without a means of subsistence, and crimes of commission, such as the crimes of Auschwitz. By leaving the Gibeonites without a way of life, by not acting, Saul is committing a crime that is only one degree removed from murder. This speaks to us today in that we passively participate in this type of injustice on a daily basis simply by living in the West, a standard of life that comes at the cost of the vast majority of the globe. While we must seek *teshuvah* from ourselves, as well as others, for such crimes of omission, we must equally face our responsibility to respond to the call of the other and to act ethically. Thus while *teshuvah* is a necessary constituent of responsibility, and thus of Levinas’ ethics, it is—unlike a relationship to God—a horizontal relationship, one that occurs between human beings and is thus also a responsibility we must all bear. Yet, as Levinas’ ethics makes clear, responsibility begins with the self responding to the call of other and it is thus the self that must accept the immense weight of the asymmetrical relationship to the other that is ethics, a weight that is made bearable by the possibility—albeit not an uncomplicated one—of *teshuvah*.

Arendt’s Turn to Plurality

Just as Levinas’ readers must decide for themselves the relationship between Levinas’ philosophical and so-called confessional texts, Arendt’s readers must also begin their analysis by overcoming academic bias’ that have developed amongst scholars seeking to draw sharp boundaries between the realm of politics, ethics and faith. Reading Arendt through the canonized Platonic model of political philosophy

²⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Devarim: The Birth of a Nation,” in *Covenant and Conversation: Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha* (July 29th 2006).

²⁷ Sacks, ‘Devarim.’ Sacks, like Levinas and Arendt, although of another generation, also connects his reflections to the topic of the Shoah in the concluding phrase, taken from the Talmud, a famous today as it is used in reference to the ‘Righteous Among Nations’, the non-Jews who risked their lives, and that of their families, to save a single Jewish life.

²⁸ Levinas makes an off-handed remark in the section regarding German guilt (Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 20), which reminds us that the background to his thought is the Shoah although he does not address the issue explicitly in this essay.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

prevents one from appreciating that her approach is *hors categorie*. If anything, Arendt's writings—both in form and content—are best understood as a response to the events she encountered in her life. Originally a theology student, Arendt's experience of persecution made her acutely aware of her Jewish identity, an awareness that marked all of her writings. While many of these writings, collected in *The Jew As Pariah* as well as *The Jewish Writings*, are of immense ethical and political importance, their radically challenge to the depiction of Arendt as a non-ethical thinker nostalgic for the Greeks often means that they are given little attention by readers of Arendt. By sidelining these texts most of Arendt's readers fail to respect the ethical and political importance of her analyses of *teshuvah*. Like Levinas, Arendt transforms the vertical dimension of *teshuvah* into a horizontal activity that occurs in the between and appreciates it as fundamental for the possibility of the political.

Contrary to the mainstream reading of Arendt, that “the most difficult aspect of Arendt's political theory is her insistence that the ethical be removed from the political,”³⁰ it is my contention that she recognises the need for an “ethics” of the *polis* and provides us with at least two concrete examples. Rather than view these as exceptions to her notion of the political, I see them as evidence of a Judaic influence in her thought. While Arendt focuses closely on the notion of forgiveness in her 1958 *The Human Condition*, this is by no means her first consideration of the topic. This fact is however overlooked by scholars who fail to consider her Jewish writings in the 1930's and 40's on *teshuvah*, which she, like Levinas, translates as “forgiveness.” In an essay entitled “The Jewish Question,” Arendt refers to the importance of *teshuvah* in Jewish circles in 1933, which understood the crisis surrounding them to be their responsibility, a responsibility which called for:

Teshuva, repentance, return to Judaism, let us take stock of ourselves ... an admission of one's own guilt, both politically, and if you will, morally.³¹

Thus like Levinas, she reflects on *teshuvah* in the context of the acts of horror being committed during the war. Yet unlike Levinas, she expresses her frustration with the Jewish community for failing to recognize that they must not take responsibility for what is occurring but instead recognize the responsibility of others. It is these others who must engage in the process of *teshuvah*, without which there is no hope for the world. As the notions of forgiveness and *teshuvah* are absent in her post-war writings on totalitarianism, the appearance of forgiveness is understood as a novelty to readers of *The Human Condition*. While Arendt's most systematic political treatise is clearly inspired by Greek and Roman notions of politics, the sections on promising and forgiving do not fit the overall structure of *The Human Condition* (labour, work, and action) nor the content (both promising and forgiveness are discussed in highly religious and ethical tones). In these two sections she speaks of sins, divinity, and miracles – notions that are odd in the context of the work as a whole as well as providing a sharp contrast to the standard depiction of Arendt as uninterested in ethics or religion. When reconnected to her earlier Jewish writings, including those on *teshuvah*, it is clear that Arendt, like Levinas and Sacks, sees *teshuvah* to be a process that includes asking forgiveness but requires doing something positive as well: in this case, acting politically by means of words and deeds to create a shared world.

It is in relation to action that Arendt introduces two human “faculties” rooted in plurality that support and strengthen the political: forgiveness and promising.³² These, I would argue, represent the two aspects of turning expressed by *teshuvah*, one oriented towards the past, the other towards the future.

Since these faculties [forgiving and promising] correspond so closely to the human condition of plurality, their role in politics establishes a diametrically different set of guiding principles from the ‘moral’ [as opposed to ethical] standards inherent in the Platonic notion of rule.³³

While traditionally both the act of forgiving another and the act making promises are understood as acts of an individual, this is clearly not what Arendt intends. While this may baffle a reader unfamiliar with her earlier writings or the notion of *teshuvah*, it makes perfect sense to consider forgiveness an act that occurs between people, complemented by promises, and necessary to create and strengthen the sometimes-fragile bonds between people. While Levinas and Sacks see *teshuvah* as community oriented, Arendt defines this communal character its primary political characteristic of *teshuvah*. It is for this reason that she explicitly distinguishes both faculties (forgiveness and promising) from a morality rooted in singularity. Arendt is here differentiating her view from that of Kant—who grounded morality in autonomy—and seeking an ethics rooted in plurality. In many ways, this is precisely what Levinas has done in terms of alterity (although Arendt fails to recognise it).

³⁰ Birmingham, Peg, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 131.

³¹ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 42.

³² *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998)

³³ *Ibid.*, 237.

Such an ethics is in fact essential to Arendt's notion of the political. Action would become as meaningless and violent as it was under totalitarianism if there was no possibility of a "return." Much like Levinas' notion of *teshuvah*, it allows for the actor's actions, which are irreversible, to be transcended, and for the wrongs of the past to be mended. As Arendt realised when writing on Eichmann, while we cannot forgive the act which has transpired, leaving its mark on the world, we must find a means to repair the world, for which the traditional Judaic term is *tikkum olam*. While *teshuvah* was not possible for Eichmann, who failed to take responsibility for his actions (the first step in the process of returning), Arendt reminds us that:

Trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving . . . releasing men from what they have done unknowingly.³⁴

Eichmann, who failed in consideration and judgement (both of which are necessary for the political according to Arendt), neither asked to be released from his crimes, nor did he recognise the consequences of his actions. What is clear from Arendt's account of forgiveness and promises, the two movements of *teshuva*, is that *teshuva* is an agonizingly difficult process that requires the constant recognition and taking up of responsibility by an actor. This, she argues, is necessary in a world that is constantly changing, and requires actors who are willing to begin again when they take make mistakes and to take risks. Only through *teshuvah* can this world marked by uncertainty be made a little more humane.

But the fact that the same *who*, revealed in action and speech, remains also the subject of forgiving is the deepest reason why nobody can forgive himself; here, as in action and speech generally, we are dependent upon others, to whom we appear in a distinctness which we ourselves are unable to perceive.³⁵

By forgiving others, we remind ourselves of the fragile, shared, world in which we all live and depend upon each other. It is this forgiveness that allows us to make sincere promises to each other as part of building a shared future. In this sense, *teshuvah* is a perfect example of a horizontal ethics that arises from inter-subjective relations rooted in plurality. Likewise, the human ability to make promises, also seen by Arendt as occurring in the between, helps to support the unpredictability of plurality. Arendt tells a Biblical story—a rare occurrence in her writings—that calls attention to the power of promises:

Abraham, the man from Ur, whose whole story, as the Bible tells it, shows such a passionate drive toward making covenants that it is as though he departed from his country for no other reason than to try out the power of mutual promise in the wilderness of the world, until eventually God himself agreed to make a Covenant with him.³⁶

As this story shows, promises are reminders of the need to publicly demonstrate our faith and trust in each other, thereby strengthening the fragile horizontal relations between people. Promises, which are a response to the unpredictability of action, provide the world with stability and hope. Because of the nature of action, whose ends are unknowable, the world can often appear extremely unstable and intimidating. Through agreements, covenants and compacts (as opposed to contracts), humans make public promises to each other to offer security to those in the public realm. While contracts create a "third," often in the form of institutions, to symbolise this agreement, covenants and compacts (which Arendt discusses in *On Revolution*) are rooted directly in inter-subjective relations. Forgiveness and promises, she writes,

arise directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking, and thus ... they are like control mechanisms built into the very faculty to start new and unending processes.³⁷

The significance of these two examples of political ethics have been noted, and yet Arendt's readers remain convinced that she was absolutely (although Arendt was rarely "absolute" about anything") against any role for ethics in the *polis*. Yet, it seems that Arendt herself had another sort of ethics in mind when she presented these examples, an ethics that arises from a plurality and in the between, rather than coming from without or above. A relational ethics, rooted in a "relative" and horizontal transcendence,³⁸ helps to strengthen the fragile human realm by providing the web of relations with faith

³⁴ *Ibid*, 240.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 243.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 243.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 246.

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Penguin, 2006), 243.

and hope, both of which are fundamental to the political. It is thus unfortunate that Arendt never explicitly explored the political ethics implied by these examples. Had she done so she would have provided many of her critics with a response to their overly simplistic accusation that her concept of the political is aesthetic, unethical, and anti-religious.

Teshuvah as The Foundation of Solidarity

While Levinas and Arendt each sought to make sense of the world after Auschwitz by means of distinct philosophical projects—concerning ethics and politics respectively—neither gave up hope in humanity’s potential to change. While both recognised that the vulnerability, fragility, and unpredictability, of human beings could lead to the horrors of the Shoah, they equally appreciated and admired the fact that these same human beings, when inspired, were cable of great acts. What became clear to both was that *teshuvah* was an integral aspect of creating the solidarity necessary for the commission of great acts. It is impossible to create a community, whether rooted in the alterity of ethics or the plurality of the political, without *teshuvah*. While both chose to use the term forgiveness in many of their philosophical writings, it is clear from their extended writings that both were inspired by subtly different notions of *teshuvah* within the Judaic.

First and foremost both Levinas and Arendt speak of the notion of turning or returning. It is this movement away from the singularity of the self towards the other that is essential for their respective projects. Furthermore, both also sought to emphasize the horizontal aspects of this relationality as the ground of solidarity between people. While *teshuvah* is often seen as being between the self, other and God, both Levinas and Arendt sought to re-interpret the notion of God by means of others, or community, emphasising the importance of *teshuvah* not only for the individual harmed but also the world. Levinas’ comparison of Haman to Hitler as well as Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann make clear that both took seriously the Judaic condition for *teshuvah* that requires that the perpetrator acknowledges the harm committed, consider its future consequences, and commit, by means of action, to repairing the harm done (as well as refraining from committing further harm). As neither Hitler nor Eichmann even acknowledged their crimes, *teshuvah* was not possible. Nonetheless, both Levinas and Arendt understood that this acknowledgement would not have been sufficient to return hope and faith in humanity to the world after Auschwitz.

While Levinas sought an ethics of alterity and Arendt a politics of plurality, *teshuvah* remains a fundamental component of each. This is perhaps the most striking connection between their projects. *Teshuvah* is a necessary feature of the fundamental relationality, a post-foundational form of solidarity, both sought to create at the centre of their respective projects. In the post-modern, post-Shoah reality within which both Arendt and Levinas wrote, there were no more certainties, guarantees or absolutes, only the empowerment and hope created by respect for alterity and the community of plurality. The sheer weight of Levinas’ notion of ethical responsibility is unbearable without the process of *teshuvah*. Likewise, the immense courage and risk required for Arendtian politics requires the possibility of *teshuvah* to address the irreversibility of action. Both understood that without the hope of *teshuvah*, humanity becomes inhumane.

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