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# Introduction

## In Praise of the Exile

It is a great achievement that Emmanuel Levinas placed at the center of his thought mercy and love for the stranger and the widow as well as love of one's neighbor, which is different from the knowledge of one's neighbor. Purely Greek thought never succeeded in developing this thought, which has its source in the world of Israel. A "dreadful realist," who lived through the Shoah, Levinas unmasked an "essentially hypocritical civilization" with its "underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets."[1] His project was to reunite the truth and the good. Jewish thought and life are the pre-philosophical inspirations that led to a complex thought that was formulated by Levinas in the Greek philosophical language. The relationship between the Jewish tradition and Levinas's philosophical writings is not one between a proto-text and a pheno-text, or a subtext and a text, which would make Levinas an esoteric writer, but one between an inspiring primordial word and its logical formulation. As David Banon has convincingly shown, theologoumena of Jewish texts are reinterpreted in a philosophical manner. Levinas offers a radical, ethical interpretation of Judaism that is seen as a source of meaning. His philosophy contests a philosophy of immanence that neutralizes transcendence of the Other and of the good: Revelation is defined as the marvel of discourse, the contact with exteriority that orients the I to the Other. The *mitzva*, the commandment, "Thou shall not kill" becomes a central philosophical concept. Instead of the I as the self-controlled *res cogitans*, Levinas discusses the alternative of becoming other to yourself through the

1 TeI, p. 9; TI, p. 24. The characterization of Levinas's thinking as "dreadful realism" is from Stéphane Mosès, *Au-delà de la guerre. Trois études sur Levinas (*Paris, Tel Aviv: Editions de l'éclat, 2004), p. 7.

acceptance of an ethical way of life before understanding.[2] Levinas's two types of writing run parallel. They are published by different publishing houses, but Levinas's Jewish writing on revelation is clearly linked to his surprise of phenomenology by the "epiphany" of the Other. This is not a religious turn in phenomenology, but the use of religious concepts as revelation and commandment in a philosophical way. Marie-Anne Lescourret has observed that the connection between the Jewish and the philosophical sources of Levinas's oeuvre does not always justify Levinas's own will to publish his different texts separately.[3] There is no dichotomy or opposition between both types of writings. In fact, the Jewish writings are far from being Levinas's minor contribution: Together with the philosophical writings, they form a diptych. The philosopher and the Jew who thinks are one, just as the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen cannot be separated from the author of the "Religion of Reason." Levinas has a double allegiance – to Athens and to Jerusalem. I would not insist on this point if some interpreters of Levinas's philosophy did not tend to minimize or even deny any correlation between the Jewish and the philosophical writings. During the Levinas Congress in Jerusalem in January 2006, however, lecturers manifested a real interest in the relationship between Levinas's Jewish writings and his philosophy. One of the questions was: In what way is Levinas's philosophical discourse on a non-eudaimonic ethics related to his Jewish writings? This is the central question of the present work.

Levinas discusses the discovery of the Other in the self. He analyzes the wonderful event of the surprise of totality by what is "beyond," by the always-disturbing alterity. His focus is upon the Other, from whom the I receives its orientation and justification. The Other leads to a breach in the totalizing tendency of the same; he causes the decentralization and de-nucleation of the I. The address of the same by the Other provokes the metamorphosis of the I into a "Here I am" (Gen. 22:1), a "one-for-the-Other," who is more concerned with the death of the Other than with his own death. Levinas used to say that (my) being-to-death is not the question; the spirituality of the I would lie in remedying the material need of the Other. The I is called upon; he is even elected to

2 D. Banon, "Levinas, penseur juif ou juif qui pense," *Noésis*, 3 (1999), Internet edition (2004), pp. 1–20.

3 See M.-A. Lescourret, "Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995): un philosophe du XXe siècle," *Cités*, 25 (2006), p. 18.

care for the Other's life and well being. He receives his/her uniqueness from the appeal that stems from the Other's face. In confrontation with the Other, the I becomes other to himself.

Levinas's consciousness of his own otherness as a Jew in French society was probably not without link with his positive evaluation of the undeniable alterity of the other man. Every human being has a "surplus" that cannot be absorbed in sameness. Levinas highlighted that in the relationship between the same and the Other, the Other is beyond one's comprehension, beyond one's grasp. Whereas Western philosophy suppressed the Other, Levinas developed a thinking in which the self, out of respect for the Other, is not anymore self-conscious and self-possessed, but decentered, oriented to the Other. In Levinas's view, not only philosophy but also Judaism contributes to Western civilization.

This book discusses Levinas's Jewish thinking and discusses the relationship between his philosophical and his Jewish thinking. There is ample evidence to suggest that Levinas's metaphysics and his Jewish essays are closely interconnected. Susan Handelman has rightly noted that all of Levinas's key philosophical ideas are found in his Jewish writings.[4] Although the Jewish writings greatly differ from the professional ones, both have much in common. From Levinas's perspective, both Judaism and ethical metaphysics express a beyond, an *au-delà*, which transforms the I into an animated, lively being. The beyond (in Greek: *epekeina*), challenges the I to live his existence as coexistence. In both the "confessional" writings and the "professional" writings, Levinas sheds light on the loftiness of a "holy" existence, an existence in humble service of the Other. Many terms and ideas of Levinas's philosophy return in his Jewish writings. Moreover, the philosophical writings contain terms that are well known in the Jewish heritage, such as the word "God," the declaration "Here I am" or the command "Thou shalt not murder" (Deut. 5:17). This can hardly be accidental, yet, in scholarship the relationship between both types of Levinas's writing has been insufficiently investigated.

Robert Gibbs has observed that the Jewish dimension of Levinas's thought has been largely ignored, or honored by a mention and then

4 S. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 270.

ignored.[5] While it is true that Levinas did not consider himself a Jewish theologian, he was a Jewish thinker whose texts on Judaism and Talmud run parallel with his philosophical works. This aspect of Levinas's thinking has not received appropriate attention. In their studies of Judaism, scholars such as Shmuel Wygoda, Catherine Chalier or David Banon revealed the importance of Levinas's thought for the understanding of Judaism today. One has indeed to assign to Levinas an eminent place in the pantheon of contemporary Jewish thinkers.[6] It is all the more noteworthy that no monograph has been produced on Levinas's Jewish texts and their relevance for the Jewish and the non-Jewish world alike. This is surprising, since in both types of his writings Levinas's aim is to point to real human transcendence, to an *über*, a beyond, in the ethical relationship to the non-assumable Other. The study of Levinas's Jewish texts is worthy of further investigation, not only in order to know his Jewish worldview but also in order to shed light upon his philosophical thoughts as such.

This study highlights the relevance of Levinas's Jewish thought for the reading of his professional work, as well as the traces of his philosophical thought in his Jewish writings. Levinas wants to surprise philosophical "Greek" thinking by confronting it with "Hebrew" thinking – the prophetic concern for the stranger, the widow and the orphan. Philosophical thinking and revelation are not without link. Philosophy has to take into account faith, and Levinas's entire enterprise is the "Greek" philosophical translation of something that Greece did not know. Parallel to the Other, who is not to be neutralized in the wholeness and closedness of the same, God cannot be contained in knowledge, the heteronomy cannot be absorbed by the autonomy. Totality is ruptured by infinity that cannot be assimilated. In Levinas's non onto-theological language God is not a "being," or "the supreme being." Rather, his discourse is towards God, *à-Dieu*, in the direction of a utopia of a heterotopy that nevertheless asks to be topically realized. The speech *à-Dieu* is intimately connected to the greeting of the other human being. Levinas's speech about God is therefore not a speech about a hyperousiological entity that whispers

5 R. Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 10.

6 C. Chalier, *Judaïsme et altérité* (Collections Les Dix Paroles) (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982); D. Banon, *La lecture infinie. Les voies de l'interprétation midrachique. Préface d'Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987).

in a person's ear: "Thou shall not kill." He rather connects "God" to the endless call of the Other, to the high demand of the Other, that is succinctly summarized in the words: "Thou shalt not kill."

The reflection on this doable command, which is not only negative, and asks for respect of the Other, has not been the first occupation of Western philosophy. Levinas, in contrast to any egological thinking, desires to present ethics as first philosophy. The reflection on *"na'ase ve-nishm'a"* (we shall do and hear; Ex. 24:7) as the obedience to a humanizing command before reflection, is for him *prima philosophia*. The "Hebrew," i.e., Jewish dimension in Levinas's "Greek," philosophical thinking, cannot be denied. This does not make Levinas's philosophy a "religious philosophy," or a "Jewish philosophy," yet, what is eminently present in the Jewish world nourishes and inspires Levinas's ethical metaphysics. There are two ways to ethics: one starting from the human freedom, the other starting from one's obligation. Levinas clearly opted for the second, the Jewish one. It was this approach to ethics that he tried to formulate in philosophical terms. The subject is commanded not to be indifferent; his non-attention to the Other is a kind of murder. In the proximity of the I to the Other, however, God comes to the mind.

In addition, Levinas's thinking on Judaism implies that one speaks differently about God, not as a *Ding an sich*, a being or a super-being, but as a high demand coming from the Other's face, as a trace in the Other's face that is immediately effaced and can never be retraced. The word God has not as its denotation some hyperousiological entity; it refers to what remains always exterior to my horizons, to the infinite rupturing of my totality. The other than other, not present in the other person, leaves his trace in the other person's solicitation. The other than other, *epekeina teis ousias*, in the successful formulation of Jean-Luc Marion "not contaminated by being," even prior to the ethical obligation to the Other,[7] breaks up and rends my horizon, fills me with the dynamics of concrete concern for the fellow human being. In my responsibility, I am a "martyr" in the etymological sense of the word, bearing witness to the infinite that ruptures my totality and disrupts the horizon of my knowledge, my wishes, my needs or expectations. Levinas argues, also in his Jewish writings, that God is not present, nor is He absent. God is not

7 GCM, p. 69; DVI, 1992, p. 115: "Dieu n'est pas simplement le 'premier autrui', ou 'autrui par excellence' ou 'l'absolument autrui' mais autre qu'autrui, autre autrement, autre d'altérité préalable à l'altérité d'autrui, à l'astreinte éthique au prochain [...]."

# Chapter 1.

# Between Professional and Confessional Writings

Much has been written on the professional writings of Levinas, less on his Jewish writings. Yet, there is a clear relationship between these two bodies of Levinas's writings. One cannot understand one component without the other; they are inseparable. Nonetheless, Levinas took great care not to publish his confessional writings in the same publishing house as the professional writings. In his Jewish essays and Talmudic readings, Levinas clarifies Judaism through philosophical notions. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the Jewish way of life and thought are the background, the *Sitz im Leben* of his ethical metaphysics. Athens and Jerusalem do not exclude each other, they fructify each other.

In an interview with Shlomo Malka, who asked Levinas concerning the relationship between his philosophical oeuvre and his "religious" works, Levinas answered that he would not be the historian of his own philosophy.[1] He nevertheless added that in his philosophical work there are "memories of an experience that is not rigorously intellectual" (*souvenirs d'un vécu qui n'est pas rigoureusement intellectuel*) and that, in the end, one has to come to the language of the philosophers, the universal language of "Greek." In his view, philosophy is not without link to religious experiences, which are expressed in a different language. In the opposite direction, the people, who translated the Bible into Greek, the people of the Septuaginta, formulated the Bible in another language and, according to Levinas, their work is not yet finished. In a way, Levinas traveled between the same and the Other, he was "bilingual" in the sense that he mastered the language of the same but also that of the Other. One of his problems was the translation of otherness in the language of sameness. He had to say something from the East in the language of the West and succeeded in leaving a Hebrew trace in the Greek discourse. At the same time, his Jewish writings were not a

1 S. Malka, *Lire Levinas*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Ed. Du Cerf, 1998), p. 107.

"*credo ut intelligam*" and even less a "*credo quia absurdum*," but rather a reflection of Jewish life that runs parallel with his philosophy on the Other, who is not to be synthesized.

In this chapter, I argue that Levinas as a master of Greek wisdom and of the unequivocal language of intelligibility, endeavored to "express in Greek those principles about which Greece knew nothing" (*énoncer en grec les principes que la Grèce ignorait*).[2] He built a philosophy and a Jewish thought that makes explicit a life to which Jewish singularity witnesses. Levinas's is a loyalty simultaneously toward "Greek" and "Hebrew." He does not hesitate to subvert the philosophical rationality in opening it up toward a source of thinking that is long ignored.[3] Levinas never wanted to "harmonize" or "conciliate." He believed that everything has to be expressed in the language of philosophy, but he did not think that the philosophical tradition is the locus of the first meaning, the place where meaning starts.[4] This place or non-place is the "signifyingness" (*signifiance*) – the meaning of meanings – of ethics as opening to the other man, ethics without which one cannot be really "human" and that shines in the founding documents of Jewish tradition and in rabbinic hermeneutics. Levinas sheds his philosophical light on this ethics, called an "optics" in both of his writings.[5]

## God as infinity and the problem of thematization

The word "God" frequently appears in Levinas's writings, where it is synonymous for "face" as that which cannot be fused in a totality. Because nobody can claim to have fulfilled all his duty, the ethical exigency remains asymptotic or infinite. The "Desire" (*le désir*) of the Other is thus insatiable, it nourishes itself with its own hunger. The more I approach God – significantly called *Illeity* – the more I measure the distance between me and Him. In traditional Jewish terms: The just will be judged in a more severe manner.

2 BV, p. 200; ADV, p. 234.

3 C. Chalier. *E. Lévinas, L'utopie de l'humain* (Présences du judaïsme, 12) (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), p. 10. Chalier explains Levinas's thought as "attentive to the prophetic inspiration" (ibid.), while keeping "the tension between Judaism and philosophy that animates the work of Levinas" (p. 11).

4 EI, pp. 24–25; EeI, pp. 14–15.

5 TI, p. 23, TeI, p. 8; TI, p. 78, TeI, p. 76; RA, p. 17, RdA, p. 33.

Conclusion

# Shem and Jafet

It is strange that Levinas's philosophical thought draws so much attention, whereas he devoted so much of his time to writing on Judaism, which scholars hardly discuss. This is even stranger since the positions adopted by Levinas and many terms used overlap in both kinds of writing. Contrary to Hegel, Levinas was convinced that Judaism was not to be surpassed by philosophy. Jewish wisdom would even have advantages over "Greek" wisdom. Non-dogmatic Judaism was for Levinas an eminently ethical way of life from which the figure of the Pharisee, living with the Law, cannot be eliminated. The divine Law, not merely good intentions, oriented the Jew to the creation of a just society. Levinas's conception of Judaism is that of a much demanding culture in which the contact with God is lived within the contact with human beings. To be "religious" is not to justify the state, but to use the state in order to realize a just society. The same search for real transcendence that Levinas finds in the authoritative Jewish writings of the Bible and the Talmud, and in the extensive library of Jewish commentaries, is present in the philosophical writings. There is a dialogue going on between Levinas's two types of writing; they correlate. When he received a doctorate *honoris causa* at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, he responded to the laudations by discussing the relationship between the Bible and Hellenism: One had to talk about the Bible, even in the Greek language, i.e., in the language of the philosopher, in order to make the Bible accessible to all. With a smile he added: "Be reassured; when one starts talking Greek, there are still a lot of things to say."[1] Levinas had a double appurtenance: to Judaism and to Hellenism.

Levinas was not schizophrenic: He thought the Bible is essential to thinking. In search for the truth, a person would have to take into account that loving one's neighbor is a basic modality of being human. Levinas

1 S. Malka, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, pp. 121–122.

described an unrest in the human being that is not to be cured, that destabilizes the tranquility of being and that is attested to in biblical literature. This does not make his philosophy a religious philosophy, but a thought in which the rights of the other man are central. Whereas Nietzsche declared that the absence of truth is the truth, Levinas contests this relativism in pointing to the transcendence of the Other as the greatest truth. His philosophy also does away with the Hegelian identity between the identical and the non-identical and denies that meaning comes from the whole, from ever-greater structures, from the entire world history that constantly progresses towards more clarity. Levinas looked for another way of meaning than presence, synchrony and being part of a whole. He found it in the non-identical, in the non-graspable, in the demanding face of the Other. The eminent place that he assigns to the transcendent face characterizes his Jewish thought as well as his ethical metaphysics.

Levinas's philosophy is further close to Judaism in that Judaism, in its refusal of the numinous and the sacred enthusiasm, demystifies the world. As philosophy, the Jewish sources, and especially Talmud, appeal to the intellect. Jews are asked to rationally explore the many meanings of the foundational texts that discuss ethical principles without forgetting the individual examples which suggest and limit them.[2] Should one not take Rabbi Akiva as seriously as Plato? And did Levinas appreciate the wisdom of Jerusalem less than the wisdom of Athens? Levinas thought that the religious meaning of Talmudic texts is "not only transposable into a philosophical language, but refers to philosophical problems." He claims that "[t]he thought of Doctors of the Talmud proceeds from a meditation that is radical enough also to satisfy the demands of philosophy."[3] The Talmudic texts discuss problems with philosophical significance. Although the language of Talmud differs greatly from the philosophical language, the problems discussed in Talmud have philosophical relevance. There is even an advantage in the language of the Sages, since "[i]deas do not become fixed by a process of conceptualization which would extinguish many of the sparks dancing beneath the gaze riveted upon the Real."[4]

Levinas learned the new philosophical thinking from his teachers

2 NTR, p. 21: "[In Talmud] [i]deas are never separated from the example which both suggest and delimits them."

3 DF, p. 68, DL, p. 101.

4 NTR, p. 21.

Husserl and Heidegger. Being trained in phenomenology, he looked within the phenomena for what transcends these phenomena. Heidegger's anonymous Being that was reflected in the neutral *Dasein*, the being-there, was characterized by Levinas as "*il y a*," the "there is" from which one has to escape. One had not to proceed from the beings to the Being, but on the contrary, from the existence, the Being, to the beings. In the human beings, Levinas searches for the "otherwise as being" and finds it in what is "beyond" the being, in the face of the Other, who calls the I to leave its sameness, its tendency to reduce everything to what is "known," in order to make an exodus out of the self towards proximity with the Other, towards the unknown. This philosophical movement out of the anonymous "Being" that masters the *Dasein*, into what is "beyond" the being and into the subject understood as a subjection to the Other, was paralleled by Levinas's uncovering and rediscovery of what the West "forgot" and "repressed": the being-for-the Other attested to in the writings of Bible and Talmud.

At the beginning of 1981, Levinas replied to a question from Philippe Nemo concerning the "phenomenology of the face," that he does not know if one can speak about such a phenomenology, since phenomenology describes what appears. The face is not known; it is what forbids murder.[5] It is not a mere phenomenon, it does not merely appear; it is rather what turns to me, appeals to me, faces me and resists my possession. Consequently, the Other is not known, grasped and conceived; he is irreducible to the self with its all-encompassing knowledge, he rends consciousness. In the face there is instruction; something demanding is expressed in it as from high. The Other is in this sense my master, although or precisely because he is the poor, the widow and the orphan. He pulls me out of myself and I am obliged to give with full hands. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas brings phenomenology to a point of rupture: one has to deal with the "*épi-phanie*" of the face as the appeal of the Other that disturbs the interesting movement of the I which reflects the being and perseveres in it. In the Jewish tradition too, the attention to the Other is primordial and justice comes before knowledge that wants clarity above all. Levinas's philosophy *and* his Jewish writings put knowledge as activity of the self in the perspective of the higher rationality of my passivity, my being touched by the Other, and of the Other's demand.

A second notion which Levinas discusses, mainly in *Otherwise than*

5 EeI, chapter 7.

# Index of Names