

**The "Other Zionism" of Emmanuel Levinas:  
The Rejection and the Reception of Levinas' Thought in Israel**

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**Abstract**

During the early 2000's, Jewish-French Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906 – 1995) became quite a 'celebrity' in Israel. The translation of his "Talmudic readings" by Rabbi Daniel Epstein was on the best-sellers list for several months, and was read by an audience of intellectuals and the wider public alike. Berry Sakharof, one of Israel's biggest rock-stars, dedicated his famous album "L'autre" to Levinas, and in the city of Jerusalem two new research institutions were founded to attend to his thought. Several conferences were held at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, many articles were written and published in Israel, and in 2003 the first two doctoral theses that researched his writings in Hebrew were published by Hanoch Ben-Pazi at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat-Gan and by Shmuel Wygoda at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

In May 2002 a major conference was held in Jerusalem in honor of Levinas, featuring lectures of over 40 scholars from Israel, Europe and the USA, and hosting a special screening at the Mount Scopus campus of a documentary film produced for Levinas' 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, with over a thousand people in the audience, including important diplomats from Israel and France.

Levinas' appearance on the academic and public stage in Israel after his death stands in a reverse ratio to the attention he and his writings received from the Israeli Public and Academia during his life. By the end of the 1970's, one can hardly find any references to Levinas and his philosophy in Israeli philosophical or other journals, and vice versa, It was during that time that Israel held major significance in Levinas' writings, whether as a religious or metaphysical idea, or as the concrete State of Israel, with its actual figures and happenings. Levinas' approach to the Zionist vision and to the 'Jewish State', which we referred to as "the Other Zionism" in our headline, had put substantial lines of Israeli thought to the test, and subverted some of its major foundations and points of view. Having done that, Levinas' thought had become in a certain sense inaccessible for Israeli thinkers.

Analyzing and comparing those writings, together with few exchanges Levinas had with his Israeli counterparts, such as Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem among

others, will point to the clear oppositions and at times also antagonisms between the two sides, but in some cases also to a certain proximity that seemed to have had supposed to allow some "dialogue", and later deed so indeed. The inter-textual analyses between Levinas and Israel, alongside extra and intra textual analyses of Levinas' writings, will allow a new understanding of the Israeli arena through the lens of the "Levinasian" perspective, and a new understanding of Levinas' thought through an "Israeli" lens, and from historical and philological contextualization, missing for the most part in this field of research.

Out of Levinas' later reception – the ways and manners in which his thought was finally welcomed in Israel, the texts that were translated, the different ideas, notions and concepts that were central to the Israeli discourse on Levinas – we can point that it was both a certain change in Levinas' thought that led to his reception, and a long and ongoing ideological, political and social change in Israel, which allowed an audience that was ready and willing to receive it. None the less, our analysis of the changes in Levinas' writings throughout the years will indicate that as "radical" his philosophy had got during the late 1960's and early 1970's, the more attention it actually received in Israel.

Our analyses and interpretations throughout this work, will try to suggest the different meanings different persons - intellectuals, politicians, etc. - gave to different events and ideas, according with their social and ideological milieu. Thus, the foundation of the State of Israel, which will be discussed in Chapter 1, was for Levinas, few years after returning from German captivity, a "Religious event" which held philosophical and theological implications. An event that transcends the historical order of the "West" and of modernity, and opens an opportunity for Zionism to be a certain fulfillment of Jewish particularism's universal moral designation. For his counterparts in Israel, though, the actual event of the foundation of Israel, accompanied by war and political tensions, signified an entrance into modern history and an opportunity for the Jewish People to begin its life as a sovereign nation. This gap in regard to the meaning and function of the State and of Judaism after the holocaust, stood in the background of the initial confluence between Levinas and Israel, which failed to establish a dialogue as each turned to its own separate flux.

In this work, we shall examine different ways in which Levinas' appeal to the "broad audience" and to the (French speaking) "Jewish audience", served him in order to present his philosophy in actual and concrete fashions. That appeal was through various publications in Jewish and general journals in France, and through his famous "Talmudic readings", which received much attention from Israel during the high-time

of his reception in the early 2000's. Those "Talmudic readings", as we shall show in Chapter 2, began in the 1960's as a polemic response to the writings of Gershom Scholem. A polemic that functioned as a paradigmatic case of the differences between the two thinkers in regards to the "texts" they have dealt with, that Scholem addressed in a correspondence between the two in the late 1940's. Throughout the chapter we will discuss various polemics within Israel and between Levinas and "the Israelis". Those polemics, centered on the questions of Jewish messianism and Jewish history, will be used to indicate how the gap between the fluxes has widened.

The third chapter of this work will focus on the "Messianic Turn" in post 1967 Israel, through which we shall examine Levinas' changing attitude towards Zionism and the Land-of-Israel, two decades after the foundation of the Israeli State. We shall confront Levinas with the "religious awakening" of "Avant-guard Zionism" (Haluziut חלוציות) and its echoes in France, as they are reflected in his own writings. The status of the Land-of-Israel, which for Levinas holds an overall moral meaning, will be analyzed vis-à-vis different Israeli responses to the "Messianic Turn", through those responses we can point to a rapprochement between Levinas and certain elements in the Israeli arena, in regard to questions on the interrelations of religion, ethics and the state, and the role of Judaism in History and in the Academia.

Israel's ideological and intellectual elite and hegemony of the 1940's – 1950's, from which many of Levinas' Israeli counterparts wrote, will be examined throughout the first two chapters of this work as a general complex (together with its' inner complexities) that the gap between it and Levinas' thought, that is also connected to the geographical distance between Paris and Jerusalem, could not be bridged. Following that, during the next and final two chapters we shall show and explain how Levinas' first steps in Israel were enabled only with the subversion of that hegemony during the 1960's – 1970's, with new powers, trends and ideas entering the public and academic spheres in Israel.

That early and initial reception, in Bar-Ilan University first, was not only a meeting between new and more willing readers and an author that his voice hitherto could not be heard, but a very concrete relationship between Levinas – whom in that time had already become a known and acclaimed philosopher – and those Israeli people and institutions that in a time of major political and social changes became open to his ideas, alongside the significant changes made in those very ideas. It was, in a sense, only a certain "other Israel" that could have, and indeed had, received Levinas' "Other Zionism" into its midst.