The Power of Goodness – Ritzpah Bat Aiah in the Interpretation of Levinas

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As for many of his contemporaries in Europe, the Shoah, the Holocaust, was a formative and fundamental event for Emmanuel Levinas. He wrote very little of his own experiences during his five years in a Nazi prisoner of war camp, but the Shoah is present in many of his ideas, between the words and lines of many of his writings, and not only in his book "Otherwise than being and beyond essence"[1], which he dedicated to those members of his family who were killed, together with millions of victims of Nazi national-socialism. Among other philosophical, existential, and religious issues concerning the Shoah were questions about evil, suffering, and God's role in all that occurred: Is it possible to believe in God in a world where millions of innocent people – children and adults, Jewish and gentiles – were killed? How? How can one not lose faith in the triumph of good in the aftermath of the Shoah?

In a world dominated by evil, a world seemingly deserted by God, those seeking explanations and wishing to understand reality might find some relief in culture, literature, and scripture. In this article we will explore Levinas' interpretation of Job and Ritzpah Bat Aiah , two Biblical protagonists who portray two different models of human response to evil and to incomprehensible suffering. Job is self-centered on his own righteousness and unjust suffering, while Ritzpah Bat Aiah embodies goodness confidently manifested in spite of her own grief. She personifies goodness as the only spark remaining in a world of darkness, in a world that lost its worldliness. Thus, she allows one not to lose faith in goodness, not to sink into total despair.

It was Levinas' opinion that interpretation of the Bible must be mediated by the Rabbinical Midrash (a method of interpretation involving homiletic teachings), rather

than applied directly. I shall explore the existing "midrashim" and their interrelations with Levinas' interpretations of Job and Ritzpah Bat Aiah.

Levinas' starting point for any discussion of the Shoah is that Nazi victims, the people killed in Ghettos, concentrations and extermination camps, were innocent.[2] Even if not all of them were righteous, no crime can justify the killing of one million children and many more millions of people who were not criminals. The idea that anyone who suffers is deserving of such suffering and that good people are dealt a good fate falls to pieces when trying to explain the Shoah. Levinas resents any type of theodicy and rejects it as immoral in insinuating accusations towards the innocent victims of the Nazis. This starting point resembles Job's, the blameless sufferer of the Bible. But similar to the interpretations of many Sages, Levinas doesn't consider Job innocent, and therefore, cannot use Job to explain or understand the Shoah. As theological questions regarding the Shoah lead to a dead end, Levinas turns his concern to human beings. He finds the only vindication of the world, of sustained hope and good, in the form of a surprising figure: Ritzpah Bat Aiah about whom we know very little, who cares for others and is merciful, performing acts of grace in spite of her own unjust suffering. She preserves the worldliness of the world. Levinas also underlines some descriptions of unconditional human goodness uttered by Ikonikov, a character created by Vassily Grossman in one of his books, whose actions echo to a large extent those of Ritzpah Bat Aiah. I shall deliberate whether there is a fundamental difference in the attitude assumed by Levinas towards the fictional twentieth-century Soviet protagonist and the Biblical character.

Rejection of theodicy

The course leading to Ritzpah Bat Aiah begins with incomprehensible suffering. Levinas saw any attempt at justifying God's ways, any theodicy of the Shoah, as not only immoral but religiously wrong.[3] Nothing can justify such horror. Any justification is monstrous! For example, in his Talmudic reading "Damages due to fire", first taught at a colloquium on war in 1975, he interpreted a Talmudic portion dealing with the fact that sometimes, in troubled times, both the righteous and the evil suffer. In such times the seemingly just, i.e. rewarding the righteous and punishing the evil, isn't what actually happens. He wrote:

> Does the ultimate reason of the violence of war sink into the abyss of an extermination coming from beyond war? Or does the madness of extermination retain a grain of reason? That is the great ambiguity of Auschwitz. That is the question. Our text does not resolve it. It underlines it. Our text does not resolve it because the answer here would be indecent, as all theodicy probably is.[4]

It is impossible, and indecent, to justify the suffering in the Shoah. What could justify such suffering? Would we wish for a God that allows such suffering to take place? What kind of God would it be? In Levinas' 1955 essay "Loving the Torah more than God", he wrote about "The certainty of God…beneath an empty sky".[5] Loving the Torah beneath this empty sky means observance of the commandments; it means responsibility to other persons taught by the commandments, unconditionally and unrelated to God's justice. The certainty of His existence does not depend on man's belief in His righteousness or His supervision but only on His Torah commandments. The human experience is that of an empty sky, of a break between God and the world.

The atheist option is always present in Levinas' writings even if he does not opt for it. But the God he writes about is the God of the empty sky, a hidden God who does not supervise his creatures, a God whose existence is doubtful. God is the unknown source of the Torah, or in other words, the source of one's responsibility to the other, beyond and prior to one's freedom. I see traces of God in the call for responsibility that I see in the other person's face that I meet and in between the letters of the Torah. But while the Torah calls me to act for others, God is the God of the empty sky, as nothing can be known of Him and He can't be justified. Levinas embraces Maimonides' negative theology. God is completely transcendent and therefore nothing positive can be said or known of Him. He does not supervise the world because He transcends it. The only thing that we can know or say about Him is "what this information [i.e. about God] can mean in and for man's life".[6] This is a fundamental point of departure which Levinas never exceeded or ignored throughout his writings. Theological questions about suffering remain unanswered, the sky might seem empty, and the questioning gaze must descend from the sky towards the other person. Loving the Torah allows and encourages this change in optic.

In his 1982 essay "Useless suffering"[7], Levinas differentiates between one's own suffering – which can be conceived of as having some religious meaning of atonement or purification, and which may be justified – and the suffering of others, which cannot and must never be justified. The suffering of others is scandalous and a call for action, to relieve their pain. The only religious meaning of the pain of others is one's ethical obligation towards the other, one's responsibility for the suffering of others and one's duty to relieve their suffering. Justifying the suffering of others through theodicy is not only wrong theologically, it might also relieve one's complete responsibility; therefore it must be entirely wrong. "The justification of the neighbor's

pain is certainly the source of all immorality".[8] This responsibility is transcendent, heteronomous, and independent of one's will; in this sense it is a religious obligation. It depends on nothing besides the other's suffering.[9] This is the philosophical foundation that will guide all further explorations in this article. We will see how Levinas understands Job's gaze that remains directed at the sky, and Ritzpah Bat Aiah who without questioning her own useless suffering finds in herself the power to respond to the suffering of others.

Job

Job is the paradigmatic Biblical emblem of unjust, futile, and unjustified suffering, and of rejection of theodicy. In the frame story of the Book of Job, we hear of Satan and God making a wager, and God permits Satan to visit on Job whatever he wishes. Satan takes all Job's money, kills his children, and infects him with a terrible skin disease. Instead of trying to relieve his pain, Job's friends justify it by trying to convince him that he has sinned and is therefore being punished. As they understand it, any pain is necessarily a punishment and God is not only just but justifiable by human beings, through theodicy. Job is necessarily a sinner who must repent. Job rejects these accusations. He knows that nothing in his behavior can justify his suffering, and we as readers know that he is right. One of Levinas' interpretations of Job underlines this aspect:

> I said above that theodicy in the broad sense of the term is justified by a certain reading of the Bible. It is evident that another reading of it is possible, and that in a certain sense nothing of the spiritual experience of human history is foreign to the Scriptures. I have in mind here in particular the book of Job, which attests at once to Job's faithfulness of God (2:10) and to ethics (27:5,6),

> despite his sufferings for no reason, and his opposition to the theodicy of his friends. He refuses theodicy right to the end and, in the last chapters of the text (42:7), is preferred to those who, hurrying in the safety of Heaven, would make God innocent before the suffering of the just.[10]

According to this note, Job is a Biblical model of the rejection of theodicy. Levinas further relates to Kant's interpretation of Job rather than to that of Rabbinical sages, although some of the midrashim may be understood as saying just that. Kant's rejection of theodicy means, according to Levinas' understanding, that morality is not based on faith. Moreover, Job's faith is based on ethics and thus founds a religion of proper conduct. Moral imperatives are not dependent on belief in God or his justice. Levinas wrote that, for Kant, moral obligation is primary and preliminary from an epistemological perspective. It serves as the basis of the idea of God's existence. It is a faith founded not on the expectation of favors but on moral obligations.

Rabbinical sources display many different approaches to Job. Some, similar to Levinas, see him as an exemplary figure for various reasons, among them his rejection of theodicy.[11] But many other Midrashim justify Job's suffering by stating sins for which he deserved punishment (for example: "With his lips [Job] did not sin, in his heart he did sin. What did he mean [when he said] "The land is delivered in the hand of the wicked one, he covers the faces of its judges" (Job, 9 24). If not, then who is it?" Or, "Job sought to exempt the entire world from judgment").[12]

Are all of Levinas' other interpretations of Job influenced by the midrashim critical of Job and identifying sins for which he was punished? Although he criticizes Job, there is no evidence of such influence. Let us explore these midrashim.

In his Talmudic reading "As old as the world?"[13] Levinas interprets a Talmud portion from tractate Sanhedrin. The subject of this reading is the role of Judaism in humanity. The Talmud portion begins with various sayings in favor of the Jewish people, including marginal members of the nation. Rabbi Zera forms a midrash on a verse that originally referred to Jacob who wore his brother's clothes when stealing his blessing, by pretending to be his brother in the presence of blind Isaac : "and he smelled his clothes (b'gadav)" (Genesis 27, 27). He suggests changing the word "b'gadav" (his clothes) to "bogdav" – his rebels.[14]Levinas says on this midrash that Rabbi Zera meant to stress that Jacob's greatness was in assuming responsibility for all the future sins of his descendants. Levinas and Rabbi Zera ignore the simple dimension of the story: Jacob lied to his father in order to steal his brother's blessing. Not a very honorable conduct. Rabbi Zera, followed by Levinas, chose to portray Jacob as a model of responsibility and therefore as deserving his father's blessing. It is not clear from this midrash how one is supposed to assume responsibility for the sins of others, but it is clearly meant to serve as an example. Later in the same portion, there is a story of Rabbi Zera who befriended his criminal neighbors and thus caused them to repent and stop sinning. This may be a way of assuming responsibility for the sins of others. But even before Levinas arrives at this story he leaves the Talmudic text temporarily in order to talk about Job. According to Levinas, responsibility for the deeds of others was precisely what Job lacked: "…Responsibility that Job, searching in his own impeccable past, could not find". Job had indeed not sinned, but he did not see himself responsible for others. This is the significance of God's answer to Job from the tempest, "where were you when I created the World" (Job 38,2). Job is to blame not for his own impeccable deeds but for his egocentric point of view. He sees only himself and does not consider himself responsible for others.[15]

In Levinas' philosophy, human beings are born responsible for others. This responsibility is always already there, prior to the self and defining it. One is oneself as responsible for other people. Its source is the creation and creator of the world.[16] This given responsibility means that no one can claim that he himself is innocent, that there is no reason for his own suffering. Theodicy is wrong when it concerns the Other's suffering, not mine, and it is so precisely for this reason, because I should act to relieve the other. This idea is further developed in "Otherwise then being".[17]

Is this theodicy? Does Levinas justify Job's suffering based on his sin? It seems so. Levinas follows the Midrash and finds that God's answer to Job is justified by Job's behavior. He did not sin but he shirked his responsibility for others, unlike Jacob and Rabbi Zera who displayed responsibility for others. His guilt is not directly towards God but towards his fellow men, and therefore, to God as well.

This is the focus of Levinas' criticism of Job in particular and of theological questions concerning the Shoah and suffering in general. In his opinion, questions such as "Where was God?", or "How did God allow the Shoah to happen?", or "How can such a God be justified?" are missing the main point. The main religious and existential question about the Shoah is "What happened to human beings in their relationship to each other that allowed the Shoah?" The Shoah was perpetrated by human beings. It was not a natural catastrophe. People did terrible things to other people. As stated, we have no positive knowledge of God, therefore

> My effort always consists in extricating from this theological language meanings addressing themselves to reason… It consists, first of all, in a mistrust of everything in the texts studied that could pass for a piece of information about God's life, for a theosophy; it consists in being preoccupied,

> in the face of each of these apparent news items, about the beyond, with what this information can mean in and for man's life.[18]

And the same is true of the Shoah. Levinas considered it futile, and even wrong, to be preoccupied by theosophy. Therefore it is also futile and wrong to expect any justification of God concerning the Shoah or anything else. Levinas rejected not only theodicy but theosophy in general, and as he was wont, redirected the questions from God towards human relationships. There is no religious meaning that is not first and foremost ethical. Job erred in asking himself the wrong questions: aside from asking himself whether he had sinned he did not ask whether he had occupied himself with others, whether he had helped them avoid sin and assumed responsibility for their guilt. This is theodicy. Levinas is inconsistent in justifying Job's suffering and joining Job's friends and the Sages. But the major issue at stake is the question asked of human beings: "Where are you?", where is the killers' responsibility to avoid killing? Where is other people's responsibility to prevent them from killing? Where is my responsibility in failing to do so? People caused the suffering of the Shoa, and people should have prevented it; therefore they, we, are guilty, and not God. Anyone who doesn't act to prevent and relieve the suffering of others is guilty, even if they ignore their responsibility, for which they are guilty. At this particular point where Job failed, Ritzpa Bat-Aya, in spite of her own unjust suffering, acted on behalf of others, and she teaches us the power of goodness.

This idea also appears at the beginning of the Talmudic reading mentioned above, "Damages due to fire". Its subject is war. The Talmud portion teaches total and complete responsibility for all damages due to fire lit by a person even if the fire got completely out of his control. Referring to war in this context assumes that similar to fire, wars too are caused by human beings, and if the war gets out of control, as it

usually does, it is still in the responsibility of the person who lit the fire or those who started the war. And indeed, towards the end of this same reading, and after having discussed the chaotic reality of war, in which people are hurt whether they are righteous or sinner, in which it seems that there is no justice and any attempt at theodicy is wrong and immoral, he still says: "Yes, war criminal do exist! Those hours when all cats are grey, in which everything seems possible, without impunity, must be paid for."[19] Damages due to war are not natural. People cause them. Therefore they demand human response, rather than theological debates.

Beyond Memory

Towards the end of the Talmudic reading "Beyond memory"[20], in which Levinas interpreted a Talmud portion dealing with the memory of the exodus from Egypt and its place in the future, where it begins to refer to "the war of Gog and Magog", Levinas wrote: "that war of Gog and Magog may have already begun in this century of Shoah".[21] What is beyond the memory of anyone who survived or lives after the Shoah are its horrors. But what might be learned from it? Does it have any significance?

> Abraham, the father of many nations, after the passage through a night, a war dubbed of Gog and Magog, but in which the *Ahavat Israel,* the love of Israel, may be the original tenderness for the other, the compassion and mercy in which lovingkindness arises, must have been stirred in the suffering in which the last hopes stand out against a world of promises belied.[22]

That is the meaning of the Shoah, not only its meaning for human beings but also as its only possible religious meaning. Instead of scandalous theodicy, Levinas suggests human goodness as a humane and religious obligation. Towards the end of this

reading he uses parts of Vasili Grossman's novel "Life and Fate"[23] to further explain and demonstrate this idea.

> From one end to the other of that inhuman apocalypse, from out of its depths, there can be heard the muffled stirrings of a persistent, invincible humanity. The "I" of men, forced by suffering back into the shackles of the self, breaks forth, in its misery, into mercy.What I called *Ahavat Israel* earlier rises, before hope, from the abyss of despair […] Through the inhuman, extraordinary promptings of mercy survive, from one human uniqueness to another, independently of, and as if in spite of, structures – political or ecclesiastic – in which they were always exhibited.[24]

Levinas' interpretation of Vassili Grossman's book underlines acts of compassion and generosity performed by individuals – against the background of what seems like the end of the world, of infinite cruelty, loss of humanity and hope – as what sustains the world. No less. He chose to focus on a marginal character in the book, Ikonikov, a Soviet prisoner in a Nazi camp, who lost his mind during the war but did not lose his memory, and concludes his Talmudic reading by citing him. Ikonikov differentiates between The Good and goodness. Many people are killed in the name of The Good, whether Christian, Communist, or any other Good. In contrast,

> [T]he kindness of an old lady who gives a piece of bread to a convict along the roadside […] the kindness of a soldier who holds his canteen out to a wounded enemy. The kindness of youth taking pity on old age, […] That private goodness of an individual for another individual […] The goodness of men outside the religious or social good […] The history of man is the struggle of

> evil trying to crush the tiny seed of humanity. But if even now the human has not been killed in man, evil will not prevail.[25]

At the end of evil, injustice, and despair, nothing is left but the unconditional goodness of one person to another. With these words of Ikonikov, whose spirit pervades Grossman's entire novel, in spite of his marginality, Levinas chose to end his reading "Beyond the memory".

> Levinas, through Ikonikov, warns against The Good that might also be a Religious or Sacred Good. Any total Good that is insufficiently conscious of human suffering, even when it is caused in the name of the Good, is dangerous and might become cruel. What is always needed, particularly in time of war and other cruelties, is goodness. One is required to care for one'sy fellow people. Theological debates are futile. Ikonikov described this powerful goodness and distinguished it from The Good. Ritzpa Bat-Aya is the embodiment of goodness.

Ritzpah Bat Aiah

A marginal biblical figure, Ritzpah Bat Aiah is the closing hero of another Talmudic reading, "Toward the Other". She is not marginal for Levinas. She is the caring and generous person who knows what to do even when adversity strikes her.

This Talmudic reading was first taught in 1963 on the occasion of a colloquium on the relationship of Jewish French survivors of the Shoah with Germany at that time. Its subject was *Le Pardon*, meaning both forgiveness and atonement. It is a complex reading that demands careful attention,[26] but in its second part, Levinas interprets a biblical story from Samuel 2 chapter 21 by means of a Talmudic portion from tractate

Yebamot 78b – 79a. The biblical story begins with a famine in the time of King David. In a message from God he is told that the famine is the result of unfinished business between King Saul, his predecessor, and the people of Gibeon, Canaanite woodcutters and water carriers since early times.[27] In order to end this affair, King David gave them seven of Saul's sons and grandsons, whom they proceeded to hang, leaving them unburied. Two of these princes were the sons of Ritzpa Bat-aya. She seems to have been unable to prevent their death, but

> Then Ritzpah Bat Aiah took sack-cloth and spread it on a rock for herself, and she stayed there from the beginning of the harvest until rain from the sky fell; She did not let the birds of the sky settle on them by day or the wild beasts [approach] by night. (Samuel 2 21,10).

She watched over the corpses of her own sons and of the other five princes for a period of seven months. But this is not the end of the story:

> David was told what Saul's concubine Ritzpah Bat Aiah had done. And David went and took the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from the citizens of Jabesh-Gilead, who had made off with them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines killed Saul at Gilboa. He brought up the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from there; and he gathered the bones of those who had been impaled. And they buried the bones …And when all that the king had commanded was done, God responded to the plea of the land thereafter. (Samuel 2 21, 11- 14)

Hanging Saul's descendants should have resulted in the end of the famine according to the message conveyed to David, as it was to have concluded the business with the people of Gibeon. But seven more months passed, seven dry months during which

Ritzpah Bat Aiah watched over the bodies of her sons and of the other princes, seven months of quiet resistance, until "rain from the sky fell" – but this isn't an exact translation, rather the water is described as bursting (*nitchu)*. It was not good rain, but violent and destructive rain. Only after David heard about Ritzpah Bat Aiah 's quiet demonstration did he understand that he had to act and give Saul, his sons and grandsons, a royal burial. Only then, after the deceased received their due respect, after the act of grace embodied by a proper burial,[28] "God responded to the plea of the land" and the famine ended.

Similar to the Talmudic portion, Levinas ignores the political motives that could have caused David to eliminate survivors of the rival dynasty. The Talmud is interested in a different interpretation: it choses to emphasize the justice that must be meted out to everyone, even the foreigners and society's weakest. According to this interpretation, once the people of Gibeon had rejected David's offer to compensate them financially, hanging the princes was a way of showing that justice was done even for woodcutters and water carriers, although princes had to be killed for this purpose. Even in situations of a radically uneven hierarchy, justice must be done and visible. Nevertheless, and for this reason, because the people of Gibeon demanded revenge relentlessly, they remained strangers, "the Gibeonites were not of Israelite stock" (Samuel 2 21, 2)[29]. In spite of their unfinished business, they could have accepted financial compensation and not demanded this cruel revenge. They chose not to do so. So they deserved justice and received it, but remained foreigners forever. Being vengeful excluded them from the Jewish people.

The Talmud does not mention Ritzpah Bat Aiah in this portion, but another midrash emphasizes her role in the proper burial of Saul's descendants and the conclusion of the famine. It is in Midrash Rabbah - Numbers:

> Come and observe the great kindness which Ritzpah Bat Aiah showed to them. She protected them by day from the birds of the air and by night from the beasts of the field, for seven months. Now, although the Holy One, blessed be He, had spoken to David concerning Saul, who had not been mourned in accordance with required practice, and was buried outside the land, David was slack in the matter of his mourning, for he thought: In Saul's case twelve calendar months have already elapsed and it is no longer the proper thing to mourn for him. When they told him of the deeds of Ritzpah Bat Aiah, he applied to himself an *a fortiori* argument, as follows: If she, who is but a woman, has acted with so much lovingkindness, must not I, who am a king, do infinitely more? So he straightway went off to show them lovingkindness.[30]

Beyond justice there is goodness, without which there is no rain, no blessing. This is what this midrash teaches.[31] The justice in this story is, as Levinas called it, a "cruel justice". The world cannot exist on such foundations. It is a deadly justice. It brings death. The world cannot exist without grace. Goodness is necessary to give life, to allow rain to fall. The corpses must be buried properly to stop the cycles of death and revenge and return to life. These are acts of grace. David learned the power of goodness to overcome death from Ritzpah Bat Aiah.

But what has all this to do with the relationship of Jewish French Shoah survivors with Germany in the 1960s? Levinas wrote:

> I have the impression that I have come back to the theme evoked by Mr. Jankelevitch when he opened this colloquium,[32] even though no one in this hall has asked that the descendants of our torturers be nailed to the rocks. The Talmud teaches that one cannot force men who demand retaliatory justice to

> grant forgiveness. It teaches us that Israel does not deny this imprescriptible right to others. But it teaches us above all that if Israel recognizes this right, it does not ask it for itself and that to be Israel is to not claim it.[33]

Over and above all this, beyond justice, retaliation, cruelty, and forgiveness, Levinas ended this Talmudic reading with these words:

> And what remains as well, after this somber vision of the human condition and of Justice itself, what rises above the cruelty inherent in rational order (and perhaps simply in Order), is the image of this woman, this mother, this Ritzpa bat-Aya, who, for six months watches over the corpses of her sons, together with the corpses that are not her sons, to keep from the birds of the air and the beasts of the fields, the victims of the implacable justice of men and of God. What remains after so much blood and tears shed in the name of immortal principles is individual sacrifice, which, amidst the dialectical rebounds of justice and all its contradictory about-faces, without hesitation, finds a straight and sure way.[34]

The last certain value, when the sky seems empty and so many dead people can't even be buried because their corpses were destroyed, what makes life possible, is goodness. Neither celestial justice nor human justice. What allows the conclusion of famine is also what allows staying alive after the Shoah. At the beginning of that same reading Levinas defined despair and loss of belief in the triumph of good as transgressions against God.[35] When suffering or witnessing suffering one might become a nihilist. This is a moral danger, as nihilism allows one to denounce any law, including moral laws. But the act of a single woman, the helping hand offered to another, makes it possible to retain some hope in humankind and in the world. What allows one not to

lose belief in the triumph of good is invincible goodness. Ethics, responsibility for others, are dependent on hope, the opposite of despair. Therefore, Ritzpah Bat Aiah is the Biblical hero of the empty sky era, the post-Shoah era. She teaches us to love the Torah more than we love God.

Levinas' interpretation of Ritzpah Bat Aiah is not based on the Talmud but resembles another midrash. Was he familiar with this midrash? There is no evidence to that effect. Is it possible to assume that, as he was wont to do, Levinas did not interpret the Bible directly rather first studied prior Jewish interpretations? In any event, the sages' and Levinas' interpretations of Job are ambivalent and in this case as well there is no written evidence of the influence of the midrash on Levinas' approach. Levinas rarely cites these sources. Why? He might have seen himself as part of a tradition, as one more link in a chain of generations, and therefore did not mention his sources, as is of costume in those texts. I am not sure and this remains unanswered.

I also found no source for the reason for Levinas' criticism of Job. Midrashim offer different justifications for Job's suffering and suggest various transgressions committed by him, but none mention his self-sufficiency. It seems more of a beneficial encounter between the Biblical text and Levinas' philosophy: his notions and definitions of liberty, responsibility, and time. This is his own exegetical creativity. Another example of an interpretation with no source in the Midrash is Levinas' discussion of the sanctity of the book of Esther. To the reasons offered in the Talmud he adds the idea that the moment of Esther's decision to endanger herself and risk her life in order to save her people is what turns this story into a sacred book.[36]These interpretations might be exceptions to the rule that one should never

interpret the Bible with hands empty of prior interpretations. But in fact, these are new answers to old questions: both examples refer to questions found in the Talmud and offer new answers. The creativity takes place within the context of Jewish exegesis, joining it and adding to it, and Levinas is loyal to his own principle of full handed interpretation.[37]

Can Levinas' exegesis of Job be considered theodicy? He does justify Job's suffering based on his transgressions. But Levinas also differentiates between one own suffering and that of others. Is a Biblical character, for instance Job, more "oneself" than "another"? If Biblical stories are meant to teach one about oneself, Job teaches the suffering person that even in times of extreme suffering; one is still responsible for others. But this must never be said about other people's suffering. All Nazi victims were others and their fate is an unjustifiable scandal.

This approach might be an example of Levinas' attitude to Biblical stories and figures, which is similar to and continues that of the sages and other commentators to the Bible. They expect to not only understand the original or "true" meaning of the text, but also demand some actual, existential meaning of it. They create a living dialogue with the text in order to learn from it and teach some new meaning hidden between its letters. This is Midrash. The Sages in the Yevamot section chose to ignore its simple meaning and to stress the value of justice for the weak and marginal groups of society (a very actual subject to this day), as reflected in the story. Similarly, Levinas chooses to identify with Job, leading to his criticism. He uses the same method in his approach to Queen Esther, who shows more concern for the lives of others than for her own, and to Ritzpah Bat Aiah, who in spite of her unjust and extreme suffering acts gracefully on behalf of others, as well as other Biblical figures who exemplify proper human behavior and actions with which one can and should identify.

According to Levinas' exegesis, Job's course does not allow what Ritzpah Bat Aiah teaches: To love the Torah more than God, which means to give preference to others over oneself, even if heaven is empty. This is obviously a new way of understanding Ritzpah Bat Aiah 's behavior beyond the simple meaning of the story – a relevant post-Shoah way of reading this story so it becomes meaningful to us, sons and daughters of the survivors.

Many scholars have stressed the essential connection between the two parts of Levinas' oeuvre, which he was so careful to differentiate.[38] I completely agree with this thesis, which is why I have not discerned between them previously. Nonetheless, there are many fundamental differences between the Jewish writings and the philosophical ones, most of which are way beyond the scope of the current article. Most relevant in this context, the Bible and its traditional Jewish interpretations have different roles. The Biblical figures and stories illustrate Levinas' philosophical ideas similarly to other literary sources. There is no essential difference between them; they are not a source of authority, rather they inspire and illustrate ideas equally. Verses are rarely cited and midrashim are paraphrased with no note of their source. Literary examples can be found in Talmudic lectures as well, as Ikonikov appears side by side with Jacob, Job, and Abraham, but here literature is used to illustrate the Jewish sources. By Translating the Talmud portions, citing them in entirety, and interpreting them, including the verses they comprise, they receive the role of teachers. Their interpretation is a way of participating in the revelation. This fundamental difference between the role of the Bible and of biblical exegesis in philosophical writings and in "Jewish" writings reflects the tension between universalism and particularism in the philosophy of Levinas. On the one hand, Judaism has a universal mission that must be

translated into universal language, and "any man truly man is no doubt of the line of Abraham"[39], but on the other hand, Jewish particularism does not disappear. One particular people with a particular history are the heirs of this legacy and they are necessary in order to patiently sustain and develop it.[40] Likewise, human values are universal and appear in all literatures, and Ikonikov describes what Ritzpah Bat Aiah demonstrates. But, on the other hand, these values are revealed, in a challenge to actual circumstances and to the exegetes, i.e. us, in the written and oral Torah.

Ritzpah Bat Aiah 's goodness, as described touchingly by the Midrash and in Levinas' interpretation, is charming, almost magical; the same goodness described by Ikonikov. In extreme times such as that of the Shoah, of war and endless suffering, it is indeed the last tiny spark that retains our humanity. Relief of another's suffering reduces evil, even if only a little. It might even have some beneficial effect on the self by turning oneself from passive sufferer into active reliever of suffering, regardless if this is not the main rationale. In circumstances of chaos and confusing evil, goodness is a certain value, enduring despite its weakness, as there are always a few good people. In retrospect, is it possible that the existence of goodness, for instance "righteous of the nation's" existence and their actions in the Shoah, allow us to avoid sinking into total despair and loss of belief in the triumph of good? Allow avoiding sinking into complete existential and moral nihilism?

Nevertheless, this goodness is not sufficient to form a reality in which another Shoah is impossible, in which another war can be avoided, in which people would not hurt other people. This vision demands social and political activity on a much larger scale.

It demands the constant subordination of politics to ethics, i.e. monotheistic politics, but this is a subject for another article.

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[1] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than being and beyond essence,* Duquesne University Press, 1998, dedication page.

Bernstein goes as far as to say that this is the basic motivation of Levinas' entire philosophy. I agree with him. See: Richard J. Bernstein, "Evil and the temptation of theodicy", Critchley Simon and Bernasconi Robert, *The Cambridge Companion to Lévinas*, CambridgeUniversity Press, 2002, pp. 252 – 253.

For more about this dedication page, see: Annabel Herzog, "Levinas, memory, and the art of writing", *The Philosophical Forum, Volume* XXXVI, No. 3, Fall 2005, pp. 342- 343.

[2]He shares this opinion, among others, with André Neher, *L'éxil de la parole*, Du Seuil, 1962, p. 213.

[3]On Levinas and theodicy, see: Richard J. Bernstein, "Evil and the temptation of theodicy", Critchley Simon and Bernasconi Robert, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, pp. 252 – 267.

Richard A. Cohen, "What good is the holocaust? On suffering and evil", *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 281 – 266.

[4] Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 187.

[5]Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 143.

[6]Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, p. 14. Another aspect of the rejection of theodicy can be found in Levinas' interpretation of the Mishna "It is incumbent on a Man to bless [God] for the evil in the same way as for the good" (Tractate Berakhot 9,5). Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the verse,* pp. 91 – 92.

[7] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous – On thinking of the other*, The Athlone Press, 1998, pp. 91 – 102.

[8]Ibid., p. 99.

[9] See also Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and evil", Philipe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil,* Duquesne University Press, 1998, pp. 179 – 181.

[10] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous – On thinking of the other*, p. 241 note 9.

[11]Levinas brings another example of the rejection of theodicy from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Berakhot* 5b, Ibid., 240, note 4.

[12]Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Bava-Batra* 15a – 16a; Yerushalmi Talmud Tractate *Sota* 5, 5-6.

[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings,* pp. 70 – 88.

[14]Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin*, 37a.

[15] Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, pp. 85 – 86. See also: Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and evil", Philipe Nemo*, Job and the Excess of Evil,* Duquesne University Press, 1998, pp. 179 - 180. André Neher claims exactly the opposite, as does a midrash in Babylonian Talmud Bava-Kama 92a, by stressing verse 42,10, "The Lord restored Job's fortunes when he prayed on behalf of his (friends) other", *L'exil de la parole*, p. 241.

[16]Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, p. 85.

[17]Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than being and beyond essence*, p. 122. This heteronomous definition of the ethical differs from Kant's autonomous definition. On

the ambivalence of Levinas' approach to Kant concerning Job, see: Paul Davis, "Sincerity and the end of theodicy: three remarks on Levinas and Kant", Critchley Simon and Bernasconi Robert, *The Cambridge Companion to Lévinas* , pp. 170 – 176.

[18] Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, p. 14. This change of focus is central for understanding Levinas' rejection of any type of theology, and in particular theodicy. Tod Linafelt interprets the story of Aharon's two sons in chapter 10 of Leviticus in the context of the religious difficulties aroused by suffering such as in the Shoah. In my opinion, his claim that his approach is similar to that of Levinas is a misunderstanding of this major point. Both indeed reject theodicy, but for Levinas the main question is ethical. Tod Linafelt, "Damages due to the fire", Tamara Cohen Eskenazi, Gary A. Phillips, David Jobling (ed.), *Levinas and Biblical Studies,* Society of Biblical Literature, 2003, pp. 113 – 123.

[19]Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, p.196.

[20] Emmanuel Levinas, *In time of the Nations,* pp. 76 - 91 . See also, Annabel Herzog, "Levinas, memory, and the art of writing", *The Philosophical Forum*, Volume XXXVI, No. 3, Fall 2005, pp. 339 – 342.

[21] *In time of the Nations*, p. 88.

[22] *Ibid.,* pp. 87 – 88. See also: Catherine Chalier, "Levinas and the Talmud" Critchley Simon and Bernasconi Robert, *The Cambridge Companion to Lévinas*, pp. 112 – 117.

[23]Vasili Grossman, *Life and Fate,* (from the Russian: Robert Chandler), Collins Harvill, London, 1985.

[24] *In time of the Nations*, p. 89.

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 91.

[26] See Elisabeth Goldwyn, *Space between the letters,* Hakibuts Hameuhad, 2011, pp. 157 – 172, 198 – 201 . (In Hebrew).

[27]Joshua 9.

[28]Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sucah,* 49b.

[29] The Talmud interprets this half verse, which describes facts, as a punishment meted out by David to the Gibeonites for their vengefulness.

[30] *Midrash Rabbah – Numbers*, viii 4 (trans. Judah J. slotky, Soncino Press, 1961, pp. 221 – 222).

[31]See also: Ester Eilam, "Ritzpa bat-Aya: thought on a hero woman", Henriet Dahan-Kalev, Avigdor Shinan etc (ed.), *A Mythical, Social Justice and Gender in Jewish Sources*, Yediot Aharonot, 2011, pp. 157 – 164. (In Hebrew)

[32] Vladimir Jankelevitch, a French Jewish philosopher who opened the said colloquium with a lesson called "Introduction to the subject of Forgiveness". His last sentence was: "Forgiveness is more powerful than evil…or more precisely, it is as powerful as evil…It is as powerful as evil but not more powerful then evil". (*Le Pardon*, Press Universitaires, 1965, p. 261, my translation)

[33] Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, p. 29.

[34] Ibid.

[35]Ibid., p. 16.

[36]*Ibid.,* p. 31.

[37]See also: Elisabeth Goldwyn, *Space between the letters,* pp.135 – 144.

[38]Catherine Challier and Simon Crichley, for instance, to name only a few.

[39]Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, p. 99.

[40] See also: MacDonald Michael J.," "Jewgreek and Greekjew",*Philosophy Today*, 35, 3 (1991), p. 215 – 225; Anette Aronowicz, "Teaching Levinas's Talmudic commentaries: The relation of the Jewish tradition to the non-Jewish world*",* *Paradigms in Jewish Philosophy*, (ed. Jospe R.), Associated University Presses, 1997, p. 280 – 289; Elisabeth Goldwyn, "The universal Mission of the Jewish People in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas", *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel,* 18, 2008, pp. 79 – 97. (In Hebrew).