Catastrophe as Religious Experience: Levinas, Leibowitz, and the Shoah / Jonathon Catlin

Theodor Herzl’s Political Zionism and the Jewish Nation-State / Kyuhyun Jo

Conflicting Agency, Baseless Choices, and the Modern Orthodox Jew / Josh Halpern

Gender and the Avot / Ben Silver

Medical and Rabbinical Authority Regarding Intersex, Gender Identity, and Jewish Law / Danya Lagos
Letter from the Co-Editor-in-Chief

We are constantly confronted by change. Changing norms, changing politics, shifting borders. Empires collapse and ideologies crumble. We meet new friends and lose old ones. The success of our communities, relationships, and philosophies rests on their ability to cope with change; to retain the central and good and discard the tired and bad. This struggle isn’t new, of course. Throughout Jewish history communities faced new challenges and radical change. Rabbis stood amid the ruins of Jerusalem, textile workers witnessed the high-held lamp of the Statue of Liberty, and thinkers of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) looked out on a world newly emancipated. These are only a sampling among the myriad world-changing events Jewish groups have had to contend with. Every answer to the conflicts between new and old opens its own set of questions, and provides future generations with new precedents and possibilities.

In this issue of *Makom*, we present several considerations of how modern Judaism, and Jewish communities, have confronted change; how philosophers, politicians and people in their everyday lives have attempted to combine new worlds and old approaches, or old worlds and new approaches. Josh Halpern weighs Modern Orthodox Judaism’s ability to settle conflicts between modern ethical obligations and ancient halakhic demands. Jon Catlin compares the responses of Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Emmanuel Levinas, two critical modern Jewish philosophers, to the Holocaust, and finds them remarkably similar. And Kyuhyun Jo assesses the political philosophies of various early Zionists, arguing that Herzl’s direct practicality stood out from a group of otherwise overly abstract thinkers. Finally, the articles in our symposium on Judaism and gender also tackle the question of change and continuity head on. Danya Lagos argues that the Jewish community should embrace the full spectrum of gender identification by accepting the multiplicity of genders handed down in the rabbinic tradition, and Ben Silver questions the absence of the Matriarchs in the opening of the Orthodox Amidah prayer.

*Makom* is itself a community that seeks to weather the winds of change and emerge strengthened. *Makom*’s role on campus is to give undergraduates a forum to discuss Jewish topics seriously, to take up interesting and difficult questions. As a young publication, every new member of the staff, even every article, shapes the identity of the journal, and it is this open space for new ideas and modes of raising critical questions that gives *Makom* so much vitality.

This will be my last year as editor at *Makom*, and that of my co-editor-in-chief Gabe Shapiro. As the last staff that were on the journal at its founding, we are thrilled to see that *Makom* will be in strong hands next year, remaining dedicated to fostering a vibrant community of thinkers engaged in a strenuous and honest dialogue on Jewish thought.

—Doni Bloomfield, Co-Editor-in-Chief
Mission Statement

*Makom* aims to provide undergraduates from the University of Chicago and elsewhere with a forum for serious intellectual engagement with Jewish topics. Targeted specifically at undergraduates and drawing upon the Chicago Center for Jewish Studies, *Makom* seeks to create a space that is serious enough to stimulate genuine and fulfilling discourse while comfortable enough to encourage undergraduates to take risks in their thinking and writing about Jewish issues. Of particular relevance are Jewish students who want to engage with their Jewishness in a more intellectual way, and students of all backgrounds who are interested in Jewish studies but whose primary academic focus is in a different area. For the former, *Makom* offers a space in which the intellectual life that is characteristic of the University can be applied specifically to exploring Jewish identity, and for the latter, a space in which they can safely investigate their academic interests in Jewish studies. Ultimately, *Makom* strives to cultivate a rich undergraduate discourse on Jewish topics, to connect undergraduates with the Center for Jewish Studies, and to contribute to both the academic and Jewish communities of the University of Chicago.

Editorial Policy

*Makom* encourages submissions from undergraduate students interested in Jewish studies in the form of essays, articles, reviews, works of art, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor. Submissions will be accepted and published on the basis of their relevance to *Makom*’s mission statement, space available, and on their intellectual and creative merit. However, *Makom* reserves the right to decline to publish submissions based on the discretion of the editors, and to edit any material submitted for publication for spelling, grammar, length, and both legal and professional standards of journalistic integrity. No anonymous submissions will be published.

Commitment to Intellectual Diversity

*Makom* is dedicated to appropriately representing undergraduates’ diversity of views on Jewish issues. Our commitment is to serious intellectual engagement with Judaism and Jewishness, not to any specific stances that such engagement may take. As such, the opinions articulated herein are to be understood as solely those of the authors, and not necessarily reflective of the *Makom* editorial board.
### Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Danya Lagos: Medical and Rabbinical Authority Regarding Intersex, Gender Identity, and Jewish Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jonathon Catlin: Catastrophe as Religious Experience: Levinas, Leibowitz, and the Shoah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kyuhyun Jo: Theodor Herzl's Political Zionism and the Jewish Nation-State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Josh Halpern: Conflicting Agency, Baseless Choices, and the Modern Orthodox Jew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ben Silver: Gender and the Avot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
symposium
The last century has challenged traditional conceptions of gender at their foundation: set roles for women and men, the moral relevance of sexual orientation, and the biological basis of gender are all being questioned. How have these changes affected the way we think about or ought to think about Judaism?
Judaism is a religion that traditionally places a heavy emphasis on its adherents’ gender in determining how they conduct daily life. It is thus no surprise that complications or transitions in gender assignment or identity can present modern traditional Jews with a variety of ritual and social tensions when it comes to the relationship between their body, their self-identification, and what is expected of them in their communities. The responses of Orthodox rabbinic authorities to cases involving non-binary gender reveals a deeply social concern in halakhic decision-making and ruling—one that has predominantly been used to preserve the status quo by finding a minimally socially disruptive gender assignment for intersex people. However, once Orthodoxy can admit to being informed by pressing social needs, the power of its halakhic decision-making process can be expanded to meet the needs of transgender individuals and others who currently find themselves rendered outside the protection of Jewish law.

There are two major paradigms in which broader secular society interprets and handles sex and gender realities outside the context of a traditional binary. One is through the category of intersex, in which a person is born with genitalia or genotype that does not correspond to an unambiguous male or female assignment. Until recently, intersex people were frequently diagnosed with a specific “condition” and operated upon during infancy or early childhood to make them correspond to one gender category or another. The other paradigm operates through the framework of transgender and transsexual identities, by which a person changes the gender or sex (or both) to which they were assigned at birth, typically during adulthood. As the medical and psychological community have employed these paradigms to respond to the needs of patients and their families, Jewish leaders have also attempted to formulate a Jewish response that attempts to fit the lives of intersex and transgender Jews within a traditional Jewish life.

That bodies, gender expressions, and gender identity come in many diverse expressions is not new to Judaism. There is a precedent within Rabbinic literature to recognize at least
Makom

six distinct gender categories. The category androgynos, or one who displays both “male” and “female” sexual characteristics is referred to 499 times in classical Jewish texts ranging from the Mishnah and Talmud to law codes up until the 16th century. A tuntum is a person with indeterminate or ambiguous genitalia, and is mentioned 516 times in the same body of literature. An ay’lonit is typically assigned as a female at birth and develops “male” sex characteristics later in life and remains infertile after puberty, and is referenced 120 times. A saris is a person assigned as a male at birth but who develops “female” sex characteristics, either through biological processes or through conscious human intervention. These texts occasionally trace the specific ways that membership in one of these categories affects halakhic obligations and restrictions.

In Orthodox Jewish communities, decisors of Jewish law (poskim) often serve as gatekeepers for many who need to make decisions about gender assignment and reassignment and other intersex and transgender issues. Members of a community seek out a ruling from a recognized halakhic figure to guide their decision making. Once a posek has delivered a decision, it is considered to be the final decision on the matter, and those who have sought it out are obligated by religious and social norms to obey it. As religion scholar Hillel Gray notes, Orthodox authorities have tended to allow for parents of intersex individuals to pursue medical operations to “resolve [their children’s] anatomical anomalies and ambiguities,” and designate a male or female gender, following the American Academy of Pediatrics’ alarmist designation of intersex status as a “social emergency.” Indeed, being born intersex becomes a “social emergency” — not because of any inherent links to physical or psychological danger, but rather when others in the community reify the association of a psychologically painful life with the lack of a conclusive binary designation. As the gatekeepers of gender identity in their communities, Orthodox poskim have used their authority to allow a halakhically lenient approach to what would otherwise be a biblical prohibition against elective surgeries that alter the “order of creation,” in the interest of a socially strict agenda to maintain intersex individuals within a two-gender binary structure. However, they do not extend the same leniency regarding surgery to transgender individuals, who arguably also have many pressing social needs to undergo surgery or change identities. In both cases, Orthodox poskim do not consider employing the rich tapestry of gender categories available in Rabbinic literature, instead seeking to make intersex individuals fit the male-female mold while denying transgender people the ability to transition between the two categories. This fragile maintenance of a rigid, unbending gender binary through selective consideration of medical expertise reveals that halakhic decision-making is not helplessly bound to a strict adherence to the letter of the law without an eye to social goals. Rather, poskim render decisions with an eye towards the society that they wish to create and perpetuate. In a contemporary halakhic climate in which other struggles are currently being fought in the realms of women’s participation and what it means for gender-based obligation and roles, one sees that many Orthodox rabbis seek to preserve the status quo as part of a broader struggle over power and slip-
pery slopes, rather than out of a pure interest in upholding Jewish law. These two parallel struggles open the door to interpreting the Orthodox halakhic approach as one firmly rooted in social norms. The alternative approach presented here exposes contemporary Orthodox halakha’s social element, one that at its core shares the willingness to compromise total conformity with halakha for political or social victories that it condemns in other more liberal movements. With this in mind, both those inside Orthodoxy and those outside of it ought to push for halakhic decisions that are more responsive to urgent contemporary social needs, perhaps those that invoke the categories that are already available to us through the Jewish tradition.

Notes


3 One major example is the well-documented opposition of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik to the formation of women’s prayer groups, which Rabbi Mayer Twersky generously claims was informed by “halakhic values, not halakhic details” in the Spring 1998 edition of Tradition.
The Amidah—the liturgical core of the Jewish prayer service—is full of requests: for understanding, health, safety, rain, and so on. But the first prayer of the Amidah, the *Avot* (“fathers,” “ancestors”), is explicitly meant to praise God, to flatter Him before making a variety of requests.¹ The strength of *Avot* seems to come from the reciter’s claim to be a member of the Abrahamic family; it is a reminder of God’s obligation to hear the reciter’s requests and answer them. On that account, *Avot* is not dissimilar to a plaintiff’s establishing standing before a judge.

The 20th and 21st centuries’ changing conceptions of gender, which is the theme of these pages, presents a serious challenge to the way that *Avot* has been recited for millennia.² As is apparent from the title of the prayer, *Avot* only praises God for the reciter being a member of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The prayer tacitly claims that showing standing before God is satisfied simply by showing descent (familial or, as in the case of converts, spiritual) from these men. No weight is given to the fact that anyone who is descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also descended from Sarah, Rebecca, and perhaps Rachel or Leah. This does not sit well with our modern sentiments, for it denies the obvious and powerful impact that mothers have in our lives. How would Jacob’s life have turned out, for instance, without Rebecca’s help?

It seems that the traditional (i.e., non-egalitarian) *Avot* lists only the patriarchs on account of some principle—perhaps a genuinely distasteful one—and this principle is found to be unacceptable by many Jews today. The most obvious candidate for this principle is outright chauvinism, and that might not be far from the truth. And yet other explanations exist, namely that the patriarchs were the first and most important (aside from Moses) of the prophets. But that point does not satisfy the egalitarian sentiment in modern Jews, since Sarah is mentioned as one of seven female prophets in the Talmud.³ (Rashi goes so far as to say that “Abraham was inferior to Sarah in prophecy”!)⁴ The traditional version’s seeming failures, therefore, have prompted most non-Orthodox strains of the American Jewish community to reform *Avot* into an egalitarian prayer.⁵ These egalitarian versions invariably mention Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and most maintain the tradition of using scriptural phrases as the basis for wording prayers.⁶
Despite their noble sentiments and acceptability to large portions of the American Jewish community, changing a prayer’s wording is not easy, and there are a number of problems associated with making *Avot* more inclusive of mothers and women. Among them: what is the order in which the names should be listed (viz., “God of Rachel and God of Leah” or “God of Leah and God of Rachel”)? Should Bilhah and Zilpah, Jacob’s concubines, be included? Do we pair husbands with wives (“God of Abraham, God of Sarah, God of Isaac, God of Rebecca, God of Jacob, etc.”), or fathers with sons and mothers with daughters (“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob. God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, etc.”)?

Answers to each of these questions and others abound. But just like the traditional version, each of these splintered, egalitarian versions of *Avot* must rely on some kind of organizing principle—for instance, the conjugal, the maternal, the paternal, or something else. It is on such a principle that each version of the prayer builds itself. And each of these principles, just like whatever unsatisfactory principle makes for the traditional version, gives a meaning or a purpose to *Avot*.

The principal question, therefore, when it comes to reforming *Avot* is not what is fair or even what is desirable. Egalitarians must first address what the purpose of *Avot* actually is, which is to ask: For what are we praising God at this point in the service? Until this past century, Jews the world over have been satisfied to praise God for familial and spiritual heritage from three particular men. It has become clear to many Jews that giving *Avot* such a meaning is at worst totally misguided and at best undesirable. But it remains unclear, in light of these new developments, for what we should show praise near the beginning of the Amidah.

**Notes**

5. The name of the prayer is often restyled as *Avot v’Imahot*, which can be rendered as “fathers and mothers.” It has been proposed, especially in the Reform movement, that the prayer be called *Dorot* (“generations”).
6. For instance, *magen Avraham* (“shield of Abraham”) is taken from God’s claim to Abraham: “I am a shield to you” (Gen 15:1). The most popular egalitarian addition to the end of the prayer, *ez-rat Sarah* (“helper of Sarah”), is presumably taken from the preceding line, where God is described
as an ozer (“helper”). The alternative, poked Sarah (“visitor of Sarah”), is taken directly from Gen 21:1.

7 Since Dan and Naphtali are born to Bilhah, and Gad and Asher to Zilpah, four of the Twelve Tribes do not genetically descend from Rachel and Leah. This makes the omission of Bilhah and Zilpah somewhat uncomfortable. But if Bilhah and Zilpah are included, then Hagar (and hence Ishmael) might also warrant inclusion in the Avot.
articles
Conflicted Agency, Baseless Choices, and the Modern Orthodox Jew

Josh Halperin

As social animals with diverse commitments, we are continually confronted with the problem of conflicted agency. We are, for example, often forced to take sides in a family feud or adjudicate between competing religious and political loyalties. In what follows, I sketch Christine Korsgaard’s view on the foundations of obligation and use her model to address the problem of conflicted agency. I argue that conflicting obligations create an identity vacuum that can be filled only by an arbitrary and baseless exercise of autonomy. I move on to question whether Modern Orthodox Jews negotiating between conflicting halakhic and humanistic obligations can identify wholeheartedly as fully “Modern” Orthodox Jews.

I. REFLECTIVENESS AS THE FOUNDATION OF OBLIGATION

In her published lecture *The Sources of Normativity*, Korsgaard grounds our feelings of obligation in our reflective nature. Her argument runs as follows: in contrast to other animals, we humans possess the reflective capacity to detach ourselves from our desires and consider whether or not they are worthy of our endorsement. To make this kind of judgment, we must appeal to what Korsgaard terms practical identities or the “description[s] under which we value ourselves.” Typically, our self-worth hinges on a multitude of such “PI’s: we might simultaneously self-identify as parents, patriots, and philosophers. By assuming these identities, we thereby accept as our normative guides their attendant principles of “act as a good parent/philosopher/Jew would.” By violating these principles (e.g., by neglecting our children, committing treason, or leading unexamined lives), we compromise on the integrity of our PIs and, hence, sacrifice that which “make[s] our lives worth living and our actions worth undertaking.” In short, our PIs obligate us to endorse or reject a given desire by imposing on us a requirement of consistency in action.

But what happens when two of our most important PIs, the PIs that “make life worth living” impose conflicting obligations on us? How do we go about choosing which PI to compromise on and which to preserve intact?
II. Arbitrariness and the Problem of Conflicted Agency

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Jean Paul Sartre cites a question posed to him by one of his students that perfectly illustrates this problem of conflicted agency. The student tells Sartre that his father has abandoned the family, his brother has been killed in World War II, and that he has lived alone with his mother ever since. While the student wants to join the war effort to avenge his brother’s death, he fears that his doing so will “plunge [his mother] into utter despair.” Paralyzed by the intractable conflict between his obligations as a brother and as a son, the student struggles to accept that he must sacrifice one PI at the altar of the other.

How might Sartre’s student or any of us facing such a conflict decide which of our competing PIs to prioritize? Although we must establish a PI hierarchy, the foundations of any such hierarchy are necessarily arbitrary. Van Willigenburg states the problem as follows:

[T]he question remains on what basis we call an identity into question and what reason we have to discard this self-conception and not the other. […] How may we choose? If practical identities are the source of reasons for choice, what source of reasons is left to base our choice on […]?

Consider the student’s predicament: what sorts of reasons can inform the way in which he structures his hierarchy? Because his PIs are what provide him with reasons to act, perhaps, one might suggest that he appeal to his PI as a brother or a son to justify the structure of his hierarchy. But this move is certainly circular! For, the student will be unable to explain why he prioritizes his mother over his brother and country, unless he possesses some hierarchy to justify his choice. Appealing to either conflicting PI to justify that hierarchy, therefore, begs the question.

Conflicting PIs draw us to an impasse; neither one can direct our course. I contend that only through a baseless exercise of our autonomy can we construct the PI hierarchies that can fill “identity vacuums” created by our internal conflicts. This construction process constitutes a profound exercise in self-definition: by lending priority to one of the PIs in our hierarchy, we constitute rather than merely maintain our self-conception.

Sartre captures this insight by famously claiming that, “We cannot decide *a priori* what ought to be done… [For] Man makes himself… We can define man only in relation to his commitments.” In Sartre’s view, identity vacuums are omnipresent; our PIs are always the logical consequences rather than the antecedents of our actions. Although Sartre’s categorical assessment of the human agency overstates the point, I believe the void he points to exists in those of us confronted by competing obligations. Under certain circumstances, our PIs determine our decision making process. But when we are confronted with con-
flicting normative obligations, our agency becomes arbitrary and, hence, autonomous. In what follows, I consider the way in which this arbitrariness and autonomy underlies the fully “Modern” Orthodox Jew’s existential situation.

III. The Impossibility of a fully “Modern” Orthodoxy

The fully “Modern” Orthodox Jew is wholeheartedly committed to both Orthodoxy and modernity. And it is this sort of Jew with dual commitments to these “two antagonists [each of which] claims to know … the truth regarding the right way of life” who must confront the identity vacuum and embrace Sartre’s burden of freedom.7 For, Orthodoxy and modernity make competing claims about what the good life requires, and to satisfy one is to invariably compromise on the integrity of the other.

For example: Modern Orthodox Jews face an identity vacuum whenever their feminist and halakhic PIs collide. Suppose that two members of a given Modern Orthodox Jewish community, Simon and Judah, are engaged in a dispute regarding whether Judah ought to partake in a traditional Orthodox Jewish prayer service. Judah identifies both as a feminist and as an Orthodox Jew. Both are fundamental to his sense of self, neither a mere contingency. While the latter places him in a context that curbs women’s religious communal rights and responsibilities, the former demands of him that he promote egalitarianism; that is, women’s equal participation in ritual life and communal worship. Judah’s conflict embodies the problem of establishing a PI hierarchy.

Simon, Judah’s friend, is perplexed by the temporarily paralyzing nature of Judah’s dilemma. While Simon offers a few words of sympathy about the challenges of confronting Modern Orthodox Judaism, Simon ultimately makes the simple appeal to the halakhic requirement to pray. And with that Simon believes that he has successfully resolved Judah’s internal conflict.

In this narrative, Simon personifies a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of conflicted agency. While Simon values his Orthodox PI as absolute and inviolable, he values his modern PI as nonessential, if not irrelevant, to his self-conception. He can, therefore, adjudicate between Orthodoxy and modernity without ever experiencing the weight of Judah’s identity vacuum. The tension that Judah experiences, however, cannot be ameliorated by a simple appeal to halakha. Reflecting on his halakhic and feminist commitments, Judah is burdened with the insolvable problem of affirming one PI over and above the other. Thus, Orthodox feminists like Judah who value both communal prayer and gender equality will necessarily face the conflict between feminism and Orthodoxy on a daily basis.8

Still, one might maintain that Judah and his fellow Orthodox feminists can bypass the conflict by interpreting halakha so that it aligns with their feminist sensibilities. Defenders
of modern partnership minyanim, for example, read the halakhic literature as establishing a firm foundation for female leadership in the context of communal worship. The term partnership minyan, originally coined by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, describes “a prayer group that is both committed to maintaining halakhic standards and practices and also committed to including women in ritual leadership roles to the fullest extent possible within the boundaries of Jewish Law.” Perhaps, by participating exclusively in such a service, Judah can preserve his dual commitments and circumvent the alleged tension between Orthodoxy and modernity.

However, I contend that exactly the opposite is true: if anything, partnership minyanim underscore the irreconcilable conflict between halakha and feminism by distinguishing themselves from perfectly egalitarian services. Proponents of partnership minyanim implicitly acknowledge that Orthodoxy and equality are incompatible: because they wish to operate within “the boundaries of Jewish Law,” they allow for women to “lead parts [but not all] of the prayer service.” In other words, while halakha can exhibit flexibility to accommodate a degree of gender equality, it is not an entirely indeterminate system; and fealty to its hard-and-fast rules invariably constrains the modern halakhist’s feminist impulse. Orthodox feminists who participate in partnership minyanim rather than perfectly egalitarian services implicitly establish a PI hierarchy in which modernity features prominently but Orthodoxy reigns supreme. Likewise, if Judah ultimately affirms the partnership option, he does not evade the identity vacuum, but rather emerges from it through a baseless exercise of autonomy.

IV. Conclusion

Like Judah, any of us confronting conflicting normative obligations must ask what fixed markers we can define ourselves by. Can we wholeheartedly identify as either Modern or Orthodox Jews when caught in a nexus of competing values and traditions? For the fully “Modern” Orthodox Jew, there is no escaping the identity vacuum that emerges from the conflicts between halakha and the moral demands of modernity. Some of us might favor modernity while others Orthodoxy; but underlying our shared experience is the inescapability of autonomous and baseless agency. Thus, in the conflict between modernity and Orthodoxy, we are whoever we choose to be.

Notes

1 Christine Korsgaard, “The Sources of Normativity,” Tanner Lectures on Human Values 12 (November 1992): 84. Throughout the paper, I refer to practical identities in the shorthand as PIs.

2 Ibid.

3 One might reply simply by asserting that we should lend priority to the more important of our
two conflicting PIs. But as the following section makes clear, I am concerned with the more difficult cases in which we attach relatively equal importance to the competing PIs.


6 Sartre, 46. The baseless nature of human agency and the weight of responsibility it places upon the individual agent in determining him “Self” led Sartre to the (rather dramatic) position that, “Man is condemned to be free.” Ibid., 29.


8 Blu Greenberg, the co-founder of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance reflects on the conflict between Orthodoxy and feminism in her own life: “So I live with the conflict [between feminism and halakha]. I live with it every day, in a thousand ways that pull me in one direction or another.” Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View From Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 168. Greenberg’s conflict spans beyond halakhic Judaism across religious lines. In Daphne Hampson’s view, Abrahamic religions cannot accommodate the feminist demand for gender equality as long as they continue to recognize the bible as their locus of authority. In stark contrast to Greenberg’s effort to live with both her feminist and halakhic identities, Hampson chose to discard her religious Catholic PI and replace it with her own version of gender-sensitive theology. Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing Inc., 1990), 86-91 and 148-150.


11 Although a number—most probably, a majority—of “Modern” Orthodox rabbis argue that partnership *minyanim* extend beyond halakha’s acceptable limits, I assume, for the sake of argument, that such *minyanim* are halakhically justifiable.

12 Ibid.

13 One might object to my claim simply by construing Modern Orthodoxy as a hybrid of modernity and Orthodoxy that privileges select features of both. But this hybrid Modern Orthodox Jew faces the problem of conflicted agency like any fully “Modern” Orthodox Jew: in order to construct his hybrid, he requires a principled way to privilege one identity over the other. This Jew, neither fully modern nor fully Orthodox, faces the identity vacuum in carving out his hybrid identity.
In 1897, Theodor Herzl boldly pronounced his accomplishment from the First World Zionist Congress: “Were I to sum up the Basel Congress in one word...it would be this: at Basel I have founded the Jewish state. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years and certainly in fifty, everyone will see it. A state is founded essentially on the people for the state.”1 Herzl’s summary, and especially his use of the phrase “the state,” demonstrate Herzl’s deep commitment to the notion that a Jewish polity uniquely for, and established by, the Jewish people should not remain a nebulous ideal. Rather, this polity need to become a realistic permanent homeland that Jews could proudly proclaim as their own.

With these words, Herzl finally abandoned his doubts about the “futility and emptiness of combating Anti-Semitism” and presented political Zionism as anti-Semitism’s decisive solution.2 Through his efforts, Herzl effectively transformed Zionism from an ideology to a programmatic political blueprint for a Jewish nation-state. In other words, Herzl created an active, concrete, and practical principle to give Zionism a clear political purpose—to provide the Jewish people with sovereignty over land that they could proudly declare as their own. I will conclude that Herzl’s political Zionism was more advanced than the thoughts of the early Zionists in the following sense: Herzl’s Zionism notably differed from that of his predecessors by presenting a systemic vision of how a Jewish nation was to be constructed as a political entity that would consolidate a permanent unity of all Jews as a people. In essence, Herzl sought to present a programmatic vision of Zionism that would be actualized in a sovereign Jewish nation-state. Herzl sought to transform Zionism from an idealist philosophy to a concrete reality in which Jews could become a unified and sovereign people.

In presenting and supporting the above thesis this paper will begin from a methodological assumption, one that will bear mentioning: this paper will assume that with respect to social and political movements the criterion for judgment should be the degree to which the movement actualized its aims. The organizing principles of these movements are of-
MAKOM
ten articulated by its leadership and these formulations can affect the success of the movement. Zionism as a social and political movement was always aimed at the betterment of Jews, and the various visions of Zionism have certainly aimed at that, but these versions have taken various approaches, some more ideological and some more practical. This paper will maintain that in his attention to the practical, Herzl's Zionism was better able to accomplish the aim of all versions of Zionism—the betterment of Jews—than any other version.

It would be wrong, however, to give only Herzl credit for efforts to actualize the Jewish state, for to do so would be to deny the importance of the tradition of Zionist thought from which Herzl's political Zionism developed. Therefore, a discussion of some early predecessors of Herzl's political Zionism is necessary to appreciate the full value of Herzl's organization of Zionism into an actual, concrete, and programmatic principle. To that end, I will first examine the origins and some unique features of Herzl's political Zionism. I will then consider religious Zionism developed by Yehuda Alkalai, socialist-Zionism by Moses Hess, and cultural Zionism by Ahad Ha'Am and explain how Herzl's political Zionism addressed their shortcomings.3

I HERZL’S PROGRAM

As is well know, Herzl's strong attachment to Zionism as a political ideology can be traced to the Dreyfus Affair of 1894, which inspired him to travel to Eastern Europe to “bring out the misfortune of the Jews and to show that they were human beings whom people revile without knowing them.” The Dreyfus Affair introduced Herzl to the egregious reality of European anti-Semitism and its dangers for European Jews. Indeed, Herzl later admitted that he “was turned into a Zionist by the Dreyfus Case.” The election of Karl Lueger, a notorious anti-Semite and advocate of racist politics, as mayor of Vienna in 1897 further convinced Herzl that anti-Semitism was not merely a social trend, but had evolved into a dangerously popular political ideology. To deal with anti-Semitism, Herzl advocated a Jewish nationalism. As a response to an increasingly unfavorable environment for Jews, nationalism was “simply a logical solution to a problem.” To firmly establish a sense of cultural pride in the heart of every Jew—and make possible the Jewish state—Herzl believed that the entire process behind the founding of a Jewish state had to be a programmatic endeavor independently undertaken by Jews.

A major component of Herzl's Zionist effort was foreign diplomacy. Though he had limited success in securing their support of European powers, Herzl also appealed to notable foreign sovereigns and politicians such as Abdul Hamid II, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and Russian Minister of the Interior, Vyacheslav von Plehve. Despite his diplomatic failures, Herzl did not waver in his belief that Jews could achieve full political independence by building their own nation and he stressed the importance of implementing what he called the “order of procedure.” This was Herzl's list of nine essential preparatory
actions that he believed were critical for the successful founding of a Jewish nation. These included promoting Judaism through “publicity,” encouraging “negotiations with Zion,” the purchase of lands for potential Jewish migrants to Jerusalem, and finally the “purchase and construction of ships.” These specific provisions demonstrate that Herzl had concrete plans to permanently realize Zionism through the establishment of a stable nation.  

Aside from the specific procedures of his program, Herzl considered two specific conditions to be essential for the building of a permanent Jewish state. First, it had to be located in Palestine—the spiritual center for all Jewish people and the “ever memorable historic home.” Second, Herzl firmly believed that the Jewish state should not be built at the expense of taking over Palestinian lands. Rather, he insisted that Palestinians should also be able to live in harmony with Jews. Under Herzl, Zionism transformed from a philosophical ideal into a systematic vision which was to realize itself into a concrete political project.

II Competing Zionist Ideals

These practical features of Herzl’s political Zionism become more pronounced if we compare it with the Zionisms of Yehuda Alkalai, Moses Hess, and Ahad Ha’Am. These early thinkers were conscious of the importance of unifying the Jewish people, but they did not present solutions to make that desired unity a permanent reality. These early thinkers thought that political unity was of utmost importance for the Jews insofar as an independent nation-state would serve as a background to promote unity among the Jewish people.

A critical problem with early Zionism was that it was highly passive towards the idea of political unity. Yehuda Alkalai, for instance, promoted such passivity. He argued that the Jewish people needed to redeem themselves by creating Jewish colonies on the Holy Land. It was through this self-redemption rather than through a process of comprehensive nation-building that the Jewish community could “look to a life of its own” and win liberty and security. Alkalai believed that the Jewish people must concern themselves with the religious mission of attaining redemption just as much as they focused on the political mission of a return to the Holy Land. Hence, Alkalai argued that the Jewish community should not “migrate in a mass,” because it was the will of the Lord for the Jews to “be redeemed in dignity.” Alkalai called for the establishment of private companies to appeal to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire to give the Jews “back the land of [their] ancestors in return for an annual rent.” This misguided hope that the Ottomans would simply give land to the Jews alone indicates the extent of Alkalai’s impracticality and his Zionism’s passivity.

Fundamentally, Alkalai did not address the problem of how the Jewish community would exercise its sovereignty once unity was achieved—a central problem to which Herzl actively sought to find a realistic solution of founding a nation-state. Unlike Herzl, Alkalai
did not apprehend the crucial fact that a people can truly maintain their unity only if they have a clear means by which to preserve it. What would hold this people together? A group can only function politically as one over a long time if they have sufficient political, cultural, and economic foundation for a self-sustaining civil society sharing social and political values. Since it primarily relied on elite representatives, Alkalai’s proposed method of petitioning for autonomy though companies would not have had the unanimity of popular support so crucial for the process. The men of these companies would undoubtedly have reflected their class interests during the petitioning process, rather than those of the whole Jewish nation. A divided representation of opinion on an important matter of public interest such as national independence would likely have promoted division of opinion, rather than encouraging its unity.

Herzl’s approach towards the construction of a nation-state, on the other hand, was formulated with a view towards preventing the possibility of social stratification among various groups within the Jewish people. The preservation of Jewish sovereignty was to be permanently achieved through a construction of the institutional infrastructures that would allow the Jewish nation to thrive as a united and sovereign community of Jewish people. Herzl’s approach not only sought to assure the Jewish people the ability to express their political independence, but also tried to make sure that they would be able to permanently preserve it through infrastructural preparedness.

Even those of Herzl’s antecedents who addressed the problem of unification dealt inadequately with the challenges of political organization. Early formulations of Zionism cared more about unification of the people than about the political organization that would truly provide a form to such unity. This problem is most apparent in Moses Hess’s Judaic socialism, which sought to establish a harmonious Jewish socialist community. Hess thought that a combination of socialism and Judaism would correctly unite Jews and guide the return of the Jewish people to their homeland. Judaism, Hess thought, was “the religion most congruous with socialist civilization.” Religious Judaism would ideally encourage an active use of reason and eventually create individuals who would dedicate themselves to their communities, practice self-discipline, and improve the social condition of the Jewish population. Ultimately, on Hess’s view Judaism would seek to perfect the quality of social life according to its messianic vision. At the same time, the actual practice of Judaism’s legalist ethics was crucial for Hess for two reasons. First, only through this practice, thought Hess, could one understand the essence of religiosity and the importance of Judaic piety. Second, Judaism’s religious emphasis on communalism would foster a collective identity for the Jewish people, which in turn would promote solidarity. Hess cared deeply about solving the problem of Jewish unity and it was only to serve this goal that he addressed issues of political organization.

As it was for Herzl, fighting anti-Semitism was an important motivation for Hess. While working with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels during the early 1860s, Hess witnessed the
popularity of anti-Semitism in Germany. In spite of similar motivations, Hess’s Zionism was less well formulated than Herzl insofar as it was primarily focused on the question of promoting unity among the Jewish people, not the question of what political form of unity the Jewish people should pursue. Communalism was the central spirit of Hessian socialism. For Hess, the condition of unity among Jews was the end; socialism was merely the primary means. The social unity that Hess sought was itself merely another means to achieve the grand and ultimate end of founding a permanent communalistic political entity that would serve to bind the Jews together as a people. While for Hess Judaism was means to socialism, Herzl combined the two elements in a single means to the end of actualizing a permanent political product that would provide both an everlasting homeland and, most crucially, a distinct identity for the Jewish people as a whole.

While Hess did believe in the necessity of founding a nation-state, it was only important to the extent that Jewish people would be able to autonomously construct a socialist society. Since Hess was primarily interested in realizing a perfect Judaic socialism that would promote a “unity between law and life,” the nation-state was only an ideal institution through which Judaic socialism would be realized in its entirety. For this reason Hess, unlike Herzl, did not have concrete, detailed plans about the essential features and necessary functions that a nation-state should have to fully serve the Jewish people. His theory was ideal rather than programmatic and practical.

Ahad Ha’Am was perhaps the closest among the early Zionist thinkers to presenting a feasible alternative to Herzl’s political Zionism. As a descendant of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) tradition, Ahad Ha’Am emphasized the importance of cultivating a distinctive Jewish spirit through a revival of Jewish culture. This proposal might have been born out of Ahad Ha’Am’s experience of pogroms in Europe during the early 1880s—a major spiritual crisis for the Jewish community. A genuine Jewish national unity capable of overcoming this crisis was only possible through an “uplifting of the flesh by the spirit.” It was not enough for people to have Jewish names; Ahad Ha’Am believed that a true Jew cared deeply about cultivating a unique Hebrew spirit by studying Jewish literature, history, and philosophy. Through this study an individual’s inner spirit unites memories of the past and hopes for the future into a “whole one single, complete organic entity.” The embodiment and cultivation of Judaism as a living spirit was most important, for that would assure the existence of a permanent Jewish consciousness. For Ahad Ha’Am, it was this permanence that mattered more than other details related to the potential state: he cared less about where the Jewish consciousness would be most securely guaranteed than that it would be guaranteed at all.

A critical deficiency of Ahad Ha’Am’s philosophy was that it lacked the detailed precision and practical character of Herzl’s political Zionism. It was unsystematic and did not have a clear political stance due to his disregard for what Yaakov Shavit called the “relevance and importance of the social context of culture.” Ahad Ha’Am was only vaguely enthusias-
tic, rather than pointedly practical, about the possibility of a complete reconstruction of a "Hebrew culture": he did not present a full institutional framework designed to actualize this possibility. Furthermore, Ahad Ha'Am did not recognize that founding and building up a national spirit is no more important than planning the specifics of preserving it. In his ebullient enthusiasm for the prospects of a national revival Ha'Am didn’t address the difficulties of preserving it over the years. Herzl, by contrast, understood the importance of permanently preserving the Jewish spirit, this issue motivated—in part—his project of founding an independent Jewish state. The critical difference between Herzl and Ahad Ha'Am is the fact that Herzl thought first about the reality of the situation before devising a theory to solve a problem while Ha'Am worked out an ideal theory before fully understanding the reality.

Herzl worked to bridge the gap between Zionism as an ideal and Zionism as a political ideology. He sought to change the conceptual identity of a Jewish person from that of a member of a dispersed ethnic group to that of a member of a united people which could rightly claim a national consciousness through territorial sovereignty. In essence, Herzl realized that national consciousness is important but not practically useful if a people do not have a definite means with which to permanently express it. Herzl was fully aware of this crucial fact, and it was his keen awareness that prompted him to develop a programmatic vision of the specifics of a Jewish state. Herzl firmly believed in the power of international diplomacy and put his belief into action by tirelessly reaching out to foreign political figures. Through his many efforts he transformed his dream into a real political undertaking. While Alkalai, Hess, and Ahad Ha'Am undeniably stressed the importance of unity among the Jews, they did not directly address the problem of how that unity was to be achieved such that it would permanently contribute to the collective improvement of the Jews as a people. Of all these thinkers only Herzl had a concrete answer to the problem: the founding of an independent Jewish state.

Although Herzl did not live to see the actualization of his ideas, it is worth noting that the fact that he conceived of political Zionism as a workable, pragmatic system for the construction of a nation—the utmost expression of political unity—is in itself a crucial proof that Herzl's political Zionism was more advanced than the philosophies of the early Zionist thinkers. Herzl recognized the fundamental fact that to breathe life into any ideal, one always needs to pursue it by constructing a workable program and taking action to realize its goals. It was Herzl's firm dedication to this basic principle that allowed him to develop political Zionism into a philosophy that would not remain merely ideal, but become a Zionism that would present a realistic and concrete solution to problem of uniting the Jewish people.
Notes


2 Neumann, *Theodor Herzl: Excerpts from His Diaries*, p. 3.

3 Since Ahad Ha'Am lived after Herzl's death, I will occasionally refer to his writings published after 1904. However, because the main thrust of my paper is the history of ideas, the substance of thoughts matters more than chronological issues.


5 Ibid. 102.

6 Ibid. 107.


8 Shapira, 60.


11 Friedman, 47.


16 Fishman, 146.

17 Fishman, 149.

18 Fishman, 151.

19 Fishman, 153-154.

20 Fishman, 155.

MAKOM

22 Simon, 181.


24 Shavit, 74.
מקוק

ממקוק
МАКОМ
Catastrophe as Religious Experience: Levinas, Leibowitz, and the Shoah

Jon Catlin

“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

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
MAKOM
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.³

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.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

I 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. 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.” 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. 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. 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.” 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 as 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.”

As Levinas put it himself, he returned from the war to “a world put into question by Hitler’s triumphs.” 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.” 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...
MAKOM

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.15

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.”16 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 1935.17 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.
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?
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
MAKOM
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.”

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 614th 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.” 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 though the collective realization of national destiny.

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. 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.” For Levinas, Heidegger’s project of recalling the forgotten question of Being, with its ideal of
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’.”23 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.”24 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.”25 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.”26

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 Judaism, 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.27

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.”28 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.”29 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.” 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.”

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?” 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.”

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.”
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;
Makom

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.35

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 Lanzmann’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
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 commandeddness 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

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.


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.


12 Translated from the Hebrew in Malka, 80.


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.


MAKOM


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.


31 Emmanuel Levinas Carnets de captivité, 211. Translated in Hammerschlag 404.


33 Ibid.

34 Hammerschlag, 411.

About the Editors

DONI BLOOMFIELD – CO-EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Doni Bloomfield is a senior at the University of Chicago majoring in Economic History. He enjoys filming movies, reading magical realism and monetarist blogs, writing giant papers on nineteenth-century banking, and being a snark. You, too, should read his BA thesis. He likes the University of Chicago, and working with all of the amazing people at Makom. This summer, he will be working at Bloomberg News. Depending on how busy his afternoons are, he will be working on a book on shadow banking.

GABRIEL SHAPIRO – CO-EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Gabriel Shapiro is a fourth year in the college. He is a native of Chicago’s northern suburbs and spent two years studying (mostly Talmud) at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel before college. In class, Gabriel is a philosophy major, a Fundamentals major, and a math minor. As a Philosophy major, he spends his time working on his BA thesis. In it he presents a new account of the Socratic Method. As a Fundamentals major, he thinks about the roles of philosophy and religion in the happy life and reads fun books. As a math minor, he is happy not to be a math major. As an editor-in-chief of this wonderful journal, he is and has been supremely proud of it, its staff, and all of its contributors. The desiderative part of his soul desires sandwiches, hummus, and shakshuka most of all. He also likes traveling and not traveling.

RACHEL JACKSON – LAYOUT EDITOR

Rachel is a second-year in the College at the University of Chicago, where she studies Visual Arts. She is involved in Orthodox Jewish life on campus, Feminist groups, and the rock climbing club. In her free time she enjoys reading the New Yorker and being outdoors.

JONATHAN NATHAN – ACADEMIC EDITOR

Jonathan Nathan is a junior at the University of Chicago majoring in History and Law, Letters, & Society. In his abundant spare time he writes a blog, gets ridiculed for his name and accent, and plots his escape into the mountains of Maine. Jonathan grew up in New York City, and has spent the last three summers refusing to sit at a desk and teaching at a boy’s camp in Maine.

ERIC SINGERMAN – CREATIVE EDITOR

Eric is a third year, majoring in philosophy. He loves to cook, eat, hike, and then eat more.
Combining some of these interests, he’s currently on the quest to get the university to fund his attempts to bake the world’s largest muffin.

Jon Catlin – Philosophy Editor

Jon is a third-year in the College of the University of Chicago majoring in Jewish studies and Fundamentals. He studies philosophical and literary responses to the Holocaust, particularly those of Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Primo Levi, and Emmanuel Levinas. Jon is the Editor-in-Chief of The Midway Review and a contributing editor at TheAirspace.net. He writes on the intersection of intellectual, Jewish, and queer issues for The Chicago Maroon, Moment and the jU Chicago blog. Jon teaches philosophy and Holocaust ethics to middle and high school ethics through the Winning Words, Splash, and Cascade programs at the University of Chicago. Together with Gabriel Shapiro, he also coordinates the Undergraduate Jewish Studies Workshop at the University of Chicago.

Benjamin Silver – History Editor

Benjamin Silver is a fourth year in the College, majoring in Political Science and Philosophy. His academic interests lie in the history of political thought and ethics, in particular changing conceptions of law and moral education. Originally from Dallas, Texas, he enjoys home brewing, baseball, and cooking in his spare time.

Dani Plung – Junior Editor

Dani Plung is a first-year in the College, intending to major in English with either a minor or an additional major in Jewish Studies. She has previously edited several writing projects, including the Young Adult Dyspraxia Blog, the Classrooms Without Borders Blog, and the Egerian Literary Magazine. She is also a regular blogger for New Voices Magazine.
About the Contributors

DANYA LAGOS

Danya is an elementary school teacher in Dallas, Texas. A 2012 graduate of The College at the University of Chicago, Danya co-founded Makom and served as a layout editor from 2011-2012. Danya now participates actively in another initiative that is also called Makom, which is committed to building a vibrant egalitarian Jewish community in the heart of Dallas. This coming summer, Danya will be learning Torah full time at Yeshivat Hadar in New York.

JOSH HALPERN

Josh Halpern is a second semester senior at Yeshiva University, where he is majoring in Philosophy. His interests include reconciling the tension between liberty and equality and unearthing the relationship between Jewish law and morality. In his spare time, Josh enjoys Chinese food and trains his mind at the local boxing gym.

KYUHYUN JO

Kyuhyun is a senior in the College who majors in history. He has a broad, global interest in international Cold War history, especially China’s foreign diplomacy towards the United States and the Soviet Union. More specifically, he is interested in understanding the Cold War beyond an age of ideological extremism and in looking at the international political dynamics behind China’s foreign relations since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. He is currently working on his BA thesis which explores China’s practice of diplomatic realpolitik and “containment” towards the United States and the Soviet Union during the two Indochina Wars. He hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in modern Chinese history and continue his research on modern China and the Cold War.
The Chicago Center for Jewish Studies is proud to support *Makom*, the undergraduate journal of Jewish thought of the University of Chicago.

This issue was made possible by a generous gift from the Gemunder Family Foundation to the College for use by the Center.

**Among its many programs, the Center:**

- administers the major and minor in Jewish Studies
- sponsors academic events on campus
- offers Jewish Studies internships to undergraduates
- through the Metcalf Fellows Program

For more information about the Center, please visit: http://jewishstudies.uchicago.edu.
April 2014

Catastrophe as Religious Experience: Levinas, Leibowitz, and the Shoah / Jonathon Catlin

Theodor Herzl's Political Zionism and the Jewish Nation-State / Kyuhyun Jo

Conflicting Agency, Baseless Choices, and the Modern Orthodox Jew / Josh Halpern

Gender and the Avot / Ben Silver

Medical and Rabbinical Authority Regarding Intersex, Gender Identity, and Jewish Law / Danya Lagos