Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas, one of the twentieth century's greatest philosophers, frequently engaged in Jewish thought and Talmudic interpretation as well. From my first encounter with his Talmudic Readings I was drawn to their style and written form and intrigued by them. As one who loves, studies, and teaches Talmud, the contents of his interpretation appeared to me bold and fascinating, its methods creative and original.

Levinas often wrote about learning Torah; about its value as a practice to be pursued, with all its ethical and religious meanings; about its role in the shaping and rejuvenation of Judaism in times of crisis, for example after the Holocaust. He emphasized the Torah's universal appeal, the human values that it teaches, and the responsibility of the Jews to translate these into a language comprehensible to everyone, to promote them in the world. His Talmudic Readings are first and foremost Torah study, practical application of this value. This learning uses a method associated with the Jewish tradition of Torah study and in his writings Levinas often imbues the principles of study with meaning that exceeds their form. His many comments on methodological issues indicate that not only was he completely aware of the principles guiding his learning, rather he also saw the method as strongly connected to the contents, as a matter worthy of consideration. This volume sets out to clarify the interpretive method utilized by Emmanuel Levinas and its link with the contents it conveys.

Levinas' interpretations of the Talmud are philosophical in content and connected to his philosophical writings. They ask philosophical questions of the text and focus on this dimension in regard to every detail taught in the text, whether *halakha* (Jewish law), story, the associations through which a statement was conveyed, or a verse

cited. Hence, learning these interpretations demands prior knowledge of his philosophy.

The difficulties that many have encountered when learning the Talmudic Readings of Levinas stem in part from the dialogue they generate between two cultures, two languages, two different modes of expression, between philosophy and Talmud. His writing is distinctly interdisciplinary and it demands proficiency and familiarity with two different domains.[1] These difficulties may be the reason for the meager research on Levinas' Talmudic Readings, research produced predominantly by Jewish scholars and mostly in Hebrew.[2]

Nevertheless, I believe that there is good reason to persist in analyzing this Talmudic commentary, created in the specific context of French Jewry in the latter half of the twentieth century. Its basic assumption that the Talmud is a text that has meaning for every person at any time, also transforms it into an efficient basis for debating many existential questions that concern Jews at the beginning of the twenty first century. We have not yet overcome the trauma of the Holocaust. Moreover, we too are occupied with fundamental identity issues, questions of assimilation versus singularity, the meaning of Israel's existence, as well as the relationship between religion and ethics, religion and politics, religion and science.

[1] This does not imply that Levinas' philosophical writings are to be considered Jewish philosophy. Levinas did not define himself as a Jewish philosopher and most of his writing does not deal with Jewish thought. Nonetheless, many of the contents of his philosophical writing are indeed evident in his Talmudic commentary and his philosophical theories are inspired by Jewish sources. Much has been written about the complex relationship between the two parts of his works. Similar to most scholars who have studied his Talmudic lessons, such as Catherine Chalier, Daniel Epstein, and Simon Critchley, I too see his works as forming a whole although, as stated, discerning its different parts. On the interrelations between the philosophy and Talmudic commentary of Levinas see Catherine Chalier, "Levinas and the Talmud", Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, p. 100-118.

[2] Richard Cohen, Jacob Meskin, and Annette Aronowicz in English; Catherin Chalier, David Banon, and Shmuel Trigano in French; Ze'ev Levy, Ephraim Meir, Daniel Epstein, Hanoch Ben-Pazi, Shmuel Wygoda, and myself in Hebrew.

Many current-day Jews do not define themselves as observant Jews and are not committed to any type of Jewish law, but they do define themselves as Jews. Where in the past faith was an essential and self-evident part of the identity of people in general and of Jews in particular, this is no longer so. The existence of the State of Israel – where a considerable part of the world's Jews live in a sovereign, democratic state, one that declares the equal rights of all its citizens regardless of faith, race, and sex – is unprecedented in Jewish history as well.[3] Jews have never before been a majority governing non-Jewish minorities and recognizing their equal rights. Moreover, Jews have never before been equal citizens in other democratic countries in which anti-Semitism is against the law, as most Jews are today in the diaspora.

These new circumstances create a need and opportunity for renewed thinking, for creating other new Jewish dimensions. And just as after the destruction of the Second Temple there was need for a new *midrash* (meaning "homiletic exegesis") to translate Jewish tradition for the post-temple era, today it is necessary to create a *midrash*, or to be precise *midrashim* (i.e., the plural form), to translate Jewish tradition for an era in which reality has been irrevocably transformed. It is necessary to reshape Judaism so that it can adapt to this reality.

Levinas' Talmudic commentary proposes a humanistic Judaism that is connected to its roots and immersed in Western culture, albeit from a critical perspective. This is one important alternative among the many diverse voices currently being asserted in the Jewish world. This is a new *midrash* of the type we need today, Torah study connected to life's most urgent questions, offering deeply meaningful answers.

[3] See for example Eliezer Schweid, "Jews in Israel and in the world: Identities moving apart", Maya Leibowitz, Ariel-Joel David, and Moti Inbari (ed.), *Who Is a Jew Today? Symposium on Jewish Identity*, p. 114-126.

The *midrash* was generated as a tool for coping with crisis circumstances. The loss of the Jewish spiritual-religious center upon the destruction of the temple necessitated a significant change in Jewish culture. The sages formed post-destruction Judaism by means of creative Torah study, redesigning the dimensions of worship and religion while maintaining a discourse with the texts that had shaped everything that preceded them. Through the *midrash*, for example, regular prayers were designed as a replacement for the perpetual daily sacrifice (*korban hatamid*) and repentance as a replacement for the ritual order (*seder ha'avodah*) at the temple on the Day of Atonement. Moreover, in response to sociological and economic transformations, charity was offered as a replacement for the agricultural gifts to the poor (*matnot aniyim*). This was made possible by maintaining the holy text with almost total interpretive freedom. The *midrash* made it possible.

I do not mean to review the entire history of Jewish culture, but Levinas' *midrash*, similar to Torah learning at Rosenzweig's *Jüdische Lehrhaus* (Free House of Jewish Learning)[4] and at present-day pluralistic *batei midrash* (Houses of Learning) in Israel, were all responses to dire circumstances. Rosenzweig was reacting to World War I, Levinas to World War II and the Holocaust. We in Israel live in a reality that encompasses unprecedented Jewish innovations but, notwithstanding the positive aspects of this reality, we are also coping with challenges that may be considered crises. The pluralistic *batei midrash* emerged in response to a deep identity and cultural crisis. These three examples of Torah study have in common their point of departure, one that is not associated with tradition and with a continuity of Torah study. They evolved apart from the yeshiva world. Rosenzweig was raised in an assimilated family and first studied Torah as an adult. His *beit midrash* was

[4] See: Franz Rosenzweig, "Upon Opening the Jüdische Lehrhaus ", *On Jewish Learning*, (edited by N. N. Glatzer), Schocken Books, 1955, pp. 95 – 102.

established in response to the need of educated and assimilated Jews to connect to their Jewish identity by learning Torah. As they were educated but not in the study of Torah, a new type of Torah study was needed, and Rosenzweig presents its foundations in the inaugural speech of his *Lehrhaus*. Levinas did receive a basic Jewish education but he only began studying Talmud as an adult after World War II. He never studied at a yeshiva. In his Talmudic interpretation he appeals to an audience of whom many lacked any Jewish education and which was also in the midst of an identity crisis following the Holocaust. In the case of the pluralistic *batei midrash* in Israel the situation is slightly more complex: The founders of these institutions, reminiscent of Rosenzweig and Levinas, arrived at the study of Torah as the result of an identity crisis and in the understanding that in order to connect to their Jewish identity they must study Talmud. These *batei midrash* attracted observant and secular women, and secular men, who had mostly been prevented from studying the Talmud previously (Talmud study in Israeli state religious schools for girls commenced at about the same period as the first pluralistic *batei midrash* – the late 1980s. Only few women had studied Talmud in academic institutions prior to that time). Male yeshiva graduates joining these *batei midrash* often did so in discontent at the Torah learning to which they had become accustomed or wishing to experience the different type of Torah study pursued there.

This point of departure afforded and still affords a great deal of interpretive freedom, leading to a similarity in the study goals and in the methods formulated in order to reach these goals. Rosenzweig wrote: "It is a learning in reverse order. A learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life, but from the other way round: from life, from a world that knows nothing of the Law, or pretends to know nothing, back to the Torah. Life, from a world which has no knowledge of that commanded or

which 'professes unfamiliarity' with that commanded, back to the Torah."[5] Learners bring their urgent questions to the learning and seek a response to these in the text, using creative interpretations that bridge the centuries separating the text from their own time and in the hope that this learning will have an effect on shaping their way of life. The learners come from different domains: Most are educated but not necessarily Torah scholars. Learners' diverse fields of knowledge and occupations affect the wealth of interpretation as envisioned by Rosenzweig and evident in Levinas' interpretation, interconnected as it is with his philosophy. This movement from the external to the internal and back again has an impact on the perspectives displayed by learners as well, learners who bring to their learning universal values and find support for these values in the texts studied. Learning Torah does not aim to separate learners from other realms, rather to ally with these realms, inspire them, and become enhanced by them. For this reason, this kind of Torah study is constructed in such a way that learning is partial and does not demand all-consuming dedication.

In this type of Torah learning the approach is organic and synchronic, meaning that every part or level of the text may be relevant to any other part and to any question asked, and all areas of life are relevant to the study of Torah. Rather than attempting to see the text in its original context of time and place, inquiries focus on its possible meaning in the here and now for specific learners intrigued by current questions.

Levinas has much to offer to Jews in diaspora nowadays, both in regard to methods and to contents, as they deal with identity crisis. I shall do my best to prove this claims throughout this book.

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[5] Ibid., p. 98.

Most of the publications discussing Levinas' Talmudic Readings focus on their content and deal with them mainly as philosophical texts.[6] His interpretive method and its basic concepts have also attracted some scholarly attention.[7]

As I studied and taught these Talmudic readings I grew to understand them as a type of *midrash*, and for this reason I thought that adding tools used in the research of rabbinical *midrash* and *agaddah* would enhance and inspire their study. This research, originating as it does from a literary discipline, deals with issues of form, language, editing, and genre, and with the connection between all these and the contents. *Midrash* is indeed an interpretation of the Torah, and Levinas' Talmudic Readings interpret sections of the Babylonian Talmud; but the research of *midrash* and *agaddah* is a good theoretical foundation on two levels of study: how Levinas typifies the

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[6] Researchers of the Talmud lessons tend to focus on the relationship between these lessons and Levinas' philosophy and see this as a deep fundamental connection. The philosophical ideological aspect of the Talmud lessons is strongly stressed in most of these writings. See: Aronowicz, "Teaching Levinas's Talmudic commentaries: The relation of the Jewish tradition to the non-Jewish world", Jospe R. (ed), *Paradigms in Jewish Philosophy*, p. 280-289; David Banon, "Lévinas, penseur juif ou juif qui pense", *La Métaphysique d'Emmanuel Lévinas*, *Noésis* No. 3, 1999, p. 27-45; Richard A. Cohen, "Humanism, religion, myth, criticism, exegesis – translator's introduction", *New Talmudic Readings*, p. 1-46; Lawrence J. Kaplan, "Israel under the mountain: Emmanuel Levinas on freedom and constraint in the revelation of the Torah", *Modern Judaism*, vol. 18/1 Feb 1998, p. 37-46; Jacob E. Meskin, "Critique, tradition and the religious imagination: An essay on Levinas' Talmudic Readings", *Judaism* No. 185, Vol. 47/1, Winter, 1998, p. 90-106; Jacob E. Meskin, "Toward a new understanding of the work of Emmanuel Levinas", *Modern Judaism* vol. 20/1, Feb. 2000, p. 78-102; Samuel Moyn, "Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Readings: Between tradition and invention, *Prooftexts* 23, 3, 2003 p. 338-363; Daniel Epstein, "Introduction" and "Afterword", *Nine Talmudic Readings*, p. 7-8, 255-261 [Hebrew]; Hanoch Ben-Pazi, *Call to responsibility*, Thesis for PhD degree, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 2003. [Hebrew]; Hanoch Ben-Pazi, "The Talmudic readings – philosophy or religious interpretation", *Da'at* 67, Winter 2000, p. 117-143 [Hebrew]; Zev Harvey, "Levinas on innocence, naivety, and boorishness", *Da'at* 30 1993, p. 13-20 [Hebrew]; Ze'ev Levy, "The 'Greek' dimension in rabbinical writings and particularly in the Talmudic legends", *The Other and Responsibility*, p. 161-167 [Hebrew].

[7] See Shmuel Wygoda in his composition *"The Jewish philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*", particularly in comparison to different contexts: philosophical interpretation of the Talmud, modern hermeneutic theories, and current-day customary methods of studying Talmud; Annette Aronowicz, "Les commentaires talmudiques de Lévinas", : *L'Herne – Emmanuel Lévinas*, p. 368 – 377; Annette Aronowicz, "Translator's introduction", Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Lectures*, p. ix – xxxix; Gil Bernheim, "A propos des lectures talmudiques, entretien", *L'Herne – Emmanuel Lévinas*, p.352 – 365; Perrine Simon-Nahum, "Une "herméneutique de la parole". Emmanuel Lévinas et les Colloques des intellectuels juifs**,** Danielle Cohen-Levinas et Shmuel Trigano (ed.), *Emmanuel Lévinas, Philosophie et Judaïsm*, p. 255 – 271; Shmuel Wygoda, "A phenomenological outlook on the Talmud: Levinas as reader of the Talmud", *Phenomenological Inquiry*, vol. 24, Oct. 2000, p. 117 - 148.

Talmud, its approach to the scriptures and to reality – which resembles that defined as *midrash*; and the interpretive method that derives from these features, reflecting these same principles. Levinas exposes these principles in his writing and applies them in his interpretation. Maintaining tradition from an attitude of renewal and regeneration is the essence of the classical *midrash* and it is also the essence of this Talmudic interpretation.

Levinas referred to the issue of compatibility between style and contents in his philosophical work as well. One of his major critiques of western philosophy targets its conceptual language. Concepts reflect generalized thinking, which has no room for details. As a result, language of this type facilitates and even demands disengagement from reality, since reality is comprised of distinct, diverse details. Furthermore, thought that relates to its objects in their form as concepts eliminates their otherness and transforms them into part of the self, of the consciousness. This may be efficient and logical in the case of inanimate objects. The problem is when humans too find themselves generalized as objects, when a person becomes merely an incidental example of the human race, with not much personal significance. In this case overall generalized thinking is inadvertently transformed into totalitarianism and violence. Humans are subjects rather than objects. Their essence can never be encompassed in generalized concepts as each person is infinite. Although Levinas too had no recourse but to use concepts, as the essential structure of language and of philosophical thought, he sought a way to express transcendental thought, contents that reflect opening up to another, a language that does not maintain others as objects rather makes room for them as subjects. He tried to create a language with spaces that leave room for otherness and for the multiple uniqueness of what, and particularly who,

comprises the concepts.[8] This writing contains an unraveling (dédire) of that which was written, spaces, doubts, and question marks, a unique style of philosophical writing.

The issue of adapting form or language to contents is evident in Levinas' Talmudic interpretations as well. Time and again he indicates the difference between the language of the Talmud, which never departs from concrete reality, and conceptual language. When choosing to remain close to the textual continuity he is interpreting, even when the text deviates from its primary topic – he does this consciously and often comments on it. This is connected to the abovementioned capacity of Talmudic language to include spaces of otherness. Hence, the lesson proffered to readers, with its structure and style that deviate from the customary and to a large degree reflect the strange style of the object of interpretation, is a far-reaching attempt to adapt the form of writing to its contents. The result is Talmudic lessons written in a style that is open to the otherness of the Talmudic text and attentive to its multiple levels. This thought generated the notion that there is good cause to examine when and how the style and methodological features of this interpretation are compatible with the contents they convey.

The study method emphasizing attention not only to the contents of the text rather also to its form and unique rhythm makes it possible to expose levels of meaning and contents in Levinas' Talmudic Readings (and not only in the Talmudic text) that exceed those facilitated by philosophical readings. Of course, this reading does not supplant other readings or diminish their significance. I have no doubt as to the value and the need for readings attentive to the thematic subtleties of these lessons, to their

[8] See *Otherwise than Being* p. 7, 192 footnote 18, 97,100, 155 - 157,170, 181. And see also: Simon Critchley: *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. This is one of the major topics discussed in the book.

philosophical meanings, and so on. The method suggested here, however, is capable of expanding the scope of interpretation of these texts, of recognizing other dimensions. This approach to the text, based on the assumption that its form and design are significant and therefore there is reason to study it in its entirety, including its rhythm and its supposed detours – exposes its wealth and uncovers meanings that cannot be revealed in any other way. This may be a way of unraveling the text, connecting to its intrinsic inspiration, and finding in its spaces other meanings that are merely part of the infinity that contracted into the written letters. This course invites the learners to become partners in the study process, to ask questions about their life and about the topics that occupy them as manifested in all dimensions of the material studied. Learning that constitutes a way of life.

The current volume's approach to Levinas' Talmudic Readings is based, as stated, on research, but it is primarily an interpretation of the lessons in a similar method to that which he himself used in his interpretation of the Talmudic discussions. The purpose of the book is not only to present a theory but mainly to make it possible for readers who are not familiar with Levinas' philosophy and with the literature of the *midrash* to understand his Talmudic interpretations and to apply them to themselves and to their life. Readers are invited to take part in this *beit midrash* where Talmud and Levinas' writings are studied and where current-day reality is considered from their own perspective. Have I managed to create a *midrash* on Levinas' *midrash* on the Talmud?

The first chapter of the book is a definition of the term "midrash". It lays the foundation for the debate and describes the characteristics of the traditional *midrash agaddah* based on research of this field and hermeneutic theories. The next chapters

focus on central features of the *midrash* as defined in this chapter and examine them in the Talmudic interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas. This structure assumes that if *midrashic* features are to be found in Levinas' interpretation of the Talmud this supports the claim that it is indeed a type of *midrash*.

The second chapter examines the approach taken by Levinas, perceiving the study of Torah and its interpretation as part of a revelation versus the rabbinical conception of their enterprise as replacing the work of the prophets.

The third chapter examines various aspects of the relationship of this Talmudic interpretation to the interpreted text; its view of the Torah's sanctity and of the methods of the *midrash*. In this chapter an attempt is made to distinguish between Levinas' Talmudic lessons and his other writings and to compare them to characteristics of *midrashic* interpretation of the Torah.

The fourth chapter deals with the relationship between interpretation and circumstances external to the text. These circumstances are present as the origin of questions asked of the text and also as the purpose for which the interpretation is generated. This aspect, shared by the traditional *midrash* and Levinas' interpretations, has a decisive effect on their common hermeneutic theory.

The fifth chapter discusses the pluralism and interpretive freedom common to the *midrash* and to Levinas' Talmudic interpretations, and their significant differences in this regard.

The sixth chapter deals with the unique features of Levinas' *midrash*: consistent focusing on interpersonal aspects of the text, even when it seems to be occupied with other matters; translating the unique language of the text into universal implications; using philosophical tools and terms as part of the interpretation; and insisting on interpreting the full text with all its elements and details.

Occasionally I shall ask how can Levinas contribute to the reality of Jewish life nowadays.

In my writing I choose to cite extensively from the Talmudic Readings and to interpret large textual segments. In this I attempt to match the form of my words to their contents and the outcome of the learning to its object; namely, more learning of the lessons and less writing about them. From time to time, and in order to explain things in their correct context, sections from Levinas' philosophical works shall be cited as well.[9]

I have no presumptions of an "objective" relationship between a writer and the object of her writing. Therefore, I find it important to clarify my point of departure as well as my connection to Levinas' Talmudic Readings.[10] I grew up in a home that endorsed the conviction that Judaism should have an impact on our life as moral people in the world, people who act to promote good in the world and therefore endeavor to apply this conviction in practice. In Levinas' writings I found a similar point of departure, words, descriptions, and deep thoughts that added a fascinating and empowering dimension to that which my mother and father, Janine and Lucien Lazare, instilled in me as a child.

As a woman, I first received access to the Talmud in the academic world, which provided me with the necessary tools and foundations for its study. Learning and teaching Talmud for years in study groups consisting of colleagues, Torah enthusiasts,

[9] When quoting sections that have already been published in English I used the existing translations, with some corrections when these seemed essential in view of the original.

[10] On this Levinas writes: "[I]t is doubtful that a philosophical thought has ever come into the world independent of all attitudes or that there ever was a category in the world which came before an attitude". (*Nine Talmudic Readings*, p. 15).

in a pluralistic *beit midrash*,[11] taught me the value of studying in a group, where partners join to create interpretations that converse with their personal and group life. This type of learning is in fact a way of practicing human interrelations and it converses with the personal reality of each learner and with the circumstances common to all learners. The Talmud proves to be a text that deals with life, derives from it and inspires it, connects people to the sound box of their culture but also to their current issues. In the *beit midrash* I learned the potential and value of adapting the method of learning to the contents learned.

In the context of learning Talmud, exploring the connection between the method of learning and its contents indeed derives from this point of departure, from the awareness that original forms of learning facilitate learning processes that are organically connected to life. I take at face value Levinas' invitation to all learners to join him in the process of learning and I attempt to discern how this invitation is indeed manifested, beyond the declaration of intent, in the interpretation itself and in its style of writing.

May my words be desirable.

[11] The voices of my teachers and friends at the beit midrash of Hamidrasha at Oranim are present in the pages of this work, between the lines, always present.