

The Pope's Apology and the Grounds of Forgiveness

By Steve Greenberg

When John Paul II offered his sincere apologies to the Jewish people for their unspeakable suffering at the hands of Christians, the American Jewish community felt mixed emotions. John Paul had his own stories of resistance to Nazi brutality and had even saved some Jews. Moreover, the context of the apology during the Pope's visit to Yad Vashem seemed to raise it from a pro forma acknowledgment to a sincere expression of the need to seek Jewish forgiveness.

Still, many in the Jewish community found the apology sadly incomplete. The question arises: How are we to respond to this apology for the murder of a third of our people more than half a century ago? Apology itself, even from as sincere a Pope as John Paul, raises questions about the nature of remorse and the meaning of forgiveness.

Among the difficulties that stand in the way of a Jewish acceptance of the Pope's apology is the Pope's avoidance of blame for the church itself. The Pope's apology was made in the name of Christians, not in the name of Christianity, nor in the name of the Church. Framed in this way, the Pope's apology missed the most important aspect of Christian responsibility. The planned destruction of European Jewry could not have proceeded except upon the foundation of an age old Christian anti-Semitism. Hateful sermons on the Jews were preached for a millennium before Auschwitz. Apologies proffered in the name of sinning Christians miss the point. The Church, as an institution, and Christianity as a religion, bears a responsibility for Jewish suffering that is not reducible to the misdeeds of individual Christians. The Holocaust would have been inconceivable if this legacy of Christian anti-Semitism did not exist.

In 1963 Emmanuel Levinas presented a lecture at a Paris conference on "Forgiveness." This lecture combines a close study of the Talmudic tractate Yoma (85a-b) with a meditation on the possibility of forgiving Germans in general, and Heidegger in particular. The lecture began with a mishna which states that while the transgressions of man toward God are forgiven by God on the Day of Atonement, human transgressions against other persons are not forgiven by God on the Day of Atonement unless the offender has first appeased the other person.

Given that atonement waits for the offended party to be appeased, the Talmud explores the contexts of asking and giving forgiveness. The setting is a lecture in the academy.

Rab was commenting upon a text before Rabbi. When Rab Hiyyah came in, he started again from the beginning. Bar Kappara came in and he began again; Rab

Simeon, the son of Rabbi, came in and again he went back to the beginning. Then Rab Hanina bar Hama came in, and Rab said, how many times must I repeat myself? He did not go back to the beginning and Rab Hiyyah was wounded by it. For thirteen years, on Yom Kippur Eve, Rab went to seek forgiveness and Rav Hannina refused to be appeased.

Earlier in this section of Talmud the rule is proffered that an offending party need not ask for forgiveness more than three times. Rab's repeated request for pardon is noted as an expression of his piety. More important for us, however, is the Talmud's struggle to understand Rab Hanina's refusal to forgive his colleague. Why did he rebuff Rab every Yom Kippur for thirteen years? The Talmud suggests an answer.

The reason (that Rav Hanina did not forgive Rab) is that Rab 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 that Rab would (someday) be head of the academy. This is why he did not let himself be appeased, so that Rab would leave and teach in Babylon.

According to Levinas what Rav Hanina understood is that Rab's actions were motivated by desires that he was himself not aware of. The dream revealed the secret ambition behind Rab's refusal to honor Rav Hanina by starting the lecture from the beginning again. Rab, without being aware of it, wished to take his master's place. Rav Hanina then could not forgive, because Rab, being so oblivious to his own motivations, could not actually ask for forgiveness in the first place.

Perhaps this is what is missing for us in the apologies of the Pope. Can we extend forgiveness to the Church so long as it has not yet truly reckoned with its own secret -- or not so secret -- supersessionist ambitions? Ought we to extend absolution to Christianity for its collusion with Nazism before it owns up fully to its horrific eschatological hope for the final erasure of Judaism in the end of days? Perhaps more to the point is the single most problematic and threatening element of Christian catechism, the exclusion of all but Christians from the kingdom of God. If there is no access to the Father except through the son, if this is the only narrative path to the Divine then what horrible end awaits those whose path to God is different?

In the mid-1960s, in Vatican II, the Church accepted that the Jewish covenant was still in force for Jews. This was an immense step forward in Catholic thinking. However, as progressive a move as it was, sadly, for Europe's Jews, Vatican II was too little, too late. A more fitting apology by the Pope would have explicitly acknowledged the complicity of the Church's pre-Vatican II theology in the destruction of European Jewry. It would have acknowledged that for far too long the Catholic Church held that only through its portals could one find God, that its faith story was the only true story. It was this sad theology that restricted

Divine grace and love to a narrow circle, and consigned all non-Christians to damnation, that made the Holocaust possible. And while Vatican II did mark a crucial step away from the theological underpinnings of the Holocaust, the full implications of its legacy need to be confronted and integrated fully into Catholic teaching before apologies can be accepted. What we want from Christianity is not a papal confession so much as evidence of a real process of teshuva, of repentance, that could purify the Church of its history of presumption and conceit, and renew it in its offering a path to God that does not obliterate all others.