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Being Jewish[1]

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995)

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I

If Judaism had only the "Jewish Question" to resolve it would have much to do, but it would be a trifling thing. Of course, one may wonder whether this question, even in itself, does not exceed the quest for an attractive or bearable life, and extend to an apocalypse and an eschatology. But posed in exclusively political and social terms—and this is the rule for public meetings, in the press and even in literature—the question refers to a right to live, without seeking a reason for being. This rhetoric that invokes the right to existence for an individual or for a people reduces or returns the Jewish event to the rank of a purely natural fact. No matter how much one hopes for a cultural and moral contribution to the world from the political independence of the people of Israel, one still does no more than expect one more kind of painting or literature. But to be Jewish is not only to seek a refuge in the world but to feel for oneself a place in the economy of being.

[1]*Note*: "Being Jewish" is a translation of Emmanuel Levinas' 1947 essay "Être Juif." Its topics include Jewish and Sartrean facticities; modern science, Christianity and Judaic temporality; Judaism and the non-Jewish world; personhood and election; freedom, passivity and anxiety; and anti-Jewish hatred. The original essay was first published in the French journal *Confluences*, 1947, année 7, nos. 15–17, pp. 253–264. It was reprinted in *Cahiers d'Etudes lévinassiennes*, 2003, Numéro 1, pp. 99–106. The Editor and Translator would like to thank Michaël Levinas for his kind permission to publish the English translation of "Être Juif."

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A different rhetoric had proclaimed this place for a century. Israel's mission, Israel's message, its monotheism and its Decalogue have become the commonplaces of the synagogues' apologetics and homily. In this way, Judaism exalted the memory of services rendered. It congratulated itself on re-discovering in the Christian or liberal world the harvest of ancient sowings. It justified its survival by the need to watch over the maturing of these sown seeds. The futility of this role, amid Christian and democratic peoples who have reached their age of majority, is easy to demonstrate. It is a role that only saints could have taken on. But Jews are neither better nor worse than others. To claim a message that has already fallen into the public domain is an ambition denied by the whole impulse that for one hundred fifty years has carried Judaism toward assimilation and in which religion, shrinking more and more, is limited to a colorless ancestor worship. In this, there is an avowal of the irresistible attraction exerted upon alleged missionaries by the very world where they were to preach.

Perhaps in this way Judaism became aware that with respect to ideas it had nothing to defend against the world. Not that its ideas were inferior to or less true than the surrounding civilization, but because, poured into the common patrimony of humanity, the idea no longer belongs to you. In the final analysis, the idea has no origin. Of what one has, it is least private; a world where one communicates by means of ideas is a world of equals.

In fact, throughout all of its history, and so long as Judaism remained a living reality, it never took stock of itself, never enumerated the ideas contained in its heritage. It put its spiritual labor into its existence rather than its preaching.

II

But towards what kind of existence does assimilation tend? Can one characterize it as the simple desire not to make oneself conspicuous, to participate in the life of nations? Is it reducible to a general sociological phenomenon in which a minority dissolves into a majority that encompasses it, and fascinates it with its force and the very value of its being a majority? Perhaps. But it is legitimate to return sociological causality to its spiritual meaning. A historical study—which we will not undertake here—can show, and this has just brilliantly been done by the Palestinian scholar Gershom G. Scholem,[2] how the very development of Jewish mysticism in the seventeenth century prepared the way for the idea of emancipation and of merging with nations, and how, consequently, the movement of assimilation was, above all, a moment in Jewish religious thought.

We would like to attempt something different: to characterize the ontological meaning of this existence of the non-Jewish world toward which assimilation acceded. It is difficult to achieve this in a few lines. The modern world is an infinitely vast and infinitely varied notion. Is it Christian? Is it liberal? Is it set in motion by an economy, a politics or a religion? Are not these differing notions separated by an abyss? And yet there is a sort of affinity among all of the

[2] Gershom G. Scholem (1941).

non-religious manifestations of this world, and there is an affinity between these and the Christianity that remains their religion.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Christianity is its capacity to become a state religion and to remain one after the separation of Church and State, to supply the State not only with its legal holidays but also with the entire framework of everyday life. Christianity is claimed with gravity by the Great King and the feudal lord, who each can be both arrogant and benevolent, and by the humble and violent peasant; and by the conservative, enterprising bourgeois and the rebellious, subjugated worker. Monks who separate themselves from the world return to the world, where they teach and act. The pagan poetry of the *Georgics*, of fields bearing golden harvests, continues imperceptibly and admirably as the religious lyric of a Peguy, a Jammes, a Claudel. There is something of a kinship between two forms of existence that at first glance are contradictory. One of these is absolutely free, liberated from all constraints, having at its disposal all the resources of an interior life that can be infinitely renewed, countlessly re-initiated. The other unfolds like something eternal: a human nature defined for ever, classed into stable kinds amid a world of regular rhythms, of pre-existing forms, of implacable laws.

This is a situation that, far from constituting a simple contradiction, appears as the dialectical essence of the world. This situation does not result from some fundamental hypocrisy that one denounces rashly. It is not proof that the Christian world is not Christian enough. Profane life in the world, unfolding at the heart of a reality without pathos—immutable but everyday—is singularly close to an existence that relies on interior life: each understands itself starting from the present.

For everyday life is essentially a present: to have to deal with the immediate, to introduce oneself into time not by moving through the entire line of the past but all at once, to ignore history. And if the immediate is related to a past, this past in its turn takes on an air of the present. Always limited, it is arbitrarily detached from a more distant past. To be in the present is to treat the world, to treat ourselves, as we treat the people around us whose biographies we do not know, who, torn from their family, from their social circle, from their interior, are all "of an unknown father," abstract in some way, but who for precisely this reason, are given immediately. Hence, the relation with being in everyday life is action. It is like Alexander's sword, which does not unknot knots, which does not redo the knotting motions in reverse, but which slices. Or it is vision—instantaneous relation—the fact of cutting out a piece within reality; of describing the limits of the horizon; ignorance of the rest, disinterest in the whole.

Scientific exploration of reality does not break with the present. Not only because it blossoms in technology and in action, but because the idea of law that allows us to recover the whole that is lost in perception returns this whole to us like a floating present. That is, without reference to the origin that was implied, still, by the idea of cause. If the everyday world is a world of approximations, of the immediate, of compromise, where it is always a matter of "first things first," where there is urgency always, the world of scientific legality remains likewise without principle. In sum, the idealist basis of modern science consists in replacing the origin with freedom, that is, in the final analysis, with the present, through this way of standing

out from time and its continuity, this way of interrupting, of coming about starting from nothing, that is, from oneself.

But Christianity is also an existence starting from the present. Granted, to a very large extent it is a Judaism. But it does not owe its success to Judaism. Its originality has consisted in relegating to the background this Father to which the Jew is attached as to a past, and in acceding to the Father only through the incarnate Son, that is, through a presence, through his presence among us. It is not a question of dogma but of emotion. Whereas Jewish existence refers to a privileged instant of the past and the Jew's absolute position within being is guaranteed him by his filiality, Christian existence possesses this privileged point of attachment in its very present. God is the Christian's brother, that is, his contemporary. The work of salvation is wholly interior, is not realized with the very entry into being, with birth. It is to be found in the power of a new birth promised at each instant, in conversion, in the contact with grace. In this, there is an attenuation of the notion of origin in its strong form, to the advantage of the notion of the present. Whence the entire Pascalian and Kierkegaardian atmosphere: the possession of salvation is freshly put into question again at each instant, but precisely for this reason salvation is given in the freshness and youth of its present. It could never constitute a settled acquisition, but offers itself for conquest. Whence, therefore, in another context, the necessity to repeat the mystery of Golgotha, to once again become its contemporary.

III

We can now say in a more precise way in what Jewish existence consists. Without claiming a theology. By simply analyzing the Jewish will to be, which posits itself anew.

The experience of Hitlerism was not sensed by everyone to be one of those periodic returns to barbarism which, all in all, is fundamentally in order, and about which one consoles oneself by recalling the punishment that strikes it. The recourse of Hitlerian anti-Semitism to racial myth reminded the Jew of the irremissibility of his being. Not to be able to flee one's condition—for many this was like vertigo. Granted, this is a human situation, and in this the human soul is perhaps naturally Jewish. But this situation, as devoid of anxiety as it is foreign to self-satisfaction, is lived in a halo of affectivity that neither the vocabulary of joy nor that of pain could accurately convey. Whence the strange echoing of Isaiah Chapter 53 and the Book of Job.

Because of this unexpected detour from execration to exultation, Jewish existence cannot be fit into the set of distinctions by which Sartre, for example, attempts to grasp it.

He is perhaps right to contest the view that the Jew has a proper essence. But if Sartre allows the Jew, as all other mortals, a bare existence and the freedom to make an essence for himself—either by fleeing, or by assuming the situation that is made him—one is within one's rights to wonder whether this bare existence admits of any differentiation. Is not Jewish "facticity" other than the "facticity" of a world that understands itself starting from the present?

We must advance a bit further into certain notions that the great talent of Sartre and the genius of Heidegger have substantiated in contemporary philosophy and literature.

There is a move in this thinking that allows the transformation of supreme commitment into a supreme freedom: not to commit oneself would still be to commit oneself; not to choose would still be to choose. It would be too long a task, but an easy one, to show that commitment through non-commitment is psychologically distinct from commitment through explicit decision and that to abstain is not to act. No matter—let us emphasize that in the case in point the existentialist view aims at nothing less than to put into question the very notion of passivity. In fact, this view begins from the idea of a fact such that activity and passivity turn into each other. This is a natural starting point when one borrows the notion of fact from a world that is without origin and simply present. A fact in a contingent existence is at once passive, since it is not willed, and free, since no one willed it. To cut loose the fact from its origin in this way is precisely to dwell in the modern world, which in its science has abandoned the quest for the origin, and in its religion exalts the present.

But a fact will be fact in an absolutely passive manner if it is a creature. The imperative of the creation that is continued in the imperative of the commandment and of the law inaugurates a total passivity. To do the will of God is in this sense the condition of facticity. The fact is possible only if, beyond its power to choose itself, which cancels out its facticity, it has been chosen, that is, elected. The past that creation and election introduce into the economy of being cannot be confused with the fatality of a history without absolute origin. Infinite time behind us, far from excluding the freedom of the present, precisely makes it possible, since the instants of the infinite series, instants without privilege, lend themselves indifferently to the present, to its freedom, to its youth, to its ignorance of the past. Quite to the contrary, the past that creation and election introduce into the economy of being communicates to the present the gravity of a fact, the weight of an existence, and a sort of base.

Thus, even if it is true that the Jewish fact exists bare, indeterminate in its essence, and called to choose an essence for itself according to the Sartrean framework, this fact is, in its very facticity, inconceivable without election. *The Jewish fact is not like this because he was plumped full of holy history, he refers to holy history because he is a fact like this.* In other words, the Jew is the very entrance of the religious event into the world; better yet, he is the impossibility of a world without religion.

This fact receives the structure of his personhood from election. In fact, there is a contradiction in the notion of "ego" ["*moi*"] that defines this notion. The ego is posited as a simple part of reality and, at the same time, as endowed with the exceptional privilege of the totality. The ego is equivalent to the whole of being, of which it constitutes nevertheless only one part. This is a contradiction that is overcome in the emotion of election. The meaning of election, and of revelation understood as election, is not to be found in the injustice of a preference. It presupposes the relation of father to children in which each one is everything to the father without excluding the others from this privilege. Thus, Jewish election is not

initially lived as pride or particularism. It is the very mystery of personhood. Against every attempt to understand the ego starting from a freedom, in a world without origin, the Jew offers to others, but already lives, the emotional schema of personhood as a son and as elected.

In a new sense, then, to be created and to be a son is to be free. To exist as a creature is not to be crushed beneath adult responsibility. It is to refer in one's very facticity to someone who bears existence for you, who bears sin, who can forgive.

Jewish existence is thus the fulfillment of the human condition as fact, personhood and freedom. And its entire originality consists in breaking with a world that is without origin and simply present. It is situated from the very start in a dimension that Sartre cannot apprehend. It is not situated there for theological reasons, but for reasons of experience. Its theology explicates its facticity.

IV

Concretely, this dimension is lived by each Jew in his feeling that he exists metaphysically. The least rag-seller who thinks himself "liberated," the intellectual who thinks himself an atheist, breathes still the mystery of his creation and his election—the only mystery left to him in a world where all has become as simple as matter, as transparent as science. An attachment to Judaism that remains when no particular idea warrants it any longer, when he has seen that the morality of his fathers has become morality, their monotheism become monotheism, their psalms become the liturgy.

Such is the Jew for others as well. When a conversation turns suddenly to a Jewish theme, the voice takes on metaphysical tones or dissipates into the whispering of indecent anecdote. As if one approached a red-light district or sector. There is something besides mystification or bad taste in this philosophical or improper talk. What is in hatred called Jewish pride or Jewish shamelessness or Jewish conceit merely stems from the interpretation that spite or cowardice lends to this metaphysical feeling, or it represents the degenerate forms—it must be admitted—that this feeling itself takes. But even if in these forms Judaism can give occasion to such reactions, this hatred is distinctly different from that provoked by a persecuted race or any given minority. There is mixed up in it I know not what sort of taste for obscenity, for immodesty and for infinity. A taste for the sacred.

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