

atheism. A text from Tractate Taanith (page 5) provides a commentary to Jeremiah 2:13: 'for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water'. It insists on the double transgression committed by idolatry. To ignore the true God is in fact only half an evil; atheism is worth more than the piety bestowed on mythical gods in which a Simone Weil can already distinguish the forms and symbols of the true religion. Monotheism surpasses and incorporates atheism, but it is impossible unless you attain the age of doubt, solitude and revolt.

The difficult path of monotheism rejoins the path of the West. One wonders, in fact, whether the Western spirit, philosophy, is not in the last analysis the position of a humanity that accepts the risk of atheism, if it must be held to ransom by its majority, but overcome it. [EXCERPT FROM "ETHICS & SPIRIT"]

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### The Ethical Relation as a Religious Relation

From this point on, jealously guarding its independence but thirsting after God, how does Judaism conceive of humanity? How will it integrate the need for a virtually vertiginous freedom into its desire for transcendence? By experiencing the presence of God through one's relation to man. *The ethical relation* will appear to Judaism as an exceptional relation: in it, contact with an external being, instead of compromising human sovereignty, institutes and invests it.

Contrary to the philosophy that makes of *itself* the entry into the kingdom of the absolute and announces, in the words of Plotinus, that 'the soul will not go towards any other thing, but towards itself', and that 'it will therefore not be in any other thing, but in itself',<sup>2</sup> Judaism teaches us a *real* transcendence, a relation with Him Whom the soul cannot concern and without Whom the soul cannot, in some sense, hold itself together. All alone, the I finds itself rent and awry. This means that it discovers itself to be one who had already encroached on the Other, in an arbitrary and violent manner. Self-consciousness is not an inoffensive action in which the self takes note of its being; it is inseparable from a consciousness of justice and injustice. The consciousness of any natural injustice, of the harm caused to the Other, by my ego structure, is contemporaneous with my consciousness as a man. The two coincide.

The beginning of Genesis is, for a second-century commentator, less interested in what a man may expect than in what he must do. It is an object of astonishment: why does the Revelation begin with

the account of Creation when God's commandments apply only to man? This astonishment is still to be found in the eleventh-century commentator Rachi, who for a thousand years now has been the way into the Bible for Jews throughout the world. And the ancient response that Rachi proposes consists in maintaining that, in order to possess the Promised Land, man must know that God created the earth. For without this knowledge, he will possess it only by usurpation. No rights can therefore ensue from the simple fact that a person needs *espace vital*. The consciousness of my I reveals no right to me. My freedom shows itself to be arbitrary. It appeals to an investiture. The 'normal' exercise of my ego, which transforms into 'mine' everything it can reach and touch, is put in question. To possess is always to receive. The Promised Land will never be in the Bible 'property' in the Latin sense of the term, and the farmer, at the moment of the first-born, will think not of his timeless link to the land but of the child of Aram, his ancestor, who was an *errant*.

It is not the legal status, however singular, of land property in the Old Testament that we need to invoke here, but the *self-consciousness* presiding over it, a consciousness in which the discovery of its powers is inseparable from the discovery of their illegitimacy. Self-consciousness inevitably surprises itself at the heart of a moral consciousness. The latter cannot be added to the former, but it provides its basic mode. To be oneself [*pour soi*] is already to know the fault I have committed with regard to the Other. But the fact that I do not quiz myself on the Other's rights paradoxically indicates that the Other is not a *new edition of myself*; in its Otherness it is situated in a dimension of height, in the ideal, the Divine, and through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God.

The moral relation therefore reunites both self-consciousness and consciousness of God. Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision. Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression. In the Holy Ark from which the voice of God is heard by Moses, there are only the tablets of the Law. The knowledge of God which we can have and which is expressed, according to Maimonides, in the form of negative attributes, receives a positive meaning from the moral 'God is merciful', which means: 'Be merciful like Him'. The attributes of God are given not in the indicative, but in the imperative. The knowledge of God comes to us like a commandment, like a *Mitzvah*. To know God is to know what must be done. Here

education – obedience to the other will – is the supreme instruction: the knowledge of this Will which is itself the basis of all reality. In the ethical relation, the Other is presented at the same time as being absolutely other, but this radical alterity in relation to me does not destroy or deny my freedom, as philosophers believe. The ethical relation is anterior to the opposition of freedoms, the war which, in Hegel's view, inaugurates History. My neighbour's face has an alterity which is not allergic, but opens up the beyond. The God of heaven is accessible, without losing any of His Transcendence but without denying freedom to the believer. This intermediary sphere exists. The Talmud states it, in that apparently childish language that earns it, in the eyes of many who read it cursorily, the reputation of allying inextricable complications to a disarming naivety: 'God never came down from Sinai, Moses never ascended to heaven. But God folded back the heavens like a cover, covered Sinai with it, and so found Himself on earth without having even left heaven.' There is here a desecralization of the Sacred.

The Justice rendered to the Other, my neighbour, gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God. It is as intimate as the prayer and the liturgy which, without justice, are nothing. God can receive nothing from hands which have committed violence. The pious man is the just man. *Justice* is the term Judaism prefers to terms more evocative of sentiment. For love itself demands justice, and my relation with my neighbour cannot remain outside the lines which this neighbour maintains with various third parties. The third party is also my neighbour.

The ritual law of Judaism constitutes the austere discipline that strives to achieve this justice. Only this law can recognize the face of the Other which has managed to impose an austere role on its true nature. At no moment does the law acquire the value of a sacrament. In a remarkable passage in the Talmud, Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai is questioned by his pupils about the reasons for the rites concerning the lustral water in Numbers, and takes refuge behind the authority of the divine commandment. But he adds that, without this commandment, 'Contact with a dead person does not make one impure, nor does lustral water purify.' No intrinsic power is accorded to the ritual gesture, but without it the soul cannot be raised up to God.

The way that leads to God therefore leads *ipso facto* – and not in addition – to man; and the way that leads to man draws us back to ritual discipline and self-education. Its greatness lies in its daily regularity. Here is a passage in which three opinions are given: the

second indicates the way in which the first is true, and the third indicates the practical conditions of the second. Ben Zoma said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole of the Torah: "Listen O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One".' Ben Nanus said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole of the Torah: "You will love your neighbour as yourself".' Ben Pazi said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole of the Torah: "You will sacrifice a lamb in the morning and another at dusk".' And Rabbi, their master, stood up and decided: 'The law is according to Ben Pazi.'

The law is effort. The daily fidelity to the ritual gesture demands a courage that is calmer, nobler and greater than that of the warrior. We know the prophecy of Israel made by Balaam: 'See! this people rises up like a leopard, it stands up like a lion'. The talmudist does not hesitate to link this royal awakening to the sovereign power of a people capable of the daily ritual. The shudder of the leopard rising, but not rising under the yoke. The law for the Jew is never a yoke. It carries its own joy, which nourishes a religious life and the whole of Jewish mysticism.

In the Psalter in which the most nostalgic appeals so closely match the paternal presence of God, the plenitude of this consoling and saving presence which 'lacks nothing', and the glorification of His Kingdom, His Jurisdiction, His Legislation and His Law, Jews do not feel that they fall short of the horizons opened up by the Gospels. The harmony achieved between so much goodness and so much legalism constitutes the original note of Judaism. The Talmud measures with lucidity the height and apparent opposition, but also the real interdependence of the principles producing it. We cannot analyse here the ontological order that makes it possible, but nothing seems simpler or more authentic than the comingling of these principles within the same verse. The psalmist, in a striking way, associates the verse's profound human distress to a call made to the divine commandment, to the *Mitzvah*, to law: 'I am a sojourner on earth; hide not thy commandments from me' (Psalms 119:19) as he unites the intimate elation of the soul that thirsts after God with the austere vision of divine justice: 'My soul is consumed with longing for thy ordinances at all times' (Psalms 119:20).

### *Responsibility*

The fact that the relationship with the Divine crosses the relationship with men and coincides with social justice is therefore what epitomizes the entire spirit of the Jewish Bible. Moses and the

prophets preoccupied themselves not with the immorality of the soul but with the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The relationship with man in which contact with the Divine is established is not a kind of *spiritual friendship* but the sort that is manifested, tested and accomplished in a just economy and for which each man is fully responsible. 'Why does your God, who is the God of the poor, not feed the poor?' a Roman asks Rabbi Akiba. 'So we can escape damnation', replies Rabbi Akiba. One could not find a stronger statement of the impossible situation in which God finds himself, that of accepting the duties and responsibilities of man.

The personal responsibility of man with regard to man is such that God cannot annul it. This is why, in the dialogue between God and Cain – 'Am I my brother's keeper?' – rabbinical commentary does not regard the question as a case of simple insolence. Instead, it comes from someone who has not yet experienced human solidarity and who thinks (like many modern philosophers) that each exists for oneself and that everything is permitted. But God reveals to the murderer that his crime has disturbed the natural order, so the Bible puts a word of submission into the mouth of Cain: 'My punishment is greater than I can bear'. The rabbis pretend to read a new question in this response: 'Is my punishment too great to bear? Is it too heavy for the Creator who supports the heavens and the earth?'

Jewish wisdom teaches that He Who has created and Who supports the whole universe cannot support or pardon the crime that man commits against man. 'Is it possible? Did not the Eternal efface the sin of the golden calf?' This leads the master to reply: the fault committed with regard to God falls within the province of divine pardon, whereas the fault that offends man does not concern God. The text thus announces the value and the full autonomy of the human who is offended, as it affirms the responsibility incurred by whomsoever touches man. Evil is not a mystical principle that can be effaced by a ritual, it is an offence perpetrated on man by man. No one, not even God, can substitute himself for the victim. The world in which pardon is all-powerful becomes inhuman.

This austere doctrine in no way leads to the inhumanity of despair. God is patient – that is to say, lets time pass, awaits the return of man, his separation or regeneration. Judaism believes in this regeneration of man without the intervention of extrahuman factors other than the consciousness of Good, and the Law: 'Everything lies in the hands of God, except for the very fear of God.' Human effort has unlimited possibilities. There is finally the help given by a just society from which the unjust person may benefit.

But nothing in this help resembles the communication of the saints, the transitivity of the redemptive act is completely educative. We are familiar with the admirable passages from Ezekiel in which man's responsibility extends to the actions of his neighbour. Among men, each responds to the faults of the Other. We even respond to the just man who risks being corrupted. We cannot push the idea of solidarity any further. Therefore, the aspiration to a just society which we find in Judaism, beyond any individual piety, is an eminently religious action. A text from Tractate Tannith magnifies this salvation of the unjust by the just. The constitution of a just society – one which 'receives the rain' – is compared to the moments that mark, in all theology, the summit of religious life. Rabbi Abbahu said: 'The day of rain is greater than the resurrection of the dead, for the resurrection of the dead concerns only the just, while the rain concerns both the just and the unjust.' Rabbi Jehouda said: 'The day of rain is as great as the day when the Torah was given.' Rabbi Hamma b. Hanina said: 'The day of rain is as great as the day when the heavens and the earth were created.' There is a subordination of every possible relationship between God and man – redemption, revelation, creation – to the instruction of a society in which justice, instead of remaining an aspiration of individual piety, is strong enough to extend to all and be realized.

It is perhaps this state of mind that we normally call Jewish messianism.

### Universalism

The role played by ethics in the religious relation allows us to understand the meaning of Jewish universalism.

A truth is universal when it applies to every reasonable being. A religion is universal when it is open to all. In this sense, the Judaism that links the Divine to the moral has always aspired to be universal. But the revelation of morality, which discovers a human society, also discovers the place of election, which, in this universal society, returns to the person who receives this revelation. This election is made up not of privileges but of responsibilities. It is a nobility based not on royalties [*droit d'auteur*] or a birthright [*droit d'aïnesse*] conferred by a divine caprice, but on the position of each human I [*moi*]. Each one, as an 'I', is separate from all the others to whom the moral duty is due. The basic intuition of the majority perhaps consists in perceiving that I am not *the equal* of the Other. This applies in the very strict sense: I see myself *obligated* with

respect to the Other; consequently I am infinitely more demanding of myself than of others. 'The more just I am, the more harshly I am judged', states one talmudic text.

From then on, there is no moral awareness that is not an awareness of this exceptional position, an awareness of being chosen. Reciprocity is a structure founded on an original inequality. For equality to make its entry into the world, beings must be able to demand more of themselves than of the Other, feel responsibilities on which the fate of humanity hangs, and in this sense pose themselves problems outside humanity. 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 to do with Israel, even if the historical Israel has in fact been faithful to the concept of Israel and, on the subject of morality, felt responsibilities and obligations which it demands from no one, but which sustain the world.

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. And Rabbi Meir, one of the chief Doctors of the Law, has ventured to say that a pagan who knows the Torah is the equal of the High Priest. This indicates the degree to which the notion of Israel can be separated, in the Talmud, from any historical, national, local or racial notion.

### *Citizens of Modern States*

The first relation man has with being passes through his links with man.

The Jewish man discovers man before discovering landscapes and towns. He is at home in a society before being so in a house. He understands the world on the basis of the Other rather than the whole of being functioning in relation to the earth. He is in a sense exiled on this earth, as the psalmist says, and he finds a meaning to the earth on the basis of a human society. This is not an analysis of the contemporary Jewish soul; it is the literal teaching of the Bible in which the earth is not possessed individually, but belongs to God. Man begins in the desert where he dwells in tents, and adores God in a transportable temple.

From this existence – free with regard to landscapes and architectures, all those heavy and sedentary things that one is tempted to

prefer to man – Judaism recalls, in the course of its whole history, that it is rooted in the countryside or in the town. The festival of 'the cabins' is the liturgical form of this memory and the prophet Zechariah announces, for the messianic age, the festival of cabins as though it were a festival of all the nations. Freedom with regard to the sedentary forms of existence is, perhaps, the human way to be in this world. For Judaism, the world becomes intelligible before a human face and not, as for a great contemporary philosopher who sums up an important aspect of the West, through houses, temples and bridges.

This freedom is not in the least bit pathological, or strained or heartrending. It relegates the values to do with roots and institutes other forms of fidelity and responsibility. Man, after all, is not a tree, and humanity is not a forest. It promotes more human forms, for they presuppose a conscious commitment; freer forms, for they allow us to glimpse a human society and horizons vaster than those of the village where we were born.

Is it not these consciously willed and freely accepted links – with all the traditions that freedoms entail – which constitute modern nations, defined by the decision to work in common much more than by the dark voices of heredity? Are these accepted links less solid than roots? In one circumstance they certainly are: when the groupings formed by them cease to correspond to the moral values in the name of which they were formed. But must we not accord to man the right to judge, in the name of moral conscience, the history to which on the one hand he belongs, rather than leave his right to judge to anonymous history? A freedom with regard to history in the name of morality, justice above culture (ancestral land, architecture, arts) – these are finally the terms that describe the way in which the Jew encountered God.

Old Hillel, the grand Doctor of the Law in the first century BC, exclaimed, on seeing a skull carried along by the current, 'You were killed for having killed, but those who killed you will be killed.' If the crimes of history do not always strike down the innocent, they are still not judgements. We wrongly conceive of a chain of violent events as the verdicts of history where history itself is the magistrate. Hillel knew that history does not judge and that, left to its fate, it echoes crimes. Nothing, no event in history, can judge a conscience. This is upheld by theological language, which measures the entire miracle of such a freedom, while stating that God alone can judge.

# DIFFICULT FREEDOM

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