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LEVINAS AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Note, for example, that the Hebrew word "within," *prīm* or *pnima*, likewise comes from the same root, *pnh*, linking the innermost part with the face—a connection that Levinas makes on phenomenological grounds but without connecting it to a fundamental Hebrew or biblical terminology.

But the meaning that Levinas bestows on the face can be linked further in the Hebrew Bible, this time with the preposition "before," *lifne* in Hebrew. This word also comes from the root *pnh* that forms "the face" (*pnim*). Thus, this familiar preposition (as Gibbs already observed) literally means "to the face" or "before." "The significance of standing in front of someone (before the other's face) has a particular resonance in Hebrew and in the Bible. It is the set of related meanings of the preposition (before) and the noun (face) that Levinas 'translates' in the concept of the face" (Gibbs: 165).

The preposition "before" is small, frequent, often mundane. Yet, when we listen to Levinas, it also always charged with the full force of that encounter that makes us human. Every "before" becomes a possible facing. When one pays attention to the literal possibilities embedded in the Hebrew underlying "before" but obscured in the English, this pervasive proposition regains its force. Interestingly, English, not French, also lends itself to communicating the full force of Levinas's meanings of the face as reflected in biblical Hebrew. Let us consider the English word "before," which we use to translate *lifne*. When we consider it as a compound word of "be" and "for," namely, being *for* someone, that is, "be-for," Levinas's insight comes through and permeates the text—and life. It is, then, as this ordinary preposition, *lifne*, before, that Levinas's face reaches us from every page of the Bible and, potentially, at most moments of our life.*

* This paper was originally delivered as a Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Region-Society of Biblical Literature, on March 14, 1994. At that time I dedicated it to my husband David Eskenazi, who so fully embodied Levinas's teaching, devoting his life to facing the Other in small and large ways, lovingly and generously. David's death in 1996 is a great loss. I rededicate the paper to him with love and with gratitude for all that he exemplified in deeds, not merely in words.

ON THE JEWISH READING OF SCRIPTURES

Emmanuel Levinas

It is not a question here of drawing up an inventory of the figures of Jewish hermeneutics of the Bible. This would require a vast amount of research, taking into account the diversity of epochs and tendencies. It would also mean determining the credibility of the interpreters measured less by any consensus than by the intelligence of each person and his familiarity with tradition. R. Ishmael's often-quoted "Thirteen figures of the interpretation of the Torah," or the famous four levels of reading: *peshat* (plain meaning), *remez* (allusive meaning), *derash* (solicited meaning), *sod* (secret meaning), whose vocalized acronym gives the word *pardes* (orchard), call in their turn for exegesis, and constitute only aspects of rabbinism in its relation to the text. Only the modern formulation of this relation, which has yet to be done, might put an end to the improper teachings where traditional sources are quoted as if, beneath the Hebrew letters that conceal them, they all derived from the same depth.

Our more modest intention is to illustrate, by examples, certain ways of reading. We shall do this by presenting a Talmudic extract which produces, in the form of arguments, the exegesis of biblical verses. Nevertheless, in doing this we shall find ourselves being led to some propositions of a more general character, for the chosen extract, in its final section, concerns precisely the scope of exegesis. Exegesis of the exegesis, a privileged text, even if it does not exclude different insights into the same subject. This is in keeping with the characteristic pluralism of rabbinical thought, which paradoxically aspires to be compatible with the unity of the Revelation: the multiple stances of the scholars would constitute its very life, all of them being the "words of the living God."

The Talmudic passage that we shall comment upon will also introduce us in particular to the meaning that, for Jewish religious consciousness, commentary of the Scriptures can take on as the path towards transcendence. It is, perhaps, essential to the actual creation of this notion.

But a Talmudic text that comments on verses requires an interpretation in its turn. What it intends to do is not immediately apparent in

terms which, for an inexperienced reader, may seem unusual, and which in fact allow for several levels and dimensions. Hence a third stage in the final section of our commentary: an interpretation of the Talmudic exegesis of the exegesis. This reading of the Talmud would not be possible for us without recourse to a modern language—in other words, without touching on the problems of today. Admittedly, it too is not the only possible reading, but it has the value of a testimony. It testifies to at least one of the ways in which contemporary Jews understand traditional Jewish hermeneutics, and above all to the way in which they understand it when they ask it for food for thought and teachings on the content.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The text we shall comment upon is taken from one of the last pages of the Tractate Makkoth in the Babylonian Talmud. This short Tractate of about fifty pages deals with judicial punishments of which one, in reference to Deuteronomy 25:2-3, is flogging (*makkoth* = blows). The passage dealing with the exegesis of page 23b has as its immediate context a theologico-legal discussion: is it possible, through the penalty of flogging, inflicted by a human tribunal, to make atonement for the punishment known as being "cut off from among their people," decided, according to the Talmud, by the "celestial tribunal"? Being "cut off from among their people," the most serious theological punishment, means being excluded from the "world to come," which designates the eschatological order in its ultimate terms, whereas the "Messianic epoch," still belonging to History, constitutes a penultimate stage of the "end of times." How can a human decision—in the case of flogging atoning for being "cut off"—intervene in a domain which exceeds man? How can it be guaranteed to be in keeping with the divine will? These questions imply transcendence and a relation which passes through this absolute distance. They touch on the problem of the possibility of such a relation, which also arises in the exegesis examining divine thought.

Before tackling the text, it would be useful to make some general remarks which, for a reader coming from outside, are called for by the particular or outdated nature of being flogged or cut off. This whole evocation of "blows," of the transgression and guilt it presupposes, may wound our liberal souls; just as the reference to a "celestial tribunal" may go against our modern minds by the dated or questionable "vision of the world" which it implies.

But in order to move towards a meaning which is retained despite an apparently antiquated language, it is necessary first of all to accept patiently—as one accepts the conventions of a fable or a stage setting—

the particulars of the text in their specific universe. It is necessary to wait for them to set themselves in motion and free themselves from the anachronisms and local colour on which the curtain rises. In no way must this "exotic" or "outmoded" language stop thought by its picturesque elements, or by the immediate meaning of the things and deeds it names. This will change. Often from apparently incongruous or insignificant questions. Without fading before their concepts, things denoted in a concrete fashion are yet enriched with meanings by the multiplicity of their concrete aspects. This is what we call the paradigmatic modality of Talmudic reflection: notions remain constantly in contact with the examples or refer back to them, whereas they should have been content as springboards to rise to the level of generalization, or they clarify the thought which scrutinizes by the secret light of hidden or isolated worlds from which it bursts forth; and simultaneously this world inserted or lost in signs is illuminated by the thought which comes to it from outside or from the other end of the canon, revealing its possibilities which were awaiting the exegesis, immobilized, in some way, in the letters.

THE TRIBUNAL AND THE LOVE OF ONE'S NEIGHBOUR

Let us come back now to the principal points of a discussion on flogging, being "cut off from among their people," and the punishments of the human and celestial tribunal. Let us accept these figures of speech and the legal formal nature of the words.

According to R. Hananiah b. Gamaliel, those who are guilty of certain transgressions that the Law of the Pentateuch punishes by cutting them off obtain remission from this damnation if they submit to the flogging imposed by the earthly tribunal. The human tribunal would thus have to be aware of sins which expel human beings from the human (the decision of God's tribunal would measure the seriousness of the sin), and would thereby have to repair the irreparable. Can the tribunal do as much as celestial compassion or mercy? Is mercy shown at the tribunal? Reference is made by R. Hananiah to Deuteronomy 25:3: "Forty stripes may be given him, but not more; lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight." The word "brother" would be essential here. It is a matter of punishing without degrading: would the tribunal and justice have the secret of the extreme measure of a difference which is a differential? In any case, R. Hananiah breaks with the dark mythological fatality whose eventuality would indicate a religious tyranny, in order to proclaim that no sin exists in relation to Heaven which cannot be expiated among men and in the light of day. The tribunal would thus also be the place where the divine regenerative

will is revealed. Admittedly, there is violence. But it is an act without a spirit of violence, contempt or hatred. A fraternal act, without passion. It proceeds from a responsibility for others. To be the guardian of others, contrary to the vision of the world according to Cain, defines fraternity. For the tribunal which reasons and weighs up, the love of one's neighbour would be possible. Justice dispensed by the just becomes compassion—not in uncontrollable indulgence, but through a judgement. God speaks with a compassion that is born in the severity of the tribunal. Excessiveness? It certainly is. But pure indulgence, free forgiveness, is always at the expense of someone innocent who does not receive it. The judge is allowed such indulgence only if he personally assumes the costs.¹ But it is proper for the earthly judge, for man, for the brother of the guilty party, to restore to human fraternity those who have been excluded. To be responsible to the point of being answerable for the other's freedom. This heteronomy among the conditions of autonomy in human fraternity is acutely thought in Judaism with the category of divine paternity as its point of departure. Divine justice arrays itself in fraternity by revealing itself in a human tribunal.²

R. Hananiah b. Gamaliel's second argument is an "*a fortiori*." If the transgression of certain interdicts "cuts off a human being from his people," then all the more reason for his carrying out the Law to return him to them. Now, to suffer the flogging decided on by the tribunal is to obey the Law to which a guilty person is subject. But why "all the more reason"?³ Because divine compassion is still more certain than its severity. A theme that is present throughout rabbinical thought, and to which R. Hananiah implicitly refers. Is it not written (Exodus 34:7):

¹ "In rendering legal judgment, [the judge] used to acquit the guiltless and condemn the guilty; but when he saw that the condemned man was poor, he helped him out of his own purse [to pay the required sum], thus executing judgment and charity..." Tractate Sanhedrin 6b. [Translator's note: Levinas indicates that he is quoting from the translation into French by the Great Rabbi Salzer.]

² It is against the paganism of the notion of the "Oedipus complex" that it is necessary to think forcefully about apparently purely edifying verses such as that in Deuteronomy 8:5: "Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you." Paternity here signifies a constituent category of what has meaning, not of its alienation. On this point, at least, psychoanalysis testifies to the profound crisis of monotheism in contemporary sensibility, a crisis that cannot be reduced to the refusal of a few dogmatic propositions. It conceals the ultimate secret of anti-Semitism. Amado Lévi-Valerusi has insisted throughout her work on the essentially pagan character of the myth of Oedipus.

³ [Translator's note: The Sorcino edition of the Babylonian Talmud renders the *a fortiori* argument as "how much more should one..."]

[The Lord keeps] steadfast love for thousands [of generations], forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation....?

And the Rabbis gloss "thousands" as at least two thousand! For at least two thousand generations steadfast love granted to merit is handed down; for four generations iniquity cries out for justice: compassion is thus five hundred times greater than divine severity. Behind this arithmetic of mercy there is moral optimism: the triumph of evil has one time only; nothing is ever lost from the triumph won over evil or from good.

From this point onwards, R. Simeon intervenes with the merit attached to the obedience to the interdicts. An intervention which, above and beyond the theological meaning of the terms, defines a certain conception of human life: "One who desists from transgressing is granted reward like one who performs a precept." The constraint imposed on the spontaneity of life, such as is provided for in the negative commandments of Leviticus 18 (whose sexual interdicts appear as the privileged example of negative commandments), is asserted by R. Simeon as the guarantee of "rewards." The negative commandment is the constraint *par excellence*, restraining the tendencies where life is lived in its spontaneity as an "outgoing force," and in particular the blind abundance of sexual desire. It would be the promise of rewards, if we are to believe R. Simeon. Certainly one can expect from this promise what simple and unquestioning faith expects: longevity, eternal life or earthly happiness—just as one can denounce its spirit of repression which abuses that faith. But as a reward for a life accepting limitations, one can also understand the nature of this very life: the limitation of the wild vitality of life, through which this life wakes from its somnambulant spontaneity, sobers up from its nature and interrupts its centripetal movements, in order to be opened up to what is other than self. A life in which Judaism is recognized, limiting through the Law this wild, animal vitality, accepting this restriction as the best share—that is, as a "reward."⁴ The

⁴ Curiously, in the final paragraphs of the pages we are studying in the Tractate Makkoth, the distant noise of unsuppressed and triumphant life, the noise of Rome, is heard. "Long ago, as Rabban Gamaliel b. Eleazar b. 'Azariah, R. Joshua and R. Akiba were walking on the road, they heard the noise of the crowds at Rome (on travelling) from Puteoli, a hundred and twenty miles away. They all fell weeping, but R. Akiba seemed merry. Said they to him: Wherefore are you merry? Said he to them: Wherefore are you weeping? Said they: These heathens who bow down to images and burn incense to idols live in safety and ease, whereas our Temple, the 'Footstool' of our God, is burnt down by fire, and should we then not weep? He replied: Therefore, am I merry. If they that offend Him fare thus, how much

plenitude of a sense of responsibility and justice is preferred to life intoxicated with its own essence, to the invasion of the unharnessed appetite of desire and domination where nothing, not even other people, can stand in its way.

R. Simeon b. Rabbi deduces the reward reserved for those who do not transgress the interdicts from the promise made in Deuteronomy 12:23-5 to the person who refrains from eating blood: if the abstinence consonant with a natural loathing is rewarded, how much more so is the resistance against what is desirable! Perhaps the horror of blood here has a meaning which is not only of a gastronomic nature. Resistance to sexual excesses and to the taste for plunder is, *a fortiori*, worthy of merit. And yet this is the "true life," if we follow the literary writers of the great Metropoles! All this accounting of merits and rewards has a wider meaning. Life as it is lived, natural life, begins, perhaps, in naivety, in tendencies and tastes which are still in keeping with a code of ethics; but if it is allowed to run its course unhindered, it ends in loveless debauchery and plunder established as a social condition, and in exploitation. The human begins when this apparently innocent but virtually murderous vitality is brought under control by interdicts. Does not authentic civilization, however it may be marked by biological failures or political defeats, consist in holding back the breath of naive life and remaining fully awake in this way, "for generations and generations to come, to the end of all generations"?⁵

We can now understand R. Hananiah b. 'Akashia's thought which closes the *Mishnah*: "The Holy One, blessed be He, desired to make Israel worthy, therefore gave he them the law (to study) and many commandments (to do)"; and "[the Lord made] the law great and glorious" (Isaiah 42:21). This is certainly not to create artificial merits or to put up hurdles deliberately. It is for the greatness of justice and for his glory that commandments are necessary against a life lived as an "outgoing force." Even in cases—such as the horror that may be felt in eating or shedding blood—where nature seems to protect us from evil! There is no natural

better shall fare they that do obey Him!" How much more shall we one day be rewarded or how much better do we who are just fare already, despite our misfortunes? When we are walking on the road and are tired, whether or not we are Rabban Gamaliel, R. Eleazar b. 'Azariah and R. Joshua, the greatest of the great, the sounds of Rome may for a moment cause us to question, in our minds and in our nerves, the soundness of the just life. R. Akiba alone is able to be merry: despite the failures, he is certain of receiving the best share. He is certain of it not through painful empirical experience, but through an *a fortiori* reasoning that is not here the guarantee of a promise, but of a value.

⁵ These are the words with which R. Simeon b. Rabbi closes his intervention in the Talmudic text we are commenting upon: "One who refrains therefrom [shall] acquire merit for himself and for generations and generations to come, to the end of all generations!"

tendency that is healthy enough not to be able to be inverted. Holiness is necessary for the healthiness of the healthy.⁶

But the greatness of justice evoked by R. Hananiah b. 'Akashia, which is conditioned by a life obeying the many commandments, is also the glory of the tribunal and the judges. To make the law glorious! Only the judges who themselves practise the many commandments can form the glorious council to which God's will aspires. The judge is not just a legal expert of laws; he obeys the Law he administers, and he is trained by this obedience; the study of the Law is itself the essential form of this obedience.⁷ Such a situation is necessary in order for earthly punishment to reduce celestial punishment; for it to be rightfully thought, with the Psalmist, that "God has taken his place in the divine council," and that "in the midst of the gods [judges] he holds judgement" (Psalms 82:1). It is necessary in order simply to justify man's judgement passed on man and the punishment inflicted by one on the other—that is to say, the responsibility of one person for the other. This is the strange ontological structure presupposed by this responsibility whereby one person assumes the destiny and the very existence of another, and is answerable for this other in a way, however, that is not characteristic of him. It is a responsibility that precedes freedom, which would mean precisely belonging to God, a

⁶ On the subject of the interdicts, it would be interesting to quote the lines which figure in what follows in our text of pages 23a and 23b of the Tractate Makkoth: "R. Simlai when preaching said: Six hundred and thirteen precepts were communicated to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five negative precepts, corresponding to the number of solar days (in the year), and two hundred and forty-eight positive precepts, corresponding to the number of the members of man's body. Said R. Hammuna: What is the (authentic) text for this? It is, *Moses commanded us Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob* (Deuteronomy 33:4), *'Torah'* being in letter-value, equal to six hundred and eleven, *'I am'* and *'Thou shalt have no other Gods'* (not being reckoned, because) we heard from the mouth of the Might (Divine)." [*Translator's note*: The ending of Levinas's translation differs substantially from that given here: "If one adds to this the first two commandments of the Decalogue pronounced at Sinai and which we heard from the very mouth of the Lord, that makes six hundred and thirteen."] A bizarre sort of accounting! In actual fact, it gives at least three lessons:

(a) Every day lived under the sun is potential depravity and thus requires a new interdict, a new vigilance which yesterday's cannot guarantee.

(b) The life of every organ of the human body, of every tendency (the accuracy or arbitrariness of the anatomy or physiology counting two hundred and forty-eight matters little, since the number of "positive" precepts divulges the secret of this figure), is the source of possible life. A force that is not justified in itself. It must be dedicated to the most high, to serving.

(c) The code containing the six hundred and thirteen precepts is not met by the number given by the breakdown of the numerical value of the letters making up the word Torah. It is not a system justified uniquely by its coherence. It institutes the order of life only because its transcendent source is personally asserted in it as word. True life is inspired.

⁷ Cf. *Quatre lectures talmudiques* [Four Talmudic Readings].

unique belonging which, anterior to freedom, does not destroy freedom and thereby defines, if one may say so, the meaning of the exceptional word: God. God appearing *through* a council of the just, itself called divine; God as the actual possibility of such a council. And, conversely, a council of the just which is not only the ultimate source of his judgement: a different will within it, the judge's judgement is inspired and exceeds or overflows human spontaneity. This is what our text will say further on. Justice cannot be reduced to the order it institutes or restores, nor to a system whose rationality commands, without difference, men and gods, revealing itself in human legislation like the structures of space in the theorems of geometers, a justice that a Montesquieu calls the "logos of Jupiter," recuperating religion within this metaphor, but effacing precisely transcendence. In the justice of the Rabbis, difference retains its meaning. Ethics is not simply the corollary of the religious but is, of itself, the element in which religious transcendence receives its original meaning.

TRANSCENDENCE AND EXEGESIS

In the Talmudic extract we are commenting upon, the text relating to transcendence comes immediately after the one that discusses the powers of a human tribunal would have in order to modify the decisions of Heaven in some way, and to be certain of agreeing with the absolute Tribunal. Here are the terms in which the problem is put: "Said R. Joseph: Who has gone up (to Heaven) and come (back with this information)?"

The answer is supplied by another scholar, Abaye, in the name of a Tanna master, R. Joshua b. Levi:

"Three things were enacted by the (mundane) Tribunal below, and the Celestial Tribunal on high have given assent to their action"; (we might also exclaim,) who has gone up (to Heaven) and come (back with this information)? Only, we (obtain these points by) interpreting certain texts; and, in this instance too, we so interpret the texts.

R. Joshua b. Levi would thus entrust to the interpretation of texts, what the Rabbis call *Midrash* (exposition of meaning), the ability to force open the secret of transcendence.

Here are the three "things" which are said to have been instituted by the earthly tribunals whose exegesis would prove to have the assent of the celestial will. First of all, the established custom under the magistracy of Mordecai and Esther, of the liturgical reading of the "Scroll of Esther" on the Feast of Purim. It would find its justification in a biblical verse (Esther 9:27): "They confirmed, and the Jews took upon them and

their seed [the Jews acknowledged and accepted]." Why two almost synonymous verbs in this verse? Because confirmation [acknowledgement] and taking upon themselves [acceptance] were two distinct acts: acceptance below, acknowledgement in Heaven.

Then the authorization of saluting another person with the Divine Name: in Ruth 2:4, Boaz (whom the Rabbis class among the judges) greets the reapers: "The Lord be with you!"; and in Judges 6:12 the angel says to Gideon: "The Lord bless thee, thou mighty man of valour."

Finally, the prescription of bringing the tithe (due to the Levites) to the Temple chamber, established as a custom by Ezra according to Nehemiah 10:39. It is confirmed by the prophet Malachi (3:10): "Bring ye the whole tithe unto the store house that there may be food in My house, and try Me herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing, until there be no enough." And the Talmud adds: "What means: 'until there be no enough'? Said Rami b. Rab: (It means), until your lips weary of saying 'Enough, enough!'"

Do not such "proofs" imply the inspired origin of the whole biblical canon? Does it not present the notions of height and transcendence as established, and the very idea of God as clear and distinct?

Unless R. Joseph's question, in its apparent naivety, is an extremely audacious one, questioning the mythological meaning of transcendence and the revelation it seems to acknowledge. Unless, in questioning the idea of someone "going up to Heaven," he goes so far as to concern the great man called upon in Exodus 24:12: "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tables of stone, with the law and the commandment." A calling upon whose reality in fact would be vouched for, ultimately, only by a text which itself already belongs to the statement of the truth which it ought to be able to establish: *petitio principii* which would hint at the whole of historical criticism today. But does not Abaye's reply indicate that he already understands his interlocutor on this higher level? Instead of establishing exegesis on some dogmatism of traditional metaphysics adopted as a truism, does not Abaye's reply consist in basing a new meaning for transcendence, and the old vocabulary, on the structure of the Book of books inasmuch as it allows for exegesis, and on its privileged status of containing more than it contains—in other words, of being, in this sense exactly, inspired?

The reading processes that we have just seen at work suggest, first, that the statement commented upon exceeds what it originally wants to say; that what it is capable of saying goes beyond what it wants to say; that it contains more than it contains; that perhaps an inexhaustible surplus of meaning remains locked in the syntactic structures of the sentence, in its word-groups, its actual words, phonemes and letters, in

all this materiality of the saying which is potentially signifying all the time. Exegesis would come to free, in these signs, a bewitched significance that smoulders beneath the characters or coils up in all this literature of letters.⁸

Rabbinical hermeneutics is rashly considered as neglecting the spirit, whereas the aim of the signified by the signifier is not the only way to signify; whereas what is signified in the signifier, according to its other modes, answers only to the mind that solicits it and thereby belongs to the process of signification; and whereas interpretation essentially involves this act of soliciting without which what is not said, inherent in the texture of the statement, would be extinguished beneath the weight of the texts, and sink into the letters. An act of soliciting which issues from people whose eyes and ears are vigilant and who are mindful of the whole body of writing from which the extract comes, and equally attuned to life: the city, the street, other men. An act of soliciting which issues from people in their uniqueness, each person capable of extracting from the signs meanings which each time are inimitable. An act of soliciting issuing from people who would also belong to the process of the signification of what has meaning. This does not amount to identifying exegesis with the impressions and subjective reflections left by the word once it has been understood, nor to including them gratuitously in the "outside" of meaning. It does, however, amount to understanding the very plurality of people as an unavoidable moment of the signification of meaning, and as in some way justified by the destiny of the inspired word, so that the infinite richness of what it does not say can be said or that the meaning of what it does say can be "renewed," to use the technical expression of the Rabbis. As the people of the Book, for whom the demanding reading of the Scriptures belongs to the highest liturgy, would not Israel also be the people of continued revelation?

But in the light of this, the language that is capable of containing more than it contains would be the natural element of inspiration, despite or before its reduction to the instrument of the transmission of thoughts and information (if it can ever be entirely reduced to this). One may wonder whether man, an animal endowed with speech, is not, above all, an animal

⁸ The word of the rabbinical scholars, the word setting out or commenting on the Torah, can be compared to the "glowing coils," to use a phrase from the *Pirke Aboth* in the *Tractate of Principles* of the Babylonian Talmud. A remarkable Talmudist, a disciple of the Gaon of Vilna (one of the last great masters of rabbinical Judaism, on the eve of the nineteenth century, the Jewish age "of Enlightenment"), Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner, interpreted this remark approximately as follows: the coils light up by being blown on, the glow of the flame that thus comes alive depends on the interpreter's length of breath.

capable of inspiration, a prophetic animal. One may wonder whether the book, as a book, before becoming a document, is not the modality by which what is said lays itself open to exegesis, calls for it; and where meaning, immobilized in the characters, already tears the texture in which it is held. In propositions which are not yet—or which are already no longer—verses, and which are often verse or simply literature, another voice rings out among us, a second sonorous voice that drowns out or tears the first one. The infinite life of texts living through the life of the men who hear them; a primordial exegesis of the texts which are then called national literature and on to which the hermeneutics of universities and schools is grafted. Above and beyond the immediate meaning of what is said in these texts, the act of saying is inspired. The fact that meaning comes through the book testifies to its biblical essence. The comparison between the inspiration conferred on the Bible and the inspiration towards which the interpretation of literary texts tends is not intended to compromise the dignity of the Scriptures. On the contrary, it asserts the dignity of "national literatures." Yet how is it that a book is instituted as the Book of books? Why does a book become Bible? How is the divine origin of the Word indicated? How is it signed in Scripture? And does not this signature, which is more important for people living today than "the thunderings and the lightnings" of Sinai, betray simple faith?

Inspiration: another meaning which breaks through from beneath the immediate meaning of what is meant to be said, another meaning which beckons to a way of hearing that listens beyond what is heard, beckons to extreme consciousness, a consciousness that has been awoken. This other voice resonating in the first takes control of the message as a result of this resonance coming from behind the first. In its purity of message, it is not just a certain form of saying; it organizes its content. The message as message awakens listening to what is indisputably intelligible, to the meaning of meanings, to the face of the other man.⁹ Awakening is precisely this proximity of others.¹⁰ The message as message in its method of awakening is the modality, the actual "how" of the ethical code that disturbs the established order of being, unrepentantly leading its style of being.¹¹ With its referent as reading, as the book—yet no less wondrous

⁹ The Book *par excellence* of what has meaning. And this is without yet highlighting the testimony given to this book by a people who have existed for thousands of years, or the interpenetration of their history and of this book, even if such communication between history and book is essential to genuine scriptures.

¹⁰ Cf. my study "De la conscience à la veille," *Bijdragen*, 3-4 (1974), 235-49.

¹¹ Ethics—appearing as the prophetic—is not a "region," a layer or an ornament of being. It is, of itself, actual disinterestedness, which is possible only under a traumatic

for all that—do we not have here the original figure of the beyond freed from the mythology of ulterior worlds?¹²

That *ethics* is not determined in its elevation by the pure height of the starry sky; that all height takes on its transcendent meaning only through ethics and the message incessantly breaking (hermeneutically) the texture of the Book *par excellence*: these, undoubtedly, will constitute the teaching to be drawn—one of the teachings to be drawn—from the passage we are commenting upon.

Curiously, the biblical text first cited by R. Joshua b. Levi in consideration of the agreement between the earthly tribunal and the celestial tribunal is taken from the book of Esther from which, it might be said, God has gone so far as to withdraw his name, the word by which he is named. Yet in this book the message emerges from between the events recounted according to their "natural" motivation, the necessities and the casting of lots. That these events, instituted as liturgy by Mordecai and Esther, could have been understood as belonging to holy History is the "miraculous" surplus of their place in the divine plan. There arises the historical order of the facts (their established order), and consciences are awoken at the highest ethical moment in which Esther disturbs royal etiquette and consents to her ruin in order to save other men. The order upset by this awakening is paralleled by the king's insomnia. Does not a Midrash from the Tractate Megillah compare the insomnia of Ahasuerus to the very insomnia of God? As if, in the impossibility of sleeping, the ontological rest of being were to be torn and entirely sobered up. Is not the relation to transcendence this extreme consciousness?

No less remarkable is the second text in which the epiphany of God is invoked in the human face. The face of the other, irreducible difference, bursting into all that gives itself to me, all that is understood by

experience whereby "presence," in its imperturbable equality of presence, is disturbed by "the other." Disturbed, awoken, transcended.

¹² In the texts invoked, indeed, determined situations and beings—equal to themselves, being held in definitions and boundaries that integrate them into an order and bring them to rest in the world—are passed through by a breath that arouses and stirs their drowsiness or their identity as beings and things, tearing them from their order without alienating them, tearing them from their contour like the characters in Dufy's paintings. The miracle of beings presenting themselves in their being and awakening to new awakens, deeper and more sober. It cannot be denied that as a disturbing of order, as a tearing of Same by Other, it is the miracle, the structuring—or de-structuring—of inspiration and its transcendence. If purely thaumaturgical miracles seem spiritually suspect to us and acceptable as simple figures of the Epiphany, it is not because they alter the order but because they do not alter it enough, because they are not miraculous enough, because the Other awakening the Same is not yet other enough through them.

me and belongs to my world; an appearance in the world which unmakes and dis-orders the world, worries me and keeps me awake. That is what is perceived by bringing together Ruth 2:4 and Judges 6:12. A transcendence both in the text in which exegesis finds more than the written seems to say, and in the ethical content, the message, which is thus revealed.

The third moment—in which the gift of the tithe is transformed by being brought to the Temple—would signify the transformation of the very act of giving into an absolutely free act of generosity where the person giving, not knowing the beneficiary, does not hear the expression of the latter's personal gratitude.¹³ Is that not one of the meanings, the figure, as it were, of the cult itself? What "strong minds" would be tempted to mock as duties towards an "empty heaven" is enigmatically the absolute opening of the soul: the opening of disinterestedness, of sacrifice without reward, of discourse without answer or echo, which "confidence in God" and prayer must have the strength to reach. The opening of self to the infinite that no confirmation can equal, and that is proven only by its very excessiveness. That would be the abundance for which lips cannot be enough, drying out through saying "enough," of which Rami b. Rab speaks in his strange hermeneutic of Malachi 3:10. A beyond the discourse. This is probably what this sudden transformation is: in the disinterested generosity of the act of giving, receiving becomes infinite, the opening on to the infinite.

THE AMBIGUITY

In our reading of the Talmudic passage, inspiration and the exegesis that discovers it, we have discerned the spirituality of the spirit and the actual figure of transcendence. Have we been right to do so? Have we been right to recognize in the ethical code on the level of the tribunal, understood as a council of the just, the actual place in which the spirit blows and the Other penetrates the Same? Will a person today not resist such readings by reducing the transcendence of inspiration, exegesis and the moral message to man's interiority, to his creativity or his subconscious? Is not ethics basically autonomous? In order to dispute such modern-day resistance, would it not have been necessary to interpret as inspiration the reasons of reasoning reason in which philosophy, in its logic, recognizes the reign of Identity which nothing that is *other* could disrupt or guide?

¹³ On the importance attached to this modality of the gift, cf. Baba-Bathra 10b.

Now this is precisely what the final section of the Talmudic extract that concerns us wishes to suggest. R. Eleazar intervenes to confirm in his own way the general argument of Makkoth 23b on the possible agreement between earthly courts of law and celestial justice. He refers to Genesis 38:26, where Judah, the son of Jacob, recognizes the injustice of the accusation he had brought against his daughter-in-law Tamar (this "is said to have taken place," according to our text, at the Tribunal of Shem, Noah's son, who was still alive). R. Eleazar refers to I Samuel 12:3-5, where all of Israel testifies at the Tribunal of Samuel to the disinterestedness of the judge Samuel; and he refers to I Kings 3:27, where King Solomon, in his own Tribunal, recognizes the mother among the two women arguing over a child. Confession of the guilty party, testimony of the people, sentence of the king: to each of these human speeches (unquestionably human in the verses quoted), R. Eleazar—in the name of a supremely audacious exegesis, but probably also in the name of a daring thought—lifts out, under various pretexts, the ends of verses which he attributes to the echo of a heavenly voice. Will the holy spirit thus have been present at men's tribunals?

One interlocutor, Raba, questions such extravagance: there is no need to have voices intervening in discourses where reason is sufficient. But it is R. Eleazar's lesson that the Talmudic text retains. It retains it without discussion, in the name of tradition. Inspiration is thus said to be in the exercise of reason itself! The logos would already be prophetic! Through the uncertainties and presumptions of reasoning thought, the light of evidence would come as if under the trauma of the Revelation. A message would be declared in all evidence.

This is true, but it should be emphasized that despite tradition, the redactors of the Talmudic text recorded the opinion that was rejected: Raba's scepticism. It is still written down. As if an ambiguity had to remain in the conclusions of the lofty debate that has just taken place according to the style of the Talmud, with remarks that are apparently without relief and made "without appearing to be made."

Would not the man of today recognize in this ambiguity the alternating movements of his own thought?

To say that the ideas on transcendence and the very idea of transcendence come to us through the interpretation of writings is, admittedly, not to express a subversive opinion. Yet it is less dogmatic to people today. It suggests on the one hand that language, at the hour of its ethical truth—that is, of its full significance—is inspired, that it can therefore say more than it says, and that prophecy is thus not an act of genius, but the spirituality of the spirit expressing itself, the ability of human speech to extend beyond the primary intentions that carry it. This is perhaps possession by God, through which the idea of God comes to us. But this

language offered to transcendence is also the object of philology; thus the transcendence that is expressed through it would be just an illusion, the prestige of influences to be demystified by History. Let us prefer, then, the genesis of every text to its exegesis, the certainties of given signs to the hazards of mysterious messages, the combinations of the shadows in the Cave to the uncertain calls from outside! This is also a science, at times an admirable one, to destroy false prophecies.

Alternative or alternation. And even an alternation of alternations before the letters of Scripture. These letters, for those who respect them as for those who mock them, may still support the dogmatic principles of a God, a power stronger than others, who interrupts—like a monstrous force or a heroic person—the necessities of nature. Then, through a science that they nurture with their presence as relics, these letters strike their readers, one and all, and rescue them from the level of asserted or denied mythologies. But in this start that readers receive there is a new alternation of movements: they go from the traumatic experience of the unknown and strange meaning to the grammar which, already operating on another level, restores order, coherence and chronology. And then there is a movement back: from history and philology to the understanding of meaning coming from behind the literature of letters and anachronisms, an understanding that again affects and awakes, forcing us out of the bed of the preformed and customary ideas that protect and reassure.

An alternation which, admittedly, testifies to the hesitation of our little faith, but from which also stems the transcendence that does not impose itself with denials through its actual coming and which, in inspired Scripture, awaits a hermeneutic—in other words, reveals itself only in dissimulation.