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SECTION C.  
REVELATION

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Revelation in the Jewish Tradition

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**The Content and Its Structure**

*The Problem*

I think that our fundamental question in these lectures concerns less the content ascribed to revelation than the actual fact—a metaphysical one—called the Revelation. This fact is also the first and most important content revealed in any revelation. From the outset this revelation is alleged to be unusual, extra-ordinary, linking the world in which we live to what would no longer be of this world. How is it thinkable? What model do we use? Suddenly, by opening a few books, there would enter into a positive world, open in its consistency and steadfastness to perception, to enjoyment and to thought, a world given over in its reflections, metaphors and signs to reading and science, truths that come from elsewhere—but from where?—and dated according to a ‘chronology’ called holy History! And, as in the case of the Jews, a holy History against which stands, without a break in continuity, a ‘History for historians’, a profane History! That the holy History of the Christian West is, in its greater part, the ancient history of a people of today, retaining a still mysterious unity, despite its dispersion among the nations—or despite its integration into these nations—is undoubtedly what constitutes the originality of Israel and its relation to the Revelation: of its reading of the Bible, or its forgetting of the Bible, or of the memories or the remorse that remain from this very act of forgetting. Against the transfiguration into myth that threatens, with degradation or sublimation, this ‘far and distant past’ of the Revelation, is the surprising present existence of Judaism, a human collec-

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Emanuel Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, Gary D. Mole, trans. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press, 1994), pp. 129–50. © Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN 47404.

tivity, albeit small and continuously sapped by persecution, weakened by half-heartedness, temptations and apostasy, yet capable, in its very irreligiosity, of founding its political life on the truths and rights taken from the Bible. And indeed, chapters of holy History are reproduced in the course of profane History by trials that constitute a Passion, the Passion of Israel. For many Jews who have long since forgotten or never learnt the narratives and the message of the Scriptures, the signs of the Revelation that was received—and the muted calls of this exalting Revelation—are reduced to the trauma of lived events long after the completion of the biblical canon, long after the Talmud was written down. (The Talmud is the other form of the Revelation, distinct from the Old Testament which Christians and Jews have in common.) For many Jews, holy History and the Revelation it entails are reduced to the memories of being burnt at the stake, the gas chambers, and even the public affronts received in international assemblies or heard in the refusal to allow them to emigrate. They experience the Revelation in the form of persecution!

These are the ‘history-making events’ of which Paul Ricœur spoke in taking up Emil Fackenheim’s expression. Do they not refer us to the Bible that remains their living space? Does not the reference materialize in reading, and is not reading a way of inhabiting? The volume of the book as a form of living space? It is in this sense, too, that Israel is a people of the Book, and that its relation to the Revelation is unique of its kind. Its actual land is based on the Revelation. Its nostalgia for the land is fed on texts. It derives nothing from belonging in some organic way to a particular piece of soil. There is certainly in this a presence to the world where the paradox of transcendence is less unusual.

For many Jews today, communities and individuals alike, the Revelation is still in keeping with the conception of a communication between Heaven and Earth, such as the plain meaning of biblical narratives would have it. It is accepted by many excellent minds that cross the deserts of the religious crisis of our time by finding fresh water in the literal expression of Sinaitic Epiphany, of the Word of God calling to the prophets, and in the confidence in an uninterrupted tradition of a prodigious History that testifies to it. Both orthodox people and communities, untouched by the uncertainties of modernity, even when they sometimes take part professionally in the fever of the industrial world, remain, despite the simplicity of this metaphysics, spiritually attuned to the noble virtues and most mysterious secrets of divine proximity. Men and communities thus live, in the literal sense of the term, outside History where, for them, events neither come to pass nor relate to those that have already passed. It is nevertheless true that for modern Jews—and they are the majority—to whom the intellectual destiny of the West, with its victories and its crises, is not borrowed clothing, the problem of the Revelation insistently arises and demands new conceptions. How are we to understand the ‘exteriority’ particular to truths and revealed signs striking the human mind which, despite its ‘interiority’, is a match for the world and is called reason? How, without being of the world, can they strike reason?

Indeed, these questions arise acutely for us, for anyone among men today still sensitive to these truths and signs, but who, living in modern times, is more or less troubled by the news of the end of metaphysics, by the victories of psychoanalysis, sociology and political economy; to whom linguistics has taught the significance of signs without signifieds and who, in the light of this, confronted with all these intellectual splendours—or shadows—sometimes wonders if he is not present at a magnificent funeral for a dead god. The ontological status or regime of the Revelation is thus worrying essentially for Jewish thought, and its problem should come before any presentation of the content of this Revelation.

### *The Structure of a Revelation: The Call to Exegesis*

However, we shall devote this first section to explaining the structure presented by the content of the Revelation in Judaism. Certain inflections in this structure will already, in fact, suggest the sense in which the transcendence of the message can be understood. I think that this explanation will also be useful because the forms of the Revelation as they appear to Jews are not well known to the general public. Ricœur has given a brilliant account of the organization of the Old Testament which Judaism and Christianity have in common. This will certainly save me having to go back over the various literary genres of the Bible: prophetic texts, the narration of founding historical events, prescriptive and sapiential texts, hymns and thanksgiving. Each genre is said to have a revelatory function and power.

But for the Jewish reading of the Bible these distinctions are perhaps not established with the same steadfastness as in the lucid classification proposed to us. Prescriptive lessons that are above all to be found in the Pentateuch, in the Torah—the 'Torah of Moses', as it is called—are privileged in Jewish consciousness for the relation they establish with God. They are required in every text; certain psalms would allude to figures and events, but also to commandments: 'I am a sojourner on earth; hide not thy commandments from me!' says Psalms 119:19 in particular. The sapiential texts are prophetic and prescriptive. Between the 'genres', then, allusions and references visible to the naked eye circulate in multiple directions.

One further remark: There is a vital search, throughout, to go beyond the plain meaning. This meaning is, of course, known and acknowledged as plain and as wholly valid at its level. But this meaning is perhaps less easy to establish than the translations of the Old Testament lead one to suppose. It is by going back to the Hebrew text from the translations, venerable as they may be, that the strange or mysterious ambiguity or polysemy authorized by the Hebrew syntax is revealed: words coexist rather than immediately being co-ordinated or subordinated with and to one another, contrary to what is predominant in the languages that are said to be developed or functional. Returning to the Hebrew text certainly and legitimately makes it more difficult than one thinks to decide on the ultimate intention of a verse, and even more so on a book of the Old Testament. Indeed, the distinction between the plain meaning and the meaning to be deciphered, the search for this meaning buried away and for a meaning even deeper than it contains, all gives emphasis to the specifically Jewish exegesis of Scripture. There is not one verse, not one word of the Old Testament—read as a religious reading, read by way of Revelation—that does not half-open on to an entire world, unsuspected at first, which envelops what was easily read. 'R. Akiba went as far as to interpret the ornamentation of the letters of the sacred text', says the Talmud. The scribes and scholars who are said to be slaves of the letter attempted to extract from the letters, as if they were the folded-back wings of the Spirit, all the horizons that the flight of the Spirit can embrace, the whole meaning that these letters carry or to which they awake. 'Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this': this part of Psalms 62:11 proclaims that innumerable meanings dwell in the Word of God. At least if we are to believe the Rabbi who, already in the name of this pluralism, scrutinizes the very verse that teaches him this right to scrutinize! This is the exegesis of the Old Testament called *Midrash*, or search, or interrogation. It is at work well before grammatical research, which came late, although it was well received, and was added to the decipherment of enigmas locked away in a quite different mode to the grammatical in the grammar of Scripture.

The diversity of styles and the contradictions of the text of the Old Testament did not escape this awakening attention. They became the pretexts for new and more penetrating readings, for renewing meanings that measure the acuteness of the reading. Such is the breadth of Scripture. A Revelation that can also be called a mystery; not a mystery that dispels clarity, but one that demands greater intensity.<sup>1</sup>

But this invitation to seek and decipher, to *Midrash*, already constitutes the reader's participation in the Revelation, in Scripture. The reader, in his own fashion, is a scribe. This provides us with a first indication of what we might call the 'status' of the Revelation: its word coming from elsewhere, from outside, and simultaneously dwelling in the person who receives it. More than just a listener, is not the human being the unique 'terrain' in which exteriority can appear? Is not the personal—that is, the unique 'of itself'—necessary to the breach and the revelation taking place from outside? Is the human as a break in substantial identity not, 'of itself', the possibility for a message coming from outside not to strike 'free reason', but to take on the unique figure that cannot be reduced to the contingency of a 'subjective impression'? The Revelation as calling to the unique within me is the significance particular to the signifying of the Revelation. It is as if the multiplicity of persons—is not this the very meaning of the personal?—were the condition for the plenitude of 'absolute truth'; as if every person, through his uniqueness, were the guarantee of the revelation of a unique aspect of truth, and some of its points would never have been revealed if some people had been absent from mankind. This is not to say that truth is acquired anonymously in History, and that it finds 'supporters' in it! On the contrary, it is to suggest that the totality of the true is constituted from the contribution of multiple people: the uniqueness of each act of listening carrying the secret of the text; the voice of the Revelation, as inflected, precisely, by each person's ear, would be necessary to the 'Whole' of the truth. That the Word of the living God may be heard in diverse ways does not mean only that the Revelation measures up to those listening to it, but that this measuring up measures up the Revelation: the multiplicity of irreducible people is necessary to the dimensions of meaning; the multiple meanings are multiple people. We can thus see the whole impact of the reference made by the Revelation to exegesis, to the freedom of this exegesis, the participation of the person listening to the Word making itself heard, but also the possibility for the Word to travel down the ages to announce the same truth in different times.

A text from Exodus (25:15), prescribing the making of the holy Ark of the Tabernacle, makes provision for poles to be used in transporting the Ark: 'The poles shall remain in the rings of the Ark; they shall not be taken from it'. The Law carried by the Ark is always ready to be moved. It is not attached to a point in space and time, but is continuously transportable and ready to be transported. This is also indicated by the famous Talmudic apologue relating the return of Moses on earth at the time of R. Akiba. He enters the Talmudic scholar's school, understands nothing of the master's lesson, but learns from a celestial voice that the teaching he has not understood at all comes, however, from himself. It was given 'to Moses at Sinai'. This contribution of readers, listeners and pupils to the open-ended work of the Revelation is so essential to it that I was able to read recently, in a quite remarkable book by a rabbinical scholar from the end of the eighteenth century, that the slightest question put by a novice pupil to his schoolmaster constitutes an ineluctable articulation of the Revelation which was heard at Sinai.

However, how is such a call to the person in his historical uniqueness—and this means that the Revelation requires History (which means, outside all theosophical 'wisdom', a

personal God: is a God not personal, before all other characteristics, inasmuch as he appeals to persons?)—how is such a call to the diversity of people insured against the arbitrary nature of subjectivism? But perhaps there are crucial reasons why a certain risk of subjectivism, in the pejorative sense of the term, must be run by the truth.

This in no way means that in Jewish spirituality the Revelation is left to the arbitrariness of subjective fantasies, that it desires to be without authority and that it is not highly characterized. Fantasy is not the essence of the subjective, even if it is its by-product. Without recourse to any doctrinal authority, the 'subjective' interpretations of the Jewish Revelation have managed to maintain the awareness of unity in a people in spite of its geographical dispersion. But, what is more, a distinction is allowed to be made between the personal originality brought to the reading of the book and the pure play of the fantasies of amateurs (or even of charlatans); this is made both by a necessary reference of the subjective to the historical continuity of the reading, and by the tradition of commentaries that cannot be ignored under the pretext that inspirations come to you directly from the text. A 'renewal' worthy of the name cannot avoid these references, any more than it can avoid reference to what is known as the oral Law.

### *Oral Law and Written Law*

The allusion to the oral Law leads us to point out another essential feature of the Revelation according to Judaism: the role of the oral tradition as recorded in the Talmud. It is presented in the form of discussions between rabbinical scholars that took place in the period between the first centuries before the Christian era and the sixth century after Christ. From the point of view of historians, these discussions continue more ancient traditions and reflect a whole process in which the centre of Jewish spirituality was transferred from the Temple to the house of study, from cult to study. These discussions and teachings are principally concerned with the prescriptive part of the Revelation: rituals, morality and law. But they are also concerned in their fashion, and by way of apologues, with the whole spiritual universe of men: philosophy and religion. Everything is bound up around the prescriptive. Outside Judaism, or within de-Judaized Judaism, the picture that one has of the prescriptive—which is reduced to the pettiness of rules to be respected, or to the 'yoke of the law'—is not a true picture.

Contrary to what is often thought, the oral Law is not just a matter, moreover, of commentary on the Scriptures, whatever the eminent role incumbent upon it on this level may be. It is religiously thought as deriving from its own specific source of Sinaitic Revelation. Here, then, is an oral Torah, next to the written Torah and of at least equal authority.<sup>2</sup> This authority is claimed by the Torah itself. It is accepted by religious tradition and agreed upon by the philosophers of the Middle Ages, including Maimonides. For Jews it is a Revelation that complements the Old Testament. It is able to enunciate principles and to give information lacking in the written text or passed over in silence. The Tannaim, the oldest scholars of the Talmud, whose generation comes to a close towards the end of the second century after Christ, speak with sovereign authority.

Clearly, the oral teaching of the Talmud remains inseparable from the Old Testament. It orientates its interpretation. This reading—scrutinizing the text in the literal mode described above, to which the Hebrew of the original of the Bible miraculously lends itself—is precisely the way the Talmud works. The entire prescriptive part of the Torah is 'reworked' by the rabbinical scholars, and the entire narrative part is expanded and clar-

ified in a specific way. In such a way that it is the Talmud that allows the Jewish reading of the Bible to be distinguished from the Christian reading or the 'scientific' reading of the historians and philosophers. Judaism is definitely the Old Testament, but through the Talmud.

The spirit guiding this reading, which is said to be naively 'literal', perhaps consists, in actual fact, in maintaining each specific text in the context of the Whole. The connections that may appear verbal or attached to the letter represent, in fact, an effort to let the 'harmonics' of one verse resound within other verses. It is also a question of keeping the passages that appeal only to our taste for spiritualization and interiorization in contact with tougher texts, in order to extract from these, too, their real truth. Yet it is a question too, in extending the remarks that may seem severe, of bringing together the generous vital forces of harsh realities. The language of the Old Testament is so suspicious of the rhetoric which does not stutter that its chief prophet was 'slow of speech and of tongue'. There is undoubtedly more to this than just the avowal of being limited in this defect: there is the awareness of a kerygma which does not forget the weight of the world, the inertia of men, and the deafness of understandings.

The freedom of exegesis is upheld at this Talmudic school. Tradition, running through history, does not impose its conclusions, but the contact with what it sweeps along. Does this constitute an authority on doctrinal matters? Tradition is perhaps the expression of a way of life thousands of years old which conferred unity on the texts, however disparate the historians claim their origins may have been. The miracle of confluence, which is as great as the miracle of the common origin attributed to these texts, is the miracle of that way of life. The text is pulled tight over what tradition expands, like the strings on a violin's wood. The Scriptures thus have a mode of being that is quite different from the exercise material for grammarians, entirely subject to philologists; a mode of being whereby the history of each piece of writing counts less than the lessons it contains, and where its inspiration is measured by what it inspires. These are a few of the features of the 'ontology' of the Scriptures.

We have said that the oral Torah was written down in the Talmud. This oral Torah is thus itself written. But its writing down came late. It is explained by contingent and dramatic circumstances of Jewish History, external to the nature and specific modality of its message. Even written down, however, the oral Torah preserves in its style its reference to oral teaching; the liveliness provided by a master addressing disciples who listen as they question. In written form, it reproduces the diversity of opinions expressed, with extreme care taken to name the person providing them or commenting upon them. It records the multiplicity of opinions and the disagreement between the scholars. The great disagreement running all through the Talmud between the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai (in the first century before Christ) is called the discussion or disagreement 'for the glory of Heaven'. Despite all the care it takes to reach an agreement, the Talmud never ceases to apply to the differences of opinion between Hillel and Shammai—and to the flow of divergent ideas which proceed from them through the successive generations of scholars—the well-known phrase: 'These and those alike, are the words of the living God'. A discussion or dialectic which remains open to readers, who are worthy of this name only if they enter into it on their own account. Consequently, the Talmudic texts, even in the physiognomical aspects that their typography takes on, are accompanied by commentaries, and by commentaries on and discussions of these commentaries. The page is continuously overlaid and prolongs the life of the text which,

whether it is weakened or reinforced, remains 'oral'. The religious act of listening to the revealed word is thus identified with the discussion whose open-endedness is desired with all the audacity of its problematics. To the extent that Messianic times are often designated as the epoch of conclusions. Not that this prevents discussion, even on this point! One text from Berakoth (64a) says: 'R. Hiyya b. Ashi said in the name of Rab: The disciples of the wise have no rest either in this world or in the world to come, as it says, *They go from strength to strength, every one of them appeareth before God in Zion* (Psalms 84:7)'. This going from strength to strength is attributed pre-eminently by R. Hiyya to the scholars of the Law. And it is the eleventh-century French commentator, Rashi, whose explanations guide every reader, even the modern one, through the sea of the Talmud, who adds by way of commentary: 'They go from one house of study to another, from one problem to another'. The Revelation is a constant hermeneutics of the Word, whether written or oral, discovering new landscapes, and problems and truths fitted into one another. It reveals itself not only as the source of wisdom, the path of deliverance and elevation, but also as the nourishment of this life and the object of the particular enjoyment that goes with acquiring knowledge. To the extent that Maimonides, in the twelfth century, was able to attach to the hermeneutics of the Revelation the pleasure or happiness that Aristotle attached to the contemplation of pure essences in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

As the 'people of the Book' through its land which extends the volume of in-folios and scrolls, Israel is also the people of the Book in another sense: it has fed itself, almost in the physical sense of the term, on books, like the prophet who swallows a scroll in Ezekiel Chapter 3. The remarkable digestion of celestial food! As we have said, this excludes the idea of a doctrinal authority. The strict formulas which, in the shape of dogmatic principles, would bring the multiple and sometimes disparate traces left in Scripture by the Revelation back to unity, are absent from the spirit of Judaism. No Credo brings together or orientates the reading of texts, according to the method in which even the renewal of the reading and of the meanings given to the verses would still be like a new wine poured into old goatskins and preserving the old forms and even the bouquet of the past. In Judaism, the formulation of articles of faith is a late philosophical or theological genre. It does not appear until the Middle Ages—that is, after an already well-ordered religious life of two thousand years (to go by historical criticism, which is always making the spiritualization of texts more recent while looking much further back for their genealogy anchored in the mythical). Between the first formulations of the Jewish Credo—which is to vary as to the actual number of essential points—and the opening out of the prophetic message of Israel situated in the eighth century before Christ (the period in which many of the Mosaic elements of the Pentateuch are said to have been composed), two thousand years have already passed; more than a thousand years separated these formulations from the completion of the biblical canon, and several centuries from the writing down of the Talmudic teachings.

### Halakhah and Aggadah

But if there is no dogmatism in the Credo to summarize the content of the Revelation, the unity of this Revelation is concretely expressed for Jews in another form. Indeed, crossing the distinction between written Revelation and oral Revelation which is particular to Judaism is the distinction, to which we have already alluded, between the texts

and teachings relating to conduct and formulating practical laws, the *Halakhah*—the actual Torah in which can be recognized what Ricoeur qualified as prescriptive—and, on the other hand, the texts and teachings of homiletic origin which, in the form of apologues, parables and the development of biblical narratives, represent the theologico-philosophical part of tradition and are collected together under the concept of *Aggadah*. The first gives to the Jewish Revelation, both written and oral, its own physiognomy, and has maintained as an orthopraxis the unity of the very body of the Jewish people throughout dispersion and History. From the outset Jewish revelation is commandment, and piety is obedience to it. But an obedience which, while accepting practical decrees, does not stop the dialectic called upon to determine them. This dialectic continues and is valid by itself in its style of open-ended discussion.

The distinction between oral Law and written Law on the one hand, and *Aggadah* and *Halakhah* on the other, constitute, as it were, the four cardinal points of the Jewish Revelation. The motivations of the *Halakhah* remain, let me repeat, under discussion. This is because, through the discussion of the rules of conduct, the whole order of thought is present and living. It gives access to the exercise of the intellect from the obedience and the casuistry it entails. This is very significant: the thought that issues from the prescriptive goes beyond the problem of the material gesture to be accomplished; although, right in the heart of the dialectic, it also enunciates what conduct is to be kept, what the *Halakhah* is. A decision which is not, therefore, strictly speaking, a conclusion. It is as if it were based on a tradition of its own, although it would have been impossible without the discussion which it in no way cancels out. The antinomies of the dialectic that are the waves of the 'sea of the Talmud' are accompanied by 'decisions' or 'decrees'. And very soon after the completion of the Talmud, 'decision manuals' appeared which fixed the form of the *Halakhah*. A work of several centuries which culminated in a definitive code entitled *Shulchan Arukh*, 'Prepared Table', in which the life of the faithful Jew was fixed down to the smallest details.

Jewish revelation is based on prescription, the *mitzvah*, whose strict accomplishment was taken, in the eyes of Saint Paul, to be the yoke of the Law. It is in any case through the Law, which is in no way felt as a stigma attached to being enslaved, that the unity of Judaism comes about. On the religious plane, this unity is clearly distinct from any doctrinal unity which, in any case, is the root of all doctrinal formulation. Rashi's first rabbinical commentary, which opens the 'Jewish editions' of the Pentateuch, expresses the surprise caused by the first verse of the Torah: why begin with the account of Creation, when the prescriptions begin in Exodus 12:2: 'This month shall be for you the beginning of months'? The commentator thus endeavours to explain the religious value of the account of Creation. It is observance which gives unity to the Jewish people. In contemporary Judaism this unity is still alive through the awareness of its ancient status and is still accorded respect even when the Law, in the strict sense, is poorly observed. It would not be wrong to claim that it is this unity, conferred upon the Jews by the Law—observed in the past by everyone—which nourishes, without them actually knowing, those Jews who no longer practise, yet still feel a sense of solidarity with Jewish destiny. Finally, it is worth noting that the study of the commandments—the study of the Torah, that is, the resumption of the rabbinical dialectic—is equal in religious value to actually carrying them out. It is as if, in this study, man were in mystical contact with the divine will itself. The highest action of the practice of prescriptions, the prescription of prescriptions which equals them all, is the actual study of the (written or oral) Law.

## NOTES

- 1 Paul Ricoeur, 'Herméneutique de l'idée de la Révélation', in Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, et al., *La Révélation*, (Bruxelles: Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1984), p 20.
- 2 '*Espace vital*', means, literally, 'living space'. The term reflects the German word '*Lebensraum*' and is also used, in French, with the sense of that term: to refer to territory believed by a people or State to be essential to its development and well-being. There is no word for this concept in English, which simply borrows the German word rather than translate it. We have left the term in French, rather than impose the connotations of German expansionism which '*Lebensraum*' brings, connotations which are not necessarily, or not as inescapably, implied by the French. This has been confirmed by Levinas in a private correspondence with the editor: 'The expression "*espace vital*" . . . evokes the "nourishing terrain" of the book to which the land, in the geographical sense of the term, refers in Judaism, and so draws out its spiritual meaning. It does not necessarily refer to the biological *Lebensraum*'.
- 3 Paul Ricoeur, 'Herméneutique . . . '.
- 4 It invites our intelligence and protects it, at the same time, by the mystery which is its source, from the 'dangers' of its truth. A Talmudic apologue, commenting on Exodus 33: 21-2 ('And the Lord said: "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by"') says: 'Protection was needed, because the destructive powers had been given full powers to destroy.' The moment of truth is when all interdicts are lifted, when the questioning spirit is forbidden nothing. At this supreme instant, only the truth of the Revelation can protect against evil, for it is in the nature of all truth to risk giving evil, too, its freedom.
- 5 *Torah* is the name given to the twenty-four books of the Jewish Biblical canon; in its narrower sense, the *Torah of Moses* is the Pentateuch. In its widest meaning, *Torah* refers to the Bible and the Talmud together, including their commentaries and even the collected pieces and homiletic texts known as the *Aggadah*.
- 6 *Tractate Berakoth*, translated by Maurice Simon, in *The Babylonian Talmud*.
- 7 On this theme, see also ch. 3 of my *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, and the essay entitled 'Sans identité' in my *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Fata Morgana, 1972), pp. 85-101.
- 8 See *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*.
- 9 I write this as 'essance', an abstract noun used to indicate the verbal sense of the word 'être' (*Being*).
- 10 Freedom means, therefore, the hearing of a vocation which I am the only person able to answer - or even the power to answer right there, where I am called.

Translated by Sarah Richmond

## 13

## The Pact

Published in *L'Au-Delà du Verset* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1982), pp. 82-106, 'The Pact' is a particularly good example of the Talmudic reading which Levinas produces virtually every year. It complies with all the criteria laid down in the previous chapter: its formal presentation of the material is an exemplary model of an ethical transcendental philosophy at work; while the content concerns precisely a contemporary reaction to the way in which the covenants are handed down in the Bible, and the sense of community they establish. The subtlety of analysis and the skill with which its insights are revealed to us as a community of readers manage to bring us together into an adherence to the Law of the text that in no sense subjugates each concrete response to a single, universal reading. Levinas therefore even manages to show here how, in one's ethical response, one is responsible for the other's responsibility.

S.H.

They turned their faces towards Mount Gerizim and opened with the blessing etc. Our Rabbis taught: There was a benediction in general and a benediction in particular, likewise a curse in general and a curse in particular. (Scripture states): *to learn, to teach, to observe* [keep] and *to do*; consequently there are four (duties associated with each commandment). Twice four are eight and twice eight are sixteen. It was similar at Sinai and the plains of Moab; as it is said, *These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses* etc., and it is written, *Keep therefore the words of this covenant* etc. Hence there were forty-eight covenants in connection with each commandment. R. Simeon excludes (the occasion of) Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal and includes that of the Tent of Meeting in the wilderness. The difference of opinion here is the same as that of the teachers in the following: R. Ishmael says: General laws were proclaimed at Sinai and particular laws in the Tent of Meeting. R. Akiba says: Both general and particular laws were proclaimed at Sinai, repeated in the Tent of Meeting, and for the third time in the plains of Moab. Consequently there is not a single precept written in the Torah in connection with which forty-eight covenants were not made. R. Simeon b.

Judah of Kefar Acco said in the name of R. Simeon: There is not a single precept written in the Torah in connection with which forty-eight times 603,550 covenants were not made. Rabbi said: According to the reasoning of R. Simeon b. Judah of Kefar Acco who said in the name of R. Simeon that there is not a single precept written in the Torah in connection with which forty-eight times 603,550 covenants were not made, it follows that for each Israelite there are 603,550 commandments. (And forty-eight covenants were made in connection with each of them.) What is the issue between them? – R. Mesharsheya said: The point between them is that of personal responsibility and responsibility for others [*the responsibility of responsibility*].<sup>1</sup> (Tractate *Sotah* 37a–b)

### The Formal Law

The problem that concerns us in this conference – that of the community – is, without doubt, a topical one, due to the unease felt by man today within a society whose boundaries have become, in a sense, planetary: a society in which, due to the ease of modern communications and transport, and the worldwide scale of its industrial economy, each person feels simultaneously that he is related to humanity as a whole, and equally that he is alone and lost. With each radio broadcast and each day's papers one may well feel caught up in the most distant events, and connected to mankind everywhere; but one also understands that one's personal destiny, freedom or happiness is subject to causes which operate with inhuman force. One understands that the very progress of technology – and here I am taking up a commonplace – which relates everyone in the world to everyone else, is inseparable from a necessity which leaves all men anonymous. Impersonal forms of relation come to replace the more direct forms, the 'short connections' as Ricoeur calls them, in an excessively programmed world.

Certainly, the context of State and nation is less abstract than that of the planet, but it is still too broad, and the universal ties of the law guarantee a condition in which men find themselves side by side rather than face to face. Even within the family, human relationships are less alive and less direct, because of the multiplicity of systems in which each person is involved. But perhaps the parental structure has never fully satisfied man's social vocation, and thus gives rise to the search for a more circumscribed society than today's, one whose members would know each other. Some think that to achieve this it is necessary to spend time together in personal encounters. Is this really the solution? The achievement of a concrete but marginal society, existing only on the edge of real society which, despite its impersonal structure, is definitely founded in 'the nature of things'? Will our social nature really be fulfilled by a leisure culture, a Sunday society, the temporary society of the club?

If the structure of a more intimate social life is to give people a sense of community, one which exults in the recognition of each person by his

fellows, surely this structure cannot be artificial? A healthy society is one which reflects the vitality of its contact with the world. Modern professional life, with the points of focus it imposes, its towns, industry and crowds – as well as its intercontinental dispersion – retains an understanding of the things which matter today. It is not the result of an aberration or an error. It is the very essence of modernity. The cohesive nature of the modern world, planned by means of Law and regulation, and all the 'remote connections' it sets up are constitutive of today's reality, even if these relationships make us march forward together rather than turn our faces towards each other. And this brings us back, does it not, to the point from which we set out?

### Our Talmudic Passage

But perhaps we have not properly considered all the implications of the Law, which may have got lost in the over-formal approach of Western society. This is what brings me to the Talmud.

We may have, here, good reason to study one of Israel's ancient texts. The Talmudic text I have chosen is relatively simple, although, as always, unusual. It concerns the problem we have raised. It is about a covenant. It interprets it in its own way, which appears to be one of not touching upon the matter at all. It interprets the covenant made between the Eternal God of Israel, and Israel's children. A covenant by which the society of Israel is founded, through the legislation of the Torah. I have entitled the passage 'The Pact'. It comes from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sotah*, 37a–b. It is very short, half a page.

I must place it in its context. The *Gemara* sequence from which it is drawn follows on from a *Mishnah* which is related to a completely different theme. This *Mishnah* discusses the question of whether, for certain liturgical formulae, such as 'blessings', 'oaths', etc., it is fitting to use Hebrew or the profane languages. The *Mishnah* is followed by several pages of *Gemara*. It is from these pages that the short sequence distributed to you has been taken. It is, in fact, a digression from the main theme, language, an area where the problem of Greek continually arises. The theme of language will emerge at a certain point in our passage. It is in no way a neutral or irrelevant theme. It introduces – perhaps in disguise – the problem of the relationship between the particular case of Israel and the universal state of mankind. We will find this echoed in the commentary of our passage.

### From the Bible to the Talmud

The text presents itself as a commentary to chapter 27 of Deuteronomy, but it also refers to chapter 7 of Joshua. By looking at these texts, along with

taught at Sinai, so that Sinai and the tent of meeting should be counted together as a single covenant. The plains of Moab are the second covenant, and Mounts Ebal and Gerizim the third. Perhaps Rabbi Ishmael also thought there was a further possible problem which ought to be discussed, which I shall not discuss here: he may have contested the absolute equality accorded to the study of the general principles and that of the particular cases of the Law. He believed, of course, that the particular and the general were both important. Without that belief, he could not be a great Talmudist. But all the same, he considered the general principles to be more important. Does this make him more liberal than Rabbi Akiba? You must ask the Talmudists in this hall who are more competent than I for a reply to that question. Perhaps Rabbi Ishmael thought that the ceremony in which everyone is able to see everyone else is of importance. Perhaps some of his ideas were close to the ones we have formulated here concerning the distinction between society and community, so that he believed the experience of the community was an essential part of the revelation.

Rabbi Akiba seems to be opposed to these ideas. He maintains that the general and the particular are absolutely equal in worth. He seems to rule out the ceremony in which everyone sees everyone else. Perhaps he thinks that a concrete situation in which men are present to each other does not constitute a true face-to-face.

So far we have counted forty-eight covenants. We have tried to understand this calculation in terms of the affirmation of the various dimensions of the Law. These dimensions cannot be accommodated by the formalism of today's law, which is utterly anonymous; a fact which may be regarded as the origin of the crisis facing modern society.

### The Law and Interpersonal Relations

Forty-eight covenants? We can do better. 'Rabbi Simeon ben Judah of Kefar Acco said in the name of Rabbi Simeon:' – this is the same Rabbi Simeon that disputed the importance of the ceremony at Gerizim – 'There is not a single precept written in the Torah in connection with which forty-eight times 603,550 covenants were not made'. The number of covenants made in the course of these three ceremonies is said, then, to be 603,550 times 48. Where does this figure of 603,550 come from? It represents the number of Israelites standing at the foot of Sinai. But why do we multiply by that number? Because the Covenant concerning the revealed Law does not have the character of an abstract and impersonal juridical act; rather, its acceptance establishes living bonds with all those adopting the Law. Within this Covenant each person finds himself responsible for everyone else; each act of the Covenant expresses more than six hundred thousand personal acts

of responsibility. The forty-eight dimensions of the pact become  $48 \times 603,550$ . This might, of course, raise a smile. It is a large number. But it is not an infinite one. The Israelites, more correctly described as men participating in a common humanity, answer for each other before a genuinely human law. In the making of this Covenant the relationship between one person and the other is not a matter of indifference. Everyone is looking at me! It is not necessary to gather on the mountains of Ebal or Gerizim, to gaze at length into each other's eyes, for there to be a situation in which everyone looks at everyone else. Everyone looks at me. Let us not forget the seventy languages in which the Torah is read out. The Torah belongs to everyone: everyone is responsible for everyone else. The phrase 'Love your neighbour as yourself' still assumes the prototype of love to be love of oneself. Here, the ethic is one which says: 'Be responsible for the other as you are responsible for yourself.' In this way we avoid the assumption about self-love which is often accepted as the very definition of a person. But we have not finished yet: 'Rabbi said . . .' The Rabbi speaking at this point is Rabbenu Hakadosh, who gave the *Mishnah* its written form, the highest Talmudic authority after, or perhaps alongside, Rabbi Akiba. 'Rabbi said: According to the reasoning of R. Simeon b. Judah of Kefar Acco, who said in the name of R. Simeon . . .' What a lot of references! Do not be surprised, those of you who may be attending your first Talmudic lesson, by this accumulation of names. In the Talmud it is always of great importance to specify, for each saying, who said it. A true teaching is one in which the universal nature of the truth it announces does not obliterate the name or the identity of the person who said it. The Talmudic scholars even believe that the Messiah will come at the moment when everyone quotes what they have learned, in the name of the person they learned it from. So the Rabbi says: 'there is not a single precept written in the Torah in connection with which forty-eight times 603,550 covenants were not made, it follows that for each Israelite there are 603,550 commandments. (And forty-eight covenants were made in connection with each of them.)' Doesn't this repeat what we heard a moment ago? The *Gemara* asks this question: 'What is the issue between them?' And R. Mesharsheya finds it: 'R. Mesharsheya said: The point between them is that of personal responsibility and responsibility for others [the responsibility of responsibility].' One is not only responsible for everyone else, but responsible also for the responsibility of everyone else. So forty-eight must be multiplied by 603,550, and the product multiplied by 603,550 again. This point is extremely important. A moment ago, we saw a part played by something resembling the recognition of the Other, the love of the Other. To such an extent that I offer myself as guarantee of the Other, of his adherence and fidelity to the Law. His concern is my concern. But is not my concern also his? Isn't he