

## Being in the Gap Between Past and Future: Hannah Arendt and *Torah Lishmah*

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### INTRODUCTION

When Hannah Arendt writes about a gap between the past and the future, her main concern is our inability to dwell in this gap, that is, in the present. She writes that a gap between the past and the future has become “a tangible reality and perplexity for all,”<sup>1</sup> yet “that we seem to be neither equipped nor prepared for this activity, of settling down in the gap between past and future.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Arendt writes about the thinking that occurs in this gap. Describing how our present thoughts are influenced by the past and future she suggests that both, the future and the past, “whose origin is infinity,” should be understood to produce “a third force.” This third force, which she describes as “diagonal force, whose origin is known, whose direction is determined by past and future, but whose eventual end lies in infinity, is the perfect metaphor for the activity of thought ... [it] remains bound to and is rooted in the present.”<sup>3</sup>

What leads Arendt to this suggestion is what she terms “treasure”<sup>4</sup> or “nameless,”<sup>5</sup> which she defines by asking if “something exist[s], not in outer space but in the world and the affairs of men on earth, which has not even a name.”<sup>6</sup> She is trying to describe what she calls “moment of truth”<sup>7</sup> that can be achieved when one “become[s] aware of an interval in time which is altogether determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet.”<sup>8</sup> Arendt connects this notion to “the minds of men ... [that have] been forced to turn full circle ... from thought into action and then ... having acted ... into thought,”<sup>9</sup> leading to feelings such as “nakedness, stripped of all masks”<sup>10</sup> and “public freedom.”<sup>11</sup> Finally, Arendt suggests that a crucial part of not being able to think or settle down in this gap is our disconnection from tradition.<sup>12</sup>

To explore how one can settle and think in the gap, I have decided to draw on the Jewish tradition. Although this article brings Arendt’s thought into conversation with education, the specific focus of inquiry within the Jewish tradition is, more specifically, on studying. The Jewish notion of “study for study’s sake” will serve here as an example of how to settle and think in the gap. Furthermore, it will unveil some interesting connections and parallels to Arendt’s thoughts on education and our overall duties towards society. Ultimately, by suggesting further directions for research, this article serves as a starting point for a reevaluation of whether thinking and settling down in the gap may after all be possible, even without necessarily being connected to tradition.

The acts of teaching and learning, as well as studying, are and have always been a central theme within the Jewish tradition.<sup>13</sup> The focus in this article is on *Torah Lishmah* in particular, a Talmudic term that roughly translates as “study for its own sake.”<sup>14</sup> Everywhere in the world, Jews ask on a daily basis in their morning prayers

to achieve this mode of studying.<sup>15</sup> The primary sources on what exactly is meant by *Torah Lishmah* are, however, to be found in the *Talmud*, the ancient Jewish legal corpus in which the concept is mentioned several times in various discussions.

Many of those sources list positive outcomes that occur when studying *Lishmah*, i.e. for its own sake.<sup>16</sup> Others try to determine which is of more value, studying or performing deeds,<sup>17</sup> whereas some discussions deal with studying *she'lo Lishmah*, i.e. not for its own sake, and whether that has any value.<sup>18</sup>

The beneficial outcomes of studying *Lishmah* include personal benefits such as becoming “like an ever-increasing spring and like a river that never ends,” or “one of which men enjoy good counsel, knowledge, understanding and fortitude” to name just two.<sup>19</sup> Other outcomes of studying *Lishmah* include qualities that are usually ascribed to God, such as “promoting peace among the heavenly host above, and among the host below on earth,” “providing protection for the entire world” and even “bringing the Final Redemption closer.”<sup>20</sup>

We may wonder, therefore, how *Lishmah* can be understood to be for its own sake if there are such plentiful of benefits to be received for doing so. Is it not paradoxical to gain reward for an action that is supposedly done for its own sake? The *Talmud* suggests that this is not necessarily so. Rather, it is the case that the rewards are the natural outcome of studying for its own sake, thereby validating that the performance was indeed *Lishmah*, i.e. for its own sake. We then encounter an interesting concept where beneficial outcomes validate an action that was performed for its own sake.

Arendt would agree that studying for its own sake, as opposed to doing so for a particular end, is the right thing to do, for, according to her, no realm other than manufacture should be a means to an end.<sup>21</sup> Yet what “for its own sake” exactly means is still to be determined. Let us look, then, at the following Talmudic text from the tractate of *Nedarim*:<sup>22</sup>

One should not say: “I will read so that I may be called wise,” “I will study, that I may be called a Rabbi,” “I will study, to be an Elder, and sit in the assembly”; but learn out of love, and honor shall be at the end, ... Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Zadok said: “Perform deeds for the sake of their Maker, and speak of them for their own sake. Do not make of them a crown in order to magnify yourself, nor a spade to dig with.”

According to this passage, the Rabbis think it matters what one’s intentions are when performing an action but the act of study in particular. The distinction they make is between doing something “for the sake of their Maker” as opposed to doing something while having a reward in mind. Doing “for its own sake,” becomes equivalent with doing it “for the sake of their Maker,” which is God.

Now if, as the passage suggests, doing for its own sake is actually doing for God’s sake, one may wonder how such an action can be defined as not doing it for some end. That is, does doing an action for God’s sake not contradict the idea of doing an action for its own sake? Apparently not, and we shall try to understand how this is the case: The ideas mentioned beforehand - of how the effect validates the cause of our actions as well as how some of the benefits are Godly acts - are the key to this conundrum: for when the act in itself is determined by its outcome,

which in our case is a Godly one, the act itself becomes Godly, and doing it for the sake of God, in return, becomes doing it for its own sake.

The effect of *Lishmah* being Godly actions could be compared to Arendt's "responsibility for the world," which in education, she argues, takes the form of authority.<sup>23</sup> We see that cause and effect play a vital role when determining *Lishmah*. This is also apparent in the Talmudic discussions on the matter of *she'lo Lishmah*, i.e. not for its own sake, or study versus action. On *she'lo Lishmah*, the following example is very typical: "Rabbi Judah said in Rav's name: 'A man should always engage in Torah and mitzvoth even if it be *she'lo Lishmah*, for from *she'lo Lishmah* it will come that he will engage in them *Lishmah*.'"<sup>24</sup>

This extract suggests that one should do so even if it is not for its own sake, for by studying *not* for its own sake, one will ultimately begin to study for its own sake. The sages, once again, are very certain that there are calculable and foreseeable outcomes to specific actions. Furthermore, here too, the outcome is what ultimately validates the action.

In the discussions on what should take precedence, study or action, we encounter a similar concept. As an example, the following story appears in the *Talmud*:<sup>25</sup>

Which is greater, study or practice? Rabbi Tarfon answered and said: "Practice is greater," Rabbi Akiva answered and said: "Study is greater." Everybody answered and said, "Study is greater, for study leads to practice."

While stating that study is of a higher value than action, we also learn that this is so because study will ultimately lead to action. The action is ultimately what we strive for and which will take precedence.<sup>26</sup> However, because it is studying that leads to action, studying gets elevated in its status. The outcome then not only validates but also completes the action in itself: only if one gets the benefits mentioned earlier and is lead into action, can one be assured to have studied *Lishmah*. Such dependence of the action on the outcome and vice versa allows for the construction of an interesting relationship between cause and effect: to use Arendt's words, "they turn full circle."<sup>27</sup> The paradox at hand here is that an outcome or result of an action that is supposed to be for its own sake is what validates the action. Furthermore, by depending on each other, they become one: that is, *Torah Lishmah* only exists in a whole concept, which includes the outcomes. This unification of cause and effect is made possible by understanding them as being connected within and by time.

The consequence of this relates directly to Arendt's interest in time or, more specifically, the gap between the past and the future: *Torah Lishmah* emphasizes how present, future, and past are not only interrelated or dependent on each other but unify into one. The present determines the future and completes the past: all time without exception.

What Arendt calls the gap, i.e. the present moment, therefore, is the only place that we can possibly think or settle in. The past remains incomplete and the future is uncertain. None of us have been or ever will "be" in another realm of time than the now. It is simply impossible not to "be" in the now as we are incapable of leaving

the present – i.e. the moment. It is always the moment. Later I shall elaborate how past and future become part of the moment.

In order to clarify this point, let us think about the following question: When did this moment begin? The answer is that there is no beginning to the moment. Nor is there an end to it. The moment is ongoing for it is always now. This idea might make us think of a digital watch which, instead of numbers, displays the word “now.” Taking into consideration that we call things without beginning or ends “infinite,” it is almost equivalent to the infinity of Arendt’s “third force.” Yet the difference is that the moment, as opposed to the third force, does not have a starting point. What Arendt terms “gap,” therefore, is rather a connecting juncture that includes the past and the future.

The implication of this is that we have the ability, within the present, to affect the past while creating the future. This might sound almost crazy to some, so let me elaborate: the past is never over for the last chapter is constantly being written. Walter Benjamin makes this point quite clearly in his *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. He uses Paul Klee’s painting of an angel with open wings, being in the moment while looking at the past and being pushed into the future. Benjamin concludes by using the term *Eingedenken* and connecting it to Jewish tradition.<sup>28</sup> Claiming that this sort of activity is specifically Jewish reminds us that *Torah Lishmah* is only one way of coming to this realization. The way Benjamin uses *Eingedenken*, a quite uncommon word in German, refers to acts of remembering, or perhaps repentance, in Jewish tradition. For, when repenting, activities and thoughts that seemed completed are reformed and changed. That is, when repenting, the original action actually changes.<sup>29</sup> Taking this idea one step further, Moshe Halbertal writes:

The past is never a closed event; its meaning continues to unfold and retroactively change in relation to new developments. This is as true of personal life as it is of historical events. What is the meaning of an event like Israel’s Six-Day War? Did the war give Israel territories to exchange for a peace agreement? Did the event put Israel in an intolerable state of occupation and demographic disaster? Time will tell. This open-endedness of the past means, in effect, something much more radical than the common claim that we don’t control the future of our efforts, given our finitude and limits. Rather it is a more daring assertion: whatever we accomplish in the past is at the mercy of future action. Future events, in other words, will define retroactively the meaning of what it is that we have done.<sup>30</sup>

We then come to understand that what it means to settle or think in the gap is to realize how much our actions matter, for they change the past and the future. *Torah Lishmah* serves as one example of this, and I suggest that further research be done in order to determine what other activities may have the same effect. Yet there is an additional layer to it. First of all, as Arendt also suggests, studying itself can go on forever.<sup>31</sup> In Judaism, such infinity coincides with the infinity of the divine presence.<sup>32</sup>

As Halbertal points out, studying *Torah*<sup>33</sup> is understood to be a way to communicate with God.<sup>34</sup> Such a claim has also been made by the Rav Chaim<sup>35</sup> and, from the sources that we have looked at so far, this seems not too far-fetched. Yet in direct contrast to Arendt’s statement that we always learn the past, there is an idea in Judaism that God studies the rabbis’ interpretations of the Torah. Similar to the past

being shaped in the present, the Author Himself studies the Rabbis' interpretations in order to understand the future meanings of His text.<sup>36</sup>

Some might think it is blasphemous to even think that God would be able to learn anything, particularly from human beings. The point, however, is that it is our limited understanding of time that forces us to use such phrasing. No, God does not study the Rabbis' interpretations. But, according to Judaism, the interpretations are part of God's creation too. And once they exist, they retroactively influence what has been written before.<sup>37</sup>

Such an approach allows for each individual to be an active and creative part of the formation of past, present, and future. One becomes a partner in crime with God, so to speak, which eventually unifies the interpreter with God's will: it becomes one. This notion, once again, comes to highlight the importance of our actions in this world.

Finally, to come full circle, I want to summarize how my work adds to Arendt's concern that we seem unable to settle or think in the present, and to draw out the further implications of this for the field of educational philosophy. Clearly, Arendt herself did not imagine a physical break within time, as she points out herself.<sup>38</sup> Rather, her concern was that we no longer relate to the world and its history in a way that allows us to take or feel responsibility.

My short survey on *Torah Lishmah* allowed for a reformulation of Arendt's "gap" into a "connecting juncture." By pointing out how our actions not only influence the present but also shape the future and the past, it should have become clear that our actions matter. Acknowledging this is, I believe, an important yet only a first step towards being able to think or settle in this connecting juncture. Like Arendt, I believe that not seeing ourselves as a means to an end is crucial, and it seems important to me to communicate this to our students from early on.

Furthermore, it seems to me that now, when many students at schools as well as universities are often overwhelmed by the easy access to knowledge and the need to succeed in a competitive environment, studying too has fully become a means to an end rather than an end in itself. From an early age, the motivation to study appears to be driven by the will to achieve certain goals, such as earning degrees and money or pursuing a career. Yet knowledge has become more accessible than ever and often all one needs to know in order to get to the information one wants is a language and how to touch a screen.

I wonder what would happen if we were able to have our students and teachers disconnect from, or even forget about, those goals that are bound to the future and instead focus on the moment and on the studying when it occurs. Transmitting values such as "responsibility for the world" that will highlight the importance of our actions while allowing for freedom within the classroom, therefore, seems to me to be of great importance. For the teacher, this will demand a certain flexibility and willingness to improvise, for even though with freedom comes responsibility, it allows us to break conformity.

One reason for this is that a part of the moment's infinity appears in the infinite amount of options that are present. Any given moment presents us with many options

to choose from, especially in relation to our actions. Thoughts such as “what subject do I want my major to be?” or “what grade does this student deserve?” are only simple examples of a wide range of decisions emerging from the infinite options at hand. Some may consider it foolish to ask our students to choose all by themselves. I believe, however, that guiding them into a place where they come to understand the consequences of their choices might be a beginning.

Key to achieving a mode of study that we do for study’s sake, then, seems to me to be a right intention as well as an openness towards where the act of study will lead us. This in return demands the ability to adapt, react, and improvise, as well as the courage to enter into unknown territory. Furthermore, one must agree that answers are never final but rather serve as triggers for further study and questioning of the topic at hand, in order to achieve an ever deeper understanding and meaning to it. Interpretation and reinterpretation, doubt as well as respect and understanding for the other and his or her opinion, also seem to me to be of great importance.

Further research is needed to determine how one could steer the students’ intention based on intrinsic values. Furthermore, it seems to me that it might be interesting to probe the possibility of having lessons at school that aim to foster, what has been termed, study for study’s sake. Finally, the question of treating students like adults, something that Arendt opposed,<sup>39</sup> seems to me to need a reevaluation if we want our students to realize the potential of the moment and the importance of our actions within it.

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1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1977), 14.

2. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.

3. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

4. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 4.

5. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 5.

6. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 5.

7. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 9.

8. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 9.

9. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 9.

10. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 4.

11. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 5.

12. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

13. Norman Lamm, *Torah Umadda* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1990), 7; Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah’s Sake: In the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1989), 102.

14. See, for example: Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah*; or Hannah Kasher, “Torah for Its Own Sake, Torah Not for Its Own Sake and the Third Way,” *The Jewish Quarterly* 79, No. 2/3 (1989): 153–163; Warren Zev Harvey, “Torah Lishmah vs Ideology,” in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought. The Path of the Spirit: The Eliezer Schweid Jubilee Volume: Vol. One*, ed. Yehoyada Amir (Jerusalem: The Mandel Institute of Jewish Studies / The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2004), 249 – 257. No exact definition for *Torah Lishmah* exists and there are different opinions on what should be included in the corpus to be studied. As for me, I would follow the Maimonidean approach of including any field of study such as philosophy and sciences in addition to scripture, cf. Maimonides: Law of Study, Chapter 1 in ‘Mishneh Torah’.

15. See: Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Hirsch Siddur* (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1997), 8 and 9.
16. See for example: *The Talmud: Steinsaltz Edition* (New York: Random House, 1989), Sanhedrin 99b; English translation of original Aramaic/Hebrew: *The Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 99b.
17. *The Babylonian Talmud*, Kiddushin 40b.
18. See for example: *The Babylonian Talmud*, Pesachim 50b.
19. *The Babylonian Talmud*, Avot: 6:1.
20. *The Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 99b.
21. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 216.
22. *The Babylonian Talmud*, Nedarim 62a.
23. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 189.
24. *The Babylonian Talmud*, Pesachim: 50b.
25. *The Babylonian Talmud*, Kiddushin 40b.
26. Maimonides: *Mishneh Torah*, Law of Study, Chapter 1.
27. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 9
28. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 704.
29. Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 95.
30. Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 93.
31. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 196.
32. Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 95.
33. As mentioned in footnote 14, the meaning of Torah in this context is open to interpretation.
34. Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 94.
35. Volozhin Chaim, *Nefesh HaChaim* Chapter 4;
36. Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 49.
37. David Dishon makes a great point in his *Dispute Culture in Israel* (Jerusalem: Shoken Publisher, 1984) showing that in Judaism all opinions are truthful no matter how contradictory.
38. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.
39. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 195.