

“Extreme Attention to the Real”: Levinas and Religious Hermeneutics

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One important area of Levinas’s Jewish thought consists in his Talmudic readings. Over the course of many years, he developed an approach to the reading of Talmud that relies, implicitly and explicitly, on various hermeneutical principles. A fundamental characteristic of rabbinic reading, according to Levinas, is “extreme attention to the Real,” the complexity of both human nature and the many concrete situations to which human beings must respond. This essay uses one of the Talmudic readings as a springboard for an exploration of the hermeneutics that are at work in Levinas’ approach, including, in this case, his own very real relationship to and disappointment with his teacher, Martin Heidegger.

Levinas and the Talmud

At first or even second glance, and certainly to the untrained eye, the Talmud appears to be a rather jumbled record of arguments and random comments. One of the ways in which Emmanuel Levinas describes its deep inner dynamic is the following:

In itself, this Talmudic text is intellectual struggle and courageous opening unto even the most irritating questions. The commentator must carve out a path toward them without letting himself be deceived by what appear to be Byzantine discussions. In fact, these discussions conceal an extreme attention to the Real. The pages of the Talmud, mischievous, laconic in their ironic or dry formulations, but in love with the possible, register an oral tradition and a teaching which came to be written down accidentally. It is important to bring them back to their life

of dialogue or polemic in which multiple, though not arbitrary, meanings arise and buzz in each saying. These Talmudic pages seek contradiction and expect of a reader freedom, invention, and boldness.¹

We find in this passage several of the characteristics that Levinas ascribes to the Talmud: "courageous opening unto even the most irritating questions"; "extreme attention to the Real"; and "multiple, though not arbitrary, meanings."

Over many years, Levinas presented readings of Talmudic passages to the Paris gatherings of French Jewish intellectuals.² His humility before the text is one of the characteristics of his reading style.

My effort to comment starts from the hypothesis that the Talmud is not simply a compilation. Of that I am persuaded, in spite of appearances to the contrary, and I always ascribe my difficulties in discovering this coherence and this profound logic of the Talmud to the paucity of my means. Perhaps nothing should be published under the title of "Jewish thought" for as long as this logic has not been found.³

There is an internal logic to the Talmud, but it is always yet to be discovered. Each exercise of reading a particular passage may contribute to the ultimate discovery of this logic, but in the meantime our readings must remain provisional and fragmentary.

Nevertheless, even in this tentative reading mode, Levinas assumes that "different periods of history can communicate around thinkable meanings" (p. 5). This is enacted in the redactional style of the Talmud itself, wherein different generations, individuals who could never have actually met each other,

¹Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 4–5. Parenthetical page numbers refer to this volume.

²Many of these Talmudic readings are available in English translation. In addition to *Nine Talmudic Readings* (cited above), see *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); *New Talmudic Readings*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999). For Levinas's Talmudic background, and his role in the Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Française, see Judith Friedlander, *Vilna on the Seine: Jewish Intellectuals in France Since 1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), Chapter 5.

³Quoted in Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud*, trans. Llewellyn Brown (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 149.

appear to be in conversation across the page.⁴ It must also be the operative assumption of anyone who claims that an ancient text can continue to speak to our contemporary situation.

Let us begin with an exegesis of an exegesis, namely the talmudic reading “Toward the Other,” which Levinas offered to the Colloquium of French-Speaking Jewish Intellectuals in 1963. Its main themes are responsibility, repentance, and forgiveness, particularly in relation to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Since Levinas brings his teacher, Heidegger, into the discussion, some consideration is given to the so-called “Heidegger Affair” (debates over Heidegger’s Nazi affiliation and its connection, if any, to his philosophy) as it relates to the overall theme of responsibility. This will also provide an opportunity to indicate the fundamental difference between Levinas and Heidegger. In connection with this, there will also be a brief exploration of another Jewish student of Heidegger, Hans Jonas, whose comments shed additional light on the question. Finally, we shall essay some general comments on Levinas’ approach to hermeneutics, highlighting along the way connections between his approach to reading the Talmud and his approach to philosophy.

“Toward the Other”

The reading which Levinas titles “Toward the Other” is based on a severely truncated excerpt from the closing passage of Tractate *Yoma*, a section that stretches over several folio pages.⁵ The tractate as a whole deals with the rituals and meaning of Yom Kippur, the most fundamental gesture of which is *teshuvah*, a turning toward other persons as well as toward God—an approach which aspires to but does not always achieve full reconciliation. This is implied by the title of Levinas’ lesson, “Toward the Other,” which discusses a story of a failed approach, a “turning toward” that takes a wrong turn.

In the passage Levinas chooses for this lesson, the Gemara expands on a typically brief statement from the Mishnah:

⁴Many contemporary writers on the Talmud attribute subtle artistry to the “Stammim,” the final redactors of the Talmud, who are credited with creating this conversational effect. See, for example, Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 15–21.

⁵The correct page numbers are 85b-87b, not 85a-85b as cited in the Aronowicz volume; the full discussion actually extends all the way to the end of the tractate, on page

The transgressions of man toward God are forgiven him by the Day of Atonement; the transgressions against other people are not forgiven him by the Day of Atonement if he has not first appeased the other person.

An example of what Levinas calls the Talmud's "extreme attention to the Real," this passage is a detailed meditation on the importance of peace-making between individuals, and examines from many angles both the necessity and the difficulty of seeking forgiveness, as well as the necessity and difficulty of offering forgiveness.

The core narrative of the Gemara's commentary is this:

Rabbi Isaac has said: "Whoever hurts his neighbor, even through words, must appease him . . .

. . . Rab once had an altercation with a slaughterer of livestock. The latter did not come to him on the eve of Yom Kippur. He then said: I will go to him myself to appease him. (On the way) Rab Huna ran across him. He said to him: Where is the master going? He answered: To reconcile with so and so. Then, he said: Abba is going to commit murder. He went anyway. The slaughterer was seated, hammering on an ox head. He raised his eyes and saw him. He said to him: Go away, Abba. I have nothing in common with you. As he was hammering the head, a bone broke loose, lodged itself in his throat and killed him. . . . (pp. 12-13)

If I have wronged another, I am obligated to seek reconciliation. Rab (Abba) goes beyond the letter of the law: having been wronged, he does not wait but rather goes to offer an opportunity for reconciliation.

The text "also wants to speak to us of the purity which can kill," suggests Levinas, "in a mankind as yet unequally evolved, and of the enormity of the responsibility which Rab took upon himself in his premature confidence in the humanity of the Other" (p. 23). It seems that his approach to the slaughterer may have caused the latter to hammer even harder on the skull before him, resulting in a splinter that causes the slaughterer's death. Such a result is even anticipated by Rab Huna, who equates Rab's zeal for reconciliation with murder. If I do what I know to be right, am I responsible for an unforeseen negative result? Yes, I am. What a complicated, difficult freedom!

"God is perhaps nothing but this permanent refusal of a history which would come to terms with our private tears. Peace does not dwell in a world without consolations" (p. 20). Consolations are not the same as justice. Here is a hint of the way in which Levinas's Talmudic readings reflect, and perhaps inform, his philosophical approach. A disciple of Franz Rosenzweig, Levinas stands against the philosophical attempt to create a complete, totalizing system. Here the reality of injustice, despite right intentions, argues against any all-inclusive philosophy. Not all injustice is rectified; life cannot be neatly

packaged. The messiness of the Real is ethically significant, beyond the consolations of a thought-out philosophy.

Among the disclaimers at the beginning of Levinas' discussion, perhaps the most important is the warning that "one should not think after hearing me that the Jewish intellectuals of France now know what the Jewish tradition thinks of forgiveness" (p. 14). This emphasizes, with a sly wink, that the talmudic conversation must remain open-ended, that my interpretation is not all-encompassing. Even if I tell you what I think the text is driving at, and even if you acknowledge the authority of my opinion, there is still always more that could be mined from the text (and neither is the Talmud the last word in Jewish teaching). We are never finished reading, just as, later, Levinas asks rhetorically, "[H]as anyone, in any case, ever finished asking for forgiveness? . . . The seeking for forgiveness never comes to an end. Nothing is ever completed" (p. 24).

The statement of the Mishnah, which launches the talmudic discussion, divides sins into two categories. Transgressions of the individual toward God, which we might call ritual sins (desecration of the Sabbath, eating unkosher food, etc.) can be atoned for by means of the Day of Atonement itself. Assuming that I have sincerely repented for such transgressions, the coming of the day itself wipes the slate clean. However, transgressions committed against another person are not so easily dealt with. God is merciful and eager to forgive sins that involve the private individual's ritual failures. But if I have wounded another person, I must first rectify that situation. I must turn toward that other, ask and receive her forgiveness. Only then does Yom Kippur effect atonement.

The arguments made in the Talmud, even when they speak of God, are not *about* God, are not an effort to describe God. "Religious experience, at least for the Talmud, can only be primarily a moral experience" (p. 15). What we can know of God comes to us through teachings about values, and the themes of sin, repentance, and forgiveness have precisely to do with values. The primary term of relationship is the ethical obligation to the other human being, so often denoted by Levinas as "the face of the other."⁶ Yet despite the

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⁶Elsewhere Levinas writes of the face of the other, which "is alone in translating transcendence. Not to provide the proof of the existence of God, but the indispensable circumstance of the meaning of that word, of its first statement." See "The Meaning of Meaning" in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993),

primacy Levinas gives to the ethical, he opens the argument to a more complex understanding of what such an attitude might mean:

It could be concluded a bit hastily that Judaism values social morality above ritual practices. But the order could also be reversed. The fact that forgiveness for ritual offenses depends only on penitence—and consequently only on us—may project a new light on the meaning of ritual practices. . . . The ritual transgression that I want to erase without resorting to the help of others would be precisely the one that demands all my personality. (pp. 16–17)

But is it the day itself, a particular moment on the calendar, that is capable of putting into motion "this total mobilization of oneself" (p. 17)? No. "One must rely on the objective order of the community to obtain this intimacy of deliverance" (p. 17). Judaism makes no sense in isolation from others; a Jewish hermit would be a contradiction in terms. This line of the argument leads Levinas to conclude that "ritual is not external to conscience" (p. 17). This is essentially the same insight that he offers in the essay "Ethics and Spirit":

One cannot, in fact, be a Jew instinctively; one cannot be a Jew without knowing it. One must desire good with all one's heart and, at the same time, not simply desire it on the basis of a naïve impulse of the heart. Both to maintain and to break this impulse is perhaps what constitutes the Jewish ritual. Passion mistrusts its pathos, and becomes and re-becomes *consciousness*! Belonging to Judaism presupposes a ritual and a science. Justice is impossible to the ignorant man. Judaism is an extreme consciousness.⁷

The preservation of "the sense of justice dwelling in the Jewish conscience" (p. 17)—would that it were always and everywhere as present as Levinas seems to think!—is intimately linked to ritual, which in turn depends upon the presence of a community. The ritual and the ethical turn out to be not such separate categories after all.

The Heidegger Question

In Levinas' discussion, the "Heidegger Affair" lurks in the background. "There can be no forgiveness that the guilty party has not sought!" (p. 19). I may be obligated to be forgiving, but I am not obligated to forgive before being asked. Indeed, to forgive prematurely would be to short-circuit the process of *teshuvah*, and to deprive the offender of some necessary inner work. "It is difficult to forgive Heidegger" (p. 25)—especially since he has not asked for forgive-

p. 94.

⁷Emanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

ness. Levinas compares this to “the easy terms promised by free grace” (p. 24). (Bonhoeffer would call it “cheap grace.”)

Martin Heidegger is a towering figure in 20th century philosophy. His major work, *Being and Time* (1927), was dedicated to his teacher, Edmund Husserl. Yet, when Heidegger, a loyal Nazi in 1933, became the Rector of Freiburg University, Husserl, a Jew, was forbidden use of the library. (Levinas had been a student of both Husserl and Heidegger.) There has been a running discussion of whether Heidegger’s political loyalties and personal moral failure were consistent with his philosophical convictions. His Jewish students have wrestled with this question in various ways.⁸ Some offered partial defenses, some pleaded with him to express regret.

Philosophically, Levinas turns away from Heidegger. To oversimplify: metaphysics has to do with beings, ontology with Being. Heidegger rejects metaphysics because of its emphasis on beings:

But if man is to find his way once again into the nearness of Being he must first learn to exist in the nameless. In the same way he must recognize the seductions of the public realm as well as the impotence of the private. Before he speaks man must first let himself be claimed again by Being, taking the risk that under this claim he will seldom have much to say. Only thus will the preciousness of its essence be once more bestowed upon the word, and upon man a home for dwelling in the truth of Being.⁹

Important as Heidegger is to Levinas, Levinas rejects this emphasis on Being, calling it unjust because it obscures the face of the other who stands before me. Levinas therefore seeks to re-found philosophy on the basis of a metaphysics that begins with the other. Hence, “Metaphysics Precedes Ontology.”¹⁰ Indeed, Levinas sees himself as thinking in opposition to Western

University Press, 1990), p. 6. Italics in original.

⁸See Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Wolin reports that a Swiss newspaper raised the question in 1936. Later that year, Karl Löwith raised the question directly with Heidegger, who responded that “his partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy.” See pp. 177–78.

⁹Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in David Farrell Krell, ed., *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), p. 199.

¹⁰Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (TI), trans. Alphonse Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 42–48. This is the heading of a crucial part of

thought (for that matter, Heidegger sees himself the same way!), which "consists in understanding being only as the *foundation of beings*."¹¹

Levinas' turn away from Heidegger is already clear in *Totality and Infinity* (1961):

To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom.¹²

Heideggerian "Being" is an abstraction which absorbs the individual into a totalizing framework that valorizes freedom over justice. For Levinas, insisting that philosophy must begin with the individual who faces me is an "extreme attention to the Real."

In March of 1966, Heidegger sent a letter to the editor of *Der Spiegel* which was taken as a "hint" that the philosopher was ready to speak more fully about his conduct during the Nazi years. An interview ensued, which was not published until after Heidegger's death in 1976.¹³ The interviewers offer Heidegger many opportunities to clarify the record, which he attempts to do in several cases. They also offer opportunities to express regret, which he consistently (and astonishingly) fails to do.

Levinas, whose Talmudic reading was offered almost three years before the Heidegger interview, and more than twelve years before the interview was published, anticipates Heidegger's failure. Levinas is already disappointed in his former teacher, who up to that point (1963) had not expressed regret nor asked forgiveness. "It is difficult to forgive Rab" (p. 25). But at least, in Rab's case, his action could be read as doing the right thing while failing to anticipate the negative consequence—we are not told how he felt afterward. In Heidegger's case (*lehavdil*—forgive the comparison!), he sees the consequences of Nazism, he knows his own complicity, yet he refuses to express regret. "One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger" (p. 25). This understatement on the

Section I.

¹¹Levinas, "Beginning with Heidegger" in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 122. Italics in original.

¹²Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 45.

¹³"Only a God Can Save Us," trans. Maria P. Alter and John D. Caputo, reprinted in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT

part of Levinas is striking. "Difficult?!" one wants to say, "impossible!" Perhaps "difficult" expresses the regret of the former student, and holds open for another moment the door of hope that Heidegger will yet come clean. But no, Rab is deemed guilty because he is brilliant and should have known better. And "it is even less possible to forgive Heidegger."

A Detour to Hans Jonas

Hans Jonas, one of Heidegger's Jewish students who fled Germany, offers another critique of Heidegger's thought. Jonas is convinced that Heidegger's philosophy is intimately connected to his Nazi sympathies. Addressing himself to Christian theologians who find in Heidegger's philosophical thought a potentially useful tool for theology, Jonas argues that despite Heidegger's appropriation of Judeo-Christian vocabulary, his orientation is fundamentally pagan.

This is not merely an accusation of heresy. Jonas sees in Heidegger a philosophy fraught with concrete consequences. It includes, for example, an emphasis on a paganish notion of fate, the call of German destiny, without providing "a norm by which to decide how to answer such calls."¹⁴ Jonas points out to his theological interlocutors that

[t]he real opposite to the Christian and Jewish view is not atheism, which contemplates a neutral world and thus does not pre-empt divinity for what is not divine, but paganism which deifies the world.¹⁵

And in what one theologian describes as Heidegger's "hauntingly suggestive" style, Jonas discovers a further danger:

May I, a mere nonsaved, but sympathetically caring child of the world, be permitted to pray: God protect theology from the temptation of resorting to haunting language! ... More important than ... considerations of taste is the specter of arbitrariness and anarchy that thus appears.¹⁶

But perhaps his strongest rebuke comes in the next paragraph, where he speaks of

the seeming, false humility of Heidegger's shifting the initiative to Being, so seductive to Christian theologians, but in fact the most enormous hubris in the

Press, 1993), pp. 91–116.

¹⁴Hans Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," in *The Phenomenon of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 247.

¹⁵Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," p. 249.

whole history of thought. For it is nothing less than the thinker's claiming that through him speaks the essence of things itself, and thus the claim to an authority which no thinker should ever claim.¹⁷

On Jonas' reading, Heidegger not only overcomes the need for hermeneutics, but lays the groundwork for a dangerous assertion of absolute authority.

Jonas and Levinas

Jonas is very direct in his critique, indeed his accusation, of Heidegger. Levinas generally seems to prefer an indirect approach. In at least two places in his essay, Jonas comes close to Levinas's thought. Jonas stresses that God is radically other: "[T]heology should guard the radical transcendence of its God, whose voice comes not out of being but breaks into the kingdom of being from without."¹⁸ And toward the end of his essay, Jonas offers a passage that could have been written by Levinas:

[I]t is hard to hear man hailed as the shepherd of being when he has just so dismally failed to be his brother's keeper. The latter he is meant to be in the Bible. But the terrible anonymity of Heidegger's "being," illicitly decked out with personal characters, blocks out the personal call. Not by the being of another person am I grasped, but just by "being"! And my responsive thought is being's own event. But called as person by person—fellow beings or God—my response will not primarily be thinking but action.¹⁹

This is consistent with what Jonas has already argued on p. 247: "I hear questions to man as the doer of deeds, not the speaker of words," which in turn echoes an early rabbinic saying: "It is not the midrash (interpretation) that is essential, but the action"—which returns us to our consideration of the Talmud.

What is Missing?

Just as a midrashic reading of Scripture requires that we inquire about what is missing from the text, so might a reading of the Talmud prompt wonder about what the redactor has left out of the discussion. In the case of this excerpt, we might ask why Levinas chooses these particular passages to explicate, while eliding others. To go beyond the obvious reasons—that he takes the text as

¹⁶Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," p. 256.

¹⁷Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," p. 257.

¹⁸Jonas, "Heidegger and Theology," p. 248.

a springboard for a public discussion within a limited time frame (as he indicates on p. 22), or that these particular passages are sufficient to make the point he wishes to make—would be a complicated and time-consuming effort, not to be attempted here in full.

But one small example may suffice. Immediately preceding the story of Rab and the slaughterer is a brief statement about a precedent set by Rabbi Zera (omitted by Levinas): “When R. Zera had any complaint against any man, he would repeatedly pass by him, showing himself to him, so that he may come forth to [pacify] him.”²⁰ Rab, in his conduct with the slaughterer, is accused by the text of what Levinas calls “premature confidence in the humanity of the Other” (p. 23)—a confidence that appears to cause the other’s death. Rab’s student even anticipates a negative outcome. Yet the text, at the same time that it seems to accuse Rab of a kind of short-sighted, over-zealous piety, also includes him in the pious precedent of R. Zera. It takes a positive view of R. Zera’s practice, aligning it with a reading of a verse from Proverbs: “[G]o, humble thyself, and urge thy neighbor” (Prov. 6:3), here read as encouraging one to act with humility and initiative in order to make peace.²¹ Neither R. Zera nor Rab is seeking forgiveness in these cases, but rather the opportunity to forgive. Neither is sitting back, arms folded, waiting for the offender to come to him.

If Rab is following the example of R. Zera, as the text implies, why is R. Zera right and Rab wrong? The contrast supports Levinas’ contention that Rab was somehow rash and premature in his action toward the slaughterer. He should have known better. But at the same time, he is extending himself, going beyond the “letter of the law,” to offer an opportunity for peacemaking. Adding the example of R. Zera actually emphasizes the complexity of the situation. Even if, in general, it is meritorious to extend oneself, and not to insist on the full respect due one’s rank, still one who is a sage is also expected to exercise sober judgment about the specific situation. Perhaps R. Zera and Rab insisted too strenuously on the respect due them on account of their learning. We do not know the circumstances of the original altercation. We are led to

¹⁹Jonas, “Heidegger and Theology,” p. 258.

²⁰*Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Yoma, trans. Leo Jung (London: Soncino Press, 1938), p. 435.

²¹This is not the exact meaning of the passage in its original context, which has more to do with extricating oneself from a rash promise, but it is quite in line with the midrashic/rabbinic style of reading. The main point is that it is sometimes necessary to humble oneself

believe that the slaughterer offended Rab, but we never get a description of the argument that led up to the unfortunate outcome. That is precisely an illustration of how difficult it is to make peace in real life. To do the right thing at the wrong time is dangerous. But is it always possible to know in advance?

A Scriptural Addendum

Levinas leads us through the talmudic argument in a certain direction, but without closing off alternate readings. There are questions which must be revisited periodically. As if to emphasize the uneasiness of the text, and its unresolvability, Levinas adds a few pages devoted to a difficult biblical text. It relates an incident in which justice is demanded, but cannot be perfectly realized. The style of the Talmud is very different from that of the Bible, but they do have in common an "extreme attention to the Real," a concern with concrete situations.

This "coda" is a reflection on 2 Samuel 21,²² in which the Gibeonites demand the death of Saul's sons, and David complies—a frightening example of a situation in which perfect justice is not possible. This is an interesting arrangement of texts by Levinas; the Gemara does not cite this passage. Levinas thus appends to his discussion of Talmud his interpretation of a passage of Scripture. We generally think of the Talmud (incorrectly) as a commentary on Scripture. Here Levinas uses Scripture as a vehicle to extend his commentary on the Talmud. He finds a passage in 2 Samuel that raises parallel questions of justice, reconciliation, and the impossibility of always finding neat endings.

In Levinas' juxtaposition of texts, we will not reach the satisfaction and rest of tidy resolutions. "The Talmud teaches that one cannot force men who demand retaliatory justice to grant forgiveness" (p. 28). So, it seems, does the Bible teach: "probably all the greatness of what is called the Old Testament consists in remaining sensitive to spilled blood" (p. 26). Justice is done, but in the process injustice is also done. We are left with "the image of this woman, this mother, this Rizpah Bat Aiah, who for six months watches over the corpses . . ." (p. 29). Echoes here of Antigone—it so often seems to be women who perform the duty of mourning in the wake of masculine justice.

Hermeneutical Principles

Levinas delivered his talmudic readings over many years, and his hermeneutic no doubt evolved somewhat over time. References will be made here to one

for the sake of peace.

other talmudic reading and to Levinas' own introductory comments, but what follows is at best a preliminary list of fifteen hermeneutical principles that Levinas applies in his reading of Talmud.

1. "Carve out a path toward" the text's "initial thrust." (pp. 4–5)
2. "Extricate the universal intentions from the apparent particularism." (p. 5)
3. "Different periods of history can communicate around thinkable meanings." (p. 5)
4. The Talmud is not a mere extension of the Bible. (p. 7)
5. "The literal meaning, which *completely* signifies, is not yet the signified. The latter is yet to be sought." (p. 7)
6. "To sketch the possibility . . ." (p. 9)
7. "Extricat[e] from this theological language meanings addressing themselves to reason." (p. 14)
8. The text does not offer information about God, but meaning "in and for man's life." This is related to Levinas' understanding of Maimonides' view that "all that is said of God in Judaism *signifies* through human *praxis*." (p. 14)
9. "Religious experience, at least for the Talmud, can only be primarily a moral experience." (p. 15)
10. "The reference to a biblical verse does not aim at appealing to authority. . . . Rather, the aim is to refer to a context which allows the level of the discussion to be raised and to make one notice the true import of the data from which the discussion derives its meaning." (p. 21)
11. "Ideas do not become fixed by a process of conceptualization which would extinguish many of the sparks dancing beneath the gaze riveted upon the Real. . . . Ideas are never separated from the example which both suggests and delimits them." (p. 21)
12. There is no "correct" hermeneutic that uncovers and clarifies the text's "original" meaning. "I do not assume that the masters whose discussion I am spelling out had a tacit understanding regarding the symbolic value of the terms used. I do not possess a key with which to decipher magical formulae." (p. 32)
13. There is a "permanent dissonance between what the Talmud draws from the biblical text and what is found in that text literally." (p. 39)
14. "[A]ttempt to translate Talmudic discourse into modern language." (p. 39)
15. Rub the text. (p. 46) "This violence done to words to tear from them the secret that time and conventions have covered over with their sedimenta-

tions, a process begun as soon as these words appear in the open air of history." (p. 47)

The Relation between Scripture and Talmud

Scriptural citations both interrupt and propel the flow of Talmudic discourse. They retain an original meaning which can and does enter into a dialectical relationship with subsequent interpretation.

[T]hese signs—biblical verses, objects, persons, situations, rites—function as perfect signs: whatever the modifications that the passage of time introduces into their visible texture, they keep their privilege of revealing the same meanings or new aspects of these same meanings. They are thus irreplaceable, perfect, and, in a purely hermeneutical sense, sacred signs, sacred letters, sacred scriptures. Never does the meaning of these symbols fully dismiss the materiality of the symbols which suggest it. They always preserve some unexpected capacity for renewing this meaning. Never does the spirit dismiss the letter which revealed it. Quite the contrary, the spirit awakens new possibilities of suggestion in the letter. (p. 8)

Commentary does more than comment. The Talmud "sees itself as a second layer of meanings; critical and fully conscious, it goes back to the meanings of Scripture in a rational spirit" (p. 7). Levinas characterizes this move as "the spirit wrestling with the letter" (p. 24). At the same time, "the Talmudic spirit goes radically beyond the letter of Scriptures" (p. 39) to the point where there is a "permanent dissonance between what the Talmud draws from the biblical text and what is found in the text literally" (p. 39).

It is common to refer to a scriptural citation in the Talmud as a "proof-text," that is, a scriptural "hook" upon which to hang one's argument. Such citations would normatively be thought of as carrying great weight, and sometimes a talmudic argument hinges on whether a sage has correctly applied such a verse. For example, a halakhic (legal) ruling that can be shown to be "*mi-d'oraita*"—from the Torah—by means of a scriptural proof-text, generally takes precedence over a legal enactment that is "*mi-d'rabbanan*"—rabbinically derived without direct scriptural connection.

Levinas, however, is not dealing with halakhic passages. By his own admission, he limits his discussions to sections of the Talmud that are primarily aggadic (p. 32). Thus scriptural proof-texts are not our objective:

The reference to a biblical verse does not aim at appealing to authority. . . . Rather, the aim is to refer to a context which allows the level of the discussion to be raised and to make one notice the true import of the data from which the discussion derives its meaning. (p. 21)

The biblical citation is not used to “prove” a point. It may, however, serve as a sign that points the reader back to its original context, thus drawing a wider set of associations into the conversation. In that case, it is shorthand, a code, for an ever-expanding range of possible meanings.

Connections between Levinas’s Philosophy and his Talmudic Reading

We might venture here to draw a structural parallel between the function of the scriptural passage in Levinas’s Talmud and the “existent” in Levinas’s ethical philosophy. The existent, the Other, does serve a function—he interrupts my freedom and awakens my understanding to the fact that I am perpetually and inevitably obligated. Nevertheless, the Other is not simply absorbed into my philosophical system. Rather, he remains Other. “Never does the spirit dismiss the letter which revealed it.” That might be phrased, in philosophical terms, as “Never does Being (ontology) take precedence over the existent who meets me face to face.” (Again, this is precisely where Levinas opposes Heidegger philosophically.)

Similarly, the scriptural citations that are found everywhere in the Talmud are, in a strange but important sense, “other” to the Talmudic text. The Talmud “wrestles” with Scripture. It goes “radically beyond the letter.” Yet, “[i]ts spirit was nonetheless formed in the very letters it goes beyond, so as to reestablish, despite apparent violences, the permanent meaning within these letters” (pp. 39–40). Scripture remains Scripture. Scriptural examples have their own reality, and “[i]deas are never separated from the example which both suggests and delimits them” (p. 21). Scripture has its own integrity as revelation, even as it sets into motion a struggle of the spirit that will be signified in and by the talmudic text.

Implications for Hermeneutics

The task of the hermeneut, the talmudic exegete, the teacher, is to rekindle the dynamism of the spirit that produced the Talmud. Though her responsibility is to “translate Talmudic discourse into modern language” (p. 39), and to “extricate the universal intentions from the apparent particularism” (p. 5), these are not tasks that ever reach completion. More important is to release the spirit trapped in the text, because ideas should “not become fixed by a process of conceptualization which would extinguish many of the sparks dancing beneath the gaze riveted upon the Real” (p. 21).

Annette Aronowicz points out “the capacity of the Talmudic text to judge the present” (p. xxv). When Levinas states in his introduction to the first four

readings that his goal "is to extricate the universal intentions from the apparent particularism" (p. 5), he might intend several possible meanings: 1) that a narrative related about a particular person contains a meaning that can be generalized and extended to that person's contemporaries; 2) that a *particular* Jewish story or statement from a particular historical time and locale has *universal* implications that apply to Jews in all times and places; 3) that a story or statement that happens to be located in a Jewish text has implications for all human beings.

Nevertheless, Levinas does not claim possession of the hermeneutical "key." Indeed, as we have seen, he rejects the notion that there is a "correct" hermeneutic that uncovers and clarifies the text's "original" meaning. "I do not assume that the masters whose discussion I am spelling out had a tacit understanding regarding the symbolic value of the terms used. I do not possess a key with which to decipher magical formulae" (p. 32). But even if there were such a key, one that could lead back to the "original meaning," the discussion must nevertheless remain open-ended, for "the literal meaning, which *completely* signifies, is not yet the signified. The latter is yet to be sought" (p. 7).

Violence and/of Hermeneutics

Another talmudic reading holds further clues to Levinas's hermeneutic approach. In "The Temptation of Temptation" Levinas discusses a passage that contains a well-known midrash describing the giving of the Torah. Based on a kind of *double entendre* offered by the Hebrew of Exodus 19:17, Rabbi Abdimi imagines that Mt. Sinai was held over the heads of the Israelites: Accept the Torah, or else! Can it be that, having just brought about the liberation of Israel, God now *forces* the Israelites to accept the Torah? In this partially humorous midrash, Levinas discovers a crucial insight, related to the tradition (cited in the same talmudic passage) that the Israelites agreed to do the commandments before actually hearing them ("*na'aseh v'nishma* – we shall do and we shall hear"). The great temptation, particularly in the West, and especially under the influence of philosophy, is to know everything, even to experience everything, before making a decision—and to believe that this is possible. I must know all my options, weigh the pros and cons, and only then decide. "The temptation of temptation is the temptation of knowledge" (p. 33).

This narrative of revelation, hinted at in the Torah and alluded to in Rabbi Abdimi's strange reading, is meant, according to Levinas, as a reminder that there is a "consent prior to freedom" (p. 37). To what does Levinas refer when he says, "In the beginning was violence" (p. 37)? Does he allude to the creation of the world, as well as to the giving of Torah? A little further on, his description of the "Torah received without violence, as it is commonly understood" (p.

37), seems to be intended ironically. There is, in fact, no revelation, no interpretation, no translation without some violence.

He also makes a statement that recalls Walter Benjamin. Pausing at the description of Raba “buried in study” and “holding his fingers beneath his foot and rubbing it so hard that blood spurted from it,” Levinas comments, “As if by chance, to rub in such a way that blood spurts out is perhaps the way one must ‘rub’ the text to arrive at the life it conceals” (p. 46). Benjamin, in a well-known passage in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” argues that those objects and documents that we know as “cultural treasures” are in fact the spoils of conquest.

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.²³

Neither Raba nor Levinas is, precisely speaking, a historical materialist. Even so, they brush these documents—Torah, Talmud—very hard.

Saying and Said

Translation is a necessary tool for building peace by building bridges between languages, cultures, traditions, nations. Nevertheless, the translation process itself involves a kind of violence, a wrenching of a text out of one cultural context and depositing it in another. Part of Levinas’ project is “to translate Talmudic discourse into modern language” (p. 39), which he elsewhere calls “Greek” or “philosophical” language. His reading, therefore, involves “extricating from this theological language meanings addressing themselves to reason” (p. 14).

For Levinas, as we have come to understand, philosophy begins with ethics. This is a principle that governs his talmudic exegesis: “Religious experience, at least for the Talmud, can only be primarily a moral experience” (p. 15). And just as philosophical “systems” close off one’s awareness of the existent, the Other who faces me, so the written text—even though it may be a trace of revelation—also hides/erases/occludes the original voice(s) that brought it to its present form. Every reading inevitably is selective, bringing some voices to the fore while necessarily pushing others into the shadows.

²²The citation on p. 28 of the text is incorrect.

Still, it is the reader's responsibility to overcome this occlusion of the Voice by seeking again and again the voices behind the text.

The texts of the Oral Law that have been set into writing should never be separated from their living commentary. When the voice of the exegetist no longer sounds—and who would dare believe it reverberates long in the ears of its listeners—the texts return to their immobility, becoming once again enigmatic, strange, sometimes even ridiculously archaic. (pp. 13–14)

Ira Stone puts it this way:

If it is possible to recover what Levinas calls the "saying" behind the "said," to return to the text as an oral tradition without abandoning the written form, to be in the presence of the original voices, then it is by way of asking questions. The dialectic—orality and the *shakla ve-taryia*, "question and answer,"—has been the age-old method of the study of the Talmud.²⁴

The written text represents the "said," the letter that must be brought back to life by the "saying" of a community that wrestles its way back to the voices behind the text, and adds its own diverse, never before heard, voices to the conversation as well. We must be aware, however, that it is not only closed philosophical systems, "totalities," that wreak violence by denying the Other a separate existence. Our own hermeneutics also "wrestle" with the text, sometimes depend on "forced" interpretations and "apparent violences," which "rub" against the grain until blood flows!²⁵

²³Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 256–57.

²⁴Ira F. Stone, *Reading Levinas/Reading Talmud* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), p. 33.