



Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Turn

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Cultural Memory in the Present

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How should we approach Emmanuel Levinas's Jewish thought? Is it best approached by comparing his Jewish works to his phenomenological works to see how they differ? Or should one start from the Greek/Hebrew binary he sometimes employs to describe different modes of thought, where Greek is analytic and Hebrew polyphonic, Greek concerned with being and Hebrew with ethics? How relevant is the fact that in *Totality and Infinity* he famously defines religion as "the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality," a definition that suggests a link between religion and Levinas's phenomenological ethics?[1] How relevant is his claim in *Difficult Freedom* that Judaism "teaches only the truths that concern the good of the community and the public order," a remark that suggests a link between Judaism and the social-political?[2] Recent serious attempts to grapple with religion in Levinas are varied indeed, ranging from Jeffrey Bloechl's *Levinas on the Primacy of the Ethical* (2022), which reads him in the vein of the Christian philosophers of religion to Annabel Herzog's *Levinas's Politics*, which reads him as a political philosopher and finds in the Talmudic readings a weaving together of "the French tradition of secular rights and the Talmudic emphasis on hesed." [3] These books and many others build on studies that were formational for the field and have not been surpassed, such as Robert Gibbs's *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (1992), in which questions of ethics/politics and Hebrew/Greek are brought to life in readings of both the Jewish and the phenomenological works.

Against this background, Ethan Kleinberg's *Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Turn: Philosophy and Jewish Thought* takes an approach that to my knowledge has never been taken before, namely, to read a selection of Levinas's Jewish writings with virtually no reference to the two main phenomenological works or to the philosophical ideas for which he is best known. There is one brief reference to *Totality and Infinity* and none to *Otherwise than Being*. Moreover, ethics is not particularly anarchic, and it is not first philosophy. Not only does Kleinberg *not* compare the two *œuvres*, but he also rejects the importance of other dichotomies scholars have found useful in accounts of the Jewish writings: Greek versus Hebrew is discussed but does not become an interpretive principle, and ethics versus politics is mentioned only to be dismissed. In place of these, Kleinberg employs as the grounding principle of his book a dichotomy he draws from Levinas on Hayyim of Volozhin: "God on God's own side" versus "God on our side." The former is something we "cannot define, think, or even name"; nevertheless, Kleinberg tells us, we "can gain access to it" through "Revelation," understood as the Torah revealed to Moses and the oral Torah revealed when we interpret (p. 5). In many readings of Levinas, ethics is a trace of the absent God; in some readings, the holy Jewish books might function as another such trace. For Kleinberg, though, reading the Talmud allows us to "maintain connection" not with an absence or with a human tradition of response to that absence but with "the divine source of the text" (p. 111). Kleinberg's Levinas is in this way at home with a certain version of piety.

The bulk of the book is a biographical intellectual history illuminating moments in which some of Levinas's Jewish writings were produced and the influences on his thought as it developed over time. Kleinberg shows Levinas reacting to his study of French and German philosophy, particularly Martin Heidegger. He describes the development of a number of early writings on the limits of freedom, on assimilation, on election, and so on, against the background of the Holocaust and the POW camps. He details Levinas's work for the Alliance Israélite Universelle (for a longer analysis of which, see Claire Katz's 2012 *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*). Most fruitfully, he documents the mitnagdic rationalism that allows Levinas to interweave an embrace of French liberalism and an awareness of the richness of the Talmud he rediscovers through the itinerant master Shushani and gradually begins to teach. Although Levinas's academic degrees and his teaching at secular universities are not mentioned, the account is presented with a clarity and insightfulness that make it a pleasure to read.

The intellectual biography culminates in the fourth chapter, in which Kleinberg engages Fred Moten's charge that Levinas's thought is racist. The subject of Levinas's Eurocentrism and the accompanying accusation of racism has been dealt with by many scholars, most notably Robert

Bernasconi, who defined the terms of the argument. Once again, though, Kleinberg takes a novel approach. There is no doubt, he admits, that Levinas holds some cultures to be better than others, but this is not much of a problem until it is coupled with the idea that the better cultures are, as it were, historically more advanced (p. 155). Insofar as Levinas entertains this second idea, his Eurocentrism is tied to a Hegelian view of history that comes at least in part from Franz Rosenzweig and is already verging on racism. But it is possible to save Levinas from this—to save him from his Hegelian-Rosenzweigian side—because there is in his writing an alternative to historical logic, namely the Talmud (p. 159). Reading the Talmud is an invitation to “step out of time” (p. 161) and therefore to suspend our modern historical bias and “reconsider the privileged place we assign ourselves based solely on historical contingency” (p. 160). Thus if one looks “not in the early texts of Levinas but through the competing and contradictory project of translating God’s words into human language,” it is possible to find the “resistance to racism” that Moten seeks (p. 163). This interesting argument is grounded in a number of assumptions, among them that racism necessarily rests on a progressive vision of history.

Everything I’ve so far discussed appears on the left-hand side of Kleinberg’s pages. Those pages are divided into columns, however: on the right-hand side, in the narrower column, Kleinberg offers readings of four of Levinas’s Talmudic lectures, one per chapter for the first four chapters. These are: “The Temptation of Temptation,” “As Old as the World,” “Beyond Memory,” and “Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry.” The right-hand side is intended to give us a glimpse of Levinas’s non-progressive vision. Indeed, Kleinberg is so intent on presenting these readings as expressing the timeless image of “God on God’s own side,” that he deliberately does not state “the dates, places, or context” of the lectures (p. 10). The readings are lively and frequently of interest. Moreover, they more or less work to illuminate the main argument. In chapter 2, for example, the discussion of the Alliance and Levinas’s role as a teacher is deepened by the Talmud’s account of law as a chain of transmission. At the same time, Kleinberg’s broader argument for the Talmud as an ahistorical universal gets a shot in the arm from Levinas’s comparison of the Oresteia, in which human virtue troubles the political realm, with a quasi-utopian Talmudic vision of the responsibility of all for all, where the category of the “elite” is for everyone. In chapter 4, where Kleinberg is struggling with the strong critique of Eurocentrism and racism, the side text deals with the way the Talmud undermines an idolatrous relationship with the Bible, and in passing discusses the role a historical approach plays in ossifying a text as dogma. Thus Kleinberg highlights the anti-historical thrust in Levinas’s Talmud at the possible expense of other thrusts.

The concluding chapter has no right-side column, as its goal is to synthesize the two sides, to bring the ahistorical “God on God’s own side” into the human vision. Accusations reasonably brought against Levinas by Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler as well as Moten reveal that history is the problem. The solution therefore is to “just let go” of history and to “address the Jew, being-Jewish, Israel, in relation to the name of the infinite itself” (p. 175). This will incidentally solve the problem not only of Levinas’s racism but also the problem (if it is a problem) of his Zionism since it appears to show us that “Israel conceived as a modern political state or particular people ... is nonrelational and solipsistic [and] akin to what Levinas calls idolatry” (p. 180). Israel should be seen on the contrary as us, as me, as everyone, as ethics in any and every time and place. In terms that he does not use, Kleinberg is inviting us to embrace a version of the Levinasian ethical as a politics, and to ignore the Levinasian political. It is a move that he acknowledges is following “Levinas away from Levinas” (p. 179). That kind of formulation is familiar from the work of Bernasconi, Simon Critchley, and, more recently, John Drabinski, all of whom pursued the argument with substantial rigor and without the religious fervor that characterizes Kleinberg’s presentation.

For those unwilling to follow Kleinberg all the way, there remains much that is useful in the book. The general presentation of Levinas’s Talmudic turn suggests that the oral Torah is an unbroken chain that has been fractured by the Holocaust. Levinas attempts to mend it by drawing out a traditional understanding of the functioning of that chain—by which the Torah adheres across time and space, and by which therefore I can understand myself to be there, placed in the text—and

making it attractive to a new generation. Kleinberg's Levinas understands his project as, in a sense, saving Judaism through a re-presentation of the Talmud as compatible with French universalism. This constructive project is successfully illuminated, at the expense of a philosophically richer critical one.

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht/Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1980), 40.

[2] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 61.

[3] Annabel Herzog, *Levinas's Politics: Justice, Mercy, Universality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 1

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