

# TOWARD THE OTHER

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■ From the Tractate Yoma, pp. 85a–85b ■

**Mishna** *The transgressions of man toward God are forgiven him by the Day of Atonement; the transgressions against other people are not forgiven him by the Day of Atonement if he has not first appeased the other person.*

**Gemara** *Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe put the following objection to Rabbi Abbahu: How can one hold that faults committed by a man against another are not forgiven by the Day of Atonement when it is written (1 Samuel 2): "If a man offends another man, Elohim will reconcile." What does Elohim mean? The judge. If that is so, then read the end of the verse: "If it is God himself that he offends, who will intercede for him?" Here is how it should be understood: If a man commits a fault toward another man and appeases him, God will forgive; but if the fault concerns God, who will be able to intercede for him? Only repentance and good deeds.*

*Rabbi Isaac has said: "Whoever hurts his neighbor, even through words, must appease him (to be forgiven), for it has been said (Proverbs 6:1–3): "My son, if you have vouched for your neighbor, if you have pledged your word on behalf of a stranger, you are trapped by your promises; you have become the prisoner of your word. Do the following, then, my son, to regain your freedom, since you have fallen into the other's power: go, insist energetically and mount an assault upon your neighbor (or neighbors)." And the Gemara adds its interpretation of the last sentence: If you have money, open a generous hand to him, if not assail him with friends.*

*... Rab Jose bar Hanina has said: Whoever asks of his neighbor to release him should not solicit this of him more than three times, for it has been said (when, after the death of Jacob, Joseph's brothers beg for forgiveness): "Oh, for*

This reading was given in the context of a colloquium consecrated to "Forgiveness" held in October 1963. The proceedings were published in *La conscience juive face à l'histoire: le pardon*, Textes présentés et revus par Eliane Amado Levy Valensi and Jean Halperin (Paris: P.U.F., 1965). Levinas's commentary is on pp. 289–304 and the discussion following it on pp. 316–335.

mercy's sake, forgive the injury of thy brothers and their fault and the evil they did you. Therefore forgive now the servants of the God of your father their wrongs" (Genesis 50:17).

... Rab once had an altercation with a slaughterer of livestock. The latter did not come to him on the eve of Yom Kippur. He then said: I will go to him myself to appease him. (On the way) Rab Huna ran across him. He said to him: Where is the master going? He answered: To reconcile with so and so. Then, he said: Abba is going to commit murder. He went anyway. The slaughterer was seated, hammering an ox head. He raised his eyes and saw him. He said to him: Go away, Abba. I have nothing in common with you. As he was hammering the head, a bone broke loose, lodged itself in his throat, and killed him.

Rab was commenting upon a text before Rabbi. When Rab Hiyya came in, he started his reading from the beginning again. Bar Kappara came in—he began again; Rab Simeon, the son of Rabbi, came in, and Rab again went back to the beginning. Then Rab Hanina bar Hama came in, and Rab said: How many times am I to repeat myself? He did not go back to the beginning. Rab Hanina was wounded by it. For thirteen years, on Yom Kippur eve, Rab went to seek forgiveness, and Rav Hanina refused to be appeased.

But how could Rab have proceeded in this manner? Did not Rab Jose bar Hanina say: Whoever asks of his neighbor to release him must not ask him more than three times? Rab, that is altogether different.

And why did Rabbi Hanina act this way? Didn't Raba teach: One forgives all sins of whoever cedes his right? The reason is that Rabbi Hanina had a dream in which Rab was hanging from a palm tree. It is said: "Whoever appears in a dream, hanging from a palm tree, is destined for sovereignty." He concluded from it that Rab would be head of the academy. That is why he did not let himself be appeased, so that Rab would leave and teach in Babylon.

The passage to be commented on has been distributed to you. Perhaps you should not take it with you. The texts of the Oral Law that have been set into writing should never be separated from their living commentary. When the voice of the exegetist no longer sounds—and who would dare believe it reverberates long in the ears of its listeners—the texts return to

their immobility, becoming once again enigmatic, strange, sometimes even ridiculously archaic. It is true that many in my audience are excellent commentators themselves. They will not take my translation, whose original they know, with them. Besides, I am relying on their help in a task I pursue only as an amateur. In any case, they will soon notice that in presenting myself as an amateur, I am not indulging in a display of false modesty. It should also be known that I have not had much time to prepare this lesson, although the forty-five minutes reserved to me would, in fact, have required a less-hurried exposition in order to be more substantially filled.

I wish to make yet another comment: the lines you are reading are about forgiveness. But this is only one of countless texts the Talmud devotes to this subject. Therefore, one should not think after hearing me that the Jewish intellectuals of France now know what the Jewish tradition thinks of forgiveness. This is the danger of sporadic explanations of Talmudic texts, like ours, the danger of a premature good conscience, nourished, in this case, by the very sources of Jewish thought!

Finally, I would like to take a last oratorical precaution. I ask myself with some uneasiness if the President of the Alliance Israélite Universelle,<sup>1</sup> Engineer General Kahn, who is receiving you here, will not be shocked by the impending return to what he referred to earlier as "the abstract and conceptual plane." Let him rest assured. Certainly we are not heading toward an area which is practical and concrete in an immediate way. But you need only peruse the text before you to realize that we are not dealing with empty abstractions. The text has a rather unusual style. How are we to read it?

Those present for the first time at this session of Talmudic commentaries should not stop at the theological language of these lines. These are sages' thoughts, not prophetic visions. My effort always consists in extricating from this theological language meanings addressing themselves to reason. The rationalism of the method does not, thank God, lie in replacing God by Supreme Being or Nature or, as some young men do in Israel,<sup>2</sup> by the Jewish People or the Working Class. It consists, first of all, in a mistrust of everything in the texts studied that could pass for a piece of information about God's life, for a theosophy; it consists in being preoccupied, in the face of each of these apparent news items about the beyond, with what this information can mean in and for man's life.

We know since Maimonides that all that is said of God in Judaism signifies through human praxis. Judging that the very name "God," the most familiar to men, also remains the most obscure and subject to every abuse, I am trying to shine a light on it that derives from the very place it has in the texts, from its context, which is understandable to us to the degree that it speaks of the moral experience of human beings. God—whatever his ultimate and, in some sense, naked meaning—appears to human consciousness (and especially in Jewish experience) "clothed" in values; and this clothing

is not foreign to his nature or to his supra-nature. The ideal, the rational, the universal, the eternal, the very high, the trans-subjective, etc., notions accessible to the intellect are his moral clothing. I therefore think that whatever the ultimate experience of the Divine and its ultimate religious and philosophical meaning might be, these cannot be separated from penultimate experiences and meanings. They cannot but include the values through which the Divine shines forth. Religious experience, at least for the Talmud, can only be primarily a moral experience.

Above all, my concern will be to keep to this moral plane. I certainly cannot deny that the rational expositions thus brought to light rest upon set positions, that they refer to preestablished attitudes. I cannot deny that the attitudes here are prior to the philosophical categories in which they come to light. But it is doubtful that a philosophical thought has ever come into the world independent of all attitudes or that there ever was a category in the world which came before an attitude. We can thus boldly approach this religious text, which lends itself in a wonderfully natural manner to philosophical language. It is not dogmatic; it lives off discussions and debates. The theological here receives a moral meaning of remarkable universality, in which reason recognizes itself. Decidedly, with Judaism, we are dealing with a religion of adults.

Our text consists of two parts: an excerpt from the Mishna (the name given to the oral teachings collected in writing by Rabbi Judah Hanassi toward the end of the second century); and an excerpt from the Gemara (the oral teachings of the period following the writing down of the Mishna and themselves recorded in writing by Rav Ashi and Ravina, towards the end of the fifth century), which presents itself as the commentary on the Mishna.

The Mishna is about the Day of Atonement—*Yom Kippur*. This Mishna was talked about earlier this morning, and I was even fearful for a second that what would be said about it was what I myself had prepared to say. But with the Talmud, there always remains something "unsaid," to use an expression in fashion with the intellectuals.

The transgressions of man toward God are forgiven him by the Day of Atonement; the transgressions against other people are not forgiven him by the Day of Atonement if he has not first appeased the other person.

A few quasi-terminological explanations are in order: The Day of Atonement permits the obtaining of forgiveness for faults committed toward God. But there is nothing magical about this. It is not sufficient that dawn break on *Yom Kippur* for these faults to be forgiven. The Day of Atonement is certainly a fixed date in the calendar, and forgiveness, that is, the freeing of the guilty soul, requires a set date in the calendar. For the work of repentance requires a set date: to enable this work to take place every day, there

must also be a day reserved especially for repentance. At least such is Jewish wisdom. But the Day of Atonement does not bring about forgiveness by its own virtue. Indeed, forgiveness cannot be separated either from contrition or from repentance, or from abstinence, fasts, or commitments made for the Better. These inner commitments can become collective or ritual prayer. The interiority of the engagement does not remain at this interior stage. It gives itself objective forms, such as the sacrifices themselves were in the time of the Temple. This interdependence of inside and outside is also part of Jewish wisdom. When the Mishna teaches us that the faults of man toward God are erased by the Day of Atonement, it wants to say that the celebration of *Yom Kippur* and the spiritual state it brings about or expresses lead us to the state of forgiven beings. But this method holds only for the faults committed toward the Eternal.

Let us evaluate the tremendous portent of what we have just learned. My faults toward God are forgiven without my depending on his good will! God is, in a sense, the *other, par excellence*, the other as other, the absolutely other—and nonetheless my standing with this God depends only on myself. The instrument of forgiveness is in my hands. On the other hand, my neighbor, my brother, man, infinitely less other than the absolutely other, is in a certain way more other than God: to obtain his forgiveness on the Day of Atonement I must first succeed in appeasing him. What if he refuses? As soon as two are involved, everything is in danger. The other can refuse forgiveness and leave me forever unpardoned. This must hide some interesting teachings on the essence of the Divine!

How are the transgressions against God and the transgressions against man distinguished? On the face of it, nothing is simpler than this distinction: anything that can harm my neighbor either materially or morally, as well as any verbal offense committed against him, constitutes a transgression against man. Transgressions of prohibitions and ritual commandments, idolatry and despair belong to the realm of wrongs done to the Eternal. Not to honor the Sabbath and the laws concerning food, not to believe in the triumph of the good, not to place anything above money or even art, would be considered offenses against God. These then are the faults wiped out by the Day of Atonement as a result of a simple contrition and penitential rites. It is well understood that faults toward one's neighbor are *ipso facto* offenses toward God.

One could no doubt stop here. It could be concluded a bit hastily that Judaism values social morality above ritual practices. But the order could also be reversed. The fact that forgiveness for ritual offenses depends only on penitence—and consequently only on us—may project a new light on the meaning of ritual practices. Not to depend on the other to be forgiven is certainly, in one sense, to be sure of the outcome of one's case. But does calling these ritual transgressions "transgressions against God" diminish the gravity of the illness that the Soul has contracted as a result of these trans-

gressions? Perhaps the ills that must heal inside the Soul without the help of others are precisely the most profound ills, and that even where our social faults are concerned, once our neighbor has been appeased, the most difficult part remains to be done. In doing wrong toward God, have we not undermined the moral conscience as moral conscience? The ritual transgression that I want to erase without resorting to the help of others would be precisely the one that demands all my personality; it is the work of *Teshuvah*, of Return, for which no one can take my place.

To be before God would be equivalent then to this total mobilization of oneself. Ritual transgression—and that which is an offense against God in the offense against my neighbor—would destroy me more utterly than the offense against others. But taken by itself and separated from the impiety it contains, the ritual transgression is the source of my cruelty, my harmfulness, my self-indulgences. That an evil requires a healing of the self by the self measures the depth of the injury. The effort the moral conscience makes to reestablish itself as moral conscience, *Teshuvah*, or Return, is simultaneously the relation with God and an absolutely internal event.

There would thus not be a deeper interiorization of the notion of God than that found in the Mishna stating that my faults toward the Eternal are forgiven me by the Day of Atonement. In my most severe isolation, I obtain forgiveness. But now we can understand why *Yom Kippur* is needed in order to obtain this forgiveness. How do you expect a moral conscience affected to its marrow to find in itself the necessary support to begin this progress toward its own interiority and toward solitude? One must rely on the objective order of the community to obtain this intimacy of deliverance. A set day in the calendar and all the ceremonial of solemnity of *Yom Kippur* are needed for the "damaged" moral conscience to reach its intimacy and reconquer the integrity that no one can reconquer for it. This is the work that is equivalent to God's pardon. This dialectic of the collective and the intimate seems very important to us. The Gemara even preserves an extreme opinion, that of Rabbi Judah Hanassi, who attributes to the day of *Yom Kippur* itself—without *Teshuvah*—the power to purify guilty souls, so important within Jewish thought is the communal basis of inner rebirth. Perhaps this gives us a general clue as to the meaning of the Jewish ritual and of the ritual aspect of social morality itself. Originating communally, in collective law and commandment, ritual is not at all external to conscience. It conditions it and permits it to enter into itself and to stay awake. It preserves it, prepares its healing. Are we to think that the sense of justice dwelling in the Jewish conscience—that wonder of wonders—is due to the fact that for centuries Jews fasted on *Yom Kippur*, observed the Sabbath and the food prohibitions, waited for the Messiah, and understood the love of one's neighbor as a duty of piety?

Should one go so far as to think that contempt for the *mitzvah* com-

promises the mysterious Jewish sense of justice in us? If we Jews, without ritual life and without piety, are still borne by a previously acquired momentum toward unconditional justice, what guarantees do we have that we will be so moved for long?

I turn now to the Gemara. The idea that no one can obtain forgiveness from God for a fault committed toward another person without having first appeased the offending party is in contradiction with a biblical verse. Let us mention in passing that Talmudic discussions sometimes present themselves as a search for agreement between an idea and a text, while behind this search, which is a bit scholastic and likely to discourage frivolous minds that are nonetheless quick to criticize, much bolder undertakings are concealed. In any case, Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe puts the following objection to Rabbi Abbahu (who no doubt thought the way our Mishna did):

How can one hold that faults committed by a man against another are not forgiven him by the Day of Atonement when it is written (1 Samuel 2): "If a man offends another man, Elohim will reconcile."

This is in express opposition to our Mishna! Here the offense committed toward another person is rectified, according to the biblical verse, by the good grace of Elohim, of God, without any prior reconciliation with the offended man.

To this the interlocutor replies: What does Elohim mean? Are you sure that Elohim is equivalent to God? Elohim is translated as judge! The answer is not without foundation. Elohim in a general sense means authority, power, and consequently, very often, judge. Now everything is in accordance with the Mishna. If a man commits a fault toward another man, God does not intervene. An earthly tribunal is necessary to create justice among men! Even more than a reconciliation between the offender and the offended is needed—justice and a judge are necessary. (And sanctions. The drama of forgiveness involves not two players but three.)

Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe nevertheless does not feel he has been defeated. If Elohim translates as judge and if the word of the verse just translated as "will reconcile" is to mean "will bring justice," if instead of "God will reconcile" one must read "the judge will bring justice," how is one to come to terms with the end of the verse? The end of the verse, as translated by the French rabbinate, states: "If it is God himself that he [man] offends, who will intercede for him?" In this latter part of the verse, God is no longer designated by the term Elohim but by the Tetragrammaton which does designate God himself and not only the judge. The term earlier translated as "will bring justice" becomes "will intercede." If we want to read this end in accordance with the beginning, we would come to understand it thus: "But if the Eternal himself is offended, who will bring justice?" An absurd trans-

lation, the commentator tells us: As if the Eternal did not have enough servants capable of enacting his justice!

Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe, to maintain the same meaning for all the terms throughout the verse, keeps to his position, which consists in attributing to God the role of the one who erases the fault of the man who has offended another man.

But the Gemara decidedly rejects this view. This is the version it proposes:

If a man commits a fault toward another man and *appeases him*, God will forgive; but if the fault concerns God, who will be able to intercede for him, if *not repentance and good deeds*.

The solution consists in inserting the italicized words into the biblical verse in order to bend it toward the spirit of the Mishna. One cannot be less attached to the letter and more enamored of the spirit! It is thus a very serious matter to offend another man. Forgiveness depends on him. One finds oneself in his hands. There can be no forgiveness that the guilty party has not sought. The guilty party must recognize his fault. The offended party must want to receive the entreaties of the offending party. Further, no person can forgive if forgiveness has not been asked him by the offender, if the guilty party has not tried to appease the offended.

But does Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe, who is so expert in exegesis, uphold the literal meaning of the verses? Doesn't he also have an idea in the back of his head? "If a man offends another man, Elohim forgives or Elohim straightens out or Elohim reconciles. . . ." Is it possible that Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe thinks that incidents between individuals do not shake the equilibrium of creation? Will you interrupt the session if someone leaves the room offended? What is it all in the face of Eternity? On the superior plane, the plane of Elohim, within the absolute, on the level of universal history, everything will work itself out. In a hundred years, no one will think about our sorrows, our little worries and offenses!

Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe thus opposes the thesis of the Mishna with a thesis that will seduce many a modern person. The doctrine which wants to be severe toward the subjective and the individual, toward little private happenings, and which exalts the exclusive value of the universal, awakens an echo in our soul, which is enamored of greatness. The tears and laughter of mortals do not count for much; what matters is the order of things in the absolute. You must see Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe's exegesis to the end: The irreparable offense is that done to God. What is serious is the attack of a principle. Rabbi Joseph bar Helbe is skeptical regarding the individual. He believes in the Universal. An individual against an individual has no importance at all; but when a principle is undermined, there you have catastrophe. If man offends God, who could set the disorder straight? There is no

history which passes above history. There is no Idea capable of reconciling man in conflict with reason itself.

The text of the Gemara rises against this virile, overly virile, proposition, in which we can anachronistically perceive a few echoes of Hegel; it is against this proposition, which puts the universal order above the interindividual order, that the text of the Gemara rises. No, the offended individual must always be appeased, approached, and consoled individually. God's forgiveness—or the forgiveness of history—cannot be given if the individual has not been honored. God is perhaps nothing but this permanent refusal of a history which would come to terms with our private tears. Peace does not dwell in a world without consolations. On the other hand, the harmony with God, with the Universal, with the Principle, can only take place in the privacy of my interiority, and in a certain sense, it is in my power.

~~XX~~ So much for the first half of my text. Is it without immediate relation to the question of forgiveness posed by German guilt? I am not so sure of that.

The following paragraph justifies the seriousness of a verbal offense.

Rabbi Isaac has said: Whoever hurts his neighbor, even through words, must appease him (to be forgiven), for it has been said (Proverbs 6:1-3): "My son, if you have vouched for your neighbor, if you have pledged your word on behalf of a stranger, you are trapped by your promises; you have become the prisoner of your word. Do the following, then, my son, to regain your freedom, since you have fallen into the other's power: go, insist energetically and mount an assault upon your neighbor (or neighbors)." And the Gemara adds its interpretation of the last sentence: If you have money, open a generous hand to him, if not assail him with friends.

"To insist energetically" would mean "to open one's purse." "To mount an assault upon one's neighbor" would mean to send to the offended party friends as intercessors. Strange interpretation! We are, it would seem, in complete incoherence. Indeed, the Talmud wants to show the seriousness of a verbal insult. If you have said one word too many to your neighbor, you are as guilty as if you had caused a material injury. No forgiveness is possible without having obtained the appeasement of the offended! And in order to prove this, a passage from the Book of Proverbs is quoted in which the issue is not insults but money. John lends money to Paul and you have guaranteed the repayment of the loan. You are certainly henceforth prisoner of the word you pledged. But in what respect does this principle of commercial law have anything to do with hurtful words?

Could the lesson here be about the identity of injury and "monetary loss"?<sup>3</sup> Or is it that what we are being taught here concerns the essence of speech? How could speech cause harm if it were only *flatus vocis*, empty speech, "mere word"? This recourse to a quotation which seems totally un-

related to the topic, and to which only a seemingly forced reading brings us back from afar, teaches us that speech, in its original essence, is a commitment to a third party on behalf of our neighbor: the act *par excellence*, the institution of society. The original function of speech consists not in designating an object in order to communicate with the other in a game with no consequences but in assuming toward someone a responsibility on behalf of someone else. To speak is to engage the interests of men. Responsibility would be the essence of language.

We can now understand the "misreadings" of the Talmudic interpretation. "Insist energetically and mount an assault upon your neighbor" means, to be sure, in the first place, insisting to the debtor to whom you have given your guarantee that he fulfil his obligation. But what does insistence mean if not the intention to pay from one's own pocket? That the extent of the commitment is measured in cash, that the sacrifice of money is, in a way, the one which costs the most is a Talmudic constant. Far from expressing some sordid materialism, it denounces the hypocrisy hidden in the ethereal spiritualism of possessors. The "insisting to the debtor" and the "mounting an assault upon one's neighbor" of which the Book of Proverbs speaks are necessary to redress the wrong done to the creditor if this redress is not to be gratuitous or spiritual. Verbal injury demands no less. Without the hard work of reconciling numerous wills, without material sacrifice, the demand for forgiveness and even the moral humiliation it involves can make room for cowardice and laziness. The effort inherent in action begins when one strips oneself of one's goods and when one mobilizes wills.

Let us draw a general lesson from our commentary. While the sages of the Talmud seem to be doing battle with each other by means of biblical verses, and to be splitting hairs, they are far from such scholastic exercises. The reference to a biblical verse does not aim at appealing to authority—as some thinkers draw to rapid conclusions might imagine. Rather, the aim is to refer to a context which allows the level of the discussion to be raised and to make one notice the true import of the data from which the discussion derives its meaning. The transfer of an idea to another climate—which is its original climate—wrests new possibilities from it. Ideas do not become fixed by a process of conceptualization which would extinguish many of the sparks dancing beneath the gaze riveted upon the Real. I have already had occasion here to speak of another process which consists in respecting these possibilities and which I have called the paradigmatic method. Ideas are never separated from the example which both suggests and delimits them.

Let us apply this methodological lesson to what follows. "To offend through speech"—we have just learned the real weight of speech. We are going to be told the ultimate meaning of every affront. The text we are about to read teaches us the following: One must seek the forgiveness of the offended party but one is freed with respect to him if he refuses it three times.

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Rab Jose bar Hanina has said: Whoever asks of his neighbor to release him should not solicit this of him more than three times, for it has been said (when, after the death of Jacob, Joseph's brothers beg for forgiveness): "Oh, for mercy's sake, forgive the injury of thy brothers and their fault and the evil they did you. Therefore forgive now the servants of the God of your father their wrongs" (Genesis 50:17).

There would be three entreaties, or a ternary rhythm, in this passage, which would prove the thesis of Rab Jose bar Hanina. The commentators discuss its cogency. What does it matter? I would like to spend some time on the choice of biblical verse. What example of an offense was sought in the Bible for the occasion? It is the story of the brothers who sold their brother into slavery. The exploitation of man by man would therefore be the prototypical offense, imitated by all offenses (even verbal).

We can apply this same method to the passage already commented upon in the beginning, about the transgressions against man and against God. "If a man offends another man, Elohim reconciles . . . but if the transgression is against God. . . ." The sentence is said by the great priest Eli admonishing his sons. Unworthy priests, they seduced the women who came to the Tabernacle and took an undue share of the offerings of the faithful. "My children, stop doing this," Eli said to them, "if a man does wrong to another man, God will forgive, but if the fault is toward God, who will intercede?" But the fault of Eli's sons seems to be toward men. The injury done to God, then, is the abuse of power that the very person put in charge of safeguarding the principle slides into. Who will be able to intercede? Who can intervene? In the name of what Law? Those who are given the responsibility of applying the Law reject the Law and turn the scale of values upside down.

The last part of the text to be commented on is in a way anecdotal. I have shortened it and have kept two of the four anecdotes found on p. 87a, so as not to go beyond the time allotted me. The stories show the dialectic of forgiveness unfolding according to the principles just established.

"Rab once had an altercation with a slaughterer of livestock." The text does not tell us who was right or who was wrong. The commentators unanimously agree that Rab was in the right. But the butcher did not come on *Yom Kippur* eve to ask forgiveness of Rab. Rab therefore felt it was his duty to bring forth this demand for forgiveness, for the sake of the offender, and decided to appear before the person who insulted him. Here we have a reversal of obligation. It is the offended party who worries about the forgiveness that the offender does not concern himself with. (In a passage I have left out, the offended party walks back and forth in front of the offender to give him an opportunity to ask for forgiveness.) Rab goes out of his way to provoke a crisis of conscience in the slaughterer of livestock. The task is not

easy! Rab's disciple, whom he meets on the way, is aware of this. This disciple, Rav Huna, asks: "Where is the master going?" "To reconcile with so and so." To which Rab Huna replies, without illusions: "Abba (familiar name of Rab) is going to commit a murder." Rab Huna is convinced that the slaughterer will not be moved by Rab's gesture, which will only aggravate the fault of the slaughterer. Excessive moral sensitivity will become the cause of death. We are far from the forgiveness generously and sovereignly granted *urbi et orbi*. The game of offense and forgiveness is a dangerous one. But Rab ignores the advice of his pupil. He finds the slaughterer at his professional occupation. He is seated and hammering an ox head. He nevertheless raises his eyes to insult once again the person coming humbly toward him. "Go away, Abba. I have nothing in common with you." The expression is marvelously precise and underlines one of the essential aspects of the situation. Mankind is spread out on different levels. It is made up of multiple worlds that are closed to one another because of their unequal heights. Men do not yet form one humanity. As the slaughterer keeps strictly to his level, he keeps on hammering the head, suddenly a bone breaks loose from it and kills him. It is certainly not of a miracle that the story wants to tell us but of this death within the systems in which humanity closes itself off. It also wants to speak to us of the purity which can kill, in a mankind as yet unequally evolved, and of the enormity of the responsibility which Rab took upon himself in his premature confidence in the humanity of the Other.

We are coming to the second story: "Rab (the man just referred to, so sensitive and so dangerous) was commenting on a text before Rabbi (before the famous Rabbi, the editor of the Mishna) in Rabbi's school. When Rab Hiyya came in (he was Rab's uncle) he started his reading from the beginning again. Bar Kappara came in—he began again; Rab Simeon, the son of Rabbi (the director's son!) came in, and Rab again went back to the beginning." (It was already a slightly parochial conference: For the first half of the session, people gather; the middle of the session is the point at which people begin to leave!)

Then Rab Hanina bar Hama came in and Rab said: How many times am I to repeat myself? He did not go back to the beginning. Rav Hanina was wounded by it. For thirteen years, on *Yom Kippur* eve, Rab went to seek forgiveness, and Rav Hanina refused to be appeased.

He never forgave. This is the end of the story.

Would an offense between intellectuals be the most irreparable? This may be one of the meanings of the text. There are levels on which an offense would be unforgivable, which means above all that there are levels which require of us the greatest circumspection. Rab the just could be re-

fused a pardon. It is better then—and this is in opposition to the easy terms promised by free grace—not to offend than to seek to set matters straight after the fact. Next to the famous Talmudic text promising those who repent places to which no just man is admitted, there is another text, no less worthy of credence: No repentant sinner can have access to the place of the just, who have never sinned. It is better not to sin than to be granted forgiveness. This is the first and necessary truth, without which the door is opened to every perversion.

One can nevertheless ask some questions, and the Talmud asks them. We have just learned that whoever asks his neighbor to release him from the wrong done to him should not ask more than three times. Why did Rab entreat thirteen times? Answer: Rab, that is altogether different. He is an exceptional being, or, if you wish, the situation is exceptional. He has offended his master. The injury done to the master differs from all other injuries. But isn't the other man always to some degree your master? You can behave like Rab. For has anyone, in any case, ever finished asking for forgiveness? Our wrongs appear to us as we humble ourselves. The seeking for forgiveness never comes to an end. Nothing is ever completed.

But how could Rav Hanina have been so harsh as to refuse thirteen times to grant the forgiveness that was humbly sought of him? He refused thirteen times, for on the fourteenth *Yom Kippur*, Rab, unforgiven, left to teach in Babylon. Rav Hanina's attitude is even less understandable, given the teaching of Raba: "One forgives all sins to whoever cedes his right." Whoever cedes his right behaves, in fact, as if he had only obligations and as if well-ordered charity began and ended not with oneself but with the other. Didn't Rav Hanina's intransigence put Rab in the position of the one to whom all sins will be forgiven?

The Gemara's explanation of Rab Hanina's behavior makes me ill at ease. Rab Hanina had a dream in which Rab appeared, hanging from a palm tree. Whoever appears thus in a dream is destined to sovereignty. Rab Hanina could foresee the future sovereignty of Rab, that is to say, his becoming head of the academy. (Is there another sovereignty for a Jew?) Thus, Rab Hanina, having guessed that Rab would succeed him, preferred to make him leave. A petty story!

This makes no sense. Our text must be understood in another way. I worked hard at it. I told my troubles to my friends. For the Talmud requires discourse and companionship. Woe to the self-taught! Of course one must have good luck and find intelligent interlocutors. I thus spoke of my disappointment to a young Jewish poet, Mrs. Atlan. Here is the solution she suggests: Whenever we have dreams, we are in the realm of psychoanalysis and the unconscious, of a psychoanalysis before the letter, to be sure. The Talmud—the spirit wrestling with the letter—would not have been able to keep up its struggle if it were not all the wisdom of the world before the letter. Now, in the story that is troubling us, what is at stake? Rab recog-

nizes his fault and asks Hanina for forgiveness. The offended party can grant forgiveness when the offender has become conscious of the wrong he has done. First difficulty: the good will of the offended party. We are sure of it, given the personality of Rab Hanina. Why then is he so unbending? Because there is another difficulty: Is the offender capable of measuring the extent of his wrongdoing? Do we know the limits of our ill will? And do we therefore truly have the capacity to ask for forgiveness? No doubt Rab thought he had been a bit brusque in refusing to begin his reading of the text again when Rab Hanina bar Hama, his master, came into the school. But Rab Hanina finds out through a dream more about Rab than Rab knew about himself. The dream revealed Rab's secret ambitions, beyond the inoffensive gesture at the origin of the incident. Rab, without knowing it, wished to take his master's place. Given this, Rab Hanina could not forgive. How is one to forgive if the offender, unaware of his deeper thoughts, cannot ask for forgiveness? As soon as you have taken the path of offenses, you may have taken a path with no way out. There are two conditions for forgiveness: the good will of the offended party and the full awareness of the offender. But the offender is in essence unaware. The aggressiveness of the offender is perhaps his very unconsciousness. Aggression is the lack of attention *par excellence*. In essence, forgiveness would be impossible. I am indebted to my young Diotima for having guided me so well (even if the revelatory dream in the story was not dreamed by the patient).

But perhaps there is something altogether different in all this. One can, if pressed to the limit, forgive the one who has spoken unconsciously. But it is very difficult to forgive Rab, who was fully aware and destined for a great fate, which was prophetically revealed to his master. One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger. If Hanina could not forgive the just and humane Rab because he was also the brilliant Rab, it is even less possible to forgive Heidegger. Here I am brought back to the present, to the new attempts to clear Heidegger, to take away his responsibility — unceasing attempts which, it must be admitted, are at the origin of this colloquium.

So much for the page from the tractate *Yoma*. Since you still grant me a few minutes, I will compare this page, in which the issue was not murders but verbal offenses, to a more-tragic situation, in which forgiveness is obtained at a greater price, if it is still possible to obtain it.

The program of this year's colloquium does not include, to my keen regret, the usual Bible commentary by André Neher. I know that in this final section of my presentation, devoted to the Bible, I will not fill the gap but only make it more obvious. But at least in this way I will link my commentary to the principal theme of this meeting: the problems confronting us regarding our relations with the Germans and Germany.

Chapter 21 of 2 Samuel reports that there were three years of famine in

the time of King David. The king asked the Eternal about it and found out that "this was because of Saul and that city of blood and because he put the Gibeonites to death"; this verse is as mysterious as an oracle. The Gibeonites were a Canaanite tribe mentioned in the Book of Joshua. Their lives were spared because they presented themselves to the conquerors of the Promised Land under false trappings, as originating from a distant, non-Canaanite land. By means of this trick, they obtained an oath of alliance. Once their ruse was discovered, they were reduced to the status of water carriers and woodcutters. This was the way the oath was honored, but the ancient biblical text does not speak of any violence they might have been subjected to on Saul's part. Our text mysteriously states: "Saul sought to strike at them in his zeal for Israel." To be sure, a thousand years later, the Talmud will explain Saul's wrongs. But without waiting so long, David sends for the Gibeonites in order to hear their grievances. They complain that King Saul had made their presence on the land of Israel impossible, that he had persecuted them and had tried to destroy them. They want neither gold nor silver. No compensations! They have no hatred toward the children of Israel but they want seven of Saul's descendants to be handed over to them. They will put them to death by nailing them to the rock on the Mountain of Saul. And David answers: I shall give them.

The book of Samuel then goes on to tell that David went and took from Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, Saul's concubine, two of her sons, that he also took five sons from Michal, daughter of Saul. (She had been David's own wife but Saul had her marry someone else during David's disgrace and exile. The difficulty lies in trying to figure out how she could have five sons, but the main point is that she had them.) David took pity on Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan. The seven unfortunate princes, given over to the Gibeonites, were nailed to the surfaces of a rock. But Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, stayed with the corpses from the season of the first fruits of barley (from the day after Passover) until the first rains (the time of Succoth). Each evening she covered the bodies of the tortured with bags, protecting them from the birds of the air and the beasts of the fields.

Do admire the savage greatness of this text, whose extreme tension my summary poorly conveys. Its theme is clear. It is about the necessity of talion, which the shedding of blood brings about whether one wants it or not. And probably all the greatness of what is called the Old Testament consists in remaining sensitive to spilled blood, in being incapable of refusing this justice to whoever cries for vengeance, in feeling horror for the pardon granted by proxy when the right to forgive belongs only to the victim. But here is what the Talmud has to say about it (tractate *Yebamot*, pp. 58b-59a):

David would not have waited three years to search for the causes of the famine which hit his country. He had first thought that the cause of the disaster lay in the corruption of men. Was the famine punishing idolatry?



rest is literature. The search for the spirit beyond the letter, that is Judaism itself. We did not wait until the Gospels to know that.

Last question: How were people able, in opposition to the strict prohibition of the Torah, to leave human corpses exposed for so many months and to profane the image of God they bear? Same answer: "It is better that a letter of the Torah be damaged than that the name of God be profaned." The image of God is better honored in the right given to the stranger than in symbols. Universalism has a greater weight than the particularist letter of the text; or, to be more precise, it bursts the letter apart, for it lay, like an explosive, within the letter.

We have here then a biblical text which the Midrash spiritualizes and interiorizes but which it preserves in its unusual power and harsh truth. David is not able to oppose a victim who cries out for justice, even if this justice is cruel. To the one who demands "a life for a life," David answers, "I shall give." And yet the Gemara teaches more. A verse of the text (1 Samuel 21:2) indicates to us, seemingly as a simple piece of historical information: "The Gibeonites were not part of the children of Israel but of the rest of the Amoreans. . . ." To this preliminary verse, the Gemara attaches the meaning of a verdict. It is David who would have excluded the Gibeonites from the community of Israel and relegated them to the Amoreans. To belong to Israel, one must be humble (place something or someone higher than oneself), one must know pity and be capable of disinterested acts. The Gibeonites excluded themselves from Israel.

What difference is there between pity and generous action? Doesn't one presuppose the other? That is not certain. There are people whose hearts do not open before their neighbor runs a mortal risk, just as there are people whose generosity turns away from men fallen to the level of hunted animals. Under the Occupation we learned these distinctions, just as we also knew souls full of humility, pity, and generosity—souls of Israel beyond Israel. The Gibeonites who lacked pity put themselves outside Israel.

One can understand even more precisely the three signs by which Israel is recognized. To humility are added the sense of justice and the impulse of disinterested goodness. But strict justice, even if flanked by disinterested goodness and humility, is not sufficient to make a Jew. Justice itself must already be mixed with goodness. It is this mixture that is indicated by the word Rahamim which we have badly translated as "pity." It is that special form of pity which goes out to the one who is experiencing the harshness of the Law. It is no doubt this pity which the Gibeonites lacked!

I have the impression that I have come back to the theme evoked by Mr. Jankélévitch when he opened this colloquium, even though no one in this hall has asked that the descendants of our torturers be nailed to the rocks. The Talmud teaches that one cannot force men who demand retaliatory

justice to grant forgiveness. It teaches us that Israel does not deny this imprescriptible right to others. But it teaches us above all that if Israel recognizes this right, it does not ask it for itself and that to be Israel is to not claim it.

And what remains as well, after this somber vision of the human condition and of Justice itself, what rises above the cruelty inherent in rational order (and perhaps simply in Order), is the image of this woman, this mother, this Rizpah Bat Aiah, who, for six months watches over the corpses of her sons, together with the corpses that are not her sons, to keep from the birds of the air and the beasts of the fields, the victims of the implacable justice of men and of God. What remains after so much blood and tears shed in the name of immortal principles is individual sacrifice, which, amidst the dialectical rebounds of justice and all its contradictory about-faces, without any hesitation, finds a straight and sure way.

#### NOTES

1. For a description of this organization, see my introduction, pp. xi-xii. (Trans.)
2. See note 1 to Levinas's Introduction. (Trans.)
3. Levinas uses an idiomatic expression here, *plaie d'argent*, which means not only monetary loss but also a loss or wound which is not fatal or, for that matter, even serious. There is an irony in the expression and thus in the sentence that was difficult to reproduce. (Trans.)