

The Rabbi on the Train: Reflections on Forgiveness

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I. THE MAN ON THE TRAIN

Anne Michaels's 1996 novel *Fugitive Pieces* contains the following parable:

A respected rabbi is asked to speak to the congregation of a neighbouring village. The rabbi, rather famous for his practical wisdom, is approached for advice wherever he goes. Wishing to have a few hours to himself on the train, he disguises himself in shabby clothes and, with his withered posture, passes for a peasant. The disguise is so effective that he evokes disapproving stares and whispered insults from the well-to-do passengers around him. When the rabbi arrives at his destination, he's met by the dignitaries of the community who greet him with warmth and respect, tactfully ignoring his appearance. Those who ridiculed him on the train realize his prominence and their error and immediately beg his forgiveness. The old man is silent. For months after, these Jews—who, after all, consider themselves good and pious men—implore the rabbi to absolve them. Finally, when almost a year has passed, they come to the old man on the Day of Awe when, it is written, each man must forgive his fellow. But the rabbi refuses to speak. Exasperated, they finally raise their voices: How can a holy man commit such a sin—to withhold forgiveness on this day of days? The rabbi smiles seriously. 'All this time you have been asking the wrong man. You must ask the man on the train to forgive you.'

Of course it's every peasant whose forgiveness must be sought. But the rabbi's point is even more tyrannical:

nothing erases the immoral act. Not forgiveness. Not confession.

And even if an act could be forgiven, no one could bear the responsibility of forgiveness on behalf of the dead. No act of violence is ever resolved. When the one who can forgive can no longer speak, there is only silence.ⁱ

This parable is markedly similar, though not identical, to Abraham Joshua Heschel's contribution to Simon Wiesenthal's book, *The Sunflower*;ⁱⁱ Heschel's tale, in turn, is a brief gloss on a longer storyⁱⁱⁱ about Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik, the Brisker Rav—an ancestor of Heschel's contemporary, Joseph Soloveitchik.^{iv} In the version recorded by R. Hanoch Teller, the Brisker Rav goes on to explain:

They thought I was a plain, simple Jew [...] and that's why they acted the way they did. Had they known who I was, I'm certain they would never have behaved so heartlessly. The insult, therefore, was not directed at me, so I cannot forgive them. Their only hope of atonement lies in begging forgiveness from plain, simple Jews and in changing their attitude towards their humble brethren.^v

In Heschel's version, the Rav is considerably briefer: 'He offended a common man. Let [him] go to [that man] and ask for forgiveness.' Heschel, like Michaels, then expounds upon the moral of the tale: 'No one can forgive crimes committed against other people [...] According to Jewish tradition, even God Himself can only forgive sins committed against Himself, not against man.'

II.

This parable of impossible forgiveness anticipates Jacques Derrida, whose 2001 essay 'On Forgiveness' maintains that forgiveness only has meaning and coherence as a discrete concept when it is unconditional, elided neither with rehabilitation, forgetting, nor amnesty; when it is devoid of any trace of exchange, neither sought nor accompanied by any expression of repentance,

and when the act to be forgiven is outside any ordinary economy of grace—that is to say, unforgiveable: 'If I say, 'I forgive you on the condition that, asking forgiveness, you would thus have changed and would no longer be the same', do I forgive? What do I forgive? And whom?'^{vi}

In this scheme, it is not just the man on the train who has passed beyond reach, but also his fellow passengers, who through their repentance have ceased to be the people who tormented him; the people *asking* forgiveness are not the people who can be forgiven, just as the man of whom they are asking it is not the one who can grant it. By the very act of asking they have removed the act from forgiveness's reach. The Rabbi in the parable cannot, and does not, echo a certain first century Rabbi in saying 'Go in peace, your sins are forgiven'. We could read this as a comforting turn: acknowledgement of a wrong by itself constitutes a repentance which obviates the need for forgiveness and renders it impossible by virtue of its superfluity. But if forgiveness does not erase the act, then neither does repentance; even such a cozy interpretation (and its coziness runs quite contrary to the instincts of most readers) offers less of a pathway to normalisation of relations than it does a displacement of the rupture from between you-and-I to between that-one-and-that-other-one, both of whom are now beyond reach and therefore beyond redemption.

This is an issue that shapes the well-worn stereotype of Jews and Judaism as harsh, legalistic, and incapable of forgiveness: in most Christian worldviews, *nothing* is beyond redemption, because Christian theology assumes an already-redeemed world. Even if redemption is postponed until the eschaton, it remains a settled fact. There is significant debate about what this means, and humanity's responsibility, but that the fact of redemption is seldom disputed.

Derrida's essay contains substantial echoes of the work of Hannah Arendt—indeed, he cites (albeit glancingly) the fifth chapter

of *The Human Condition*, and while he makes no direct reference to *Responsibility and Judgement*, the question of forgiveness that he explores is intimately linked to the questions of guilt and moral culpability explored by Arendt therein. A collective, Arendt says, cannot be morally responsible, because a collective cannot actually act—only individuals can do so. Claims of collective guilt—guilt which adheres to an entire a society for actions undertaken ‘in their name’—are not only philosophically incoherent, but actually morally dangerous, because they dilute responsibility and obscure actual culpability: ‘Where all are guilty, nobody is.’^{vii}

Arendt admits a limited utility to speaking of collectives, but she highlights the fictive dimensions of such language: ‘collective ownership ... is a contradiction in terms’;^{viii} ‘men cannot become citizens of the world as they are citizens of their countries, and social men cannot own collectively as family and household men own their private property’;^{ix} a collective cannot bear any responsibility for wrongs done, nor, indeed, make any claim regarding wrongs done against itself; a collective cannot promise, cannot forgive. A collective has no capacity for action. Rather, it is formed by, and in aid of, the actions of individuals; it ‘assumes, in the case of many men mutually bound by promises, a certain limited reality.’^x

It is this state of being an individual among individuals that Arendt means when she invokes the notion of plurality, a way of bridging the gap between man and men without falling into the trap of erasing difference so often prompted by sloppy thinking about collectives. Our existence as members of a collective is a story that we tell about our lives in the world. In turn, the very fictivity of such a collective existence becomes part of the instability that individuals act to dispel through the medium of the promise:

The unpredictability which the act of making promises at least partially dispels is of a twofold nature: it arises

simultaneously out of the 'darkness of the human heart', that is, the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act. ^{xi}

But at the same time, it is the existence of an individual among other individuals which renders the entire enterprise of human existence meaningful:

Man's inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all. ^{xii}

Here, Arendt figures plurality as an object of desire, something which must be paid for in the currency of uncertainty which is then mitigated by the act of promising and the promise of forgiveness. This is an important slippage away from the treatment of plurality as *the* basic fact of human existence, which she presents at the start of *The Human Condition*. To understand the meaning of this we may perhaps, take a cue from the pairing of plurality with reality, which, while not subjected to the same development as a technical term, we can infer to be a similarly inescapable fact of existence. The suggestion is that even conditions which must be taken as given are still to be paid for; the basic fact of human existence is debt, from which all of human activity is an attempt to extricate ourselves. To whom that debt is owed, and whether it actually can ever be paid,

are questions with which Arendt does not engage with, in that particular text, though they are crucial questions for my purposes in this article: the payment of such debts literally constitutes the redemption of the world.

III.

This discourse, like all discourses of the past century, is shadowed by the Holocaust, which is figured in the imaginations of all of my interlocutors as the paradigmatic unforgivable, of which all victims have passed from the earth and no other dares contemplate forgiveness on their behalf, even if to forgive on behalf of another were possible. You must ask the man on the train—and all the men, and women, and children that were on the iconic trains that arrived at the gates of the synecdochal Auschwitz (there weren't always trains; it wasn't always Auschwitz) have passed even further beyond reach than Anne Michaels's peasant, who never existed at all.

Except, of course, they haven't; while heartbreakingly small in number compared to the masses that entered into the system of ghettos and camps—not to mention those who did not make it even that far, victims of the mobile extermination units that operated on the Eastern Front or whose lives, like Walter Benjamin's, ended in flight—not all victims perished. Some survived; in spite of the rhetoric of incommensurability between the states of 'victim' and 'survivor' first popularised by feminist theorists,^{xiii} the fact of an individual's continued existence does not erase past victimisation, any more than victimisation destroys an individual's capacity to survive. The Holocaust was more than straightforward state-sponsored murder; it was the industrialised process of dehumanisation that made murder on such a scale not only possible, but normal.^{xiv} Thus, even if one accepts that no person may forgive the ending of a life on behalf of the one whose life has

ended, it does not follow that the Holocaust is unforgiveable *in toto*: there are survivors, who are capable—though in no way obligated—of forgiving the specific wrongs done to them.

Derrida knows this; his target in his essay is specifically institutionalised forgiveness, that passes from a collective of victims to a collective of perpetrators, upon the receipt of an adequate performance of apology, rather than from particular individuals to other particular individuals. This does not just have the effect of making the guilty less specifically guilty; the collapsing of individual experiences into a collective victimisation erases the narratives of survivors, and in so doing obviates the possibility of even partial forgiveness. The institutionalisation of forgiveness thus accomplishes the final erasure that the original offence did not. Derrida focuses his critique on the transactional aspects of institutionalised forgiveness, but I suggest that this collapsing of identity is the true point of conceptual incoherence. We are, perhaps, not that far apart in our analyses; the institutionalisation of individual relationships into economic transactions that are replicated on a scale that can be imagined as global is, of course, one of the dominant features of late capitalism.

Nevertheless, Derrida's focus on transactionalism leads him to slip, without noting it, between institutionalised and individual forgiveness, treating the latter not only as a model for, but actually interchangeable with, the former. This slippage is hardly unique to Derrida, as the use of the story of the Rabbi on the train as a model for discussions of forgiveness and the Holocaust, such as within *Fugitive Pieces* or *The Sunflower*, makes clear. But such slippage is not only problematic for its contribution to conceptual incoherence; the fact that the institutional processes which Derrida critiques are derived—explicitly or implicitly—from Christian structures of confession, pardon, and redemption, also contributes to the assumption of fundamental contrast between Jewish and Christian political theologies, in which Christianity once again offers an

expansive and universalising system from which Jewish thinkers must dissent.

This tension is also evident in Arendt's work on forgiveness, again in fifth chapter of *The Human Condition*. Arendt takes as her model the words of Jesus of Nazareth, who she hails as '[t]he discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs':^{xv} 'And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.'^{xvi} Unlike Derrida, who discounts such everyday transactionalism in order to focus on forgiveness applied to unforgiveable acts, Arendt specifically excludes questions of radical evil from her discussion, noting that 'according to Jesus, they will be taken care of by God in the Last Judgment, which plays no role whatsoever in life on earth'.^{xvii} In contrast to Derrida, who asserts that 'One could never, in the ordinary sense of the words, found a politics or law on forgiveness', Arendt sees forgiveness as foundational to political action: the concept of forgiveness is necessary in order to mitigate 'the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting.'^{xviii}

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever.^{xix}

Arendt grounds such forgiveness 'for the sake of the person' in the recognition of plurality, of being one human among many others engaged in the same enterprise of being human, faced with the 'impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act', which moves us to pardon, not for the sake of any particular

person, but for the sake of personhood itself, out of sympathy for the dilemma of action, unpredictability, etc., that entangles us all.

IV. THE MAN ON THE TRAIN, AGAIN

And so we return to the man on the train—or, more precisely, to the end of the story: Yom Kippur, ‘the Day of Awe when, it is written, each man must forgive his fellow.’ There are two notions contained in this sentence which trouble my philosophical picture of forgiveness. The first is easy: it is written that each man [*sic*] *must* forgive his fellow. What sort of forgiveness is compelled by force of law—even holy law? None at all.

On this point, a further variation on the parable is perhaps more helpful: Rabbi Yisrael Salanter was also insulted by a young man on a train; when they reached their destination and the youth saw the men assembled to greet the Rabbi, he sought pardon, which the Rabbi granted immediately. They engaged in conversation whereupon Rav Salanter learned that the youth was hoping to become a *schochet*, and Rav Salanter took the youth into his own home and went to great lengths to promote his advancement; when the youth finally managed to pass his ordination exams, he thanked the Rabbi and asked why he had shown such generosity. Salanter’s response is quite typical of the *mussar* movement, which he founded:

It is easy to say 'I forgive you'. But deep down, how does one really know if he still bears a grudge? [...] The only way to remove a grudge is to take action. One who helps another develops a love for the one he aided. By helping you, I created a true love which is overwhelmingly more powerful than the words, 'I forgive you'.^{xx}

The second issue is slightly less obvious: the climax of the tale comes at Yom Kippur, when observant Jews gather together in the synagogue to atone for transgressions against God—and it is a collective atonement: *Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalanu*—we have trespassed, we have dealt treacherously, we have robbed. This is not a peculiarity of the Yom Kippur prayerbook, but rather a point at which the prayerbook discloses a rather tricky point of Jewish theology: unlike the Noachide and Abrahamic covenants, which were agreed between God and a single individual and then inherited by the descendants of that individual, the Mosaic covenant is collective from the moment of its inception; it is between God and *kal Yisrael*, the entirety of the Jewish people, ‘those who are standing here today in the presence of the Lord and those who are not here’ (Deut 29:15). According to the liturgical logic, a collective covenant is a collective responsibility: when one individual fails to uphold it, *all* are required to atone, if not for direct transgression then for failure to prevent the transgression of others.

The collective responsibility which underlies the Yom Kippur liturgy is, however, quite different from the collective responsibility which Arendt and Derrida argue against. The collective responsibility assumed in institutionalised forgiveness, in which a single figure (usually an elected official) speaks on behalf of the totality of a society is a diffusion of responsibility, from individuals who chose to participate in specific actions, to a generalised social structure in which things ‘just happen’. The liturgy of Yom Kippur represents a re-distribution of responsibility from a generalised collective back to individuals; the plural form of the verbs used does not negate the fact that each member of the community confesses as one human being among others, an individual bound up directly in responsibility *to* and *for* other individuals, out of sympathy for the dilemmas of action, unpredictability, and covenantal obligation that entangle all.

Forgiveness, then, is not forgetting, amnesty, or exchange, but instead recognition: a recognition of our own susceptibility to error, a susceptibility which necessarily passes into our systems and institutions, in spite of our best efforts to guard against it. Absent this recognition, our attempts at enacting justice will not only fail, but be compounded in their failure by a confusion regarding the locus of responsibility, leading to the erasure of individual actions and identities. The redemption of the world does not come from outside of the world, but from recognising ourselves as inescapably part of the world.

i Michaels, A. *Fugitive Pieces*, London 1997, p. 153

ii Wisenthal, S. *The Sunflower*, New York 1976.

iii At least, there is a longer version of the tale in circulation; the longest version I have identified thus far is related by Hanoch Teller (quoted below) however, as this version is dated considerably later than Heschel's, and the record of the tale's development and transmission is otherwise sparse, it is reasonable to be cautious about the possibility of embellishment on Teller's part.

iv That is to say that while the story has the character of a Hasidic tale, of the sort collected by Martin Buber and consumed by his audience of mostly assimilated German Jews as representations of the authentic folk culture they had left behind, it comes from the misnagidic tradition

v Teller, Hanoch. *A Midrash and a Maaseh*, 2 vols, New York 1996, vol. 2, pp. 252-255

vi Derrida, J. 'On Forgiveness', in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, New York 2005, p. 38

vii Arendt, H. 'Collective Responsibility', in *Responsibility & Judgement*, New York 2003, p. 147. The summary above is a gloss of the first half of the book, leaning heavily on 'Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship' and 'Collective Responsibility'.

viii *Ibid.* 276

ix *Ibid* 277.

x *Ibid* 265.

xi *Ibid* 264.

xii *Ibid* 264.

xiii See especially Kelly, L. *Surviving Sexual Violence* Cambridge 1988.

xiv See, especially, Scarry, E. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford 1985.

xv Arendt, *The Human Condition* 238.

xvi Luke 17:3-4, qtd in Arendt, *The Human Condition* 239-240.

xvii Arendt, *The Human Condition* 240.

xviii *Ibid* 236.

xix *Ibid* 237.

xx This tale comes from R. Mordechai Kamenetzky's *drash* on Parshat Mishpatim, published at <http://www.torah.org/learning/drasha/5758/mishpatim.html> (Accessed 14 November 2014).