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# Ethan Kleinberg. "Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Turn: Philosophy and Jewish Thought"

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**Ethan Kleinberg.** *Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Turn: Philosophy and Jewish Thought.* Stanford University Press 2021. 248 pp. \$90.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781503629448); \$28.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781503629592).

Kleinberg's recent book can be read as a biography of Emmanuel Levinas as a Jewish intellectual and educator. The pages of the book's four chapters have a two-column layout, labelled 'Our side' and 'the Other Side.' To that effect, we need to read the Introduction, then column A from chapters One through Four. Then, to go back and read column B from chapters One through Four, and lastly, the concluding chapter.

If we follow the plain reading, we encounter a competent account of Levinas's intellectual development, with particular emphasis on his turn, after the war, from a career in philosophy and literature to an involvement with the problem of French Judaism's survival after the Holocaust. Kleinberg's account is solid, showcases the secondary literature, and benefits from the publication in recent years of Levinas's papers and drafts from the war and early post-war periods. In addition, Kleinberg provides a good characterization of Levinas's role as teacher and later director of the *École Normale Israelite Orientale* (the teachers training school of the *Alliance Israelite Universel*) and his involvement in the *Colloques des Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Française*. He provides a convenient chronological table of the meetings of the *Colloques*, their subjects, the title of Levinas's lecture, and the date of publication of the proceedings, or in some cases, of the publication of Levinas's lesson in other venues (xv-xviii).

However, this reading would be contrary to the author's stated intentions. The whole layout of the book conspires against it. We need to treat the two-column page layout as a conceptual claim to follow the author's intention. Kleinberg follows Derrida's *Glas*'s steps, using a multicolumn format. This format evokes the layout used in the traditional Jewish editions of Scripture and the Talmud, with one crucial difference. In the traditional Jewish editions, the center of the page is occupied by Scripture or the Talmudic text, surrounded by the most authoritative medieval commentaries. There is only commentary in Derrida's *Glas* and Kleinberg's text, unanchored to any consecrated *ur-text*.

This architecture is supposed to explore the problem of the transcendence of Levinas's commentary. Kleinberg has been rehearsing this question in some of his previous work. A 2012 paper (*In/finite Time: Tracing Transcendence to Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Lectures, International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 20:3, 375-387) asks about transcendence in the context of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* and suggests the importance of the Talmudic Turn for his thinking. His more recent *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (2017), refers to the present book as a concrete study of a double science of history inspired by Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence.

Kleinberg presents his thesis in the Introduction, pointing to the fact that contrary to some of his disciples' hagiographical accounts of Levinas's life, he did not train in the study of the Talmud in the traditional 'Vilna style.' Therefore, he cannot be a link in the transmission chain, which originated in the Gaon of Vilna and his students and was later popularized by rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (p. 3). Levinas never made such a claim. On the contrary, he always claimed to be a pupil



of the mysterious Mr. Shoshani, a learned albeit troubled character of whose real life almost nothing is known. Levinas himself emphasized in his lectures on several occasions that he was only an amateur and far from being a creative Talmudic scholar.

Kleinberg's intention is not to discredit the teaching of Levinas but rather to deal with the puzzle that, from a strict historiographical point of view, Levinas is not a bearer of the tradition that he is trying to continue. There is a duality between the historical account, which shows that Levinas's early education and training was focused on Russian and Western culture, that Levinas was a reader of Bergson and a student of Husserl and Heidegger. On the other hand, when expositing on the Talmud in the sessions of the *Colloquium*, he does not speak as a historian, philologist, or a philosopher. He dismisses the work of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, who advocated a philological and historical study of the Jewish textual traditions. According to Levinas, this movement aimed to establish only the historical record, making almost complete abstraction of the richness of the tradition they step out to study. Kleinberg agrees in principle with the view that a study of religion that does not leave room for an understanding of the believer's point of view and instead stresses a social science, or historical-philological points, can only produce a reductionist account of religion.

Kleinberg's claim is somewhat different from the two other claims that have been made against Levinas. First, the claim that there is an irreconciled tension between Levinas's work as a philosopher and his activity as a Jewish educator in the aftermath of the Shoah. Second, the claim that the universality of his ethical position is not always compatible with or even relevant to his confessional allegiances.

To deal with these paradoxes, Kleinberg proposes to use a distinction that originates in the same Volozhin's rabbi, founder of the system of Lithuanian *Yeshivot* and of the tradition to which Levinas belonging has been earlier problematized by Kleinberg. This is the distinction between 'God from God's side' and 'God from our side,' which Kleinberg recovers from Levinas's 1978 exposition of Rav Chaim of Volozhin's treatise *Nefesh Hachaim* (The Life's Soul): "God on God's side" refers to God's infinite and transcendent qualities that lie beyond our grasp. "God on our side" references God as revealed in our imperfect world' (5). The first represents absolute transcendence, of which we cannot know anything. The second is a relative transcendence, transcendence as we can fathom it. Having established this difference, Kleinberg asks how we can then gain access to 'God on God's' side without reducing God to the reproduction of what we know of 'God from our side'? The answer he elicits from Levinas's text is that revelation allows us to address transcendence in the first sense without incurring the risk of projecting transcendence onto it in the second sense. So, 'when scholars attempt to reconcile the universal aspects of Levinas's work with the particular aspects... to reconcile them with a larger or more inclusive message, they do so from "our side." In this work, I pursue the possibility that for Levinas, ethics springs from a source on the other side of our finite political or particular decisions and actions (6)'. This is not to say that this account is irremissible or faulty. Just that it is not, according to Kleinberg, the whole story:

'In this work, it is the conflicting registers of the immanent and transcendent or finite and infinite as appearing in the formulation "God on our side" and "God on God's side." Thus, the book is divided to provide an account of Levinas's Talmudic lectures that comes at this history both from "our side" and from the "other side." To do so, I deploy a deconstructive approach to the past that resists the interpretative closures that limit more traditional strategies. This is done by employing what Jacques Derrida has called a double gesture (*un double geste*) or double session (*double scéance*), where two distinct modes of understanding the past remain open 'according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, a double writing, that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple.' (9, quoting Derrida's *Positions*).

In the concluding chapter, Kleinberg wraps up his argument with what he calls a 'constitutive dissymmetry.' The question of the immanence or exteriority to a specific interpretative school of the Jewish tradition is pushed to the side. Instead, the author addresses Judith Butler's, Derrida's, and Fred Moten's criticism of Levinas's project. Symptomatically, Kleinberg frames the problem as our (or Levinas's) inability to 'let go.' We can rescue Levinas's project if we reject his identitarian aspects or save his identitarianism at the expense of his universalism. Kleinberg speaks of a 'three-stranded braid' (Western Philosophy, Enlightenment Universalism, and Lithuanian Talmud), each with its challenges nowadays.

What is this 'let go' exactly supposed to achieve? At first glance, it looks like a repetition of the supersessionist Christian appropriation of the Old Testament. Furthermore, the strategy of 'letting go' does not seem to address the criticism (such as Moten's) that even the universalist aspects of Levinas's philosophy, his emphasis on the Greek tradition and its synthesis with the Bible, are parochial, reflect the view of the superiority of the white race and Occident and disparages the non-occidental traditions and individuals.

This argument is much more prejudicial for Levinas's work than the previous objections listed by Kleinberg. If accepted at face value, it is not apparent how Kleinberg's strategy shields Levinas from this argument or from the no less radical question raised by Andrew McGettigan, linking the experience of the face to monotheism.

Perhaps the question is not to 'let go' but to step up and own the problem. Levinas's challenge to hold together the three brides of philosophy, Illuminism, and Judaic tradition at that historical moment is, for better or worse, his response to the civilizational crisis of the twentieth century. And there is little to be gained by jettisoning such important, even if imperfect, values without further ado.

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