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**Eric Jacobson**

Understanding Walter Benjamin's  
*Theological-Political Fragment*

**Catherine Hezser**

Freud's Oedipus-Complex and the Problems of Jewish  
Assimilation in the Writings of Franz Kafka and Philip Roth

**Shmuel Trigano**

Levinas and the Project of Jewish Philosophy



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## Levinas and the Project of Jewish Philosophy\*

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In "violence and metaphysics"<sup>1</sup>, Jacques Derrida undertakes to understand and to weigh the import of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas by resituating it within the perspective of Western philosophy as the latter defines itself in relation to its Greek origins. But, while the Jewish dimension of this thought is well underscored in Derrida's essay, the criterion for this Judaic element remains undetermined, despite the fact that Derrida delineates its boundaries: "It is neither a Jewish theology, nor a Jewish mysticism (it could even be understood as the challenge to theology and mysticism). Nor is it a dogmatism or a religion, or even a moral philosophy. In the last analysis, it never derives its authority from Hebraic theses or Hebraic texts"<sup>2</sup>. Derrida, in fact, comes to define Levinasian thought as "the explanation and reciprocal overflowing of two origins and of two historical speeches, Hebraism and Hellenism. Does not a new momentum, a certain strange communality, announce itself in Levinas' thought, which would not be the spiraled return of Alexandrian promiscuity?"<sup>3</sup>. Our query will continue that of Derrida but we will pursue our investigation not from the starting point of the Graeco-European philosophical heritage but, symmetrically, from the starting point of Hebraism and, more specifically from the starting point of that "Alexandrian promiscuity" to which Derrida refers and that we,

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\* Translated by Prof. Annette Aronowicz (Franklin & Marshall College).

<sup>1</sup> In Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*. Le Seuil, Paris 1967. Abbreviations of Levinas' works cited here: EE: *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris, ed. de la revue Fontaine, 1947; EDE: *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris, Vrin, 1949, 2ème édition, 1967; TI: *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. La Haye M. Nijhoff, 1961; DL: *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*. Paris. Albin Michel, 1963 et 1976; HAH: *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Montpellier. Fata Morgana, 1972; AE: *Autrement qu'être ou au delà de l'essence*. La Haye Martinus Nijhoff 1974; DSAS: *Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*. Paris, Minuit 1977; ADV: *Au delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques*. Paris, Minuit, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

along with many others scholars call “Jewish philosophy”. What is the status of Hebraism in Levinas’s thought and in what way does this thought go beyond it, perhaps inaugurating something other than “Jewish philosophy”?

Until now, the analysis of Levinas’ connection to the universe of Jewish thought seems always to have started with the assumption – implicit and never unpacked – that there is a massive intellectual base, identified as “Judaism” (Derrida distinguishes “Hebraism” from “Judaism”, because no doubt, he views the latter as a religion). Into this “Judaism”, analysts have, without differentiating among them, mixed elements and sequences drawn from a Jewish tradition that nonetheless witnessed diverse periods and diverse intellectual enterprises (When speaking of Jewish tradition I am not only speaking of a Hebraic one. I am referring especially to the Talmud, written in Aramaic, and to rabbinic thought, often not expressed in Hebrew either). Indeed Talmudic thought is not Kabbalistic thought, which is not the thought of “Jewish philosophy”, which is not the ethical thought of “Judaism”, even if it is true that a structural matrix common to all these modes of Jewish thinking could be made to appear. It is within the framework of this temporal and literary succession of phenomena that we thus find “Alexandrian promiscuity”, “Jewish philosophy”. Before evoking Levinas’ link to any of these intellectual corpuses, one must see him against the background of this “Jewish philosophy”. This will help us understand both his “Hebraic debt” and how his work “goes beyond Hebraism”, as Jacques Derrida proclaims.

It is, in fact, the link of Levinas’ thought to Jewish philosophy that should be probed, more than its apparent kinship to Talmud. For the effort to “translate” Judaism<sup>4</sup> into a (Greek) philosophical language, or to think the message of Sinai in Greek categories, or to bring about a synthesis of Greece and Israel, or to philosophize within a Jewish inspiration and thus necessarily, in all these cases, to “go beyond” Hebraism<sup>5</sup> is twenty centuries old. “Jewish philosophy”, in any case, is not necessarily far removed from the Talmud. Saadya Gaon, one of its main figures, was the chief of the Talmudic Academy in Babylon. This school (Jewish philosophy) of thought was born, in fact, at the same

<sup>4</sup> It is at that moment that “Judaism” begins to designate the entire (and plural) fabric of the civilisation of the Jews, still fundamentally marked by the religious. The term *ioudaïsmos* appears for the first time in Hellenistic Greek, as a concept opposed to that of *hellenismos*.

<sup>5</sup> We have here as many possible definitions of the specificity of “Jewish philosophy” relative to other Judaic corpuses.

