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## TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORK OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Neither the life nor the work of Emmanuel Levinas, the remarkable French Jewish philosopher and talmudic commentator, fit easily into customary categories. Levinas, who died in Paris in late 1995 just a few weeks shy of his ninetieth birthday, was born in Lithuania and emigrated to France, becoming a French citizen in 1931.<sup>1</sup> While still in his early thirties Levinas seemed poised to enter a promising career as a philosophy professor. Then the Second World War broke out. Drafted into the French army, Levinas was soon captured and, in view of his status as a French soldier, was sent off to spend the next five years in Nazi prison camps. When the war ended he returned to Paris and soon found out that his family in Lithuania had been slaughtered. Levinas rebuilt his life and, some fifteen years later, finally began that promising academic career. He had in the meantime taken on an important role in Paris' growing postwar Jewish community as the head of a training institute for Jewish educators; he also spent many years learning Talmud with a noted teacher.<sup>2</sup> Levinas continued to participate actively in Jewish communal life in Paris both during his academic career and long after he retired from the university in 1976.

Levinas' rich and complex life spanned many worlds. His work similarly resists disciplinary pigeonholes. He wrote with great acuity and mastery about philosophy, ethics, religion, literature, aesthetics, contemporary culture, and Jewish texts. His philosophical work is among the most important in the twentieth century. His several volumes of talmudic commentaries and his collection of essays on Jewish ideas and issues are also highly regarded.<sup>3</sup> His influence not only in philosophy and in Jewish thought, but in the humanities and social sciences as well, has been and continues to be significant.

While scholars have generally acknowledged the exceptional nature of Levinas' life and the diversity of his work, they have been reluctant for the most part to admit what follows from this—that in order to understand Levinas' unique project as a whole, it may well be necessary to move beyond academic models and the disciplinary divisions they reflect. This does not, however, mean discarding academic procedures and distinctions; Levinas' work demands not something *less* than

academic ways of thinking, but rather something *more*, something larger or more generous.<sup>4</sup> In this article I begin to develop a new approach to Levinas that acknowledges the implications both of his rich life and, above all, of his expansive vision.<sup>5</sup>

I begin with a brief sketch of the new paradigm. Section two goes on to show how this new paradigm generates a very different view both of Levinas' philosophical writings and of his Jewish and talmudic writings. In section two the reader will find the surprising claim that several traditional Jewish sources play a vital role in Levinas' *philosophical* writings. Section II also offers a brief account of the several quite distinct tasks Levinas sought to accomplish through his intriguing use of philosophical ideas in his *Jewish and talmudic* writings. Section three provides details about Levinas' philosophy in order to substantiate the claim advanced in section two; it attends in particular to talmudic and kabbalistic ideas that shaped Levinas' philosophy. In light of this discussion, section four draws the conclusion that several standard ways of understanding Levinas' philosophy, which ignore the traditional Jewish sources functioning within that philosophy, leave us with an inadequate or distorted picture of it.

As the reader may have already gathered, according to this new model Levinas draws a strong distinction between philosophy and Judaism. Section five therefore takes up two obvious questions that defenders of this model must answer. The first question concerns sociological or biographical factors that may have led Levinas to distinguish in this somewhat unusual way between philosophy and Jewish tradition. The second concerns the ultimate *philosophical justification* that Levinas offers for accepting the strong distinction he draws. The sixth and concluding section attempts to answer this second question. By means of a comparison between Levinas and some other contemporary thinkers, section six describes Levinas' own philosophical argumentation for a real differentiation between philosophy and Jewish tradition; here we come to the *philosophical* way in which Levinas makes room for real interactions between philosophy and Jewish tradition.

#### I: TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM

Studies of Levinas have tended to focus on his philosophical writings and have generally located him squarely within the intellectual and institutional framework of philosophy as it is practiced in the modern West. As I have argued elsewhere, this is a somewhat misleading and narrow approach, one that has prevented scholars from appreciating Levinas' strong critique of modern Western attitudes and cultural institutions, found especially in his Jewish writings and talmudic essays.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed Levinas' *philosophical* writings themselves vigorously denounce certain fundamental features of the Western philosophical tradition, advocating instead ideas whose provenance seems to lie outside that tradition.<sup>7</sup> One might, by contrast, formulate a less limited approach to Levinas. This would grant that while Levinas' philosophical writings are most assuredly an essential part of his body of work, the several other parts, such as the Jewish apologetic writings and the talmudic commentaries, are equally significant and might furnish insight into the philosophical writings. Support for this approach can be found in Levinas' multifaceted view of himself. Both in his polished texts and in interviews it seems clear that, while Levinas regarded himself as a philosopher, he also took himself to be several other things, for example, a talmudic exegete, a Jewish educator, and on occasion a spokesman for the Jewish tradition. The present essay will sketch just this sort of richer reading of Levinas, one based on all the interconnected pieces of his whole project.<sup>8</sup>

This more balanced reading cannot, of course, merely replace a primarily philosophical reading of Levinas with a primarily religious reading. Here we come upon a stark dilemma that has for too long hampered the study of Levinas: either you use Levinas' philosophical writings to read his religious (and other sorts of) writings, *or* you use Levinas' Jewish religious writings to read his philosophical (and other sorts of) writings. This dilemma and its disjointed alternatives seriously distort Levinas' far-reaching and uniquely connective approach. We will not fully and correctly understand Levinas until we can pass through the horns of this dilemma, and this requires a more inclusive and holistic view.

According to the novel perspective I will be sketching here, Levinas' work is extraordinary because it fully respects the *distinctness* of each separate sphere of life and of each intellectual discipline—and yet simultaneously manages to establish lines of *relationship* between them, doing so in an original manner (which will be discussed in a moment). Reading Levinas in this new way involves stretching beyond disciplinary boundaries and beyond tight compartmentalizations of different spheres of life to try to catch sight of the deeper integration, the living coordination, he creates.

Talk of “integration” or “coordination” must not, however, mislead: Levinas neither blends disciplines together, nor “harmonizes” philosophical reflection and religious life.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, Levinas actually intensifies individual differences between distinct disciplines, and he separates academic life from religious tradition with great vigor and clarity. The need to move beyond conventional academic models becomes palpable at precisely this point for it is here that we encounter the almost paradoxical dynamic of Levinas' thought. This dynamic has

three features: (1) Levinas maintains that each discipline and each religious tradition (in particular, Judaism) enjoys a fully distinct and independent identity of its own; (2) at the same time, this strongly differentiated world allows for relationships between autonomous domains, whether of enrichment, criticism, or both at once; (3) however—and this is absolutely crucial for understanding Levinas correctly—in talking about interactions and relationships between independent domains Levinas is *not* seeking a third frame of reference hovering above any two intellectual disciplines, nor is he looking for a third frame of reference outside of and encompassing both philosophy and Jewish tradition. From the theoretical heights of such a third frame of reference, of course, one could glance down at both the discipline of philosophy and the Jewish tradition and see how they were related. This would be an ultimate metaphysical system or a fundamental philosophical theology. For Levinas no such third frame of reference exists: all that exist are discrete disciplines and concrete religious traditions; there is nowhere *else*, no *other* place to stand except in a specific discipline or tradition.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to many thinkers, Levinas rejects any sort of comprehensive vision that would allow us to transcend or leave behind the (reputedly) unfortunate limitations of being situated within a particular religious tradition or within the rules and procedures of a particular intellectual discipline. Levinas does not believe in—and, above all, does not trust—such ultimately rootless comprehension. Levinas claims, rather, that a relationship *between* two disciplines actually takes place *within* each of the two disciplines. To take a different example, he holds that the relationship *between* the discipline of philosophy and the Jewish tradition takes place *inside* the discipline of philosophy, and *inside* the Jewish tradition. In other words the relationship between philosophy and Jewish tradition is internal; this relationship is reflected *in the interior of* the disciplinary confines of philosophy and *in the interior of* the concrete reality of Jewish tradition—and *not* in some third frame of reference, distinct from the discipline of philosophy and from Jewish tradition, which would surpass both of them.<sup>11</sup>

## II: THE NEW PARADIGM AND LEVINAS' TWO GENRES OF WRITING

The preceding account provides only a brief outline of the complex logic that defines Levinas' thought as a whole. One may perhaps hear in this logic distant echoes of Leibniz and even of the Maharal of Prague, among many others. Of course much more needs to be said. Still, enough detail has been provided to allow us to grasp how different both groups of Levinas' writings must look once we recognize their overall logic.

As we have seen, Levinas understands philosophy and Jewish tradition to be discrete, independent realities that may enter into relation with one another, a relation that takes place within each separate domain. This means, to take a relevant example, that traditional Jewish ideas may shape and alter the character of various lines of thought found within the discipline of philosophy. Grasping this concept enables us to notice a very important point that has received little attention (and even less analysis): Levinas' philosophical writings actually show us one instance, one form of this internal relationship between philosophy and Jewish tradition.<sup>12</sup> Levinas' philosophical writings, which certainly represent a significant contribution to the ongoing tradition of Western philosophy, are themselves a product of exactly this sort of internal relationship, wherein Jewish ideas and texts have entered into, and altered the course of philosophical conceptualization and argumentation. This is not unlike the way in which we discover that an otherwise invisible and distant planet has, in fact, affected a visible and nearby planet: it is *in the changes in the orbital course* of the planet before us that we see the effects of the distant planet, and it is *in the changes in the intellectual course* of philosophical reflection that we see the effects of Jewish tradition. (The reader will find a more detailed attempt to substantiate these claims about the nature of Levinas' philosophy in the next section.)

Levinas' Jewish writings and talmudic essays conform to a similar pattern. Just as Levinas' philosophical writings reveal the influence of certain Jewish ideas within one moment of the tradition of Western philosophy, so Levinas' Jewish writings reveal the influence of certain Western philosophical notions within one moment of ongoing apologetic or commentarial writing about the Jewish tradition.

Levinas brings to his readings of the Talmud the Judaically reshaped modern philosophy we have just been describing, wherein traditional ideas drawn from the Gemara and even from the kabbalah exert an intriguing torsion on such figures as Kant, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. In this sense Levinas' talmudic essays are something like an updated version of a venerable Jewish practice, that of reading the *aggadic* (nonlegal) portions of the Talmud—with their richly woven narratives, irony, and startlingly acute human portraits—as intimations of a full-blown moral (or mystical) philosophy. As is well known, traditional commentators uncovered recommendations on ethical self-perfection, theses on the ultimate nature of human history, even speculations on the hidden interrelations of human beings and their creator, within the poignant and memorable stories of the *aggadah*. In the course of proffering his own readings, Levinas refers to some of these classic commentaries, especially the *Chiddushei Aggadot* of the Maharsha, and incorporates their insights.<sup>13</sup>

However, this more or less traditional Jewish way of using conceptual insights—here those gleaned in part from contemporary Western philosophy—as an instrument with which to appropriate and develop the meanings of *aggadic* portions of the Gemara constitutes only one of the several things Levinas is up to in his talmudic readings. As we noted above, Levinas also draws on hints found in the *aggadah* to issue forceful critiques of patterns of behavior and thought that have become established in the broader culture of the modern West. Moreover, on a third front, Levinas clearly hopes his interpretations of talmudic texts will interest modern Jews who may know little of Judaism, perhaps opening up for them a path back to the tradition and the radiance of its texts.<sup>14</sup>

There is nonetheless an important *asymmetry* between Levinas' philosophical and his Jewish writings. The difference, of course, is that the tradition of Western philosophy is largely a type of discourse, whereas the Jewish tradition is far more than discourse. It includes not only a great variety of different sorts of discourse but also an all-encompassing and living system of law, rituals, gestures, practices, music, collective structures, ways of organizing space and time, and so on. So when Jewish ideas affect Western philosophical discourse and produce a new form of that discourse—as we see in Levinas' philosophical writings—we can say without qualification that Jewish ideas have affected at least a moment of Western philosophy. Yet when we say that certain ideas taken from Western philosophy have affected discourse about Judaism—as we see in Levinas' Jewish writings—we cannot say without qualification that Western philosophy has affected the Jewish tradition. For *that* description to apply in an unqualified way we would need something far larger in scope, a possible example of which might be the tradition of Jewish Averroism in the Middle Ages and its lasting effects.<sup>15</sup>

### III: TRADITIONAL JEWISH SOURCES IN LEVINAS' PHILOSOPHY

Once the unique “logic” of his work is understood, one realizes that Levinas has cleared the conceptual space within which Jewish traditional materials can come into intimate and formative contact with the techniques, texts, and ideas of Western philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Such a realization must spur the scholar to try to discover and analyze the traditional Judaic materials that lie behind certain of Levinas' philosophical moves.

Indeed there is a strong case to be made that several classical Jewish sources made their way deep into Levinas' philosophical workshop and thus affected his philosophy from within. Leaving to one side Levinas' ruminations on specific *sugyot* in his published volumes of talmu-

dic commentary, it would seem that the multivalent method of talmudic conversation and analysis has entered deeply into the heart of Levinas' philosophy, especially his later work. For instance, as we will see in section six, Levinas' later philosophy places great value on a plurality of differing viewpoints that coexist and interrogate, or interpellate, each other. It gives central importance to the oscillation of alternating voices (related indirectly to talmudic *shakla v'taria*), and it has a pronounced tendency to define human beings on a deep level as beings who *speak to*, who *say to*, one another. The Talmud itself, and its traditional method of study, must both be counted among the sources of Levinas' later philosophy.

In addition to the Talmud's invaluable influence on Levinas' later philosophy, another classic Jewish source may have had a very specific role. This is R. Hayyim of Volozhin's *Nefesh ha Hayyim*, an important early-nineteenth-century ethico-kabbalistic text by the Vilna Gaon's most famous disciple.<sup>17</sup> As I have suggested elsewhere, this text may well have shaped Levinas' later thought.<sup>18</sup> In particular, this text seems to have influenced Levinas in his lifelong struggle to reinterpret and reappropriate the work of his own teacher, Edmund Husserl.<sup>19</sup> Throughout his career, Levinas returned again and again to the vast, impressive Husserlian corpus, penning many essays on various aspects of Husserl's thought. Levinas constantly sought to solve his own philosophical problems by revising and altering ideas he found in Husserl. Levinas produced most of his revisionary essays on Husserl during the period from roughly 1961, when *Totality and Infinity* was published, through 1974, when *Otherwise Than Being* saw the light of day. He likely wrote many of these essays at least in part to find answers to criticisms of the earlier text.<sup>20</sup> It is in 1963, during exactly this period, that we find Levinas' earliest published reference to the *Nefesh ha Hayyim*; he would go on to write five or six pieces on this text, one that clearly played a prominent role in his thinking.<sup>21</sup>

Far more important than this plausible chronology, though, is the fascinating and novel way in which Levinas begins to reread Husserl in the essays from this period (which culminate, of course, in Levinas' second magnum opus, *Otherwise Than Being*).<sup>22</sup> During this period Levinas refashions his own earlier views about the nature of the individual—and he does so, I wish to argue, by combining ideas taken from the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* with central concepts taken mainly from Husserl's intricate writings on time consciousness.<sup>23</sup> This matter clearly demands separate and detailed treatment in another venue. For the moment, then, let me indicate just one general point that may help to illuminate this complex relationship.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, as well as in some of his essays on Husserl leading up to its publication, Levinas describes the individual—the

“subjectivity”—as being “the other in the same.”<sup>24</sup> Levinas also uses cognate phrases to express the same idea, saying for instance that the other “animates” or “inhabits” the self. With these phrases he seems to suggest that the core of my identity is constituted by my being, in some way “inhabited by” or “animated by” another person, “the other” for whom I am responsible. According to this scheme, my own singular identity first arises from my being responsible for that other person whom I bear within my very self: it is *my*—and no one else’s—irreplaceable responsibility for that other person that makes me “me.”<sup>25</sup>

Without further clarification of this profound Levinasian idea about the nature of ethics and identity, what matters for our purposes here is the strong echo that any reader of the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* must hear at this point, for the language Levinas uses resonates powerfully with this text. Some background detail may be helpful in appreciating this point.

The *Nefesh ha Hayyim* describes a richly concatenated cosmos of countless worlds, both supernal and ordinary.<sup>26</sup> God has delegated to each human being the responsibility to maintain these worlds and the cosmos they compose. The worlds depend for their sustenance on a human being’s deeds, for each and every one of these brings weal or woe to a specific element or feature in the cosmos.<sup>27</sup> The *Nefesh ha Hayyim* tells us that God created humanity as the sum of all that went before so that each human being includes in his or her makeup something of every created power, luminous force, or world, whose creation preceded his or her own. Human actions, human speech, human thought, and even the organs and limbs of the human body all correspond to various components of the cosmos; thus a single human action, or the condition of even one organ or limb, can enhance and repair—or weaken and harm—different facets of the cosmos. Each human being is literally a microcosmos, a cosmos in human form, containing within his or her composition a remarkably organized plurality representative of the multiplicity to be found in God’s creation.<sup>28</sup> This human being, who bears an essential responsibility for the entirety of God’s creation is, moreover, linked with God through a three-part soul made up of *nefesh* attached to *ruach* above it, while *ruach* is attached to *neshamah* above it. Yet the ultimate root of these three intertwined souls rests in God, the *neshamah of the neshamah*. In this way the lowest level of God’s own soul, as it were, can be said to lie within each separate human being, ensouling him or her.<sup>29</sup>

The *Nefesh ha Hayyim* sees each concrete, embodied human being as the guiding, life-giving “soul” of the “body” of the cosmos, a cosmos for which he or she is responsible. This means that God, whose own divine soul reaches down into the soul of each person, *ensouls* all the many worlds. This follows because each person in fact extends God’s



ensouling presence into the world by being tied up with God's own soul (the *neshamah of the neshamah*). Because each person is the "soul of the cosmos," as we have seen, this means that God, through and in human beings, is ultimately the soul of the soul of the cosmos, the *nefesh ha-hayyim*. According to the *Nefesh ha Hayyim*, then, to be a human being means: (1) to be ultimately responsible for the cosmos, to exist *for the sake of* the cosmos; (2) to animate the vast, manifold cosmos that one inhabits; (3) to contain within oneself all of the discrete elements of the cosmos for which one is responsible; and (4) to be animated, in the last analysis, by God's own soul.

Of course there is much more to say about the *Nefesh ha Hayyim*, both with respect to other features that may be relevant to the development of Levinas' philosophy and with respect to the intrinsic interest of this profound text itself. Nonetheless, enough has been said to allow the reader to see what may well be one source for Levinas' powerful language of "inhabiting" and "animating" in *Otherwise Than Being*. R. Hayyim's reworking of kabbalistic material (from both the Zohar and Lurianic sources) seems to have given Levinas a model or a direction in his attempt to rethink the nature of ethics, subjectivity, and human responsibility. Of course it is just that: a model, a direction, a set of compelling images and ideas on which Levinas drew in writing his later philosophy. I am by no means arguing that Levinas simply cut and pasted bits of R. Hayyim into his own work. Levinas could not possibly have done this, especially because on the model proposed here Levinas was acutely aware of the differences between Jewish tradition and the discipline of philosophy; Levinas saw the texts and discourse generally found in the former as quite distinct from those of the latter.<sup>30</sup>

#### IV: HOW TO READ (OR NOT TO READ) LEVINAS' PHILOSOPHY

These remarks about the nature of Levinas' philosophical writings and about specific Jewish sources that resonate within them imply that at least two of the prevalent strategies for reading Levinas' philosophical writings must be flawed.

(1) There are those who take Levinas to be no more than the latest participant in a philosophical conversation that began, proximately, with Husserl and Heidegger and continued on in Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Habermas, Derrida—and now Levinas.<sup>31</sup> In one sense, of course, this is correct: Levinas does indeed represent a powerful, recent engagement with Husserl's legacy and with continental philosophy. This fact about Levinas must never be forgotten; without it, one cannot understand the nature of Levinas' own philosophy,

especially its later form, since Levinas' own thinking always remains so thoroughly rooted in Husserlian phenomenology, that being the original—and never entirely forsaken—context of Levinas' philosophy. Yet this point, taken by itself, overlooks what Jewish materials *do* within, and to, the philosophical context of Husserlian phenomenology that Levinas brings with him; it prevents us from seeing how Levinas' philosophical writings result from the impact of Jewish materials on continental philosophy.

(2) A second approach to Levinas involves locating his philosophical writings in the context of modern Jewish philosophy. There is certainly great value to this; Levinas was conversant with and influenced by modern Jewish philosophers, and he prominently acknowledges his debt to Rosenzweig in several places.<sup>32</sup> Yet if the preceding sketch of the “logic” of Levinas' work is correct, then this approach too must have its limitations. Levinas' acknowledgement of the distinct existence of Jewish tradition will set him apart from other twentieth-century Jewish philosophers, for instance, Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig. Far from Cohen's talk of a rational correlation between universal philosophical reason and Judaism, and far also from Rosenzweig's sophisticated, quasi-existentialist version of this correlation, Levinas' thought preserves separateness. It recognizes that the specific halakhic, sociological, liturgical, textual, historical, and institutional elements of Jewish tradition constitute a separate space, one that cannot be assimilated to philosophy. Levinas' unusual kind of thinking, rather, nurtures plurality or multiplicity.

To put this another way, it is very difficult to defend the view that Levinas approached Judaism by *fitting it into* some larger philosophical or theological scheme. Levinas did not do this. Now, to be sure, Levinas did employ philosophy both in order to interpret Judaism (as Note 8 makes clear) and to *defend* it from its “cultured despisers.” However, one must distinguish carefully here between two very different intellectual stances. (1) A thinker may acknowledge that Jewish tradition is a phenomenon distinct from, and autonomous with respect to, philosophy and still go on to use philosophical categories to interpret Jewish tradition. (2) A thinker may understand Jewish tradition by reference to an overarching epistemological, theological, or metaphysical system that assigns a specific role or function to that tradition. Levinas—who, after all, drew on Jewish tradition to upbraid and correct Western philosophy—can be charged only with the former.<sup>33</sup> The same cannot be said so clearly or easily, however, about Levinas' predecessors in modern Jewish philosophy, who most often seem to conform to the latter, but not to the former. At the very least this question must await further research that will clarify the relationship between Jewish tradition and philosophy in such major figures as Cohen and Rosenzweig.<sup>34</sup>

## V: QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NEW PARADIGM

On the model being proposed here, Levinas kept philosophy and Jewish tradition separate even as he infused certain Jewish ideas into philosophy and used certain philosophical concepts in order to present Judaism. While I hope that the reader finds this model compelling, it does leave open two quite different sorts of question, which we might call sociological/biographical and philosophical, respectively. The former asks why Levinas might have come to hold the view of the relationship between philosophy and Judaism we have described here, given that this view diverges strongly from those held by other modern Jewish philosophers.<sup>35</sup> The latter asks about the ultimate philosophical reasons, or argument, Levinas gives us on behalf of the marked distinction between philosophy and Judaism portrayed in this model. I will suggest an answer to the first question in this section and develop an answer to the second in the next section.

One interesting way in which Levinas differs from earlier modern Jewish philosophers can be seen in his attitude toward the reality of Jewish religious life. Levinas' Jewish writings refer routinely and extensively to the textual, intellectual, halakhic, sociological, liturgical, and ritual details of traditional Jewish religious life. Far from downplaying the significance of these particularistic details or assimilating them to some larger, universal pattern, he argues that the ensemble of such details in fact constitutes the unique revelation preserved in and passed on by Jewish tradition.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Levinas shows little interest in searching out "European precedents" for the details of Jewish tradition he analyzes and celebrates, nor is he curious about parallels with Christianity. Instead he often simply begins with the reality of the Jewish way of life, without feeling the need to locate it first within any far-reaching account of intellectual development or of historical growth. In general, Levinas seems far less impressed with or beholden to Western culture than do many modern Jewish thinkers, and he adopts a stance toward it that one has trouble imagining either Cohen or Rosenzweig taking. Levinas seems then to treat Jewish tradition as something unique and thus quite distinct from philosophy.

There are several reasons for this, but I will discuss only one of them here: Levinas' historical and cultural location.<sup>37</sup> One can understand that the Nazis would have cured Levinas of any residual interest he might have had in the relation between Germanism and Judaism, a topic that had worried Cohen many years earlier. A search of Levinas' work for references to what one might conjecture would be the relevant analogue is fruitless: he never mulls over the relation between Frenchness and Judaism. In a similar way, the shoah taught Levinas that Rosenzweig's preoccupation in the *Star* with various stages of Western

art, culture, and philosophy as a way to situate Jewish tradition was unnecessary and probably no longer tenable.<sup>38</sup> Whatever one may think of this, Levinas' Jewish writings and talmudic essays often seem to suggest that today—in the aftermath of two world wars, various campaigns of genocide, and an unthinkable murderous attempt to eradicate his own people and tradition from the face of the earth—it is the task of ancient Jewish tradition to educate and civilize the young, superficial societies of the modern West, whose thinly veiled capacity for savagery on an incomprehensibly vast scale is no longer in doubt.<sup>39</sup> One might say that where his nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors often saw a vertical relationship between the great universality of Western philosophy and the particularity of Judaism, Levinas sees either a horizontal relationship between equals or a pedagogical relationship in which Jewish tradition must instruct both Western culture and Western philosophy in the ways of ethics and of patience.<sup>40</sup> Levinas cannot and must not be reduced to being a “Holocaust thinker.” Nonetheless Levinas had witnessed firsthand, unlike his predecessors, the chilling, blood-soaked failure of modern Western humanism.<sup>41</sup>

#### VI: LEVINAS AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY

The preceding may help to explain, sociologically and biographically, why Levinas came to hold certain views. But what *philosophical* reasons does Levinas, that consummate philosopher, offer us for these views? How, in other words, does Levinas argue philosophically for the strong distinction he draws between philosophy and Judaism?

There is indeed a distinctive Levinasian philosophy that lies behind and supports the strong distinction Levinas drew between philosophy and Judaism. A good way to begin to understand it is by contrasting it with a pervasive development in contemporary philosophical thinking about religion. Ludwig Wittgenstein formulated one version of this general development, while Hans-Georg Gadamer more recently propounded another. Both of these thinkers insisted with considerable originality that all thinking begins not with abstract axioms but rather with the concrete and given realities of language, of sociocultural organization, and of historical situation. According to these thinkers the actual forms of human life, and the details of historical location, make possible philosophical reflection—and everything else we do. Thus philosophy cannot dismiss such “merely accidental” facts about how we live, and have lived, as a priori irrelevant to the higher truths philosophy seeks. Instead philosophy will have to begin with the recognition that it finds itself in a communally and historically shaped world made up of many forms of human life and kinds of discourse. The *philosophy-*

*ical* form of life and kind of discourse will have to acknowledge that it, itself, is just another form of life and kind of discourse, which can no longer claim a priori to be superior to, and of greater truth value than, other historically given forms of life and kinds of discourse. If the philosopher wishes to argue that forms of life and kinds of discourse rooted in philosophy are superior to others, he is certainly free to do this, but then he must actually argue his case. In short, the philosophical form of life and kind of discourse may or may not be superior to other forms of life and kinds of discourse, but this open question will have to be settled through the a posteriori procedure of framing arguments, countering objections, and actually persuading people.

While this is, of course, a terribly oversimplified account, it furnishes enough basic information about the approach championed by Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and their followers to enable us to grasp how it resolves the difficulty documented above. By beginning with the inescapable and formative reality of human society and history, this line of thinking introduces a powerful distinction between philosophy and such things as Jewish tradition *from the start*. Philosophy may still condemn Jewish tradition or absorb relevant truths from it—or Jewish tradition may do these things to philosophy—but there is no problem imagining how these sorts of interactions and interrelationships could be possible.

Although there may be some interesting and even important points of similarity between this recent development and Levinas' philosophy, the two are quite distinct. Levinas does not begin his philosophy with the given data of human society and history. He certainly attends to the details of things like human embodiment, sensation, need, pain, hunger, labor, ethics, and so on—but these are not sociological, cultural, or historical, and are not equivalent to forms of life or kinds of discourse.

Levinas' solution to the difficulty we are considering here is different.<sup>42</sup> He does not incorporate philosophy into a sweeping and fully differentiated picture of the panoply of human activities and forms of life. Working from another direction entirely, he criticizes philosophy for what he feels has been its total fixation on the words, arguments, treatises, and texts that carry its wisdom. Levinas calls the formulated ideas, sentences, propositions—in short, the discourse—of philosophy “the said.” Levinas does not limit the said only to philosophy; it includes all the different kinds of discourse and ranges over everything from speech to published prose. The said corresponds to the observable world of buildings, people, actions, texts, and so on that the historian might describe. The said enables the historian to construct a story that synchronizes events and builds up a sense of time; more generally, the said is what makes it possible to assemble a coherent world of space and time, what we call *being*.

Levinas argues that philosophy has, however, almost totally ignored the enigmatic yet profound reality through which and in which the said itself comes into being. Levinas calls this “the saying” and devotes the magnum opus of his later philosophy, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, to exploring its depths. The saying produces the said, whether in speech or in writing. The said can by definition always be synchronized, included in an encompassing totality of space and time; it is always part of a narrative. The saying, by contrast, is *not* included in the said; it is not, by definition, something that can be synchronized, nor is it part of a narrative. This claim may seem contradictory; we will return to it below.

The saying is always something *I* do with or to *you*: I say to you. This is true whether the “I” is the one that would be spoken by the author of this essay or by any one of you who may be reading it, and even when I say to myself, the “you” to whom I would otherwise be saying is implied. Of course there are many aspects of “my saying to you” that we can treat as events, as bits of the said: the time of day at which I speak to you, the location, my posture and your posture, my feelings and your feelings, the inflection or tone I impart to my speech, the actual words I choose, what I may hope to accomplish in speaking to you, how you hear me, and so on. All of this lies in the domain of the said. The saying is something entirely different: it is primordial communicative openness directed toward another. All the various factors of my and of your personality may be actively present as I am saying to you, but the saying itself is not a factor of personality. It is in many ways what makes me human, what Levinas often calls my lowering of my defenses in communicating something, anything, to you.

The saying is not exactly a capacity, an action, or a performance; it is more like an essential feature of human life, my turning toward another person and trying to express something to her. I cannot choose the basic outward-directedness and orientation toward the other that constitute saying, although I can certainly choose whether to speak or not, what to say, etc. Yet the saying makes me a person on a level of human identity so basic that it *precedes* my volition and my decisions. In a certain sense, it would be more correct to describe the saying as passive, because while I can choose to speak to you or not, the saying is almost a pre-given form, the original internal and external choreography of human sociality, and I can no more choose it than I can choose to have the ability to walk upright, to use language, or to employ opposable thumbs. Yet what is most intriguing about the saying is that it *not* a project or intention of mine. The saying is an unguarded moment of sheer semantic sincerity, of expression without prudential calculations and driving interests: it is pure communication, nothing more than the openhanded giving of meaning to another in an act of expression—in

other words, the handing of a gift of meaning to another person—that is one of the central features of human life. It is as if my decision at a particular moment to speak to you relies on and enacts a far older pattern, one I did not make.

What Levinas argues, then, is that philosophy has ignored the various persons saying to other persons, through which and in which the texts, arguments, and words of philosophy come into being. Philosophy has forgotten, Levinas charges, that philosophy, in particular, and discourse in general (and all that discourse makes possible) emerge only in, and from, the apparently humble reality of one human being communicating with another. This has far-reaching consequences for philosophy, which may best be brought out by following Levinas' description of how philosophy actually proceeds.

As Levinas sees it, the said preserves the results of individuals saying in the form of texts; this enables others to come on the scene and “unsay” what they find in those texts, to critique the said. Still others can then “resay” the original said, defending or reinterpreting it. Soon the first “unsaying” and its “resaying” themselves become texts connected to the original text, and all of these texts together become the text of philosophy—until someone else comes along and “unsays” this new text. On this model, philosophical activity and the growth of philosophy would be impossible without the said or the text. Yet, and this is Levinas' key point, philosophy also depends here on the saying of various different persons, whose saying to others in fact generates the various saids that function to “unsay” or “resay” original texts.

Without the saying of these individuals and their interlocutors, there would be no philosophy, or perhaps philosophy would remain exactly one static, unchanging doctrine. However, once one recognizes the indispensable and necessary role of saying in propagating new saids to unsay or resay the text (the said up to that point), one suddenly develops a very different picture of philosophy. For in this case, philosophy can never fully grasp itself, can never completely understand itself; it can never be a closed system. This is because there is one aspect of what makes philosophy happen—namely, the saying of one individual to another person—that cannot be made part of philosophy's discourse, its system, the said. Recall that the saying, unlike the said, cannot become part of a temporal sequence or a narrative. It would therefore seem that philosophy must always fail to attain total closure, like a frustrated dog always failing to catch its tail.

Has not Levinas himself, however, in offering us this account of philosophy, in fact *included* the saying in the narrative he offers? Is this not a telling contradiction? Levinas responds that it is not; he maintains that the “time” of philosophy (and of his own description) cannot in fact be synchronized with the “time” of saying. Yet does not this very

statement *itself* synchronize the saying and the said in one sentence—even if it does this for the purpose of *denying* this very synchronization? Levinas again denies that it does, arguing ingeniously that the situation is reminiscent of the skeptic in philosophy who denies that truth exists.<sup>43</sup> The skeptic is supposedly refuted when he is asked whether his own claim—that there is no truth—is itself true. However, as Levinas reminds us, skepticism is as old as philosophy and never seems to go away. The skeptic presumes that his own skeptical charge does not become part of the general discourse of philosophy but rather remains external to it, like a permanent challenge or contestation delivered from a dimension other than that of philosophy. Levinas replies in exactly the same way: even the critic who charges Levinas with contradiction must avail herself of the saying in order to issue the said of this charge. Levinas therefore claims that in attacking it she has in fact confirmed his own point.<sup>44</sup>

We see here at last Levinas' own view of the problem presented in section three. Unlike Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and their followers who want to place philosophy (at least initially) on an equal footing with things like tradition, Levinas has instead built a fundamental sort of systemic irresolution and asynchronicity into philosophy itself. This basic open-endedness results from an unabsorbable plurality of individuals directed toward interlocutors, which guarantees philosophy a continuous, quasi-organic, life cycle of challenge, growth, and incorporation. Philosophy cannot deny Jewish tradition its own independent sphere of existence, because any statement to that effect would purport to represent philosophy as a final and closed system. On Levinas' model, this statement would remain open to unsaying, resaying, and so on, and the argument would resume. Philosophy remains unfinished and unable ever to be finished, because it is a form of discourse, and what human beings are exceeds the capacities of any and all discursive systems (including the system in which I am making this remark).<sup>45</sup>

While I must leave full exploration of the many talmudic resonances in Levinas' "philosophy of philosophy" for another occasion, this last point does suggest a fascinating possibility: do human beings exceed the discursive in Levinas' philosophy because they are *b'tzelem Elokim*? Levinas does not say this in his philosophical writing of course, but as an avid and close reader of R. Hayyim of Volozhin, who spends much time expounding the meaning of this central phrase, Levinas would certainly have been thinking about it. Talmud Torah is infinite because it has to do, ultimately, with the mind of God (as it were). Is Levinas perhaps transferring this idea from Talmud Torah to the secular realm of philosophy? Is he saying, in other words, that just as Talmud Torah is ever unfinished because it is the human attempt to understand the Infinite, so philosophy is ever unfinished because it is the human at-



tempt to understand human beings, who are *b'tzelem Elokim* and thus partake to some small degree of the infinity of their creator? If this surmise is correct, then perhaps we see the human embodiment of this divine infinity in saying, in the essentially peaceful reality of communicating with others, of opening ourselves to them. If so, then philosophy is our endless attempt to sound the depths of our human openness and directedness toward the other person, a pre-philosophical and extra-philosophical moment of *imitatio dei* that exceeds what philosophy can grasp.

HEBREW COLLEGE

NOTES

1. The brief synopsis of Levinas' life I offer here is indebted to Richard Cohen's excellent account in *Elevations* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 115–32. For a full-length biography of Levinas, see Marie-Anne Lescourret's *Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris, 1994).

2. This was the famous and mysterious talmudic sage R. Mordechai Shoshani, to whom Elie Wiesel (who also studied with R. Shoshani) devoted a chapter entitled “The Wandering Jew” in his *Legends of Our Time* (New York, 1968).

3. In 1960, despite his growing career as a philosophy professor, Levinas began what would become a longstanding practice—the presentation of a lecture on selected talmudic passages, almost exclusively *aggadic*, to an annual meeting of French-speaking Jewish intellectuals. Levinas would continue to prepare and deliver these lectures for nearly thirty years, long after he had retired from the university. These many talmudic readings were subsequently published in four volumes (three volumes in English translation). For more details on these colloquia, see Robert Gibbs' fine chapter, “Correlations, Translations,” Chap. 7 in *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 155–75. See also Note 15 below.

4. This article is concerned, in a general way, with the limitations of academic approaches to Levinas; it points to the way in which Levinas' thought, taken as a whole, does not entirely conform to the habits of mind and methods customary in academic institutions. While thorough treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this article, it is perhaps appropriate here to remind the reader of the importance of studying the interests and the history that have shaped contemporary academic institutions, their intellectual assumptions, and their procedures. Indeed academic disciplines themselves are just as open to this sort of critical, genealogical study as are the ways of life and the traditions that have hitherto been subjected to just such critique by academics. It is not relativism to begin to trace the historical forces that formed paradigms in var-

ious disciplines, nor is it relativism to recognize their cultural specificity. It is, rather, honesty and the evasion of hubris. (These remarks are indebted to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau.)

5. This new paradigm challenges established ways of reading Levinas' varied oeuvre. Given the sheer number of distinct issues on which discussion of this paradigm touches, I have been forced to limit myself here mostly to presenting it and exploring just a few of its ramifications. On this score I must ask for the reader's understanding, for in several instances I have found it necessary either to confine consideration of possible objections to the notes or to point to the need for future studies beyond the scope of the present essay.

6. Jacob Meskin, "Critique, Tradition, and the Religious Imagination: An Essay on Levinas' Talmudic Readings," *Judaism*, Vol. 47 (Winter 1998), pp. 90–106.

7. Few students of Levinas would deny this claim, especially since so many of his texts substantiate it. For example, take this forceful attack on modern Western philosophy from *Totality and Infinity*:

The predominance of a tradition that subordinates unworthiness to failure, moral generosity itself to the necessities of objective thought, is perceivable in European thought. The spontaneity of freedom is not called in question; its limitation alone is held to be tragic and to constitute a scandal. Freedom is called in question only inasmuch as it somehow finds itself imposed on itself: if I could have freely chosen my own existence everything would be justified. . . . The critique of spontaneity engendered by the consciousness of moral unworthiness, on the contrary, precedes truth. . . . The consciousness of unworthiness is not in its turn a truth, is not a consideration of facts. . . . The freedom that can be ashamed of itself founds truth. . . . To discover the unjustified facticity of power and freedom one must . . . measure oneself against infinity . . . this way of measuring oneself against the perfection of infinity is not a theoretical consideration; it is accomplished as shame, where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise" (*Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh, 1969], pp. 83–84; originally published as *Totalité et Infini* [La Haye, 1961], pp. 55–56).

As this passage makes clear, Levinas does more than reprimand various Western philosophers: he will also indict major parts of the tradition of Western philosophy itself. Levinas' condemnation of the individual's "rootless spontaneity" in this passage accords very well with the idea that the essence or identity of each human being lies, in fact, in his or her responsibility. This latter idea stems from one of Levinas' favorite Jewish texts, the *Nefesh ha Hayyim*, whose possible contribution to Levinas' philosophy will be considered in section two.

8. Some readers may feel that the view contained in this paragraph, to the elaboration of which this article is dedicated, cannot possibly be correct, because it is obvious that Levinas is first and foremost a philosopher and that he clearly subordinates Jewish tradition to philosophy. First let me ask such readers to read on, especially into section three, where intriguing suggestions are made regarding the partial *dependence* of Levinas' philosophy on Jewish tradition. Second, leaving aside for the moment the Jewish sources that may have shaped Levinas' philosophy, I would like to cite the following remark by Levinas, made to Philippe Nemo in the course of their interviews: "At no moment

did the Western philosophical tradition in my eyes lose its right to the last word; everything must, indeed, be expressed in its tongue; but perhaps it is not the place of the first meaning of beings, the place where meaning begins” (*Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen [Pittsburgh, 1985], pp. 24–25; originally published as *Éthique et infini* [Paris, 1982], p. 15). Levinas will make the same distinction in several of his talmudic essays; in that context he is generally discussing the distinction between Greek language and Greek wisdom. He points out that Greek language, like “the tongue of Western philosophical tradition” just cited, is the language of analysis, commentary, and demystification, and is therefore indispensable. Indeed even if one wanted to challenge the privilege of this language, one would still use this very language to formulate the challenge. However, in the talmudic essays Levinas also quite clearly reserves judgment about a closely related matter: the content or meaning one uses this language to express, the type of “wisdom” that animates it. Once again, the relationship between Greek and Hebrew traditions in Levinas’ thinking remains quite complex, and it certainly seems incorrect to characterize this relationship by saying simply that the latter is subordinated to the former. See “Model of the West,” in *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 13–33 (originally published as “Modèle de l’Occident,” in *L’au-delà du verset* [Paris, 1982], pp. 29–50); and “The Translation of the Scripture,” in *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 33–54 (originally published as “La traduction de l’Écriture,” in *A l’heure des nations* [Paris, 1988], pp. 43–66).

9. This fact can be observed in many places in Levinas’ vast oeuvre. For instance, Levinas himself states it plainly right at the start of *Ethics and Infinity*: “I have never aimed explicitly to ‘harmonize’ or ‘conciliate’ both traditions [Biblical and philosophical]. If they happen to be in harmony it is probably because every philosophical thought rests on pre-philosophical experiences, and because for me reading the Bible has belonged to these founding experiences” (p. 24).

10. To stand in a discipline and in a tradition at the same time is by no means to hover outside and over the two of them. It is rather to participate in different spheres simultaneously. After all, I can be married to one person, related to some others, a neighbor to still others, a colleague of yet others, and so on. Will anyone seriously maintain that this constitutes a *prima facie* case that I am no longer one integrated self? That would make schizophrenia a required component of normal life. Will anyone maintain that these various spheres are not really different? That would make normal life, with its multiple genres of relationship, impossible. I freely admit that standing both in a tradition and in a discipline can at times be an invigorating challenge, just as participating in the diverse forms of daily interaction can be. What I wish to deny is that we must understand this sort of plurality by appeal to some ultimate framework *outside* the tradition and the discipline in which I stand. Rather than a move to “greater generality,” what may actually be needed is an enriched sense of the particular ways in which the tradition and the discipline might interact and of the concrete details of these interactions.

11. In this sense I must respectfully disagree with Gibbs’ fine study *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, especially with several of the methodological

points he makes in chapter one of that work. In the reading of Levinas I am advancing here, there is no room for the Cohenian (and Rosenzweigian) notion of correlation; this notion would involve exactly the sort of overarching third frame of reference of systematic metaphysics that Levinas rejects. Nonetheless, in arguing that Jewish tradition has indeed shaped Levinas' philosophy—although I am arguing that it has done this from the inside—I have been guided by Gibbs' insightful claim in *Correlations* that it would be "(t)he task for a whole volume . . . to trace the role of 'Hebrew' as teacher in Levinas' 'Greek' works" (p. 157). The present essay aspires to be, roughly, an introduction to that "whole volume."

12. There could be other forms of this as well. What seems to be required, at a minimum, is an individual thinker possessing sufficient depth both in the discipline of philosophy and in the Jewish tradition. This is already rare. Beyond this, though, such an individual would have to be seeking ways to express him- or herself—i.e., there would need to be a creative drive. R. Joseph Soloveitchik might well be one example of this in the twentieth century. (Hermann Cohen might be another; see Notes 34 and 35 below.)

13. See especially Lawrence Kaplan's "Israel Under the Mountain: Emmanuel Levinas on Freedom and Constraint in the Revelation of Torah," *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 18 (February 1998).

14. In this sense one can say that among the many things motivating Levinas to write his talmudic lectures was a decidedly *apologetic* interest. I thank Professor Aryeh Cohen for this insight.

15. Levinas' Jewish writings and his talmudic essays have not been a central focus for scholarship. There are signs though that this may be changing. Secondary works that give some consideration to these writings include the work of Gibbs (see Note 3 above); Edith Wyschogrod's *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (The Hague, 1974), pp. 159–99; Cohen, *Elevations* (Chicago, 1994); Catherine Chalié, *Judaïsme et Altérité* (Lagrasse, 1982); Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption* (Bloomington, 1991), part 2; and Ira Stone's introduction to the talmudic commentaries, *Reading Levinas/Reading Talmud* (Philadelphia, 1998). Important articles on this topic include David Banon, "Une herméneutique du sollicitation. Lévinas lecteur du Talmud," in *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée: Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. Jacques Rolland (Lagrasse, 1984), pp. 99–115; Ze'ev Levy, "Greek and Hebrew in The Work of Levinas" (in French), forthcoming in *Pardes*; Levy, "Emmanuel Levinas as a Jewish Thinker," in *Hazon Nahum: Essays in Honor of Norman Lamm* (New York, 1997); and Ephraim Meir, "Levinas' Thinking on Religion as Beyond the Pathetic: Reflections on the First Part of *Difficult Freedom*," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy*, ed. Emil L. Fackenheim and Raphael Jospe (Madison, 1996), pp. 142–64. The high quality of these works notwithstanding, they do not generally endeavor to provide an interpretation of Levinas' many-sided intellectual project. An intriguing attempt to do this is Fabio Caramelli's "Le rôle du judaïsme dans l'oeuvre de Levinas" (*Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, Vol. 81 [November 1983], pp. 580–99), which draws connections between Levinas' two different bodies of writing.

16. See the citation from Gibbs in Note 11. It must also be underlined that in referring here to the "logic" of Levinas' work, I hardly mean to imply that

there is any sort of overarching, argued plan according to which Levinas worked. Nor do I mean to suggest that Levinas' bodies of work form any sort of system or quasi-system. The term *logic* here serves rather more metaphorically to highlight the purpose or significance of Levinas' use of genre distinctions in his own writing. It also alerts readers to the fact that they must read Levinas' philosophical writings with an awareness of the contribution that Jewish tradition has made to that philosophy. Neither the specific ways in which Levinas "allowed" certain elements of Jewish tradition to interact with his own philosophical creativity, nor the specific parts of the tradition he drew on, are governed by any sort of logic, and I do not mean to imply that they are.

17. Only the first part (*sha'ar aleph*) of the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* has been translated into English, unfortunately without the original—and copious—citations, analyses, and notes of its author. See *Anthology of Jewish Mysticism*, trans. and ed. Raphael Ben Zion (New York, 1981), pp. 129–204. There is an excellent French translation that retains all of R. Hayyim's original additions and includes the translator's scholarly notes: *L'âme de la vie*, trans. Benjamin Gross (Lagrasse, 1986). For an introduction to R. Hayyim of Volozhin, see Immanuel Etkes' *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 30–56.

18. See my "A Singular but Significant *Shiddukh* (Marriage): The Meeting of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and Edmund Husserl in the Pages of Emmanuel Levinas," presented at the 1997 Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies. Two other important treatments of Levinas and the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* are Chalié, "L'âme de la vie: Lévinas, lecteur de R. Haïm de Volozin," in *Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris, 1991), pp. 387–98; and Stéphane Mosès, "L'idée de l'infini en nous," in *Répondre d'autrui: Emmanuel Levinas* (Boudry-Neuchâtel, 1989), pp. 41–51.

19. For studies of the relationship between Husserl and Levinas, see Jacques Colette, "Lévinas et la phénoménologie husserlienne," in *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée*, pp. 19–36; and Cohen, *Elevations*, Chap. 10 (pp. 223–40) and Chap. 12 (pp. 274–86).

20. These essays are collected primarily in two volumes, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris, 1982) and *De Dieu Qui vient à l'idée* (Paris, 1982). These two volumes remained untranslated until very recently and have now appeared as *Discovering Existence With Husserl*, trans. Richard Cohen and Michael Smith, *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Evanson, 1998); and as *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Palo Alto, 1998).

21. Levinas' earliest reference to the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* is in his little essay "Means of Identification," first published in French in 1963 (*Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand [Baltimore, 1990], pp. 50–53; originally published as "Pièces de identité," in *Difficile liberté* [Paris, 1963], pp. 78–82). I recently heard an anecdote according to which Levinas met Gershom Scholem when the latter visited Paris in 1961 or 1962. Levinas supposedly asked Scholem for a recommendation as to which Jewish text he ought to read on the topic of ethics. Scholem reportedly told Levinas to read the *Nefesh ha Hayyim*. I have not yet been able to confirm this story.

Chronologically speaking, Levinas' next reference to the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* is

a very brief but striking comment on the religious power/experience of Talmud Torah in the talmudic essay “Model of the West” (on *BT Menachot*), which was originally presented in 1976 (*Beyond the Verse*, pp. 13–33).

Levinas follows this in 1978 with a detailed, full-length paper entitled “‘In the Image of God’ According to Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin” (*Beyond the Verse*, pp. 151–67).

In 1984 he published “Prayer Without Demand,” which looks at prayer in the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* (*sha’ar bet*) (*The Levinas Reader*, ed. and trans. Sean Hand [Cambridge, 1989], pp. 225–34; originally published in *Etudes philosophiques*, Vol. 38 [1984], pp. 157–63). In 1984 he also brought out a short book called *Transcendence et intelligibilité*, which features a brief comment on the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* (Geneva, 1984), pp. 58–60.

In 1985 Levinas published an essay on *Nefesh ha Hayyim* called “Judaism and Kenosis” [*In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael Smith (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 114–32; originally published as *A l’heure des nations* (Paris, 1988), pp. 133–51].

Finally, in 1986 Levinas wrote a preface about the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* to accompany Benjamin Gross’ French translation.

I think it is clear that we are justified in taking Levinas as a very serious reader of this text. It also seems reasonable to offer a conjecture about chronology. Levinas was probably immersed in the *Nefesh ha Hayyim*, a text that would loom large in his own intellectual and spiritual life, during exactly that period in which he was writing his most important essays on Husserl, essays on which he would then draw in putting together his second magnum opus, *Otherwise Than Being*.

22. While both Chaliel and Mosès have written excellent essays on the general relationship between Levinas’ philosophy and the *Nefesh ha Hayyim*, neither has taken up the sort of specific issues considered here (such as Levinas’ relationship to Husserl, and the possible role of the *Nefesh ha Hayyim* in this). Chaliel, for instance, points out that Levinas’ concept of patience, which already figures prominently in *Totality and Infinity* and will grow as Levinas’ philosophy develops, is remarkably similar to R. Hayyim of Volozhin’s interpretation of theurgy, human responsibility, and passivity. Mosès on the other hand investigates the notion of the infinite in this text and concludes that it may well be some sort of inspiration for Levinas’ own philosophical thinking about the infinite. See Chaliel, “L’âme de la vie,” pp. 387–98; and Mosès, “L’idée de l’infini,” pp. 41–51.

23. Husserl’s far-flung and extensive reflections on internal time consciousness, originally published in German as Vol. 10 of the collection of Husserl’s complete works known as *Husserliana*, have now been translated into English as *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)* by John Barnett Brough (Boston, 1991).

24. “The same has to do with the other before the other appears in any way to a consciousness. Subjectivity is structured as the other in the same, but in a way different from that of consciousness” (*Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [The Hague, 1981], p. 25; originally published as *Autrement qu’être ou au delà de l’essence* [Boston, 1988], pp. 31–32). Levinas will also talk about the “one penetrated by the other;” “the other in one’s skin;” and

so on. “The other in the same” occurs too often throughout the pages of *Otherwise Than Being* to allow for a complete citation. Three representative passages appear on pages 49, 69–70, and 114–16 of the English translation and on pages 63–64, 86–88, and 146–47 of the French.

25. Despite the considerable moral power of these expressions, it must be pointed out that they form part of Levinas’ later attempts to transform Husserlian phenomenological philosophy. Indeed one cannot really appreciate their meaning and grasp their plausibility outside the context of Levinas’ fascinating reinterpretation of various elements of Husserl’s thought; without this context these phrases will probably end up seeming to be mostly rhetorical hyperbole. Unfortunately I cannot offer a detailed description of this larger context here and must wait for another venue.

26. I have found several secondary works of great value in thinking about this text. See Norman Lamm’s *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah’s Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries* (Hoboken, 1989) and Tamar Ross’ “Two Interpretations of the Doctrine of Tzimtzum: R. Hayyim of Volozhin and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady,” in *Mehkerei Yerushalayim be’Mahshevet Yisrael*, Vol. 3 (1982), pp. 153–69 (in Hebrew). I must also thank Alan Brill for sharing some of his insights on this text with me over the years.

27. *Nefesh ha Hayyim* (B’nai Brak, 1989), *sha’ar aleph, p’rakim aleph* through *gimmel*.

28. *Nefesh ha Hayyim, sha’ar aleph, prakim daled* through *zayin*, and *yud-bet* through *yud-daled*.

29. *Nefesh ha Hayyim, sha’ar aleph, p’rakim tet-vov* through *yud-tet*.

30. The next part of this story—into which I cannot go here—will need to provide some sense of exactly *how* Levinas proceeded to reformulate, and reappropriate, certain concepts taken from Husserlian phenomenology *in light of* these powerful paradigms from the *Nefesh ha Hayyim*.

31. Obviously, this conversation could be extended forward—that is, into the future—by adding names like Patocka, Marion, Irigaray, Tugendhat, and so on. Similarly, one might extend it backwards, prior to Husserl, by moving from Nietzsche, to Schopenhauer, Hegel, Schelling, Fichte, Kant, and so on, all the way back to the pre-Socratics. Richard Rorty is responsible for the notion of “philosophical conversation” that I employ here.

32. See especially *Totality and Infinity*, p. 28; “‘Between Two Worlds,’” in *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 181–201 (“‘Entre Deux Mondes,’” in *Difficile liberté*, pp. 253–81); and “Franz Rosenzweig: Une pensée juive moderne,” *Hors sujet* (Paris, 1987), pp. 67–89. For secondary work on this topic, see Gibbs, Cohen, and also Jean-Louis Schlegel, “Lévinas et Rosenzweig,” in *Les cahiers de la nuit*, pp. 50–70.

33. On this Jewish critique of Western philosophy, see Note 7.

34. Michael Zank and Almut Bruckstein are in the process of bringing out important new work on Cohen that may move Cohen closer to the first stance mentioned here, and thus to Levinas, at least on this point. See also Wyschogrod, “The Moral Self: Emmanuel Levinas and Hermann Cohen,” *Da’at*, Vol. 4 (Winter 1980), pp. 35–58; and Levy, “Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Hermann Cohen’s Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Stéphane Mosès and Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim, 1997). With respect to Rosenzweig things are

more complex. I would suggest that this is because the *Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig's one major text of philosophy, was written in his youth. As Rosenzweig matured, he occupied himself more with classical Jewish sources—and of course with Jewish educational projects. It may well be the case that had an older Rosenzweig thought it a worthy task to write another book of “Jewish philosophy”—and it is not at all clear that he would have thought so—he would have fashioned a far more supple form of thought, one much better able to handle plurality. The ability of the *Star* to allow for multiplicity and for complex, open-ended interactions hardly impresses one today. This follows in large part from the nature and the structure of the *Star* itself. As even Gibbs, a noted scholar and exegete of Rosenzweig, has remarked, “(I)f Rosenzweig's theology impresses us, if it leads us to see the divine side of love and speech, then it accomplishes this precisely by all of the creaks and groans of the systematic architecture” (*Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, p. 100).

35. It must be noted that one could also argue that figures such as Cohen and Rosenzweig should be seen, rather, as early proponents of the approach Levinas succeeds in working out. In this view Cohen and Rosenzweig anticipate Levinas in their own admittedly quite different attempts to reshape philosophy through the use of traditional Jewish concepts. As mentioned in the preceding note, Zank and Bruckstein are at work on readings of Cohen that are compatible with this idea. For a strong argument in favor of reading Rosenzweig along these general lines, see Leora Batnitzky's “The Philosophical Import of Carnal Israel: Hermeneutics and the Structure of Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*,” Chap. 3 of her *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton, forthcoming).

36. A classic instance of this is Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” in *Beyond the Verse*, pp. 129–50 (“La Révélation dans la tradition juive,” in *L'au delà du verset*, pp. 158–81).

37. Another important reason is Levinas' rootedness in Husserlian phenomenology. This way of doing philosophy demands a detailed, descriptive account of those “mental and physical acts”—of perception, association, collection, sensation, memory, anticipation, and so on—through which human beings come to have richly integrated experiences, including even our experiences of such ideal objects as geometrical figures, numbers, and concepts. This vigilant bringing to self-awareness of the complex ways in which our real physical and intellectual experiences get built up gave Levinas a style of thinking very different from that of Cohen or Rosenzweig. This feature of Levinas' intellectual biography may explain the respectful but clear distance he takes from such things as Cohen's neo-Kantian “ideals” or Rosenzweig's neo-Schellingian metaphysical system; it may also explain the passionately interested attention he lavishes on the concrete details of human life in general and of Jewish tradition in particular.

38. It is an open question whether the tragic events of the mid-twentieth century imply also that Rosenzweig's criticism of philosophy in the *Star* was insufficiently radical. It is similarly a matter of debate whether such events suggest that the *Star*'s systematic reliance on comprehensive metaphysics—those of Schelling and, implicitly, of Jakob Böhme—is outdated and unwise.

39. On this point see especially Levinas' powerful little essay “Antihumanism



and Education,” in *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 277–88 (“Antihumanisme et éducation,” in *Difficile liberté*, pp. 385–401). Many of the talmudic essays make this general point also; see, for instance, “Model of the West.”

40. This is a complex matter, of course, and Levinas assumes several different attitudes in different places in his work. It might be more accurate to say that he holds both a horizontal and a pedagogic view. Regarding the idea of Judaism teaching the modern West about patience, I have written elsewhere: “Levinas . . . finds a lack of patience in other distinctively modern, western poses: the considerable energy spent contemplating ‘correct’ ways to express youthful rebellion; the need to experience absolutely everything; impatient and superficial demands for ‘immediate relevance’; the dangerous tendency of ‘large’, ‘generous’ (ideological) ideas to pass unnoticed into their opposites (‘intellectual Stalinism’), and even the super-sophisticated, utterly *au-courant* readers and writers of *Le Monde*, for whom the depths of complex talmudic thought can be only an occasion for great humor. . . . Both this critique of modern western chronopathy, or chronophobia, and those structures of Jewish religious and communal life Levinas advocates instead, will feature prominently in [Levinas’ talmudic essay] ‘Model of the West’” (Meskin, “Critique, Tradition, and the Religious Imagination,” p. 94).

41. Levinas’ experience does not automatically make him fall into the camp of the antihumanists either. Instead Levinas turns to Jewish tradition and its ancient ways, passed down over time, to try to find a form of life capable of nurturing truly humane values. On this see “Antihumanism and Education,” in *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 277–88 (“Antihumanisme et éducation,” in *Difficile liberté*, pp. 385–401).

42. In the sketch that follows, I attempt to summarize some basic points Levinas makes in *Otherwise Than Being*. This is of course a perilous undertaking. While topics in this book tend to be thoroughly interconnected, Levinas’ most focused discussion of the matter to be considered here can be found in Chap. 2, “Intentionality and Sensing,” pp. 23–59, esp. pp. 45–59 (“De l’intentionnalité au sentir,” in *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, pp. 29–76, esp. pp. 58–76).

43. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, pp. 165–71 (*Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, pp. 210–18).

44. For a helpful study of this tricky and intricate issue, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford, 1992).

45. In light of this view of philosophy, one might well argue that Levinas ends up closer to Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and even perhaps to certain kinds of pragmatism than might appear at first. A formal argument for such closeness would require description of the very different pathways by which these thinkers arrive at conclusions that may share some surprising similarities.