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ROBERT GIBBS

## Levinas and Jewish Thought

EMMANUEL LEVINAS is revitalizing Jewish thought and also helping to reorient contemporary philosophical discussion. But the reception of his work in the English-speaking world is slow and uneven. His major philosophical works have been known to a small circle of phenomenologists for some time, but only recently has his position as a leader in postmodern thought become clear. Levinas's Jewish works, moreover, have only recently begun to receive attention and translation in America and England, and so the full import for Jewish thought is yet to emerge here. Nonetheless, consideration of the effects in France and of the first writings here indicate that Levinas will signal a renewal of the concern for ethics coupled to an energetic and creative re-engagement with rabbinic texts. In many ways, Levinas appears as the leader for what we may call postmodern Judaism, combining a deep interest in Jewish thought with a contemporary philosophical perspective.

We may begin with Levinas's philosophical themes, because even there we can see an agenda deeply resonant with a tradition of Jewish philosophy. Levinas is often compared with Buber because Levinas emphasizes what Buber called the 'I-you,' the face-to-face encounter where speech and ethics begin. More significant, however, is his relation to Franz Rosenzweig, and particularly *The Star of Redemption*, because Levinas adapts much of the logic and structure of Rosenzweig's work. And like Rosenzweig's teacher, Hermann Cohen, Levinas makes the task of ethics the fulcrum for all thought. This tradition of ethics, profoundly Jewish and rigorously philosophical, characterizes Levinas's work.

A useful introduction for the non-philosopher has recently appeared. *Ethics and Infinity*<sup>1</sup> is an interview with Philippe Nemo,

1. *Ethique et L'infini*. Paris. Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982. Trans. by Richard Cohen as *Ethics and Infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

which first appeared in French in 1981. It gives an overview of Levinas's life and of his major philosophical works. It is not an especially rigorous treatment of his thought, but for those who want to get acquainted with the main themes and the vocabulary it serves well.

What it introduces one to, ultimately, are the two major philosophical volumes: *Totality and Infinity*<sup>2</sup> and *Otherwise than Being*.<sup>3</sup> These works are difficult but exciting and even revolutionary. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas presents a phenomenology of the face, the moment when someone looks at me. He argues that I am responsible for the other person, but that the responsibility is not symmetric. I am bound to the other, but I cannot say that the other is similarly bound to me. Levinas rejects the attempt to found ethics on reason and on universal obligations or rights. He argues that this ethical moment, instead, is the origin of reasoning and of speech. Thus the theory locates the other person at the center of my responsibility, my speaking, even my reasoning. The shift from myself as the subject who thinks, acts, wills, to the other as the center of my concerns is characteristic of postmodern thought. Levinas makes this shift in a decidedly ethical way, daring to explore my vulnerability to an other person. I am obliged independent of my own plans, intentions, reflections, and so on. In a very real sense, Levinas has provided a philosophical correlate to the notion of chosenness — an election that makes me what I am and which I cannot control. Through a phenomenology of perception and language, Levinas discovers a philosophical account of being chosen.

*Totality and Infinity* also examines the person before and after encountering an other. Levinas has an extensive discussion of eros and sexuality which has sparked both negative and qualified positive discussions from feminists (DeBeauvoir and Irigaray, respectively). His account of femininity is hardly progressive, but it also raises philosophical and ethical issues about the choice to not confront an other person, a choice which is

2. *Totalité et Infini*. 4th Ed. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971 (1st ed. 1961). Trans. by Alphonso Lingis as *Totality and Infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

3. *Autrement qu'Être ou Au-delà de l'Essence*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974. Trans. by Alphonso Lingis as *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

a model for the ethical response of offering oneself to the other. Levinas also discusses the reproduction of responsibility in one's child, the one for whom I am responsible no matter how he acts. And he discusses a fraternity and equality of all through the ethics of the face-to-face.

#### RELATING TO THE OTHER

The book is a world in total, complete with intricacies and questions beyond the interest of all but the scholar. But its reputation was widespread in Europe. Theologians, philosophers, literary theorists, political theorists, and others, read and addressed the fundamental challenges of the book, exploring the possibility that the other, the excluded, was in fact the one to teach us. Levinas's second major work, *Otherwise than Being*, has not been as widely influential. While the first text is philosophical and complex, the latter is still more dense. Levinas now dwells exclusively on the moment of the face-to-face, and considers it as a *proximity* to the other. *Proximity* is a play with the words for approach, near, and neighbor in French, but there is a subtext that links this to the words for nearness and sacrifice in Hebrew. Levinas interprets the way that I give myself to the other as a passive becoming hostage, and again argues that this relation is the central one. I am responsible for what the other does, suffering and expiating for his sake. Speaking and perception are located in this relation of proximity, and the question of how I can be bound to the other before I can choose dominates the text. The claims are now excessive, purposefully, in order to show just how little control we have over what we ought to do. Levinas recognizes that we will not respond as we should, but he is concerned to see how we become bound.

This text is rewarding, especially for philosophers, because of the way that thought itself is made to emerge from responsibility. Levinas keenly analyzes the way that the reflection upon this moment of proximity will itself step away from responsibility, and he interweaves the awareness of the need for speaking, for thought, for reasoning, even for philosophy, with the risk and the betrayal that all will impose. Levinas can neither do without thought nor trust it, and so the ongoing disruption of thinking, the appeal to an other, and the need to respond to an interruption are key features of his thought. This com-

mitment to think and to write even when no individual thought or text, no attempt to tie it all together, no unified theory, is capable of enclosing the decisive experiences is again characteristic of postmodern thought. Levinas offers philosophical resources of the first rank in the continuing work of postmodern thought.

Fortunately, a volume of shorter and generally more accessible philosophical papers has recently appeared. *Collected Philosophical Papers*,<sup>4</sup> provides us with a selection of important essays from different periods in Levinas's writing. We see the idea of the face and its challenge to me emerge in the essay "Freedom and Command." And then in the key discussion of "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," Levinas develops the idea that the responsibility which is mine is the interruption of the infinite into the world. In the face of the other I am called to serve the other, and the more I serve, the more I am responsible, the more my duties multiply. It is the recourse to metaphysics, to the idea of infinity, which allows Levinas to avoid the opposition of slave and master, because I may serve the other freely only as a response to an infinity which is not opposed to the finite.

In the longest of the essays in this volume, "Meaning and Sense," Levinas develops a theory of speech and language which rests the power of signification — of one thing (a word) standing for another thing — upon the ethical responsibility I have for the other person. Because I can be for the other, can suffer for the other and give of myself for the other, speech allows words to stand for others. This move switches away from a theory where language is most of all a way of knowing the world, or even one in which language is closed in itself and knows only its own activities. The importance of Levinas's move to make ethics the model for language provides a postmodern ethical view of language and of literature. Later in this essay, some of Levinas's relation to literary theory will be considered. Levinas's own problem with this ethical theory is that to write about it is not the same as to do it, to give myself for the other. One of his distinctive concepts is the trace. Levinas introduces the trace in order to account for the absence of emphatic ev-

4. *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Phaenomenologica, Vol. 100. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.

idence of the ethical encounter. Neither the face, nor proximity, nor the infinite can appear in a philosophical court. They are too ambiguous and evanescent. But on the other hand, there are traces of these experiences. Traces themselves are ambiguous and can point to something which cannot appear on its own.

### HIS GOD IDEA

The idea of trace leads to the essay "God and Philosophy," because ultimately it is God who cannot be present but who leaves traces in the face of the other person. Following a long Jewish tradition, God cannot be seen, cannot be real in the normal sense of the word. Instead, God appoints us to care for the other, and the most we can say is that God has passed by. Better, I can say "Here am I" or "In the name of God, I am at your disposal." The importance of this essay for Jewish thought will appear more fully below, but for philosophy the importance is remarkable because it shows how Jewish themes can reorient philosophical thought. Levinas contests the distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But unlike medieval or modern Jewish thinkers, he does not force Judaism to conform to the philosophical idea of God, but rather interrupts the traditional concepts of philosophy and theology with an insistence on a God who commands us to care for our fellows but does not appear. He does not defend Jewish religious experience of God. Instead, he insists on the inaccessibility of God, except through commandment. The possibility of making philosophy think Jewishly, think ideas which do not easily fit into its tradition of reflection, is a new opportunity for postmodern Jewish thought. One could argue that this sort of translation or adaptation of Jewish themes into philosophical texts is a trademark of Jewish thought since Philo, including many medieval thinkers. But Levinas manages to overturn central concepts of philosophy in the process. His postmodernity is reflected in both demanding a new orientation to the traditions of philosophy and in his continuing a positive relationship with philosophy.

While several secondary texts have now appeared on Levinas's

philosophical work, one stands out: *Face to Face with Levinas*.<sup>5</sup> Many of the essays in this volume were in Levinas's French *Festschrift*. They include important contributions by postmodern thinkers and by Levinas scholars. They do not, however, explore his relationship to Judaism. There are discussions by Lyotard, Blanchot, and Irigaray, that show how important Levinas has been for the development of French thought in the last twenty years. Other essays locate Levinas in relation to Derrida, to the tradition of phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and to Kant and Hegel. There is also a helpful interview with Richard Kearney, which in some ways is more substantial than the one with Nemo, although it is not as programmatic.

Levinas's impact on philosophy itself has multifold importance for Jewish thought. First, it signifies the possibility in modern France for a Jewish philosopher to achieve recognition as a significant thinker. Second, Levinas succeeds in making philosophy correlate with Jewish thought: he is able to contribute to change in several central philosophical concepts. This act of altering philosophy must be seen in a philosophical context, but it signifies a possibility for Jewish thought reaching beyond provincial borders. The possibility for this change in philosophy has been prepared for by philosophy itself, even as the possibility for the reception of a Jewish thinker also requires a preparation by European culture. But the philosophical preparation points in the direction of a third point. Philosophy can now learn from Judaism because philosophy has had to abandon the modern claims for self-sufficiency and completeness. Thought on its own can no longer govern itself nor legitimate all other discourse. The collapse of modern projects of the subject and of self-authenticating reason signify a great change in the weather for philosophy. But they are more than merely a break in the clouds for Jewish thought and themes. They also blow through the study of Judaism and of Jewish thought in particular. If I have discussed the philosophical side of Levinas at some length, it is precisely because of the changes he has wrought there must also 'come home' to Jewish studies,

5. *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.

and the full measure of his impact on Jewish thought depends on exploring the correlate impact on philosophy itself.

### JEWISH WRITINGS

Levinas's Jewish thought takes various forms. The central text is *Difficult Freedom*.<sup>6</sup> This is a work that stands as one of the great collections in twentieth century Jewish thought. It is unfortunate that the English translation is quite poor, at times ridiculous. The text rises above its treatment, but the version we have now will in many places confuse those who cannot look at the French. Levinas segregates his Jewish writings from those for a philosophical audience, but we still find a philosopher at work in those Jewish writings. This text collects various short and long pieces, some written for academic audiences, some for Jewish-community audiences, some directed to Jewish educators, some for the broad reading public. In the first edition there were several pieces on Khrushchev and the Soviet Union, and in both editions there are pieces on Israel and Zionism. Levinas was an educator for several decades, principal of the Normal School for the Alliance, and so he writes with passion and knowledge about developing Jewish education. He steers a careful course between developing Jewish education and denunciation of European culture, trying to advocate a contemporary, distinctly Jewish, contribution to Europe.

What emerges from several of the essays is a Judaism which focuses on responsibility. In the discussions of the opening section ("Beyond Pathos"), Levinas defines Judaism not as a matter of sentiment, ethnicity, or birth. Instead, he focuses on the power of Jewish texts and their commandments to define what it means to be a Jew. Most of all, being Jewish is being responsible for others. He defines Judaism by the view of responsibility he develops in his philosophical texts.

In the second section, Levinas produces a commentary on passages from the talmudic tractate Sanhedrin which discuss messianism. These commentaries are the first examples in a genre Levinas has developed. For almost thirty years he has presented commentary on talmudic texts at the annual confer-

6. Emmanuel Levinas. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. by Seán Hand. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

ence of French-speaking Jewish intellectuals, sponsored by the World Jewish Congress. Each year a topic is chosen, and while most of the contributors focus on contemporary analyses or on historical questions, Levinas finds a passage from Talmud to explore the issue. In 1960-61, the topics were morality and history, and Levinas began with the discussions in Sanhedrin. The audience appreciated his efforts to make traditional learning speak to current concerns, and so requested that he continue to offer these readings.

Other essays in *Difficult Freedom* defend Judaism against some of its learned despisers. And still others discuss heroes of Jewish thought: men like Jacob Gordin and Franz Rosenzweig. What Levinas respects in these heroes is their effort to think a Judaism which was not merely historical and which could directly engage the suffering of Jews in our time. Finally, there is a set of remarkable essays on Jewish education, which insist that only by study and fresh engagement with Jewish tradition can Judaism survive, but even more importantly, that only through such study can Judaism help save our culture. Judaism has something distinctive to offer the contemporary scene, a mode of study and teaching which accentuates the responsibility we bear for each other.

### APPROACHING THE TEXT

Levinas has also published four further volumes of Jewish writings. The first two were sets of his talmudic readings and have been translated together in the volume *Nine Talmudic Readings*.<sup>7</sup> The form of the readings is fairly constant. Levinas offers a translation of the text for commentary. He then introduces the reading by disclaiming his ability to interpret Talmud, and then he moves through the text line by line, trying to explain both what the text is addressing and what that contributes to a more general philosophical theme. The *style* he chooses tend to be aggadic.

Levinas's interpretations are a continuing effort to discover what we might call a philosophical Talmud. His preference for aggadah is both for the content (the more theoretical matters)

7. Emmanuel Levinas. *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Trans. by Annette Aronowicz. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990.

and for the style. He admits that he is not trained for the rigors of halakhic argument. But the issue is also ideological, because Levinas respects but avoids what we might call an Orthodox reading of Talmud. Levinas shows respect for such traditional perspectives, and indeed credits them with preserving the texts and also the Jewish people. But his concern is to discover a freedom of thought and argument in the text — one which requires a philosophical orientation — in order to explore how the text can have meaning for our contemporary problems.

A second approach that Levinas chooses to avoid (though not ignore) is the critical-historical method. Levinas takes as his assumption that different epochs can communicate about certain themes, and thus that talmudic discussions can contribute to our current self-understanding — indeed, that what Judaism needs is precisely this contribution. Not that Levinas ignores the texts or their contexts — but that his exploration of the texts is not to find out about their time and the history of ideas, but to find out what the Sages can teach us today.

The emergence of a philosophical Talmud, however, is not a reduction of the Talmud to some universal principles. Instead, Levinas must explore the details, the arguments, the structure of the text. Much of what he says 'goes without saying' to talmudists. Indeed, to many learned readers the readings Levinas proposes will seem largely introductory, even amateurish. But to the larger Jewish public, these texts show the way that rabbinic texts can teach us — without invoking piety and without becoming merely historical artifacts.

The guiding light of Levinas's readings is a certain sort of narrativity in a *svgya*. He treats the text as possessing a sequential logic. Thus he navigates the discontinuities of speakers and of topics (and of language, generation, place, and so on) in order to find a conceptual sequence that restores a certain integrity to the text. Although he does not refer to the editors and the editorial hand, Levinas assumes a thoughtful, consistent and rigorous editor.

One of the most important readings is the third, which examines the discussion of God holding Mt. Sinai over the people when offering the commandments (Shabbat 88a-b). This is ideally suited to Levinas's sense that ethics is responsibility, a response to a command which I did not initiate. He calls the reading "The Temptation of Temptation" and makes it into a battle

with Western Philosophy. The argument focuses on whether one has the authority to judge a command before accepting it, and the answer from the Talmud is that the answer from Exodus 24:7 ('we will do and we will hear'), allows for a responsible, ethical acceptance which precedes knowing what is commanded. From a normal philosophical view, such acceptance is naive, but that view itself presupposes that I am sovereign in my world. Levinas's interpretation of the text is subtle and difficult, but the conclusions are striking: not only am I responsible prior to my rational choice, but I am also responsible for what others do. I am hostage for the other. This radical claim is a hallmark of Levinas's later philosophical work, and it emerges here, in an interpretation of the talmudic text.

*The Levinas Reader*<sup>8</sup> surveys the various texts and genres of Levinas's Jewish writings, and in addition includes several important philosophical essays. The result is a useful anthology. The *Reader* is uneven, borrowing the faulty translations of *Difficult Freedom*, and providing a limited survey of the philosophical growth of Levinas, but also offering essays from various works and displaying much of Levinas's range between two covers.

The talmudic reading included in the *Reader* ("The Pact"), shows Levinas working on an example of bizarre rabbinic mathematics. The covenants between the Jews and God are multiplied by various factors, but the ultimate addition is the responsibility not only for all of the others, but for the others' responsibility for all of the others' others. "This must also mean that my responsibility includes the responsibility taken up by other men....In the society of the Torah, this process is repeated to infinity; beyond any responsibility attributed to everyone and for everyone, there is always the additional fact that I am still responsible for that responsibility."<sup>9</sup>

The editor has included several essays from *Difficult Freedom*, including ones which define Judaism as responsibility for others and which develop the programs for Jewish education. He also includes a series of essays on Zionism from Levinas's fourth Jewish book: *L'Avant-dela du Verset*.<sup>10</sup> Levinas is a dovish Zionist.

8. *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand. London: Basil Blackwell, 1989.  
9. *Reader*, p. 226.

10. *L'Avant-dela du Verset*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1982.

But even that form of support is in tension with his thought, because he argues in *Totality and Infinity* that politics must be criticized by ethics. Ethics is a realm of infinite duties, while politics is the translation of those duties into a market-place where responsibilities are rationalized and finitized. As a result, politics both receives its impetus from ethics and remains always vulnerable to the critique of ethics — the teaching of the other. No state, therefore, has its justification in itself, but any state is in ambiguous relation to ethics.

When Levinas then turns his attention to Israel he attempts to hold Zionism to the image of ethical politics he developed. He repeatedly denies that Israel is a state like any other or that it is politics as usual, and in so doing he insists on the ethical challenge of Israel. He insists that Judaism depends ultimately on its books and not on national politics for its existence. The teaching of Jewish books, though yearning for that land, sets a clear priority of people over land — and in 'people' Levinas does not limit himself to Jews.

### JEWISH STUDIES

Levinas has had an impact on Jewish studies in France parallel to that upon the philosophical community. His interest in both rabbinic and philosophical texts has been influential on the publication of many new translations of Jewish books. A series called "Les Dix Paroles" has appeared by Verdier. Volumes include tractates of Talmud, works of Maimonides, midrashic texts, mystical texts, and so on. A full translation of Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* appeared recently from another press.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, several authors have emerged directly influenced by Levinas who are writing about both philosophical and rabbinic topics in ways consonant with his thought. Stéphane Mosès, Catherine Challer, David Banon, Marc-Alain Ouaknin, Alain Finkelkraut, and others have written books which explore either the issues of contemporary Jewish philosophy or those of traditional texts, or both. The result has been a resurgence of both general and Jewish interest in Jewish thought in France.

11. Franz Rosenzweig, *L'Étoile de la Rédemption*, trans. by A. Derczanski and J.-L. Schlegel, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982.

Judith Friedlander's book, *Vilna on the Seine*, discusses several key Jewish intellectuals in Paris, including Levinas.<sup>12</sup> It is an anthropological assessment of this re-emergence of Jewish thought, and notes that most of the renaissance comes from Jews who are not French. Indeed, the intellectualism of the Lithuanian talmudic tradition is part of this movement, as even her title indicates. She has a lengthy chapter on Levinas, where she culls much of the biographical information from various interviews that have appeared in French. Her presentation of the philosophical matters is somewhat weak, but the account is of value for placing Levinas in a context.

In the past year two books have appeared in English that locate Levinas in the context of Jewish thought. One is my own *Correlations in Levinas and Rosenzweig*.<sup>13</sup> The task of that book is to explore how both Rosenzweig and Levinas are re-orienting philosophy by recourse to themes from Jewish thought. I clearly locate Levinas as the current representative of the tradition of Cohen and Rosenzweig, and explore the relation of his Jewish writings to his philosophical ones. Moreover, I place Levinas in various contexts in order to show his relation with other thinkers: with Cohen, with Rosenzweig, with Marcel, with Buber, and with Marx. The result is to give access to a philosophically challenging Jewish reading of Levinas.

The other book is Susan Handelman's second book, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*.<sup>14</sup> Handelman examines the implications of Levinas's work for continuing arguments in literary theory. She explores Jewish dimensions of literary theory, emphasizing several important postmodern themes. Levinas (and to some extent Rosenzweig) serve to restore the ethical structure of Jewish hermeneutics, by insisting on the responsibility for the other in reading and writing. Her work has some similarity to the developments in France, except that she chooses as her audience not one from Jewish Studies, but rather the general literary

12. Judith Friedlander, *Vilna on the Seine*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

13. Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Levinas and Rosenzweig*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

14. Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991.

theory readers. That audience is even more likely to be surprised to find so much assistance in restoring ethics from Jewish thought. With Handelman's book the correlation that Levinas accomplished with philosophy is repeated in the field of literary theory. Again his work helps make Jewish thought come alive, but again, not for the sake of Judaics alone, but with the claim that it will also help enrich a general discourse. This aid, moreover, is secured precisely by insisting on the themes which are constant in Levinas, whether writing for philosophers or for Jewish intellectuals: the emphasis on responsibility and the ethical origin of language. Levinas manages to make some of the most basic themes in Jewish thought address the most recent and flashy postmodern discussions. That address accentuates certain dimensions of Jewish thought which have often recently been underemphasized, and moreover, it gives Jewish thought a vital part to play in contemporary discussion.

DAVID ELLENSON

## *Eugene B. Borowitz: A Tribute*

### *On the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*

IN THE SUMMER of 1969, while waiting for a friend at a Greyhound Bus Station in Lynchburg in my native Virginia, I perused a rack of paperback books in the station's gift shop. I had just completed an undergraduate seminar on "Modern Christian Religious Existentialism," and my eyes raced to a work entitled *A Layman's Guide to Religious Existentialism*. To this day, I have no idea why this book was placed among the rows of pulp novels that otherwise dominated the stand. However, it was there, in that most unlikely setting, that I was first introduced to the name and writings of Eugene Borowitz. As I read the pages, I was struck by the clarity, precision, passion, and accessibility of the author's words. Furthermore, as a young Jew, I was gratified that amidst all the Christian theologians explicated in the work were Jewish ones as well.

Particularly striking was a chapter on a German-Jewish theologian named Franz Rosenzweig. It was with a mixed sense of gratitude, relief, and excitement that I devoured this chapter. I was elated to find a Jew who was such a significant participant in this emotionally and intellectually compelling contemporary religious dialogue. Borowitz's exposition of Rosenzweig's thought meant a great deal to me on an intellectual level. More significantly, I was grateful for the guidance to be gained in a modern idiom from a Jewish thinker on eternal questions of religious faith and doubt. Several years later, when as a second-year rabbinical student at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York I attended Eugene Borowitz's lectures on "Modern Jewish Religious Thought," I was given a vocabulary to name and define the religious struggle I was then experiencing. In his initial lecture in the course,



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