

## Catastrophe as Religious Experience: Levinas, Leibowitz, and the Shoah<sup>1</sup>

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“The Jewish conscience ... regains its unity and unicity in moments of great crisis, when the strange combination of texts and men, who often cannot speak the language of these texts, is renewed in sacrifice and persecution. The memory of these crises sustains the quiet intervals.”

— Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*<sup>2</sup>

The trajectory of modern Jewish thought was profoundly shaped by the catastrophic events of the twentieth century that culminated in the Shoah. Yet responses to such catastrophes are as varied as Jewish thinkers themselves. The opposing views of philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Yeshayahu Leibowitz on the religious implications of catastrophe exemplify a broader conflict in postwar Jewish thought: while wartime persecution became an integral part of Jewish religious experience after the Shoah for Levinas, it remained religiously irrelevant for Leibowitz. Each of these figures sought to create a new bedrock for post-Shoah Judaism, and each claims to represent the essentially Jewish response to the Shoah. The trouble is that, since their views seem incompatible, we are led to wonder whether Judaism was after all irreparably fragmented by the Shoah—precisely the defeatism they both resisted. Though their answers to the call of catastrophe differ radically, I will argue that each figure’s views should be regarded as different sides of the same coin, drawn from the same concern for solidifying Jewish identity amidst post-Shoah uncertainty. After the very continuation of Judaism was put at risk during the war, these thinkers were faced with a daunting question: what, after all this, is Judaism? For both for Levinas and Leibowitz, though the latter seems to deny it, the Shoah ultimately necessitates a turning away from subjective religious experience and reaffirms the centrality of commandment as the defining element of Judaism.

The postwar era in which Levinas and Leibowitz wrote was a time of religious anxiety in which thousands of years of religious tradition were tested by the persecution of the Jews of Europe. The Shoah incited an upheaval in Jewish thought, and theology in particular, as

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characterized by Richard Rubenstein in the preface of his 1966 *After Auschwitz*:

It would have been better had six million Jews not died, but they have. We cannot restore the religious world which preceded their demise nor can we ignore the fact that the catastrophe has had and will continue to have an extraordinary influence on Jewish life. Although Jewish history is replete with disaster, none has been so radical in its total import as the Holocaust. Our images of God, man, and the moral order have been permanently impaired. No Jewish theology will possess even a remote degree of relevance to contemporary Jewish life if it ignores the question of God and the death camps.<sup>3</sup>

Rubenstein's theology sparked split reactions. Some Jews, especially many survivors of the camps, shared Rubenstein's misgivings about traditional faith. As Levinas writes about such survivors, "Chapter 53 of Isaiah," which suggests that the innocent bear the suffering of all, "was drained of all meaning for them" (DF 12). This spelled the end of the classic form of theodicy—as Susan Neiman defines it, "the systematic justification of suffering, and of God's goodness in the face of it."<sup>4</sup> While other catastrophes in the history of the West could be redeemed by their positive effects, the Shoah, the epitome of what Levinas called "useless suffering," rendered this logic impossible. Some Jews stopped practicing out of doubts born from the Shoah; as Primo Levi said, "There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God."<sup>5</sup> But many others became more religious than they had been before the war and thought the postwar period both occasioned and necessitated a revival of Judaism.<sup>6</sup> As we will see, Levinas and Leibowitz clearly fall into the latter group: each attempted to reestablish what he felt was the core of both Jewish religious experience and Judaism itself.

### EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Born into a Jewish family in Lithuania in 1906, Levinas received a basic Jewish education but largely left it behind in his young adulthood, when he went on to study phenomenology at various universities in Germany. He would be nearly forty by the time he began studying Talmud and rediscovered the Jewish textual tradition in postwar Paris. Throughout the arc of his thought I am about to lay out, we see the influence that historical events, specifically crises, had on his post-Shoah writings. In the late piece "Signature," Levinas explicitly describes his corpus as, "dominated by the presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror" (DF 291).

While serving in the French army, Levinas was captured in 1940 and sent to a prisoner of war camp in occupied France. In 1942 he was relocated to a special work unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Germany, not far from the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. During this time, "The French uniform still protected us from Hitlerian violence," as he

writes in a short text on “Bobby,” a dog that roamed around outside his camp (DF 152). Though his life was protected, we see from his writings that he felt dehumanized by the experience of segregation into a Jewish-only camp. He writes that the gaze of Aryan passersby on his labor unit “stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes” (DF 153). In the camp, he writes that Jews experienced their Jewishness as “beings entrapped in their species” and concluded that “anti-Semitism is the archetype of all internment” (DF 153). In contrast to Levinas’s dehumanizing captors, Bobby the dog’s playful trust in the Jewish prisoners, his “animal faith,” rehumanized the prisoners: “For him, there was no doubt that we were men” (DF 153).

This period was fundamental in Levinas’s move away from the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, who had been his mentor and whose genius Levinas praised in numerous early texts.<sup>7</sup> All this changed, however, when Heidegger joined the Nazi party in 1933 in order to serve as Rector of the University of Freiburg. He said in his inaugural address that his position demanded “rootedness in the essence of the German university” and “that unyielding spiritual mission that forces the fate of the German people to bear the stamp of its history.”<sup>8</sup> As per Nazi ideology, this German “essence” excluded all traces of Jewish influence. Levinas began to move away from the focus on Being in Heidegger’s philosophy, and toward a philosophy emphasizing “the Other” as a source of escape from Being.<sup>9</sup> Drawing upon Levinas’s recently published wartime diaries, Sean Hand writes that for much of the war Levinas departed from philosophy entirely and turned to literature, notably Proust.<sup>10</sup> While Levinas wrote little on Jewish themes early on, he begins to cite the Torah in the notebooks around 1944.

The haunting nature of the Shoah echoed his personal experience at liberation. His biographer writes: “For Levinas, the return from captivity also meant the discovery of horror. His whole family in Lithuania had been murdered ... by machine-gun fire in Kaunas. Levinas never spoke about it.”<sup>11</sup> Only Levinas’s wife and daughter, who had been hidden by a close friend, fellow philosopher Maurice Blanchot, survived the Shoah. We see this in the dedication of *Otherwise Than Being*, considered by many to be Levinas’s most important philosophical work. He writes in Hebrew, as opposed to his philosophical language, French: “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists” after which he lists his lost family members and concludes, “May their souls be clutched in the link of life.”<sup>12</sup>

As Levinas put it himself, he returned from the war to “a world put into question by Hitler’s triumphs.”<sup>13</sup> In a 1968 essay about Martin Buber, Levinas writes, “There is in the exegesis of texts, the ‘assumption’ of one’s history, as it is termed these days, the questions raised for today’s Jews by the ordeal they have just passed through, their need to regroup, to find themselves again.”<sup>14</sup> Levinas envisioned a way off of the path of despair and assimilation for diaspora Jews after the Shoah. He saw the persecution as a hopeful opportunity for the reappropriation of traditions like exegesis, and goes so far as to list the experience

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of persecution among the elements that “nourish Jewish thought.”

In Levinas’s 1966 essay “Honor Without a Flag” (translated as “Nameless”), he was explicit about the influence of the Shoah on his religious project:

The dropping away of all the forms between 1939 and 1945 reminded us ... of the fragility of our assimilation ... We returned to the desert ... We must—in reviving the memory of those non-Jews and Jews, who, without even knowing or seeing one another, found a way to behave amid total chaos, as if the world had not fallen apart ... we must, through such memories, open up a new access to the Jewish texts and give new priority to the inner life.<sup>15</sup>

The “forms” he mentions are the facades of toleration that crumbled under Nazism. With them collapsed most of Europe’s Jewish religious and cultural institutions, as well as the Jewish way of life they made possible, leaving European Jewry bereft of many prewar sources of unity and community—not to mention the almost unthinkable number of lost family members and spiritual leaders. Yet Levinas’s focus is never on the atrocities committed; he does not vow revenge or draw political conclusions. Rather, he grounds the need to renew Judaism in the fact that, amidst the chaos of the war, some “found a way to behave.” However few, those like Maurice Blanchot who resisted the violence seem to have inspired Levinas’s call for a “new access” to Jewish tradition, which becomes the priority of justice through the encounter with the Other.

In his essay “Judaism,” Levinas is concerned with what defines Judaism, no doubt responding to competing claims to “true” Judaism between Zionists, reform Jews, and other groups after the Shoah. He comes to reject narrow definitions of Judaism as simply cultural, religious, or national, for he sees the true essence of Judaism distinct from and extending beyond these concepts—as something that only becomes clear in times of crisis:

The Jewish conscience, in spite of its different forms and levels, regains its unity and unicity in moments of great crisis, when the strange combination of texts and men, who often cannot speak the language of these texts, is renewed in sacrifice and persecution. The memory of these crises sustains the quiet intervals. (DF 25)

“During these extraordinary moments,” he goes on to explain, conceptions of Judaism based on the miracle of Revelation alone are revealed to be insufficient. “In the place of the miracle of the unique source,” he writes, “there shines the marvel of confluence” that is Jewish life. In these moments, Jews experience “a voice calling from the depths of converging texts and reverberating in a sensibility and form of thought that are already there to greet it.” The textual voice is at once new and familiar, so the exegesis Levinas practices

is at once religiously innovative and traditional.

In defining moments of crisis and uncertainty, Judaism for Levinas is revealed as more than a nationality or even a people unified by their chosenness and religious revelation—both of which for him deprive Judaism of its “spiritual significance.” It instead becomes a collective “sensibility” that builds upon a textual tradition to bear what for Levinas is the unique commandment of Judaism. “What does the voice of Israel say?”

The traumatic experience of my slavery in Egypt constitutes my very humanity, a fact that immediately allies me to the workers, the wretched, and the persecuted peoples of the world. My uniqueness lies in the responsibility I display for the Other. (DF 25–6)

The uniqueness of the Jew, qua Jew, which for Levinas is his duty for justice and obligation to the Other, emerges out of the collective Jewish experience of persecution that begins with enslavement in Egypt. For Levinas, this defining commandment develops out of history and reality—a genuinely divine commandment, but one that is only realized in times of crisis.

## II LEIBOWITZ

Sharply counter to Levinas on the religious significance of lived experience, Leibowitz writes, “To consider history as the foundation for faith is to deplete religion of all religious significance.”<sup>16</sup> For Leibowitz, Judaism is distinguished not by its textual tradition, which is shared with the other religions of the book, or its history, which he does not consider unique, but by its form: the halakha, which “is essentially ahistoric” (JHV 97). Drawing upon a tradition of ahistorical Jewish thinkers, Leibowitz concludes that the vicissitudes of history are insignificant for Judaism, for “man is required to serve God in the world as it is” (JHV 102). This includes even the Nazi persecutions of Jews, which motivated Leibowitz’s family’s emigration from Germany to Palestine in 1935.<sup>17</sup> However influential they may have been for Leibowitz personally, he writes that these events have no religious significance:

The Holocaust of our generation is religiously meaningless. The Holocaust belonged to the course of the world, it merely exemplified the lot of the helpless who fall prey to the wicked. What was not done for the sake of Heaven, or was not suffered for the sake of Heaven, is indifferent from a religious point of view. (JHV 217)

Leibowitz insists that persecution, even if religiously motivated, should not elicit a religious response from its victims. Since Leibowitz sees the fulfillment of the halakha as the only means of access to God, ascribing religious significance to historical events as Levinas does is idolatrous—a misunderstanding of what is properly religious.

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Leibowitz summarizes this view in the essay “The Uniqueness of the Jewish People,” in which he argues that Jewish history or Israeli origin are insufficient criteria for capturing the essence of Judaism. He rejects the idea of Judaism as a “factual datum” or “natural entity” instead arguing that it is a “being of the mind,” for “a nation exists insofar as there is a consciousness of its existence” (JHV 80–81). Real events are barren of enduring value for Leibowitz, including religious value. He critiques Hegel’s theory of the religious significance of history, the notion that “if there is no world, God is no God” (JHV 45). But Leibowitz takes seriously the Biblical claim that God reigned before anything was created, and so “The world and all it contains are insignificant before God.” Since God created and elected the Jewish people, He is the ultimate source of religion, not they. Leibowitz summarizes this philosophical view: “Values are not rooted in reality; they are objects of aspiration beyond reality toward which one must strive from within reality” (JHV 80). Reality cannot be the foundation for the divine aspirations that by definition transcend it.

This view is consistent with Leibowitz’s readings of the Book of Job, the archetypal Biblical case of suffering testing belief. He reads God’s final response to Job as an attempt “to disabuse Job and his friends of the idea that man is the center of creation and a being of supreme value” (JHV 97). To attempt to justify the workings of the world using human reasoning as Job’s interlocutors do “deifies man and turns the deity into a functionary of humanity, whether as the moving force of history or as the guarantor of the morality springing from the human heart” (JHV 97-98).

After submitting to God, Job is put in proper relation to Him, removed of his initial expectation of protection from suffering. The force most counter to Leibowitz’s idea of faith *lishmah* (Job’s completely disinterested faith) is Western humanism, a term Levinas used to describe his own position, whose stated aim is the deification of man. Leibowitz insists that Job’s piety, piety properly understood, brings no protection from worldly harm.

Following Maimonides, religious actions are for Leibowitz the aim in themselves, not in the service of human needs or values, or even protection from catastrophe as devastating as Job’s. Providence is thus “essential,” for its own sake and purely religious, rather than “functional,” or instrumental toward human ends (JHV 59). Divine governance in this view works abstractly through God’s giving of the *halakha*, not as his intervention in or concern for particular historical events. With this claim, Leibowitz seems to provide a final answer to the problem of evil: providence is completely detached from history and thus cannot be legitimately put into question by historical events. Yet Leibowitz’s cold, resigned conclusion that “Natural things do happen, and at times cause harm” seems far too blasé after an event like the Shoah, which was not merely harm but near elimination (JHV 59). Leibowitz’s Judaism, completely devoid of concern for human reality, deprives us of the comfort of an ordered world that human beings have always sought from religion, from the cries of Job to those of Holocaust victims. His faith *lishmah* is truly and purely spiritual, but at what cost?

## III CONTESTING AN AHISTORICAL JUDAISM

Leibowitz's approach is fundamentally different than Levinas's, who, on philosophical grounds, considers religious experience a far more inclusive category than faith *lishmah*. For Leibowitz, Judaism—insofar as it is defined by the halakha and is thereby eternal—is immune to history. For Levinas, such a view of religion becomes impossible after the reality of the Shoah:

What happened in Europe between 1933 and 1945, culminating in the death camps, led this sensibility [of a reunion with an ancient religious experience] beyond the impossible. Religion certainly does not begin with a triumphant, irrefutable Religion ... But there are human events which tear open their own envelope. There are events which burn up the concepts that express their substance ... The Nazi persecution and, following the exterminations, the extraordinary fulfillment of the Zionist dream, are religious events outside any revelation, church, clergy, miracle, dogma or belief." (DF 262-3, emphasis mine)

Irrefutable Religion here points to Hegel's conception of Christianity as God manifesting himself in history in the form of destiny. Such an unshakable view of religion as inevitability becomes untenable after the Shoah, as no principle of faith seems inviolable after such real horrors. Religious concepts are emptied of their meaning for a people so threatened by catastrophe, so their religion cannot be considered an unchanging entity. This leads Levinas to conclude that the Nazi persecutions, and also the founding of the state of Israel, are in fact "religious events" even though, like Exodus or the Babylonian Exile before them, they fall outside of faith *lishmah*.

Leibowitz criticizes what he calls "Religious historiosophers," who especially tend to read Isaiah and Jeremiah as historical, even political, thinkers in the Bible — the former defending the unique importance of Jerusalem, the latter denying it (JHV 100). But, he writes of these prophets, "The core of their religious message is not the survival or destruction of Jerusalem, but God-fearingness and service of God ... neither viewed the historical situation as possessing intrinsic religious significance" (JHV 100). Leibowitz uses the story of the destruction as a didactic tool akin to Maimonides's understanding of biblical parables. At its deepest level, the story is, along with the rest of biblical history, not about history itself, which would be to entertain "religious opportunism," but instead one's proper relation to God therein (JHV 101).

But Levinas would accept Leibowitz's pejorative label "historiosopher," given that he openly and methodically extrapolates metaphysical and religious principles from particular experiences in history. For Levinas, the commandment of responsibility for the Other, which is universal and transcendent, originates only from the particular encounter with

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the face of another person. He writes on the universality of ethics for Judaism:

This “position outside nations” of which the Pentateuch speaks, is realized in the concept of Israel and its particularism. It is a particularism that conditions universality, and it is a moral category rather than a historical fact ... According to one apologue in the Talmud, only on the spot where a chosen society worships can the salvation of a humanity come about. The destruction of the Temple compromised the economy of the world. (DF 22)

Inspired by certain Talmudic interpretations of historical events in scripture, Levinas routinely attributes great religious significance to historical events in their particularity. While Levinas does not focus on the importance of Israel or the Temple as Zionist “historiosophers” in the tradition of Isaiah might, he recognizes the influence they have had on Judaism and humanity more broadly. After all, the destruction of the Second Temple brought about Rabbinic Judaism, which served to bring God’s command for justice into the world.

For this reason, Levinas has no qualms with reading Jewish texts anachronistically. In one case, he concludes an interpretation of David seeking justice for the Gibeonites:

The Midrash affirms that the crime of extermination begins before murders take place, that oppression and economic uprooting already indicate its beginnings, that the laws of Nuremburg already contain the seeds of the horrors of the extermination camps and the “final solution.”<sup>18</sup>

Levinas is seemingly unable to separate his own experience of persecution from the reading of ancient Jewish texts. Once he has established the importance of particular experiences in what constitutes Judaism, his own experiences continually surface in unexpected places.

The personal underpinning of Levinas’s thought is clear in the connection he makes between the Nazi persecution of Jews and his understanding of Judaism as grounded in the reality of Jewish existence, regardless of Halakhic observance:

Let us imagine the apocalyptic atmosphere of the period 1933-1939! War is coming ... The Jewish question takes on metaphysical dimensions ... Without credo or worship, Judaism is lived out in a religious or apocalyptic way. This unique destiny, beyond the misery of a people, shows us the fundamental incompatibility between the spiritual and the idyllic. (DF 168)



Under circumstances of persecution in which Halakhic practice was impossible, Levinas affirms that Judaism survived through some other means. One might even go so far as to suggest that the sheer survival of the Jews in that apocalyptic time was a religious act, in line with Emil Fackenheim's proposed 614<sup>th</sup> mitzvah, in Levinas's wording: "The Jew, after Auschwitz, is pledged to his faithfulness to Judaism and to the material and even political conditions of its existence."<sup>19</sup> The purely conceptual carries little weight in reality for Levinas; the basis of religious experience must be found elsewhere. And so "the Jewish question" Levinas refers to, itself a non-Jewish pretext for anti-Jewish mythology, becomes metaphysical once appropriated by Jews in the aftermath of the Shoah as an opportunity to reevaluate what constitutes Judaism.

#### IV LEVINAS RETHINKS JUDAISM

Levinas's post-Shoah understanding of Judaism limits the experience of transcendence—the experience of God—to the ethical relation with the Other. This emerges most clearly in his polemics against Heidegger, whose mystification of reality Levinas denounces as paganism. Heidegger elevates one's "Being" to a semi-divine status, stressing the importance of geographical "enrootedness" and national destiny as the most important aspects of authenticity (DF 232). Levinas writes that Heidegger's insistence on "Place" for identity, grounded in claims about Being rather than in ethics, causes "the very splitting of humanity into natives and strangers" (DF 232). Enrootedness in one's place, an example of the kind of idolatry that both Levinas and Leibowitz abhor, prohibits the possibility of ethics, whose claim to significance is its universality. We see this prescient worry of Levinas's as early as 1934 in "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," which was written shortly after Hitler came to power, and marks Levinas's first major break with Heideggerian ontology. Levinas describes Hitlerism's biological understanding of the soul as "chained" to the body, which then becomes, "more than the object of spiritual life," its "heart," and thus abandons the value of freedom through truth and choice that Western humanism had so long valued in favor of the Nazi rhetoric of glory through the collective realization of national destiny.<sup>20</sup>

Levinas writes of such idolatry, "Judaism is perhaps no more than the negation of all that ... The mystery of things is the source of all cruelty towards men" (DF 232). But it is clear that Levinas never abandoned Heidegger's phenomenological method even as he rediscovered his Judaism after the war; he retained much of its vocabulary but used it to critique ontology (the question of existence) and develop a new ethics of Otherness. As Sarah Hammerschlag has argued, Levinas's experience of Jewish persecution during the war led him to conceive of Judaism as its own "form of being-in-the-world," borrowing Heidegger's terminology from Being and Time but applying it to Jewish religious experience.<sup>21</sup> Hammerschlag reads Levinas's corpus as a search for transcendence, an escape from what Levinas called the West's "totalitarianism or imperialism of the Same."<sup>22</sup> For Levinas, Heidegger's project of recalling the forgotten question of Being, with its ideal of

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peace through purity, advocated violently stomping out difference in the name of a more perfect world. Levinas writes in his 1935 “On Escape”—an escape from Heidegger’s ontology of the Same—“Every civilization that accepts being—with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies—merits the name ‘barbarian’”<sup>23</sup> While Heidegger celebrated the emergence of pure Being under Nazism as glorious destiny, Levinas saw it as the West’s ultimate tragedy, the point where it stopped fighting for freedom and tolerance and succumbed to base instincts. Contra Being, Levinas writes that “Jewish existence is a category of being,” and proposes it as an alternative to Heidegger’s Being that avoids the latter’s violence by instead positing ethics, the embrace of difference, as first philosophy (DF 183).

In opposition to Heidegger’s glorification of being as inevitability but borrowing its philosophical structure, Levinas describes the Jewish experience under Hitlerism: “The Jew is ineluctably riveted to his Judaism.”<sup>24</sup> This becomes a radically religious experience that leads Judaism back to its meta-historical roots in creation and election. He goes on: “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.”<sup>25</sup> For better or worse, suffering on account of one’s Judaism intensifies one’s feeling of Jewishness. Even in atheism, Levinas goes on to say, “An attachment to Judaism ... remains when no particular idea warrants it any longer.”<sup>26</sup>

But Levinas goes beyond simply the feeling of being persecuted as a racial or cultural Jew, and comes to reconceive of the Jewish religious experience as a direct result of persecution. He writes in his seventh and final notebook from his time in captivity:

In persecution I rediscover the original sense of J[udaism], its initial emotion. This is not just any persecution—an absolute persecution, which pursues the being everywhere, enclosing it in the bare fact of its existence ... The situation of pure submission where there is an election ... Or rather revelation ... An intoxication of this useless suffering, of this pure passivity by which one becomes the son of God.<sup>27</sup>

As Hammerschlag writes on Levinas’s revelation in the captivity, “The meaning of Judaism was not revealed to Levinas in the music of ancient chants, nor in the rhythm of the holidays, but in the senselessness of an existence nearly stripped of its holidays, in the grinding down of life to its barest components, in the radical intensification of the irremissibility of being.”<sup>28</sup> As Levinas asks in one of his wartime journals, what is Judaism “if not the experience since Isaiah, since Job, of this possible return—before hope, at the depth of despair of the pain in happiness, the discovery in suffering itself of the signs of election.”<sup>29</sup> Without valorizing or vindicating the Shoah or persecution in general, both of which Levinas denounces in his essay “Useless Suffering,” Judaism offers a way to election whose realiza-

tion is conditioned by real suffering in history.

Levinas repeatedly uses spiritual language to describe Jewish persecution, and even comes to define religious experience as suffering. After the war, for example, he attributed the “blossoming of cult mysticism” in France to its status as a “shortcut to our destiny, that of man in his anguish and fundamental suffering—that is to say in his religiosity.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the camp was a place in which the prisoner’s suffering brought out a profound “awareness of his Judaism,” and thus served as “a possible germ of a future Jewish life.”<sup>31</sup> Part of this meant that he wanted his experience of persecution to change the world such that it could never happen again. Unfortunately this hope was dashed almost immediately after he returned from captivity.

When Levinas reconvened with colleagues at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Jewish institution where he taught, he heard disturbing news: even after the war had ended, in 1946, forty Jews who had returned from hiding and concentration camps were murdered on allegations of blood libel in Kielce, Poland. In the short text, “Is It All in Vain?” Levinas worried that the experience of his generation had already been relegated to history textbooks: “How could our own experience not have had the exceptional status of changing history and making something like this impossible? ... that everything that had the status of being exceptional, let us say the religious, in our adventure, had not arrived to break the implacable course of things?”<sup>32</sup> For each generation, he writes, there exists “an exceptional event which brings it to maturity, which puts in question the values on which men have lived, which makes received and acquired ideas seem juvenile ... For those who are today forty years old, Hitlerism is this event.”<sup>33</sup>

For Levinas’s entire generation, the experience of the war seemed exemplary and uniquely capable of uprooting once and for all the violent tendencies of Western civilization. News of postwar pogroms destroyed that optimistic belief. But rather than despairing, Levinas formulated that belief into an imperative: “We refuse to let our events have this status: it cannot all have been in vain.”

In these writings during and immediately after the war, Levinas identifies Jewish persecution throughout the war as and opportunity for Judaism to embrace its status as the exemplary bearer of ethics in the West. On the one hand, Levinas writes, borrowing from Franz Rosenzweig, of Judaism as essentially ahistorical. But he uses this term in opposition to Hegel’s conception of Christianity participating in dialectical history that justifies suffering — starting with that of Jesus Christ. Being outside of such a system of history, Judaism is uniquely positioned to judge the world’s violent course. However, through his many references to the war in his writings, he also acknowledges, as Hammerschlag puts it, “that there is indeed a way in which this very definition is historically conditioned.”<sup>34</sup>

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### V TOWARD A JUDAISM OF COMMANDMENT

I have laid out several major philosophical oppositions between Levinas and Leibowitz on the religious significance of the Shoah. But in emphasizing what their responses have in common, we can trace the emergence of an even more important turn in postwar Jewish thought. Each thinker ultimately turns away from subjective humanism toward absolute principles that take the form of religious commandments. For Leibowitz, this means a defense of the halakha as a tool to check those individual desires that led to the horrors of the Shoah. He writes:

Disparagement of “social superstitions,” of “meaningless routines” or “empty conventions” has only loosed the reins and set free forces of darkness and agents of horror which had been restrained only by customary routine. Our generation especially has learned that men are incapable of living a life fit for men by their own decision and on their own responsibility. (JHV 23)

On a practical level, the halakha serves as a yoke of joyful decency and humility for the Jews who bear it. Leibowitz is responding here to supporters of individualistic and subjective religious experience that characterize others from his generation, who in their suffering turned to prayer akin to that in Christianity. Though Leibowitz may not consider the Shoah and related events religious experiences as such, it serves his point to remind his readers of the horrors that have befallen his generation and his people. It thus seems that these events do carry religious significance for him insofar as they influenced his religious philosophy and reinforced his values.

Leibowitz’s pessimistic view of human nature, as an example of which he invokes the Shoah, compels his belief in the halakha, which serves primarily to delimit the sphere of holiness:

Nothing is holy in itself. There is only that which is “holy to God”... Abrogation of the distinctive religious category of holiness and imputation of sanctity to human functions and drives is one of the most vicious phenomena of our times, socially, educationally, and morally. This generation has been witness, as none other before it, to the evil which may be perpetrated in the name of fatherland, nation, honor, liberty, equality, and any other human value to which holiness is attributed when men lose sight of the great truth that holiness is resident in a realm which transcends human values...

By distinguishing the sacred from the profane the halakha functions as a bulwark against idolatry in all its manifestations and a defense

against the corruption associated with it. (JHV 24-25)

For a second time, we see Leibowitz calling out to his generation, having witnessed the Shoah, to realize the risks idolatry entails. These are the risks of improper religious practice, especially subjective prayer and sanctifying worldly goods — first among them, land (Leibowitz was an outspoken critic of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, which he predicted would corrupt the character of the Jewish people). Yet idolatry means not only sin, disapproval from God, or religious “corruption” in the abstract—it also has worldly ethical implications. Idolatry is not only a distraction from the proper relationship with God; it also leads to the perpetration of violence in the name of the false idols (and ideologies) of human values.

Levinas raises a similar accusation against Western civilization’s idolatry that reaches back farther than Heidegger to all of Christianity. Despite its tradition of transcendence, Christianity enables a Heideggerian sacralizing of the material:

Through sublimation, Christianity continues to give piety roots, nurturing itself on landscapes and memories culled from family, tribe, and nation. This is why it conquered humanity. Judaism has not sublimated idols—on the contrary, it has demanded that they be destroyed. Like technology, it has demystified the universe. It has freed Nature from a spell. Because of its abstract universalism, it runs up against imaginations and passions. (DF 234)

Through transcendence, Christianity is able to raise up and glorify all that surrounds us. Levinas thus links Christianity to Heideggerian paganism by their shared idolatry. Here, both Levinas and Leibowitz would agree on Judaism’s resistance to the “imaginations and passions” of idolatry, insisting that such passions must be restrained by the yoke of religious order.

Levinas thus structures ethics as an unconditional commandment in his polemic against French philosopher Simone Weil’s notion of Christian mercy. Weil praises willingly but indiscriminately loving one’s neighbor as Christ did, but Levinas insists that this choice is not up to us—rather, our obligation to serve the Other is a commandment from God. He writes, “Violence is any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act” — precisely what mercy is for Weil (DF 6). While Weil’s mercy leaves the individual in command over the Other, Levinas calls justice a “moving out of oneself” (DF 10). God’s command is clear: be just! This obligation applies unconditionally, for “The attributes of God are given not in the indicative but in the imperative” such that the ego’s freedom to act ethically “shows itself to be arbitrary” (DF 17). Yet it is a rational justice that takes account of desert, while Weil’s mercy is more like indiscriminate sympathy. Just the opposite of Weil, seeing the particular face of the Other in misery gives the Other complete mastery over oneself;

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we are to see the Other as “someone who is associated with God and has rights over us” (DF 139). This experience of deriving a principle from a particular experience imitates in miniature Levinas’s abstraction of religious principles from history. And so ethics, and with it Judaism as a whole, takes the form of a commandment for justice from God, abnegating the subjective experience of ethical choice.

Levinas and Leibowitz thus both define the Jews as a people commanded by God. Returning to his essay on the uniqueness of the Jewish people, Leibowitz writes:

The uniqueness of the Jewish people is not a fact; it is an endeavor ...  
The uniqueness of the Jewish people is a direction and a target. The people of Israel were not the chosen people but were commanded to be the chosen people ... The Jewish people has no intrinsic uniqueness. Its uniqueness rather consists in the demand laid upon it. (JHV 86)

Leibowitz resists the Nazi definition of Jews as primarily a race or nation of Israel. Rather, the uniqueness of the Jews lies in their status as commanded by God. But importantly, he continues, “The people may or may not heed this demand. Therefore its fate is not guaranteed” (JHV 86). Since Leibowitz defines Judaism by its commandment to fulfill the halakha, the fulfillment of Judaism hinges not upon the mere giving of the commandment, but upon Jewish religious praxis. Judaism is thus a fragile entity, for it is dependent on the observance of real Jews in the present. This concedes that Judaism is in some sense dependent upon Jewish practice in history, thus qualifying, if not contradicting, Leibowitz’s concept of a completely ahistorical Judaism.

In his book *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy*, Emil Fackenheim reports this problematic view of Leibowitz’s in what is perhaps its most extreme articulation:

At a Tel Aviv conference in the late 1980s — on the film *Shoah* yet! — Yeshayahu Leibowitz asserted that what mattered was the survival of Judaism, not that of Jews. Claude Lantzmann, the guest of honor, was scandalized. He would ask just one question of the professor but would have nothing more to say to him after that: “Where were you during the Shoah?” Leibowitz replied that he had been in Palestine, with Rommel at the gates, and that if the Shoah had also wiped out the Yishuv [pre-Israel Jewish colony in Palestine] he would think no differently.<sup>35</sup>

On account of his views of what constitutes Judaism, Leibowitz dismissed the significance of the Shoah for Judaism at a time when most academics stressed its influence on Judaism. While Lantzmann’s question insinuates that Leibowitz’s views were shaped by

his merely indirect experience of the Shoah, Leibowitz stood his ground by insisting that even the destruction of all the Jews in the Jewish homeland would not change his view. Fackenheim, who moderated the panel with Lanzmann, was forced to conclude by reductio ad absurdum, “If Professor Leibowitz says that Judaism would survive the murder of the last Jew he cannot be serious. He is joking about a desperately serious subject.” Indeed, Leibowitz’s conclusion about the Shoah seems absurd, and Levinas disagrees with him profoundly on this issue.

Levinas criticizes the idea of prayer as the gatekeeper of Jewish consciousness, and with it Leibowitz’s conception of Judaism as Halakhic observance, as too narrow. “By closing ourselves to the Jews who are without Judaism but who, without Judaism, act as Jews, we risk ending up with a Judaism without Jews” (DF 271). A paradox of identity arises under Leibowitz’s exclusive Judaism of the halakha: there are real Jewish contributions to the world — for Levinas, ethics in particular — that Jews could put forward yet not be considered Jews by Leibowitz’s restrictive definition. By essentializing Judaism in Leibowitz’s strict terms, we risk what is after the Shoah and the diaspora the threat of Judaism’s literal disappearance.

Meanwhile, Levinas courts the opposite risk by broadly defining Judaism as the exemplary bearer of justice for all mankind. He does this in part because, compared to Leibowitz, Levinas places the modern world in less extreme distinction to the divine, for “the activities of the modern world have lost the world’s profane character” (DF 271). Levinas seeks a new direction for Judaism, concerned that “The prayer that institutes Judaism and confirms it, no longer opens itself up sufficiently to God and humanity to satisfy the contemporary Jewish consciousness in Europe” (DF 271). For Levinas, Halakhic practice alone can no longer link the religion of the Bible to those who must live by it, and so a Judaism of justice must take priority over a Judaism of the halakha.

Yet Leibowitz would argue that, in making Judaism universal, Levinas also in a sense makes Judaism as a distinct entity disappear. While Levinas appeals to the shared humanity of the face of the Other to stress a universal ethics, Leibowitz rejects opening Judaism so wide:

Those who would ground morality on the image of God in man may remember that Adolf Hitler and Adolf Eichmann were created in God’s image like you and me, and also every rapist and murderer, as well as the most righteous of men ... Man — any man — is by nature beastlike; it is only the service of God that raises him from nullity to significance and confers value on him. (JHV 107)

Here, Leibowitz refuses to accept Levinas’s notion of a shared humanity with people whose visages have become our culture’s stand-ins for evil. This is just one instance of

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Leibowitz's view that humanity is not equipped to pave its own moral path. And even if it did so by enacting justice, that path would not be religious:

Morality is morality. The attempt to fuse morality and religion is not a happy one ... From the standpoint of Judaism man as such has no intrinsic value ... The Bible does not recognize the good and the right as such, only the good and the right in the eyes of God. (JHV 7)

This view is absolutely opposed to Levinas's, in which morality is the highest religious practice and in fact the only means of access to God. Yet Levinas is aware that his project of re-centering Judaism around ethics "entail[s] the risk of atheism," a phenomenon that clearly worries Leibowitz greatly (DF 15). Nevertheless, Levinas concludes, "That risk must be run."

## VI CONCLUSION

Despite the risks entailed by universalizing God's commandment to the Jews, Levinas is unable to compromise on the primacy of ethics after Judaism's very existence was threatened during the Shoah. While this conclusion could have been independently reached, it is clear from Levinas's biography and the way in which he intersperses references to his own captivity into his philosophical readings of Jewish texts that it is at the very least heavily influenced by the Shoah. While Leibowitz lacks the personal experience of catastrophe, he nevertheless directly engages many of the same problems as Levinas that Judaism faced after the Shoah. I have attempted to show how each thinker's understanding of the religious significance of catastrophe for Judaism informs his conception of Judaism itself. Though Levinas and Leibowitz's responses to the Shoah differ radically, they converge on the question of Judaism: each affirms Judaism's foundation of irrevocable commandedness as a counter to the dangers of subjective ethics and idolatry. This unshakable foundation for Judaism, as distinct from historical, national, or cultural bases for Judaism, is central to post-Shoah Jewish identity and religious experience. Once Judaism was nearly destroyed, it had to be reconstituted with unconditional principles at its core.

## NOTES

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**1** An earlier version of this essay received the 2013 prize for the best undergraduate essay in Jewish studies from the Chicago Center for Jewish Studies.

**2** Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 25. Hereafter abbreviated DF.

**3** Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), xix-xx.



**4** Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 291.

**5** Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. John Shepley (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro Press, 1989), 68.

**6** It seems likely that Levinas would echo a sentiment espoused by another Jew assimilated before the war, Primo Levi: “If it hadn’t been for the racial laws and the concentration camps, I’d probably no longer be a Jew, except for my last name” (1987), “Until these months [of 1938] it had not meant much to me that I was a Jew.” See Berel Lang, *Primo Levi: The Matter of a Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 91.

**7** Levinas describes Heidegger in 1931: “Martin Heidegger, whose name is now Germany’s glory” is a thinker of “exceptional intellectual power” and “extraordinary prestige.” See Emmanuel Levinas, “Freiburg, Husserl, and Phenomenology” *Unforseen History*, trans. Nidra Poller (1931; Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 64.

**8** Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University: Address Delivered on the Solemn Assumption of the Rectorate of the University of Freiburg,” trans. Karsten Harries, *Review of Metaphysics* 48 (March 1985), 470.

**9** Levinas said in an interview late in life, “I hated myself very much during the years of Hitler for having preferred Heidegger at Davos,” the site of the latter’s great debate with Ernst Cassirer. In Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger’s Philosophy in France 1927–1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 42.

**10** From the fifth wartime journal, in Seán Hand, “Salvation Through Literature: Levinas’s *Carnets de captivité*” *Levinas Studies* 8 (2013), 57.

**11** Salomon Malka. *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, trans. Michael Kigel and Sonja M. Embree (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 80.

**12** Translated from the Hebrew in Malka, 80.

**13** Emmanuel Levinas, “Nameless,” *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 119.

**14** Emmanuel Levinas, “Martin Buber’s Thought and Contemporary Judaism,” *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (1968; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 4.

**15** This text was originally titled “Honor without a Flag,” referring to the flags that once flew atop synagogues and other Jewish institutions destroyed in the war. Emmanuel Levinas, “Nameless,” *Proper Names*, 121.

**16** Yeshayahu Leibowitz. *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 97. Hereafter abbreviated JHV.

**17** Leibowitz supposedly “hated living under non-Jewish rule.” See Norman Solomon. *Historical Dictionary of Judaism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 226.

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- 18** Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 27.
- 19** Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," trans. Richard A. Cohen, in R. Bernasconi and D. Woods, eds., *The Provocation of Levinas* (London: Routledge, 1988), 164. In Fackenheim's wording: "the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another posthumous victory" Emil L. Fackenheim, "The 614<sup>th</sup> Commandment" in *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 19-24.
- 20** Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," trans. Seán Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Autumn 1990): 63-71.
- 21** Sarah Hammerschlag, "A Splinter in the Flesh': Levinas and the Resignification of Jewish Suffering, 1928–1947," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* vol. 20 n. 3, 394.
- 22** Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi (1975; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 14.
- 23** Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 73.
- 24** Emmanuel Levinas, "L'inspiration religieuse de l'alliance" *Pax et Droit* (1935), translated in Hammerschlag, 394.
- 25** Emmanuel Levinas, "Being Jewish," trans. Mary Beth Mader, *Continental Philosophy Review* 40 (2007), 208.
- 26** *Ibid.*, 210.
- 27** Emmanuel Levinas *Carnets de captivité*, 180. Translated in Hammerschlag, 403.
- 28** Hammerschlag, 403.
- 29** Emmanuel Levinas *Carnets de captivité*, 213. Translated in Hammerschlag 404.
- 30** Emmanuel Levinas, "La spiritualité chez le prisonnier israélien" [The Spirituality of the Israeli Prisoner] *Carnets de captivité* 1 (1945; Paris, 2009), 205-208. Translation by Sarah Hammerschlag.
- 31** Emmanuel Levinas *Carnets de captivité*, 211. Translated in Hammerschlag 404.
- 32** Emmanuel Levinas, "Tout est-il vanité?" (Is it all vanity?) *Cahiers de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle* 9 (1946), 1-2. Translation by Sarah Hammerschlag.
- 33** *Ibid.*
- 34** Hammerschlag, 411.
- 35** Fackenheim, Emil L. *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1996), 244.