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## СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

<b>И. Дворкин</b> ( <i>Еврейский университет в Иерусалиме</i> ) ВМЕСТО ПРЕДИСЛОВИЯ . . . . .	5
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### ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

<b>У. Гершович</b> ( <i>Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет</i> ) НЮАНСЫ ЭЗОТЕРИЧЕСКОГО ПИСЬМА МАЙМОНИДА В СВЕТЕ ПЕДАГОГИКИ АЛЬ-ФАРАБИ . . . . .	7
<b>R. E. Allinson</b> ( <i>Soka University of America; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem</i> ) NACHMAN KROCHMAL AND THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN . . . . .	19
<b>D. J. Cohen</b> ( <i>University of Chicago; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem</i> ) BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE: JEWISH DIALECTICS IN SOLOVEITCHIK'S WRITINGS AND DIALECTIC THEOLOGY . . . . .	34
<b>T. A. Акиндинова</b> ( <i>Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет</i> ) ЭСТЕТИКА ГЕРМАНА КОГЕНА В КОНТЕКСТЕ ЕВРОПЕЙСКОЙ ЭСТЕТИЧЕСКОЙ МЫСЛИ XX ВЕКА . . . . .	50
<b>I. Dvorkin</b> ( <i>The Hebrew University of Jerusalem</i> ) A MATHEMATICAL ROAD TO LITURGY. RELIGION AND MATHEMATICS IN FRANZ ROSENZWEIG'S PHILOSOPHY . . . . .	70
<b>J. M. Delgadillo</b> ( <i>Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla, México</i> ) MAY JARHETH DWELL IN THE TENTS OF SHEM: TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL READING OF TALMUD BASED ON LEVINAS' THOUGHT . . . . .	81
<b>J. R. Coorey</b> ( <i>University of Leicester; University of St Andrews, Durham University</i> ) SCHOLEM'S MESSIANISM IN THE UTOPIANISM OF SCRIPTURE . . . . .	100

### ЭССЕ

<b>J. R. Russell</b> ( <i>Harvard University; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem</i> ) THE BIBLE AND REVOLUTION: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON EXODUS, PSALM 37, ESTHER, AND PHILO . . . . .	109
<b>И. И. Евлампиев</b> ( <i>Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет</i> ) О ВОЗМОЖНОМ ВЛИЯНИИ ЕВРЕЙСКИХ РЕЛИГИОЗНЫХ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЙ НА ФИЛОСОФИЮ АНРИ БЕРГСОНА . . . . .	135
<b>A. A. Sinitsyn</b> ( <i>Saint Petersburg State University; The Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities</i> ); <b>V. A. Egorov</b> ( <i>The Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities</i> ) MIKHAIL KALIK — ARTIST AND THINKER ( <i>IN MEMORIAM</i> ) . . . . .	146

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**MAY JAPHETH DWELL IN THE TENTS OF SHEM:  
TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL  
READING OF TALMUD BASED ON LEVINAS' THOUGHT**

*Abstract:* Emmanuel Levinas wrote over twenty Talmudic readings. Throughout those readings, Levinas raised new ideas and attractive forms to access the Talmudic wisdom; this methodology becomes a philosophical way through which one can approach the Jewish wisdom; which contains teachings on the meaning of life, the very humanity of human being, criticisms of political violence, the relationship between justice and forgiveness or our responsibility and responsiveness to the other.

This work attempt to systematize the main features of this Levinasian methodology meant to read the Talmud and analyze whether this model constitutes a creative and useful interaction between Jewish thought and philosophy. What are the possibilities for contemporary philosophy when it dialogues with the Talmudic wisdom? Levinas shows us the advantages for actual philosophy of the attentive reading of Talmud, full of dialogue in tension, full of concepts set to examples.

Levinas teaches us we can start from the internal in order to reach the universal. We will not address the specific content of Levinas' over twenty Talmudic readings which may be more in line with the ethical proposal of the Lithuanian philosopher, but rather I'll try to show how fidelity to the rabbinic tradition is compatible with intuitions and developments of Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Ethics, as of our author analyzed.

*Keywords:* Talmud, Ethics, Levinas, Methodology, Greek—Hebrew, Talmudic reading.

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**«ДА ОБИТАЕТ ЯФЕТ В ШАТРАХ ШЕМА»:  
К МЕТОДОЛОГИИ ФИЛОСОФСКОГО ЧТЕНИЯ  
ТАЛМУДА В СООТВЕТСТВИИ С ИДЕЯМИ ЛЕВИНАСА**

*Резюме:* Эммануэль Левинас написал более двадцати талмудических истолкований. В этих работах Левинас нашел новые идеи и пути понимания талмудической мудрости; эта методология становится философским спосо-

бом приближения к еврейской мудрости, содержащей учения о смысле жизни, о сущности бытия человека, о критике политического насилия, о взаимосвязи между справедливостью и прощением, о нашей ответственности и отзывчивости к другому.

Данная работа пытается систематизировать основные черты этой методологии Левинаса, предназначенной для чтения Талмуда, а также проанализировать, является ли эта модель творческим и полезным взаимодействием между еврейской мыслью и философией. Каковы возможности современной философии, когда она находится в диалоге с талмудической мудростью? Левинас показывает нам значение для современной философии внимательного прочтения Талмуда, полного напряженного диалога, полного понятий, установленных на примерах.

Левинас учит нас, что мы можем начать с внутреннего, чтобы достичь всеобщего. Мы не будем рассматривать конкретное содержание более двадцати левинасовских талмудических интерпретаций, которые в значительной степени согласуются с этическими концепциями литовского философа, но попытаемся показать на примере анализа текстов Левинаса, насколько верность раввинской традиции может быть совместима с интуицией и разработкой феноменологии, герменевтики и этики.

*Ключевые слова:* Талмуд, этика, Левинас, методология, греческий—иврит, талмудическое чтение.

## 1. INTRODUCTION — THE PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT WORK

Knowing full well that dividing the texts of Emmanuel Levinas under philosophical and, strictly speaking, Jewish or confessional texts is a common classification, and that carrying out possible translations or transferences from that point forward, the question whether search classification is validating itself or applicable to Levinas is legitimate. On the one hand, this classification stems from the unproven fact that what is confessional is no philosophical matter or that it does not raise or contain philosophical questions and therefore, cannot be the source and the first formulation of philosophy. Is it possible to sever our modes of access to what is real so that we may distinguish clearly between philosophy and religion or philosophy and ordinary thought? To think thus is to think as “all philosophies did not derive from non-philosophic sources” (SS 122), which is senseless. On the other hand, the classification itself seems to gratuitously separate intelligibility from transcendence; common sense and faith; stripping of *logos* all belief, something that would shock a good Talmudist as well as a good phenomenologist<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note the proximity Levinas observed between the Talmud as a unit of faith and intelligence (the scholastic philosophy *fides quaerens intellectum, intellectus quaerens fidem* will grow on the echoes of this institution) and the husserlian “doxic the-

Thus, we can find very interesting works of authors such as Burroughs<sup>2</sup> or Meiskin<sup>3</sup>, who explored the influence of Levinas's philosophy on their own Jewish writings, or Handelman's<sup>4</sup>, for whom all of Levinas's fundamentals would appear in her Jewish writings. However, if we observe carefully the "theological turn" of the French phenomenology, it is not apparent that the borders between philosophy and theology exist as it has usually been believed, or that the gap between them is exceedingly large<sup>5</sup>. In addition, Levinas himself was not afraid to bring philosophy and religion closer; "Philosophy, for me, derives from religion. It is called into being by a religion adrift, and probably religion is always adrift" (SS 182). Therefore, I do not wish to begin from an unwarranted and impervious dichotomy between philosophical thought (the Greek), and prophetic inspiration (the Hebrew) to later investigate their possible influences.

Instead, in the present work I want to explore what Levinas himself said about the Talmud, and reconstruct from his five books destined to Talmudic readings<sup>6</sup>, a methodology of philosophical access to the Talmudic texts. It is true that the contents of the more than twenty Talmudic lessons that Levinas expressed at the *Colloquia of Jewish Intellectuals of the French Language* are a more interesting subject of analysis since they contain a wealth in intuitions, argumentative display, and an ethics proposal but it exceeds by far the lim-

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sis" (*Ideas*, § 244) that any position (affective, practical, etc.) would distrust an implicit or explicit logical factor, while to Levinas himself, all logical predication would be established in a non-representative intentionality and in a predicative pre-rationality. Cf. Levinas 1977a: 3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Burroughs 2012: 124–136.

<sup>3</sup> Meiskin 1998: 90–106.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Handelman 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Janicaud et al. 2000; Rahner 1968; Purcell 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1968 — *Nine Talmudic Readings*, A. Aronowicz (trans.), Indiana University Press; Bloomington-Indianapolis 1990 (QLT); *Du Sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1977b — *Nine Talmudic Readings*, A. Aronowicz (trans.), Indiana University Press; Bloomington-Indianapolis 1990 (SS); *L'au-delà du verset*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1982 — G. D. Mole (trans.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1994 (ADV); *À l'heure des nations*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1988 — M. B. Smith (trans.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1994 (AHN); *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1996 — R. A. Cohen (trans.), Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1999 (NLT).

In addition to these texts, there are two additional Talmudic readings in the corpus: a so-called "Messianic texts" in *Difficile Liberté. Essais sur le the judaïsme*, Le livre de poche, Paris 1984 — S. Hand (trans.), The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1990 (DL) and a chapter entitled "Quelques vues talmudiques sur le rêve" in the book *The Psychanalyse est-elle une histoire juive?* Le Seuil, Paris 1981, 114–128 (QVTR). Throughout this work, all references will be cited with the page numbering of the English language editions, except QVTR, where the numbering will make reference to the French edition and the translation into English is mine.

its of a paper. Our reconstruction will attempt to analyze form over content, methodology over proposal, structure over content, referring always straight back to his texts. This path has already been opened by Catherine Chalier<sup>7</sup>, Ira Stone<sup>8</sup>, Elisabeth Goldwyn<sup>9</sup> and Shmuel Wygoda<sup>10</sup>, whom I cannot but admire. In particular, my gratitude to Professor Georges Hansel, from whom many of us have learned to read The Talmud in the Levinasian way<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, we will not refer to classical works from which those of Neusner<sup>12</sup> or Stemberger<sup>13</sup> stand out to explain what the Talmud is, which were its formative stages or its decisive influence on the ordinary and ritual life of a believer. We will ask ourselves rather what the Talmud is *for* Levinas, what the philosopher saw in its permanent source of meaning and significance, what potentialities he taught us to discover in its reading; furthermore, we ask ourselves — and this is our base hypothesis — whether the methodology of reading the Talmud blowing on burning coals to turn them into flames (*Abot* 2, 10 — NLT 48) is also, by extension, the strictly speaking philosophical access to any text and, therefore, the doctors of the Talmud are wise (*hakhamim*, φηλόσοφοι — QLT 7) not only by the moral, legal and metaphysical issues addressed (philosophy), but also because of their rational access to the real and with purposes of universality (philosophizing).

## 2. WHAT — APPROACH TO THE TALMUD ACCORDING LEVINAS

The Talmud is the transcription of the oral tradition (Oral Torah) of Israel, which governs the daily life of the Jews. The daily life of a Jew includes, incidentally, the study and exegesis of the Written Torah (QLT 3). This is fundamental. Judaism as a religion of the Book contains an oral revelation which helps to find the meaning of the letters, unraveling thus the multiplicity of meanings hidden in the folds of the Scripture. Therefore, the Talmud is not a mere compilation of comments, but a way to discover the deeper meanings of the text and which, in turn, is significant (SS 104), because it goes to the biblical stories and images, and with complete freedom and creativity, gives them their deepest sense, that is, their real sense (QLT 55).

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<sup>7</sup> Chaliier 2002: 100–118; Chaliier 1991. In this volume appeared also two interesting analyzes on Levinas and the Talmud by Annette Aronowicz, “les commentaires talmudiques de Levinas” and Gilles Bernheim “A propos des lectures talmudiques”.

<sup>8</sup> Stone 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Goldwyn 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Wygoda 2001; Wygoda 2002: 149–183.

<sup>11</sup> In various colloquia of the *North American Levinas Society*, I have witnessed the usual Talmudic reading by professor Hansel, full of erudition, sympathy, and generosity.

<sup>12</sup> Neusner 1983; Neusner 1984; Neusner 1994; Neusner 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Stemberger 2011; Strack 1996.

The Talmud is a continuous digging in Scripture, since the rabbinic wisdom “seeking the unsaid hidden within the said” (AHN 94), revives and renews the terms of Scripture, and thus maintains the word “alive”. The difficulty of this digging “does not lie in the absence of treasures but in the inadequacy of the tools at my disposal for the dig” (QLT 72). This incessant exegesis, up to the point of hyperbole exegesis of the exegesis shows us two things: a) the text is alive and it is the source of life for those who read it and; b) that it needs to be brought to life through careful, intelligent, shared and free reading, that is to say, through a *midrashic* reading, to avoid Scripture from acquiring the immobility of the historic document (DL 68). The Talmud teaches us that Torah is life that vivifies when is vivified, it is the breath of the living God not incarnate but inscribed (AHN 59). On this we will return later.

The Talmud is composed of two sections: the *Mishna* (repetition) and the *Gemara* (study). The first collects the rabbinical discussions of the Tannaim, “holders of the Revelation referred to as Oral Law and which, according to Israel’s faith, has been transmitted from masters to disciples ever since the epiphany at Sinai. The Oral Law would be independent of Scriptures, although it refers itself to them and directs their interpretation” (SS 182). This first stratum of the Talmud was put in writing close to the second century C. E. by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (*Rabainu HaKadosh*, our Holy Master). In turn, the *Mishnah* was the subject of further discussions among Talmudist doctors known as Amoraim, which in part reflected the teachings of the Tannaim which were not collected in the *Mishnah* and, therefore, had fallen outside (*baraitot*) and, in part, questioned the text with new events in the life of the people. The *Mishnah* was, then, enriched by both the confrontation with the *baraitot*, as well as with new discussions of the Amoraim; this new dialectical stratum was set toward the end of the 5th century through the efforts of Rav Ashi and Ravina, and received the name of the *Gemara*. The Torah certainly contains beforehand all truth, but it is necessary to unravel its meaning; this penetration is possible through the reading of the *Mishnah*, and behold, this interpretation also must be interpreted in search of new teachings. The *Gemara* is the hermeneutics of the hermeneutics: exponentiation of the spirit in search of meaning. This is how revelation “is forever continued” (ADV x).

This suggests that the written Torah does not reach its full meaning other than through the amplification the Talmud, which the same dynamic works within it, performs of it: the *Mishnah* does not reach its full meaning until the *Gemara* raises new questions about it (SS 142) and enlightens explains it (ADV 91). This way, “The *Mishna* is the tradition of the Oral Law adding in the Sinai to the Written Torah. But it is also the unwritten with all its possibles; it is the beyond the verse awakening the verse. “The *Mishnah* is already exegesis stirring within the written and posing the future “problematic” of the *Gemara*” (AHN 66). *Mishna* and *Gemara* constitute the Talmud treatises through which the Jews read the Old Testament and differ, therefore,

from the rest of the readers of the Bible. The Talmud defines the Jew as a Jew (QVTR 115).

In what refers to written versions of the Talmud, there are two<sup>14</sup>: The Palestinian or Jerusalem, and the Babylonian. It is important to note that one of the most famous editions of the Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*) was the one written in 1886 in Vilnius, Lithuania, homeland of Levinas, and remember that intellectual renaissance of Judaism flourished in Lithuania (18th century), at the time of the debate — and more than a debate — between the *hassidish* and the *mitnagdim*; led by the famous Gaon<sup>15</sup>, Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo<sup>16</sup>, and at the head of those, the famous Baal Schem Tov<sup>17</sup>. The fact Levinas is a Talmudist is not, then, random.

The Talmud asks what the Scriptures mean and tell us for the present life: This is crucial!<sup>18</sup> Therefore, on the one hand the Talmud seeks what intelligence is registered in them, that is to say, what wisdom is contained and, on the other hand, what regulations can be drawn from them. These two purposes have given rise to the classification of accounts within the Talmud in *Aggadah* and *Halakha*. Levinas did his Talmudic readings on Haggadic texts he believed the *Halakha* required a special intellectual muscularity (QLT 32), which, since they were apologues or adages, were more similar to what in the West could be called philosophy and allowed interpretations on different levels (QLT 4), because the decoding of a complex verse is often carried out by an apologue, but the apologue itself becomes a deciphering that requires further deciphering (AHN 84). However, Levinas himself rejected an exclusive division between

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Cohen 1980; Steinsaltz 2000; Girón Blanc 2005; Jacobs 1984; Mielziner 1894, specially the fourth part: “Outlines of Talmudical ethics”.

<sup>15</sup> This title was used after the 7th century to designate the Head of the Babylonian Talmudic Academies, and literally means “wise”. These academies gave way to the *yeshivot*; institutes of study of the Torah and the Talmud, the first of which was founded by the disciple of the Vilna Gaon: Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, who Levinas admired.

<sup>16</sup> Further on him may be found in: Etkes 2002; Hundert 2004.

<sup>17</sup> In his essay, Herszel Klépfisz, introduces the figure of Rabbi Israel, known as the Baal Schem Tov which literally means *master of the good Name*, as a spiritual guide of amazing simplicity, who healed and performed miracles and whose teachings arose from the heart and not of the arid study of the Torah. He did not preach in the synagogues, but in the shops and stands (cf. Klépfisz 1967: 5–25).

<sup>18</sup> Levinas viewed the approach to the Talmud from the mere History or Philology with much suspicion; this perspective would reduce and turn impure the impatient hands that handle the texts: the teaching would hide from those readers (AHN 24). The reading of the Talmud searches within the problems and truths (QLT 9) inaccessible to the puritanism of historicism, or to the exegesis of structuralism (QLT 6), but which are the vital problems of every man: “what matters to us is to ask questions of these texts — to which Jewish wisdom is tied as if to the soil — in terms of our problems as modern men” (SS 92). Levinas is not afraid to affirm: “The Talmud, according to the great masters of this science, can be understood only from the basis of life itself. This holds not only for the very teaching it brings, which assumes life experience (that is, a great deal of imagination), but also for the understanding and perception of the signs themselves” (QLT 8).

*Halakha* — way of behaving — and *Aggadah* philosophical, religious or moral significance of the behavior (SS 194). Moreover, there is a mutual dependence between both, since all sense tends to regulate and all law requires a sense<sup>19</sup>, to such a degree that “the ambiguity *Halakha-Aggadah* [is] inherent in every *Halakha* and in every *Aggadah*” (SS 195).

And yet, the Talmud is not the next chapter in the Scriptures, relating the historical vicissitudes of the people of the Covenant. “The Bible furnishes the symbols but the Talmud does not ‘fulfil’ the Bible in the sense that the New Testament claims to complete and also continue the Old” (QLT 7). The Talmud does not prolong the Scriptures, but digs in them; and goes to their significations and updates them assessing the problems involved in them (QLT 54). If we may, the Talmud is the obstinacy of reason to make sense of the ambiguities and uncertainties of the Bible, and even the very search for these ambiguities in where it seems the Bible asserts and provides evidence that lends itself to a clear reading (NLT 73; DL 65). “The meanings taught by the Talmudic texts [...] are suggested by signs whose material form is borrowed from the Scriptures” (QLT 6), as the biblical signs themselves: their verses containing objects, people, images, rites or situations would function as perfect signs (QLT 8), bursting with meaning, whose continued scrutiny always reveals new aspects of the same signification.

### 3. WITH WHOM — THE TALMUD AS COMMUNITY INTELLIGENCE

The Talmud requires a community of spirits: masters debating one another; disciples learning and questioning their masters; masters confronting their disciples; disciples squabbling one another to argue the best interpretation. The texts seem to only reveal themselves to an ‘us’: the community of study, to the *yeshiva* (QVTR 116). Levinas reminds us the verse of Jeremiah 50:36: “A sword upon who traffic in lies, that they may lose their head”, and read by the *midrash*, replacing “liar” for “solitary thinker”, and the “lose your head” from its literal to its metaphorical sense, says: Beware of those who think in solitary, they shall become fools! (ADV 49).

As we know, Levinas himself learned the Talmud from a master so extraordinary as enigmatic: Mr. Chouchani<sup>20</sup>. And not only did Levinas learn from him, but also Elie Wiesel or Herni Nerson<sup>21</sup>. As we will later examine, Chouchani showed Levinas a different and non-traditional method to read The Talmud. For now, we will note that Levinas referred to him as “a presti-

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<sup>19</sup> As the parable of Yitzhak the blacksmith, in *Baba Kama* 60b, which Levinas synthesizes thusly: “I will give you a *Halakha* which is an *Aggadah*, an *Aggadah* which is a *Halakha*” (SS 195).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Poirié 2006: 152–159.

<sup>21</sup> Malka 1994.

gious master” (QLT 8) and “an excellent master” (SS 103). The master-student relationship is a fundamental institution, considerably difficult to describe in our current West, and implied a bond of many years and so strong, that in the event of exile of the master, his entire school would accompany him: this relationship is viewed by Levinas as a social structure as firm as marriage (ADV 43). This relationship begins at the moment of sharing, from spirit to spirit, an element of knowledge (NLT 47), but solidifies both by the limit (tradition) imposed by the master on the student’s autonomous interpretation (ADV 97), as enriching the thought of the master by the questions posed by his students (ADV 50).

Access to the Talmud — which is the living Torah (AHN 75) — can only be accomplished through the living commentary, because that is its origin and essence. Levinas knows that “When the voice of the exegetist no longer sounds [...] the texts return to their immobility, becoming once again enigmatic, strange, sometimes even ridiculously archaic” (QLT 13–14). Although the Talmud was fixed and eventually put in writing, in principle its teachings required — and still require — the community, which through dialog comprehends, updates and carries it on. Levinas himself confesses how, when a text gave him difficulties, he consulted with his friends on it Dr. Nerson, Theo Dreyfus, Ms. Atlan, etc. “For the Talmud requires discourse and companionship. Woe to the self-taught!” (QLT 24); and so we have that the openness and challenge of living speech (SS 91) in community, conditions which gave birth to the Talmud, are the same conditions required for its understanding.

Those who read the rabbinical debates in the Talmud may come to three mistaken — or at least, hurried — impressions: *a*) there are intense and even violent debates; *b*) there is generally not only one conclusion or consensus on an issue by way of orthodox position; *c*) an excessive use of proper names. Let’s see in what sense — to Levinas — these three characteristics of the debates between masters and disciples are not vices, but virtues.

a) Levinas promises us that “one can rediscover its initial thrust” because “in itself, this Talmudic text is intellectual struggle and courageous opening unto even the most irritating questions”, this is why we should not be fooled by appearances of Byzantine discussion, “in fact, these discussions conceal an extreme attention to the Real” (QLT 4–5).

What is at stake, in order to interpret the Scripture, is the sense of the Torah, the sense of the entire universe, our behavior and our life, why objections, refutations, attacks, defense... “wars of the Torah” (NLT 98)<sup>22</sup> where the doctors of the Talmud seem to fight each other with verses as blows (QLT 21). In addition, nobody is able to reduce or monopolize the countless meaningful

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<sup>22</sup> They schools of Hillel and Shammai are well known, and their constant discrepancies let us see how complementary are sometimes apparently opposing points of view. That is why the Talmud says (*Eruvin* 13b) that a voice from heaven approved both visions by stating: “one and the other are words of the living God”.

possibilities of a verse, and this is the main argument for the community to be a *sine qua non* of the sense.

b) The failure to arrive at an unambiguous dogmatic position within the pages of the Talmud derives from its very essence. If the verse, as we have said, contains countless possibilities, and each approach gradually uncovers them, even in the light of approximations to the approximations, then the Talmudic debates may not come to a conclusion the way an Aristotelian syllogism does. Nor is it a Hegelian dialectic where each thesis is gradually assumed in the pursuit of a more perfect one. The rabbis who discuss see possibilities, even at different levels; this is why their claims and denials are not, strictly speaking, contradictions. To give an example (SS 136–160), asking whether witchcraft should be punishable by stoning, or by sword, or even be allowed and not punished, may be due to the association of this reality to bestiality or demonology or even for cultic purposes, which is arguable in all cases. This is not casuistry; rather, it is the comprehension of the various meanings of what is real.

c) Given names appear across all of the Talmud, as the sense and intelligence of the text is a matter of men, not of celestial forces or angelic inspirations. The Talmud does not allow for supernatural signs as endorsement of the comprehension of the text (AHN 17). The Talmud “has an incessant concern for attributing every saying to its historical author. Hence the constant evocation of personal names of the rabbinical scholars who have spoken or who, in such and such a circumstance, behaved in such and such way (ADV 87). In summary, let us say that, as Rabbi Yirmeya did in a Talmudic passage<sup>23</sup>, the Torah was given at Sinai, after that no attention is paid to any celestial voice; the interpretation must follow what the majority says, and is a matter of particular men — proper names, who are responsible for their words.

#### 4. WHAT FOR — THE PURPOSE OF THE TALMUD AND TALMUDIC READINGS IN LEVINAS

Levinas resorts to the Talmud to interrogate and interpret the text to extract his ethical sense from it. At the end, what began as the search for meaning will be light and norm for life: *Aggadah* transformed into *Halakha*. Both purposes: a) the inquiry-interpretation of the text, and b) the extraction of the ethical sense are, in my view, the synthesis of the four general covenants of the Torah: to learn it (*lilmod*) and to teach it (*lelamed*) — with regard to the first, to observe it (*lishmor*) and to do it (*laasot*) with regard to the second (ADV 76). Let us take a closer look at what Levinas himself tells us on these two purposes of the Talmud and the Talmudic readings.

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<sup>23</sup> The interesting case proposed by the Talmud (*Baba Metzia* 59b), where Eliezer argues miracles again and again to say that the heaven is in agreement with his interpretation is correct; however, the majority of the rabbis did not agree with his interpretation and they prevailed.

The Talmud is permanent asking about the Torah. Asking which is question on its multiple senses. It is spirit — or activity of the spirit — that “awakens new possibilities of suggestion in the letter” (QLT 8), that is to say, the spirit sheds light on the symbols and this light revives the symbolic power of the same symbols. The Talmud is a spirit *wrestling* with the letter of the Torah (QLT 24), that interrogates it, penetrates it... that grinds it and is violent to it, although, paradoxical as it may seem, the Talmud extracts — in the end — from the letter, the spirit (QLT 77). Levinas is not afraid to explain it in these terms: “The Oral Torah speaks in ‘spirit and truth’, even when it seems to do violence to the verses and letters of the Written Torah” (SS 92–93), and when he comments on the passage where Raba was engrossed in the study of the Torah and at the same time rubbed his feet with so much force that blood flowed from them (*Shabbat* 88b): “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 [...] this violence done to words to tear from them the secret that time and conventions have covered over with their sedimentations, a process begun as soon as these words appear in the open air of history. One must, by rubbing, remove this layer which corrodes them” (QLT 46–47). It is not correct, therefore, to say that we must “decode” the Talmud, as if it were a cryptogram that hides its meaning (QLT 32) and that Levinas — or any other thinker — will show us how to use the Rosetta Stone on any of its pages. The Talmud is not obscure<sup>24</sup>. More precisely would be to understand interrogation to the text as if to a person.

Levinas teaches us that our first encounter with the text is to acknowledge it as “master”<sup>25</sup> and not as a framework of myths or a history book. After all, the Talmud is not but the testimony that the true thought is not a reflection of the soul with itself (νόησις νοήσεως), but an authentic discussion between thinkers (ADV 49). To read the Talmud is to enter in the intersubjective dynamics of people of flesh and blood, with an intelligence called upon to unravel the ultimate meaning of life. To *read* the Talmud is, tacitly, to recognize oneself as *disciple*; to *interpret* it is to live among *masters* and to continue teaching.

This inquisitive activity of the *Mishnah* on the Torah, as we have discussed, is performed by the *Gemara* on the *Mishnah*, and must be performed, in turn,

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<sup>24</sup> “If the Talmudic saying is so strange, it is not because it would take pleasure in stating in a complicated way what can be expressed in a simple way. On the contrary, it is because it leaves a multiplicity of meanings to its saying, because it calls for several readings of it. Our role, precisely, consist in looking for them” (ADV 37).

<sup>25</sup> It is a constant in all of his Talmudic readings that Levinas make an initial act of humility, acknowledging that the text exceeds his capabilities, and feels he does not match up to the experts and teachers of the Talmud. Two texts are eloquent in this regard: “Our greatest concern, despite all that might appear new in the mode of reading we have adopted, is to separate the spiritual and intellectual greatness of the Talmud from the awkwardnesses of our interpretation (QLT 9) and “I always feel inferior to my text” as if it were a legacy of Moses, who was slow of speech and slow of tongue, not through personal defect, but because “it is the objective style of a thought which fails to embrace the forms of rhetoric” (SS 181).

by the scholar of the Talmud as a whole. Levinas will take the words of Abaye as his own; words that invite the interpretation of the verses (*Makot* 23a) and will make of its judgment a *leitmotiv*: “The verses cry out: “Interpret me!” (NLT 69; DL 89). Not doing that is to leave the text mute or weak<sup>26</sup>, is to take away its essence as Book: inspiration. On the contrary, when we decide to deal with it, the text is the one that seems to overflow us: its multiple meanings engendered by the terms and examples “have multiple understandings which arise not from ambiguity, but from the inexhaustible wealth of the innumerable dimensions of the concrete” (NLT 56). The infinite contracted (*tsimtsum*)<sup>27</sup> in the finite is the ultimate root of the Talmudic — and Biblical — Hermeneutics for Levinas: “all that a text suggests does not enter the text, is suitable neither for the letters of the text nor for tradition” (ADV 61). The un-said *does not fit* in the said although resonates in it (NLT 118) and, therefore, as Edwards states<sup>28</sup>, our readings of it always remain tentative and fragmentary.

Certainly our reading should be based on respect for data, examples and conventions that the text contains (QLT 5) knowing in full that in those textual elements a sense beyond the symbol hides. By way of a beautiful phrase, Levinas defines the purpose of the interpretation: “let’s restore the sense of what is said by the texture of the text” (NLT 68), as if this texture is present in the initial reading as what is said and awaits to express its saying until our interpretation. However, hermeneutics does not quiet the questions of intelligence, but multiplies them. The exegesis reveals a polysemy and multiplicity of dimensions the text encloses which, at first glance, did not seem evident (ADV 15). And so a dynamic that cannot be stopped is generated: to ask so as to interpret, to interpret to further inquiry; to interpret knowing that the interpretation will engender new questions that will ask, in turn, to be interpreted. Wonder of the Talmud!

But what seems a mere exercise in speculation or an arduous game of language<sup>29</sup>, soon shows its other face: by interpreting the text, we interpret life;

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<sup>26</sup> Of particular interest is the analogy between intellect-text and life-food, establishing a symbiosis where the text requires of the intellect to be alive without losing meaning, and the intellect requires the text to feed and continue to live: “The life of a Talmudist is nothing but the permanent renewal of the letter through the intelligence [...] Reason eats ideas. The rational premises motivating a verdict are good wheat. The intellect is a life” (QLT 79).

<sup>27</sup> As noted by Scholem, the *tsimtsum* is a condition of the Creation: God could not have created without a retreat unto him so as to create what is different from him, which involves a continuous and repeated act of self-restraint, a constant contraction of being so that what has been created is not within it. To apply the ideal of the *tsimtsum* both to Revelation as to Redemption, thus completing the triad of Rosenzweig, can help us to understand the Torah as primal contraction of sense which the Talmud unravels, and the Redemption as the retreat from the sameness and its *conatus essendi* in pursuit of otherness, as noted by Levinas. Scholem 2000: 71–74.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Edwards 2008: 37.

<sup>29</sup> Borowitz 2006.

our life. The provocations that the text suggests, and the challenges it invites to, reaches in those who study the level of life, — that in which knowing is indistinguishable from practice — the level where *science* and *conscience* concur, “where reality and justice no longer belong to two distinct orders” (ADV 47). It is now that learning (*lilmod*) and teaching (*lelamed*) are strengthened and fulfill in the observance (*lishmor*) and in Ethical duties (*laasot*).

The worries held in the Talmud are the same each of us have (SS 104), so it is a near text. This way, what to us seemed *infinite*, for its multiple senses open to the exegesis, is at once *proximate*; two characters of the otherness Levinas will analyze in many of his works. Now then, the otherness of the text is *altered* and *alterative* alterity: altered because it is us — with our questions and interpretations — who unceasingly make the text anew; but it is also alterative, because it retains its power to educate and elevate us beyond the “care-for-self”, characteristic of the wildlife, and bring us closer to the “care-for-the-other”, characteristic of the authentic human life (AHN 1).

The Torah holds universal justice as its teaching (QLT 66). Levinas consistently shows his rejection to consider the Talmud as a religious text which would extract from the Torah the foundation of a piety, because to him, the “religious experience, at least for the Talmud, can only be primarily a moral experience” (QLT 15). Levinas constantly endeavored to remain in that moral plane<sup>30</sup>. And it is indeed that, the access to what may signify, in the end, God and how his intimate life is, would turn, to Levinas — who is of alike mind to Maimonides on this matter, discourse into an alien theosophy<sup>31</sup> for Judaism. Rather, we must approach a text, certainly religious, but to extract “from this theological language meanings addressing themselves to reason” (QLT 14) for Judaism is a religion to which “what is said of God *signifies* through *human praxis*”, a God who appears to the human consciousness “clothed in values” (QLT 14), whose revelation are moral commandments that refer to human life, with its limits and its drama (DL 64). The remission is guarantee that the sober thought of the Talmud is an inspired one, and that if we sharpen our ears to listen to its finer notes, it will construct in its rigorous logic the premises of a true humanity (AHN 3).

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<sup>30</sup> “Neither in the thought of the organizers nor in actual fact was this study of a Talmudic text to take on the character of a religious exercise, such as a meditation or a sermon within a liturgy. This would in any case have been contrary to the real essence of the Talmud, which the intellectual has the right to seek out” (QLT 3).

<sup>31</sup> “God expresses a notion religiously of utmost clarity but philosophically most obscure. This notion could become clearer for philosophers on the basis of the human ethical situations the Talmudic texts describe. The reverse procedure would no doubt be more edifying and more pious but it would no longer be philosophical at all. Theosophy is the very negation of philosophy” (QLT 32).

## 5. HOW TO — SOME METHODOLOGICAL KEYS TO READ THE TALMUD ACCORDING TO LEVINAS

Is it possible to affirm that the new and *non-traditional*<sup>32</sup> way Levinas reads the Talmud (SS 91) is a reply to the methodology with which Mr. Chouchani taught his disciples (DL 83)? It is almost impossible to answer what is the specific contribution of Levinas in the strictly methodological; indeed, the application of this method to various Talmudic passages made them resonate with the core themes of his philosophy: the proximity as a modality of the separate, criticisms of the *conatus essendi*, the notion of commandment, the hyperbolic responsibility, the permanent challenge to political power, the maximalist notion of justice, the erotic, sociability, and a long etcetera. For now, without going into an investigation similar to the “Socratic question in the Platonic dialogs” with regard to Chouchani and Levinas, let’s look at some keys Levinas provides in his writings to read and delve into the Talmud:

1. A first important point is that, except in rare occasions<sup>33</sup>, Levinas himself translated Talmudic pages he discusses, which opened new possibilities, since the mere exercise of translation of the Hebrew-Aramaic to the French was a first effort to fix the meaning of the Semitic terms, that are usually polysemous, but noted that polysemy and tried to explore it during his reading. He confessed he had approached the Talmud belatedly, although as a child he did learn the ‘square letters’ (QLT 9). Surely, when translating, Levinas reminisced on the days of his childhood in learning the Law<sup>34</sup>.

2. A second element and perhaps, it is time for us to pause, a *midrashic* reading of the biblical verses. *Midrash* means “explanation”, and is one of the exegetical methods of the Torah. Also the term is applied to the compilation of such

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<sup>32</sup> Levinas notes that although, to some, “the obscurity of my method and its results” may cause disappointment (QLT 55) and not all come to accept his way of commenting the Talmud (SS 140–141), because not necessarily please the absolute Talmudists (SS 166), he certainly turns meanings into themes that the *traditional method* not always did, be it because it took them as evidence, be it because it paid no heed to the dialectic that crossed the whole dispute (SS 92).

<sup>33</sup> In “The nations and the presence of Israel” (*À l’heure des Nations*) and when quoting complementary passages to his reading, Levinas used the French translation by Israel Salzer, Chief Rabbi of Marseille. Also Levinas comes to rely on the translation of the Hebrew Bible by the French Rabbinate, although on occasions he suggests his own translation of the terms.

<sup>34</sup> In a very suggestive text for its biographical burden, where Levinas identifies as Jewish and philosopher, and wants access the Talmud from both perspectives, it is said that “the exposition of a Talmudic text by someone who has not spent his life studying rabbinic literature in the traditional way is a very daring enterprise, even if the person attempting it has been familiar since childhood with the square letters, and even if he has derived much from these texts for his own intellectual life. The traditional knowledge of Talmudic texts, in all their scope, by itself would not satisfy a Western thinker, but this knowledge is none the less the necessary condition of Jewish thought” (DL 59–60).

explanations that the rabbinical doctors came to pronounce. In concern to method, the *midrash* would fall under the *derash*, one of the four senses of a verse<sup>35</sup> (*Peshat* — literal sense, *remez* — allusive sense, *derash* — symbolic sense, *sod* — mystical sense) (DL 66–67). The *derash* has four basic “principles”<sup>36</sup>: 1) In the Scripture there is no before or after. Without denying the chronology of events within the Bible, it is accepted as a matter of principle that any text can come to the aid of another that requires a new interpretation; 2) the Writing explains itself. The support and interpretation of a biblical text must as a last resort be another biblical text, and not something foreign to the Bible; 3) the Writing is a unit where ‘everything’ is contained, but a certain audacity is necessary to unravel its meaning; 4) in Scripture nothing is superfluous, so that the apparent repetitions or contradictions are overcome in a dynamic manner by the imperative of finding an explanation that is also enlightening. The passages in the Talmud Levinas discusses and his own commentary continuously follow these rules<sup>37</sup>.

The *midrash* provides Levinas with ample creativity in the interpretation (AHN 105), teaches him, for example, to isolate and read only a few words of the verse and thus obtain yet another reading (NLT 94), to use etymologies that are unconvincing as mere pretexts (QLT 59), to translate with freedom (DL 60), to intersperse terms of different verses (QLT 19), to be guided by the physical form of the letters (ADV 47), to brood over the text “front and back” until he fully comprehended it (QLT 59) or even simulate various terms thanks only to the consonants and so acquire new meanings (NLT 125). The *midrash* is a concrete way to express at the same time freedom of the spirit<sup>38</sup> and subjection to the letter, and show they are not irreconcilable. The *midrash* has, in a few words... “the power to force the secret of transcendence” (NLT 67). An author who showed Levinas at different times of the virtualities of the *midrash* was the Polish Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Edels — or Adels — (16th century), better known by the acronym Maharsha (*Morenu Harav Shmuel Adels* — Our guide Rabbi Samuel Adels). Levinas describes him as a great help (SS 132) and went on to quote him a dozen times and always in order to understand the logic of bold *midrashic* comparisons. A word of warning to the reader: in order to avoid the arbitrary hermeneutics that might betray the text — since there are those who think that the Jewish hermeneutics is arbitrary and far-fetched (QVTR 114), Levinas proposes a culinary limit: “Many readings are possible as long as they are not in poor taste” (QLT 82).

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<sup>35</sup> Goodhart 2014: 5–16.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Girón Blanc 2005: 33–34.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Levinas 1987: 7–11.

<sup>38</sup> “A marvelous master, Mr. Chouchani [...] has shown us what the real method is capable of. He has made a dogmatic approach based purely on faith or even a theological approach to the Talmud altogether impossible for us. Our attempt must attest to this search for freedom, it would like to invite other seekers” (QLT 8).

3. In addition to the general principles of the *derash*, there are some exegetical “rules” (*middot*)<sup>39</sup> (Hillel was the first to put them in writing) and that they, regardless of the wording we may consult, coincide in these seven points: 1) “Lightness and heaviness” (*kal Vahomer*): it is a type of *a fortiori* argument: “if that is so, the greater the reason this will be” Although it is a rule of common sense, this allows a critical mobility at the time of hermeneutics. Levinas came to use it many times. 2) “Equivalent ordination” (*g’zerah Shavah*): Is an argument by analogy, where the meaning of a word in a specific context can be applied to that same word but in a different context. 3) “Construction of a father (rule) from a single text” (*binyan ab mikathub echad*) or 4) “Construction of a father from two texts” (*binyan ab mishene kethubim*): both agree on what could be called a “paradigmatic verse” or prototype. It is to explore the possible meanings of an expression and apply the same interpretation to all parts of the Scripture (this is why a rule is constructed for the time that expression appears). It is a commonly used rule in the readings of Levinas and that even our thinker warns the reader<sup>40</sup>. 5) “Moving from the general to the particular or from the particular to the general” (*kelal uferat*): similar to the synecdoche by which we refer to the whole naming only one of its parts, or vice versa. 6) “The similar in another place” (*kayotze bo mimekom akhar*): the clearance of two passages in contradiction thanks to a third party, analogue not only to specific words but to global approaches or contexts that surround the words. 7) “The term is illustrated by the context” (*dabar hilmad me’anino*): Refers to the fact that the term is illustrated by the full context and not only by a specific passage. This would imply that the teaching of each verse, as the part, requires of the entire Torah, as a whole, to be carried out (ADV 48) or that the practice of the Talmud requires making the whole of the Tractates vibrate in the text studied (ADV 15). In the following numerals we will find the Levinasian accents of some *middot*.

4. Levinas often advises us to seek unity of the whole, the coherence of the text (ADV 15), although the alleged effort is arduous given the apparent differences between texts (especially between the *Mishna* and the *Gemara* that, on not a few occasions, seem to speak of very different topics). Looking for the unit is as “discover the most interesting ideas and perhaps even the central ideas guiding” in the Talmud (NLT 50). This search for unity is not achieved by passing over the text; it is necessary to read and reread, building and sewing back together the fragments of the text (QLT 36); for achieving the unity of all, each of the parts acquires a new tonality which, separately, did not provide. If you will allow me the mathematical analogy, the senses of a verse would

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Girón Blanc 2005: 34–35.

<sup>40</sup> “The possibilities of signifying tied to a concrete object freed from its history — the resource of a method of thought we have called paradigmatic — are innumerable” (QLT 8). “I have already had occasion here to speak of another process which consists in respecting these possibilities and which I have called the paradigmatic method” (QLT 21). “This paradigmatic conceptualism is a theoretical procedure for comprehending the Real” (NLT 56).

be the factorial result of the possible connections of this verse with others, forming always new significant units. This exponentiation of meanings applies to both the Torah and rabbinical sayings; for example, Levinas says that “It is in the manner of the Talmudic text — which can be considered as a process of compilation- to quote, in evoking the adage of a rabbinical scholar, his other sayings, which may seem to bear no relation to the subject under discussion. But it must always be asked whether there is not, between these apparently disparate sayings, a profound link which revives the discussion, opens it up to new perspectives, throws new light on to it or discovers its true object” (ADV 95).

5. Levinas urges us to pay attention to the examples, to the concrete. He berates the intellectualism of the West has detached prematurely from the concrete (NLT 56) and does not explore and exhaust the multiplicity of meanings and significations that coexist in the materiality of the example (QLT 60). Consider “fire”; to define it abruptly as “destruction”, and always handle it thusly, would imply a tremendous reduction of the polysemy of the text where it is mentioned, for the fire heats the hearth, purifies the metals, prepares the food, dispels the night. ... never lose sight of this enrichment of the symbolic for the concrete! (QLT 7). Let us remember that the images in which thought is expressed in the Talmud, can only release their meaning if they are addressed in their concreteness, not in their abstraction, and perhaps that is a closer link between Talmud and phenomenology, because “the sages of the Talmud are discussing neither an egg nor an ox but are arguing about fundamental ideas without appearing to do so [...] To retrace one’s steps from these questions of ritual — which are quite important for the continuity of Judaism — to philosophical problems long forgotten by contemporary Talmudists would indeed demand a great effort today” (QLT 4).

6. If it is true that all text without a context is a pre-text, the more so if we speak of the Talmud. The context was to Chouchani, nothing more and nothing less than the spirit of the verse: “This master taught that, beyond this or that verse, closely or remotely supporting what a Talmudic scholar is saying, it is by its spirit, that is, its context, that the verse conveys the proper tonality to the idea it is supposed to establish” (SS 103). In this way, when a Bible verse is given as proof, what is invited is the search for the context of the quote (SS 166) and thus, raises the level of debate or expands the scope of the texts. The possibles multiply to the extent that the context endows the term with meaning. Even the contextual reading can join another of the *middot*, for example, “the similar in another place”, and so we may understand that the referral is a referral-contextual one, hence Levinas affirms: “when the Talmudist, commenting on a biblical text, refers to another biblical text — even if the reference is arbitrary- one must read carefully the context of the quoted passage. [...] At issue here is the association of one biblical ‘landscape’ with another, in order to extract, through this pairing, the secret scent of the first” (QLT 55).

7. The Talmud is teaching, and requires some sort of universality to make it instantiable, so that, it may respond to the uniqueness of every soul (ADV 49).

The master may teach a student, or all of his disciples, or even a crowd. Thanks to the “rule of universalization or internalization” (QLT 5), the barrier of time and space is crossed, and the text is significant because of the conceivable meanings it suggests. What makes a text universal is not the level of abstraction, but the inspiration, and hence the possibilities are what determine the projection of significant material. As Levinas pertinently points out, “the essence of great text is not to arise outside history but to have a meaning beyond the situation which has evoked them” (SS 108). Levinas was constantly trying to update the text, to make it speak beyond the rabbinic anecdote and Jewish theology; he wants the text to acquire its status of universal Teaching (in Hebrew, *Talmud*), able to speak to men of all ages and cultures.

## 6. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION — TALMUD, PHILOSOPHY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The most important translation Levinas taught us through his work was not from the Hebrew to the French, but from the Hebrew to the “Greek”, that is to say, the language of reason, of thought, of philosophy. According to a beautiful passage of the *Megillah* treatise, when the Torah was translated into Greek by seventy elders, the translation itself reveals “discordances in the text that will one day be explored by philosophy and that, through the *midrash*, were already fecund in another dimension of meaning” (AHN 52). In Genesis (9, 27) appears a sort of prophecy about this confluence: “May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem”. Japheth, the descendant of Noah who populated Europe, the ancestor of all Greeks, would one day be invited to dwell in the tents of Shem — the father of the Middle East, the ancestor of all Jews. Is it not perhaps the work of Levinas a way to fulfill in his own person, as both Jewish and philosopher, this promise? Or are we his readers those who are welcome to these tents of Shem after heeding his readings, which are the same invitation? Do we, philosophers, still have time to seek shelter in the tents of the Talmud and there find rest, food and life?

The Talmudic readings are an effort to translate to the Greek the wisdom of the Talmud, even though “the Talmud is not philosophy, its tractates are an eminent source of those experiences from which philosophies derive their nourishment” (QLT 4). To translate the Talmud to the Greek would not only make it speak the language of the philosophers, but also make it “accessible to the cultured human beings” (QLT 9), but make it speak to all men of all earth.

A psalm sings: “A day in thy courts is better than a thousand!” (Ps 84:10) and a daring *midrash* interprets it thus: “10) Better to Me one day spent by you in study of Torah than a thousand sacrifices that your son Solomon will (some day) offer before Me, on the altar” (ADV 51). Levinas is syntonic to this exegesis, because he always felt that the study of the Law was raised to the level of the supreme liturgy (AHN 68), that this peculiar Teaching is a hearing of God

which refers us to our neighbor, that does not shirk his duty through ritualism, which is ethics: “that the relationship with the Divine crosses the relationship with men and coincides with social justice, is therefore what epitomizes the entire spirit of the Jewish Bible. Moses and the prophets preoccupied themselves not with the immortality of the soul but with the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger” (DL 19–20). Levinas sees that God cannot override the responsibility of man to another man; this responsibility is the divine design: the *place* to meet with Him. “Place” or “space” it’s said in Hebrew *Makom*; with this enigmatic — or cabbalistic — word Levinas finishes his book *Four Talmudic Readings*, perhaps because at the end of a Talmudic reading we are always referred to the “*there*” of the Face of the Other that requests of us. The Talmud is teaching of responsibility.

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