BRILL

JOURNAL OF JEWISH THOUGHT
& PHILOSOPHY 32 (2024) 267–291

JJTP
brill.com/jjtp

Escape to Judaism: Levinas's First Steps toward Becoming a Jewish Thinker

Niv Perelsztejn | ORCID: 0000-0002-1827-3213
Wolfson Doctoral Fellow, Department of Jewish Studies, Bucerius Institute for Research of German Contemporary History and Society, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel
nivperels@gmail.com

Received 31 May 2022 | Accepted 11 December 2022 |
Published online 23 September 2024

Abstract

This paper recontextualizes Emmanuel Levinas's intellectual journey of the 1930s, focusing on his first philosophical and Jewish writings and his initial criticism of Martin Heidegger. It demonstrates Levinas's philosophical transformation using newly discovered texts alongside published writings. These texts illustrate the early stage of his philosophical development and its connection to his first involvements with Jewish thought. An English translation of a newly discovered radio talk Levinas gave in 1937 is appended. This lecture enables a glimpse into the historical and philosophical context of the journey taken by a young immigrant Jewish philosopher in the intellectual scene of 1930s Paris.

Keywords

Emmanuel Levinas – Martin Heidegger – Jewish philosophy – twentieth-century French philosophy – phenomenology of religion – sociology of religious practice

"The rite is precisely the behavior of someone who perceives the mystical resonance of things within the hustle of our daily action," said Emmanuel Levinas in a newly discovered lecture from 1937.[1] What was it that led him from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) in late 1920s Freiburg, a time and place overshadowed by his meeting with Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), all the way to Jewish religious practice?

In the following pages I will retrace Levinas's path from his enthusiasm for Heidegger's philosophy as a student, attested in his descriptions of the atmosphere in Freiburg,[2] to his critical reassessment of the German "master" after 1933, using Judaism in his attempt to escape from "the climate of Heidegger's philosophy."[3]

In Levinas's first, short "Jewish" text, published in April 1935, he used Heidegger's hermeneutic approach to the history of philosophy, drawn from his lectures on Aristotle,[4] to discuss the "actuality" (*actualité*) of Maimonides's (1138–1204) opposition to the Greek philosopher in his *Guide for the Perplexed*.[5] Two years later, he presented a talk titled "Arts techniques et pratiques religieuses" (Technical Crafts and Religious Practices) on a public radio station in Paris. The published version of this long-lost lecture was found in the digital archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and is presented here in English translation.[6] In the talk, Levinas turned against Heidegger's philosophy (this time the ontology of *Being and Time*) to discuss the difference between Jewish religious practice and the modern or technological way of life.

These two texts are essential in illustrating the early stage of Levinas's intellectual shift from being Heidegger's student and "enthusiast" until 1933, and a "Heideggerian philosopher" throughout the 1930s, to his later criticism of

1 Emmanuel Levinas, "Arts techniques et pratiques religieuses," *Les cahiers de Radio-Paris: Conférences données dans l'auditorium du Poste National Radio-Paris* 8, no. 5 (1937): 518–521. I include an English translation of the lecture ("Technical Crafts and Religious Practices") at the end of this article.

2 Anne-Marie Lescourret, *Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 74.

3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 19. Translation slightly modified.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

5 Emmanuel Levinas, "L'actualité de Maïmonide," *Paix et Droit*, no. 4 (April 1935): 6–7. One could speculate about whether Levinas had Maimonides's halakhic writings in mind during his philosophical transformation, but this paper will rely on the available historical sources. Michael Fagenblat has translated this text into English. See Emmanuel Levinas, "The Contemporary Relevance of Maimonides (1935)," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2008): 91–94.

6 https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9794035f/f512.item (accessed July 5, 2024). My translation of this text is found in this paper's appendix.

Heidegger regarding the intersubjective constitution of subjectivity and the relations with the Other in *Time and the Other*.[7] In the 1930s, Levinas's already important contribution to French philosophy relied on Heidegger's own philosophical methods, which Levinas turned back against his teacher's philosophy. This places Levinas's "younger" work in opposition to his later "adult" philosophy, in which he revisited a much wider history of philosophy to extract from it a "return to the original themes of philosophy," and not only in defiance of Heidegger.[8]

These texts of the 1930s are also philosophical and not exclusively Jewish. They may be even more philosophical than Jewish, as they do not rely on Jewish sources at all, except for the writings of Maimonides. It was only after the war and Levinas's re-introduction to the Talmud by Monsieur Chouchani (1895–1968; also known as Hillel Perlman and Mordechai Ben Sasson, among other names) that the rabbinical sources were translated into a new hermeneutics.[9] Nonetheless, these texts should be considered as the first stage in what would become Levinas's claim to fame outside academic philosophy departments, his "adult" Jewish writings and Talmudic readings.[10]

The radio talk and other recently discovered materials I present give an almost complete picture of Levinas's philosophy in the 1930s. Reading them is both informative and instructive. They tell us how he understood other thinkers and how he constructed his own thoughts on his way to becoming a philosopher himself. The philosopher who had the greatest impact on Levinas's "escape to Judaism" was Heidegger.[11]

A major part of the road Levinas walked in his early Jewish-philosophical writings has been studied by Sarah Hammerschlag. She portrays his turn toward Judaism and the role of Franz Rosenzweig in his philosophical journey

7 See Emmanuel Levinas, *"Time and the Other" and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 2. And see, for example, Levinas's use of Husserl, Kant, Descartes, Malebranche, and others in constructing his argumentation in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*.

9 Sandrine Szwarc and Shmuel Wygoda, *Fascinant Chouchani* (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 201–272.

10 See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, "A Religion for Adults," in *Difficult Liberty: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 11–23.

11 For a more complete picture of Levinas's philosophy and his understanding of the theopolitical role of Judaism throughout the 1930s, compare this article with Michael Fagenblat, "Paganism as a Political Problem: Levinas's Understanding of Judaism in the 1930s," *Religions* 15, no. 5 (2024): 529, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050529 (accessed July 5, 2024).

from his days in Strasbourg all the way to the late 1940s.[12] I will focus on the relations between Levinas's philosophical "model" and his own philosophical writings in the 1930s. It is a stage in his philosophical development that was historically and philosophically separated from the later writings by his time in German captivity as a French soldier,[13] where he reengaged with "the Jewish problem."[14] In the early stage I portray, he followed a Heideggerian model for philosophizing into which he tried to insert a revitalized component of transcendence that he had found in both German Idealism and Maimonides.

Building on a careful examination of the pre-war writings presented here in their historical context, this paper thematically follows the evolution of Levinas's attitude toward Heidegger's philosophy, from his student days to his apprehension of a new understanding of the phenomenology of action, which he used to "escape" and interact with other philosophical ideas and with Jewish religious practice.

"Phénoménologie" and "Heidegger" were barely mentioned after 1933 in Levinas's published writings until his first "captivity notebook."[15] As I show in this paper, Levinas "became a philosopher" *and* "a Jewish thinker" by overcoming Heidegger with a new *French* synthesis of German Idealism and Judaism. This new outlook was most poignantly present in his public radio talk, where he said that Jewish praxis points directly at the idea of transcendence.

1 From the University of Strasbourg to Freiburg, and Finally Paris

On the morning of Friday, April 4, 1930, the board of Strasbourg University's philosophy department, headed by philosopher Jean Hering (1890–1966), convened to approve with distinction twenty-four-year-old Emmanuel Levinas's dissertation on the theory of intuition in the phenomenology of Husserl.[16] This

12 Sarah Hammerschlag, "'A Splinter in the Flesh': Levinas and the Resignification of Jewish Suffering, 1928–1947," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20, no. 3 (2012): 389–419.

13 Niv Perelsztejn, "The 'Other Zionism' of Emmanuel Levinas: The Rejection and the Reception of Levinas' Thought in Israel" (masters thesis, Department of Jewish History, Faculty of Humanities, University of Haifa, 2020), 11–21 [Hebrew].

14 Gershom Scholem was one of the partners Levinas tried reaching during his postwar shift, after five years away in German captivity. See Niv Perelsztejn, "A Forgotten Polemic between Levinas and Scholem, 1947–1961," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2024): 187–211.

15 Emmanuel Levinas, "Carnets de captivité," in *Œuvres*, vol. 1, ed. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier (Paris: Édition Grasset & Fasquelle, IMEC Editeur, 2009), 51–52: "… – science. Précisions."

16 *Bulletin de la Faculté des lettres de Strasbourg* 8, no. 6 (April 1930): 261.

work was published shortly afterward,[17] closely followed by Levinas's translation into French of the *Méditations cartésiennes*[18] and the papers he wrote on the University of Freiburg and on his former teacher Edmund Husserl.[19] These writings served as impactful foundations of Husserlian phenomenology in 1930s France, following Hering's own contribution to Husserl's introduction into French philosophy.[20] Husserl actualized, in his own way, the implications that Hering suggested phenomenology could have for French philosophy of religion.[21] Levinas returned after the Second World War and the Holocaust to reexamine Husserl's work and his own translation of it,[22] but for the rest of the 1930s he had focused his philosophical efforts mostly on Heidegger and his philosophy.

In the 1931 article "Fribourg, Husserl et la phénoménologie," Levinas described Heidegger as going beyond Husserl's intellectual contemplations to the more primal relations of a "readiness-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*) with the world. He even went so far as to name him "the greatest philosopher in the world." His early 1930s "commentaries" on Heidegger's philosophy were innovative within the French intellectual scene and are viewed by scholars as marking the first stage of Heidegger's reception in France.[23]

17 Emmanuel Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Alcan, 1930).

18 Edmond Husserl, *Méditations cartésiennes: Introductions à la phénoménologie*, trans. Gabrielle Peiffer and Emmanuel Levinas (Paris: Armand Colin, 1931).

19 Emmanuel Levinas, "Sur les 'Ideen' de M. Husserl," *La revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 104 (1929): 230–265; Levinas, "Fribourg, Husserl et la phénoménologie," *Revue d'Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande* 5, no. 43 (1931): 403–414.

20 On Hering's role in introducing Husserl's phenomenology to a French audience in the 1920s–30s, see Christian Y. Dupont, "Jean Héring and the Introduction of Husserl's Phenomenology to France," *Studia Phaenomenologica* 15 (2015): 129–153.

21 Jean Hering, *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse: Étude sur la théorie de la connaissance religieuse* (Paris: Alcan, 1926).

22 Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998). The original title of the 1949 French edition was *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*.

23 For Levinas's enthusiasm regarding Heidegger, see Emmanuel Levinas, "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 113 (1932): 395–431. For Heidegger's early reception in France, see Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger in France*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), xi–xii, 19–21. See also Jean Greisch, "Heidegger et Lévinas interprètes de la facticité," *Emmanuel Levinas: Positivité et transcendance*, ed. Jean-Luc Marion (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 181–207.

Following Heidegger's rectoral address of May 1933,[24] the German philosophy that Levinas had spent the better part of his twenties mastering – and which he played a significant role in transmitting – became philosophically problematic for him. Heidegger and his university were turned into a single philosophical rival that Levinas needed to deal with.

Heidegger defined German philosophy in his 1933 rectoral address (*Rektoratsrede*) as a battlefield. Philosophizing, he asserted, means fighting against an opponent who threatens one's existence. This rivalry is the structure Levinas was drawn into when he attempted to subversively overturn Heidegger's philosophy from within. His attempts to turn Heidegger's philosophical "battlefield" into a "playground" led him to rethink philosophy as well as religiosity. He did so by adjusting the focus of Heidegger's hermeneutics and ontology from the German universities and philosophy to the Jewish community and its religious ideas during the intellectual and political turbulence of 1934–1937 in Paris.

2 The Phenomenology of the Play and the "Search for the Serious"

Heidegger's "betrayal" sent Levinas on a philosophical journey, and Judaism was not his first stop. He had already found an "outside" source, which he translated into French and published in June 1934. It was a paper in Russian written by the Soviet psychologist Pavel Maksimovich Jacobson (or Iakobson, 1902–1979), relatively unknown today. The forty-five pages of "La psychologie de l'acteur" (The Psychology of the Actor)[25] were published in Levinas's "go to" venue of those years, the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, edited by the Jewish anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). Levinas did not come upon Jacobson's work by chance, and – considering Jacobson's phenomenological background – it is likely that Levinas's early explorations

24 Martin Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, ed. Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 5–13.

25 Paul Jacobson and Emmanuel Levinas, "La psychologie de l'acteur," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 117, nos. 5/6 (1934): 395–440 (translated from Russian). The little information available on Jacobson tells us he was one of the outstanding students of Gustav Shpet (1879–1937). Shpet himself, a prominent psychology scholar, was central in transmitting Husserl's phenomenology to Soviet scholars. See Thomas Nemeth, "Gustav Shpet (1879–1937)," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/shpet/ (accessed October 20, 2022).

into Husserlian phenomenology were conducted also during a months-long family visit at Kovno with his soon-to-be wife Raïssa in 1932.[26]

Jacobson presented a phenomenological investigation of the psychological structure of a stage actor's performance – how an actor operates on stage with the previously scripted theatrical play he or she is to perform.[27] He used Husserl's structure of consciousness to study the psychology of the theater actor, which allowed Levinas to reengage with foundational questions regarding the place of subjectivity in and outside of the Heideggerian structure of Being.[28]

In his 1937 radio talk, Levinas did not present to his audience (including both the general public and the Jewish *kahal*) an analysis of theatrical dramatic expression, but of the "daily" actions one performs all the time. By separating the actions from their "dailiness," Levinas sought for "signals of transcendence," as sociologist Peter L. Berger later called them[29] – those moments of suspension of the world which allow one to contemplate the act that is about to be enacted and the world in which it takes place. This was also Levinas's own initial criticism of Husserl, but in a different language – that of French sociology.

A suspended world, as such, is a world which stands against what Levinas later called the impersonal facticity of existence.[30] For Levinas, this is the basic structure which relocates the subject in the world as an active participant in existing: like the stage actor's pre-scripted performative world, "the Jew" lives in a created world where Creation is constantly measured, reflected upon, and reshaped. It is a world created to be "played" with, in the sense of actively engaging it after contemplating it from "outside," and not a world one is "falling" (*verfallen*) into.

The 1934 translation and the 1937 talk are useful in decoding some of the more obscure fragments found in Levinas's abovementioned notebooks. Early in the first of his "captivity notebooks," which dates to September 8, 1937, a few months after the radio talk, there are several mentions of a "play" (*jeu*).

26 Lescourret, *Levinas*, 91.

27 It was, as stated in the paper, a short presentation of wider research conducted by Jacobson that could not be published due to technical difficulties. Two years later, in 1936, Jacobson did publish a book based on the outlines he set forth in this paper. See Pavel Maksimovich Iakobson, *Psikhologiia stcenicheskikh chuvstv aktera* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1936).

28 Levinas, "Carnets de captivité," 51–60.

29 Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).

30 This is also one of the core motives Levinas presented in *Time and the Other* for his post-Heideggerian philosophical pursuits. See *Time and the Other*, 44–51.

"Seriousness," he wrote, is in the very foundation of Being, while playing functions as an "escape"; it is the task of "searching for the serious" ("Jeu – recherche du sérieux"), which allows one to evade the world's seriousness.[31] The world was not created to serve a master, but to enjoy the creation.

Playing or acting publicly and rehearsing privately suspends one's stagnant existence in the world and pushes one to reflect on why the stage was built and why the script was written. It is a phenomenological play that analyzes the occurrence of an act.[32] It enables seeing from outside (or from above) the profound "seriousness" of the world, or of the theater in this allegory, and unveils it as a playground. Heidegger's ontology, in contrast, is the most serious philosophy.

"Authenticity" was taken in Heidegger's thought as a "serious" burdening liability which not only Heidegger, but the bureaucratic modern world of sociology, demands. Levinas asserted throughout his talk that religious rituals enable an *intuitive* suspension (*epoché*) of the world. It was a philosophical play that relied on Husserl's transcendental reduction. Following Jacobson, he broadened its *practical* scope, but it was still part of "the world of Heidegger."[33]

3 Escape from Being

Transforming the philosophical "battlefield" into a "playground" was an attempt to sustain, with different contents, the structure of existential understanding. It is "a structure that is primordial and constantly whole,"[34] which Heidegger constructed in *Being and Time* using the analysis of "anxiety" (*Angst*).

To escape from Being's *nauseating* seriousness was Levinas's goal in "De l'évasion" (On Escape), published in *Recherches philosophiques* in 1935,[35] the same year his daughter Simone was born. There he attempted to evade the grasp of Being and to assert the *need* to "escape" as the primal component of the structure of subjectivity. He subverted some of the foundational notions

31 Levinas, "Carnets de captivité," 51.

32 Ibid., "Phénoménologie – science. Précisions."

33 Levinas, "Carnets de captivité," 105. It is interesting that shortly after Levinas's talk, Martin Buber "escaped" Germany and joined the sociology department at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

34 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 170–171.

35 Emmanuel Levinas, "De l'évasion," *Recherches philosophiques*, no. 5 (1935–1936): 373–392. For the English translation, see Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

in the Heideggerian analysis of Being by turning "anxiety" into "shame" and "nausea" that one needs to run away from. Three years before Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) addressed the same idea in his first novel, *La nausée* (1938),[36] the feeling of sickness resulting from being shackled to existence was stressed by Levinas as the reason for the foundational human need to escape:

> This term *escape*, which we borrow from the language of contemporary literary criticism, is not only a word à la mode; it is world-weariness, the disorder of our time [*mal du siècle*]. It is not easy to draw up a list of all the situations in modern life in which it shows itself [...]
>
> [It] shows up the nakedness of an existence incapable of hiding itself. This preoccupation with dressing to hide ourselves concerns every manifestation of our lives, our acts, and our thoughts. We accede to the world through words, and we want them to be noble.[37]

This philosophical article was an attempt to overturn Heidegger by replacing his "Dasein," which "falls into existence," with something else that was not named but pointed at by the end of the text, and this alternative to Dasein is the focus of my discussion on young Levinas's idea of religious practice and Creation below.

The problem Levinas faced first was that of the inauthenticity of modern life's various "temptations" and "dangers," options and horizons. For Heidegger, historical contingencies and false philosophical (or scientific) reasoning leads one toward escape or "flight" from one's primordial relations to the world.[38] These relations are captured in his philosophical model by the idea of care (*Sorge*): One is in the world, and her or his care for existence, and not for contingent things, belongs to the fundamental structure of Being. This leads to becoming conscious of one's scattered life, followed by uniting it into seriously authentic *living*.

This one whole life is lived by negating the confusing multiplicity presented by the outside world; thus, relating one to the world he or she immanently belongs to, beyond the veil of inauthentic confusion that causes anxiety. This

36 Jean-Paul Sartre, *La nausée* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1938).

37 Levinas, *On Escape*, 52, 64; italics in the original translation. Compare with Levinas's 1953 talk in Israel titled "Is Ontology Fundamental?" ("Ha-im ha-ontologiyah yesudit?"), which was published two years earlier. See Emmanuel Levinas, "L'Ontologie est-elle fondamentale?," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 56, no. 1 (1951): 88–98. For the English translation, see Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 1–11. For the little we currently know about Levinas's talk in Israel, see Perelsztejn, "The 'Other Zionism,'" 2.

38 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 172–174.

anxiety provokes one's recognition of the lack of a solid ground to stand on and care for and awakens the will to find it: to assert beyond doubt one's own life. This authentication is a negation of the false plains concealing the ground and a positive unification of all the components in life deemed by a harsh philosophical investigation to be true.[39]

Once all the components, all attributes of life, are unified by the authenticating movement one has willed one's way into, then it is a total life. The totality of one's Being is the unison of one's fully aware "doings" working together as a whole. The authentic life is consistent in its discovery of the truth about itself by philosophizing. It continuously refers to something that is already within its reach and is obscured by misunderstandings. Following Levinas's 1930s criticism of Heidegger, especially in his "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" (1934),[40] the model we find is structured toward a "singularity" which, for Levinas, negates the possibility of freedom and encompasses the totality of Being with nothing exterior to escape to.

The primordial *will* in Heidegger's structure also reflects its content: anxiety pushes one to will for the true meaning of the world one lives in. This points to a most important attribute: one's community, or *Heimat*.[41] It is the way of expanding the model from the *personal* attribute to what at this stage can be named the *communal*. It is done by unveiling within the community's past – using a hermeneutical method rather than a historical one – the true substantive elements that can authenticate it.

As noted above, this paper aims to portray Levinas's understanding of Heidegger's philosophy by thematically following Levinas's arguments to recover what he was facing. This also calls for carefully locating Levinas's 1930s writings in their historical context. The key text Levinas was responding to in those writings was Heidegger's rectoral address, "The Self-Assertion of the German University." There, *a* most important attribute of life will become *the* most important attribute of the university.

39 See ibid., 169–183.

40 Emmanuel Levinas, "Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme," *Esprit*, no. 2 (1934): 199–208. For the English translation, see Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," trans. Sean Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 63–71.

41 Relying on the translation of the rectoral address, "one's community" seems to me the most fitting translation for the purpose of this paper, regarding the notion of a community which encompasses the different communal attributes Heidegger presented in his address.

4 Heidegger's Shadow over Freiburg

It is helpful to imagine Levinas reading the address and feeling attacked, as if he were being told by Heidegger that he is categorically no longer his student. The effect that the address had on Levinas was profound, as this paper shows. Contributing factors were Heidegger's rumored ban on Husserl's use of the university's library, and of course Heidegger's involvement with Nazism.[42]

This idea perhaps supports the assertion that the Heidegger that Levinas was reading in the 1930s was not the one he read later, nor the one we read today. It was a "pagan" and "barbaric" Heidegger.[43] A gatekeeper checking those on the way in or out. Facing that, Levinas was looking for a way to escape from his university or from "the fortress walls."

Heidegger began his address by defining the "ground" that contemporary German universities were lacking. This ground is their role as an educational or *transformative* community one belongs to. One becomes a student by leaving one's original community to learn how to authentically reconnect with it.

But, while the meaning of one's "community" changes in the universities, the *will* to authenticate that drives the search for meaning is maintained throughout the transition. The universities' role is to teach the students how to "assert" the growing, expanding, and evolving community or homeland (*Land*, *Patrie*, *Eretz*). For Levinas, this expansion narrows the scope and reach of life to its binding, nauseating surroundings, like a prison.

Technically speaking, one goes to the university to *knowingly* authenticate and assert one's life, the same way one would go to a government bureau to authenticate a birth certificate. The university transfers the horizon or goal of the process from the *personal* to the *national*. One's community expands but is still limited by the linguistic, cultural, religious and other attributes one learns to study and explore. Philosophy carries out this process by teaching one how to think of the whole and of the connections between its parts. The students eventually, if they are the very best, become philosophers who see all scientific fields and all German communities as a whole and can teach it onto others.

To fulfill this role, the universities should have the right *spiritual* leadership to understand and guide the "spiritual mission that forces the destiny of the

42 See Daniel M. Herskowitz, "The Husserl-Heidegger Relationship in the Jewish Imagination," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 110, no. 3 (2020): 498–499.

43 Levinas did not mention Heidegger by name with respect to the philosophy of Hitlerism, paganism, or barbarism, and in his first Jewish text ("L'actualité de Maïmonide"), he wrote that it is not Judaism's job to teach the pagans about monotheism; see below.

German people into the shape of its history."[44] The rector's administrative and essential work is to make the university *want* to fulfill this role, to will this role into existence:

> Do we know about this spiritual mission? Whether we do or not, the question must inevitably be faced: *are* we, teachers and students of this 'high' school, truly and commonly rooted in the essence of the German university? Does this essence have genuine strength to shape our existence? Only if we fundamentally *will* this essence. […]
>
> Neither awareness of the present state of the university nor acquaintance with its previous history are enough to guarantee sufficient knowledge of its essence – unless we first, with clarity and severity, delimit this essence for the future, and in such self-limitation, *will* it, and in such willing, *assert* ourselves.[45]

The "self-assertion" of the university is the "historical mission" that will be accomplished by following its rector's authentic will as he follows politics. Heidegger performed this task in his address to the university by asserting and defining the "essence" of the German universities: to "educate and discipline the leaders and guardians of the destiny of the German people." The will to do this is the will to scientifically ground and advance the "historical spiritual mission of the German people" as a people living in a German state "while German destiny is in its most extreme distress."[46]

The Socratic "know thyself," or the unification of local knowledge, is not in itself the goal. The unified will of the university's different prospects leads further to a unified national-socialist spirit:

> The teachers' will to essence must awaken to the simplicity and breadth of knowledge about the essence of science and thus grow strong. The students' will to essence must force itself to rise to the highest clarity and discipline of knowing and integrate, demanding and determining, engaged knowledge [*Mitwissenschaft*] about the people and its state into the essence of science. The two wills must confront one another, ready for *battle*. All abilities of will and thought, all strengths of the heart, and

44 Heidegger, "Self-Assertion," 5.
45 Ibid.; italics in the original.
46 Ibid., 6 (translation slightly modified).

> all capabilities of the body must be unfolded *through* battle, heightened *in* battle, and preserved *as* battle.[47]

German knowledge, as Heidegger claimed earlier in his address, is set within the frame of the "German destiny."[48] The "truth" of this knowledge is defined by what really *is*: a primordial German essence that is hidden by historical and sociological changes. The clash between the wills to know the German community will forge a lab, or a battlefield, where knowledge goes through a process of scientific fusion.

The fusion of the university's knowledge is thought of within the nation's unification under the Third Reich. Philosophy unites the university by abstracting and utilizing the people's manner of uniting: the "German spirit" that was forged in battle and fused the German people's different contingent elements – the unification of languages, symbols, tribes, duchies, and states with different geographic and cultural attributes or components among them.[49]

The philosophical battle against the inauthenticity of "scattered" modern life in *Being and Time* is undertaken as the battle for the destiny of the German state and the German people fused together into a nation. This is the "world of Heidegger" that Levinas categorized later in his captivity notebooks as a "pagan world" where the nation is the gateway from philosophy and from the university to reality.[50]

5 Toward a *Jewish* Philosophy

Levinas's critical use of Heidegger's philosophy tried to change its point of reference from inherent to external – first, thematically speaking, by replacing the drive of the *will* with that of the *need*. The philosophical investigation into one's "world" does not result in anxiety and an inherent *will* to act, but in a nauseating *need* to escape caused by exterior circumstances that alienate one from herself or himself.

One's encounter with the arbitrariness of the world provokes a nauseating feeling which forces one to get out. At the end of "On Escape," Levinas suggested

47 Ibid., 9–10; italics in the original.

48 Ibid., 7.

49 This philosophical mission, it should be mentioned, could only be carried out once the military forces and the government had sufficiently advanced the territorial and political administrative unification.

50 Levinas, "Carnets de captivité," 57: "Patrie – notion païenne"; 105: "La nation comme accès au réel. Monde de Heidegger."

adding the crucial component of an exterior source that is not "outside of the walls" horizontally but *vertically*: "It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident."[51]

Levinas aimed here at the addition of an external element, different from "le bon sens" of Descartes's *Discours de la Méthode* (1637). He had found it in "L'actualité de Maïmonide" (The Actuality of Maimonides).[52] Published in 1935, very much in proximity to "On Escape," it was written for a special issue of *Paix et droit* – the journal of the educational-cultural Alliance Israélite Universelle, where he began working less than a year before – celebrating the eight-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Maimonides.

Levinas's text was an answer to a call issued shortly before by Jacob Gordin (1896–1947). Gordin, himself a Lithuanian (or Dvinskian) Jew, called for Jewish historians of philosophy to reevaluate Maimonides's role in modern religious thought. He mentioned that Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) had already begun this contribution to modern philosophy.[53] Cohen's philosophy itself was the topic of a series of lectures Levinas gave in Paris in conjunction with Maimonides's eighth centennial during the spring of 1936.

The titles of the lectures indicate that the course followed the scheme of Cohen's *Religion of Reason*:[54] (1) "Reason"; (2) "The Problem of Individuality"; (3) "The Idea of Justice"; and (4) "Conclusion: Hermann Cohen's Religious Philosophy and Contemporary Jewry." Cohen offered a new understanding of Judaism within the progressive movement of the history of reason. But Levinas's article on Maimonides indicates that he rejected Cohen and Gordin's idea regarding the Jewish role in the history of philosophy:[55]

> The mission of Judaism would be a mere trifle if it limited itself to teaching monotheism to the earth's peoples. It would be instructing them in what they already know. Paganism is a radical powerlessness to exit the world. It does not consist in denying spirits and gods, but in situating them in the world.[56]

51 Levinas, *On Escape*, 73.

52 Levinas, "L'actualité de Maïmonide."

53 Jacob Gordin, "Actualité de Maïmonide," trans. Nina Gourfinkel, *Cahiers juifs* 2, no. 10 (1934): 6–18.

54 Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: F. Ungar, 1972).

55 See Hammerschlag, "'A Splinter in the Flesh.'" On Levinas and Rosenzweig, see also Richard A. Cohen, "Levinas, Rosenzweig, and the Phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger," *Philosophy Today* 32, no. 2 (1988): 165–178.

56 Cited by Hammerschlag, "'A Splinter in the Flesh,'" 397.

Levinas allowed himself much creative freedom when interpreting Maimonides's philosophy and selected a few examples from his *Guide for the Perplexed* to create the impression of a Jewish thinker who did not fully submit to the rules of Greek thought. Instead, Maimonides's ideas served as an example of the relations between Jewish religious thought and pagan thought.

The separateness of Judaism is what stood on trial, and the religious coexistence that Levinas had very much hoped for relied on tolerance. Because assimilation, as a form of submission to Christianity or to the West, did not contribute enough to that coexistence, the solution Levinas suggested required diving into Jewish religion.[57]

Levinas finished "On Escape" by stating that one must go outside of Europe to find something to bring back and better it with. He had clearly deemed this inner-European betterment worthy here and now, praising the "aspirations" of German Idealism:

> [The] value of European civilization consists incontestably in the aspirations of idealism, if not in its path: in its primary inspiration idealism seeks to surpass being. Every civilization that accepts being – with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies – merits the name "barbarian."[58]

In his short 1935 article on Maimonides, Levinas again contrasted the openness toward transcendence with "an arrogant barbarism which has installed itself into the heart of Europe."[59] Less than a year before, in "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," Levinas phrased it even more poignantly: "Hitlerism [...] awaken[ed] the secret nostalgia within the German soul."[60] His words were directed to the lack of answers to Heidegger in contemporary philosophy and especially to the downfall of "the aspirations of idealism" in philosophy.[61]

To counter that, he asserted that time is unfolding differently beyond Being. Time is thought of as the site of "Revelation" and "Action": where the "noble" prescriptive Word of God is heard and acted upon until fulfilment. The Jewish religious community lives in Space, "with the rest of the world," only ad hoc.

57 See Emmanuel Levinas, "L'inspiration religieuse de l'Alliance," *Paix et Droit*, no. 8 (1935), 4.
58 Levinas, *On Escape*, 73.
59 Levinas, "L'actualité de Maïmonide."
60 Levinas, "Reflections," 64.
61 See Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "In Heidegger's Shadow: Ernst Cassirer, Emmanuel Levinas, and the Question of the Political," in *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, Stefani Hoffman, and Richard I. Cohen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 93–103.

The temporal rhythm of the world is something it only seemingly adjusts to, like every community with a religious "mentality."

6 A Jewish–French Philosophy of Praxis

Jewish communal life or "Jewish tradition" is the contemporary picture of the things Jewish communities and individuals do to face the arbitrary contingency of the world. In the meantime, "authentic" Jewish life is lived above the earth, outside of its rhythm and beyond the troubles of every day, in a messianic time of fulfillment. It constantly fulfills the order it was given: to follow the Word of God regardless of *anything*.

With his mind set on the decline of Idealism, Levinas used Maimonides to establish a separate "religious category" within the history of philosophy by following Heidegger's hermeneutics of the early 1920s lectures on Aristotle:

> The historiological aspect of philosophy is visible only in the very act of philosophizing. It is graspable only as existence and is accessible only out of purely factical life and, accordingly, with and through history. This entails, however, the demands of reaching clarity of principle with regard to: 1. The sense of actualization of philosophizing, and 2. The nexus of the actualization and the Being of philosophizing in relation to the historiological *and* to history.[62]

The presence of an external Ideal or a Creator makes the difference and positions Maimonides's philosophy as authentically Jewish. Comparing Levinas's understanding of Maimonides with Heidegger's quote, it (1) has a sense of actualization of *religiosity* and (2) its actualization *transcends* history.

The generational return to an external source through a lineage of older texts, in Levinas's 1930s thought, means that authentic Jewish life, in terms of its concrete ground and its goal, is not from this world but from somewhere given by the text. In his 1937 radio talk he said that the Bible was written as an instructional text that commands the reader: "the imperative is the mode in which it prefers to conjugate verbs."[63]

Levinas's philosophical journey to Judaism resulted in a Maimonidean (or neo-Kantian) transcendent source, namely – to paraphrase what Levinas said in the radio talk – the *havdala* (differentiation) between the Jew's Shabbat and

62 Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, 4.

63 Levinas, "Technical Crafts."

his weekdays.[64] It is a category that allows one to leave Heidegger's university and the pagan "incapacity to transgress the limits of the world,"[65] and it risks interfering with common sense and "the wisdom of the nations."[66]

The authentication process of Jewish life is carried not inward but upward by the spiritual life each Jew actively lives with his or her community, as they were instructed by the Creator. By following God's instruction, Jews fulfill the cause for which they were created, perhaps seeming to others like a spiritless technological wonder of a self-operating artificial intelligence; Levinas distinguishes between the "transcending" practice of the Jew and the "innate" mechanic social order of modernity.

This contextualizes Levinas's radio talk within the contemporary French sociology he was addressing, mainly Lévy-Bruhl's anthropological distinction between the "primitive" pre-logical and mystical mentality and the "progressive" rationalistic mentality.[67] Levinas relocates this distinction in his talk in the "heart" of Europe by placing the modern "rationalistic mentality" below the "religious mentality."

Technology replaces the "primitive nature" with the modern rational "social machine." The mystical element that Lévy-Bruhl found in the "primitive mentality" is kept concealed by technological advancement, but the messianic mentality brings it back to history by rationalistically interpreting it to fit with modern times.

"[T]he mystical resonance of things" is nothing vague for Levinas's "Jew."[68] Following the logic of Levinas's model – reversing Heidegger's structure of "German" science – current provocations are always the ones that demand an answer, and the answer needs to be given in a current manner. The solution

64 This idea is pointed to several times in Levinas's 1930s writings. It resembles in very general lines the idea of *différance* expressed by Jacques Derrida (1930–2004): to *defer* or hold back against meaning (or push history back) and to *differ* or distinguish between meanings (while continuously differentiating itself from history by a "continuous creation" of new meanings). See Levinas, "Carnets de captivité," 51–60. For a recent study on the subject and for Husserl's possible role in Levinas's development of this idea, see Stefan Zenklusen, *Adorno's Nonidentical and Derrida's Différance: For a Resurrection of Negative Dialectics* (Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2020).

65 Levinas, "L'actualité de Maïmonide"; this part was also translated in Hammerschlag, "'A Splinter in the Flesh,'" 397.

66 Levinas, *On Escape*, 73. The quote is from the closing sentence of the paper.

67 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les societes inferieures* (Paris: Alcan, 1928); Lévy-Bruhl, *Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive* (Paris: Alcan, 1931). Later he would assert that both potentially lay within every society. See Lévy-Bruhl, *Les Carnets* (Paris: PUF, 1949), 131.

68 Levinas, "Technical Crafts."

to the modern Jewish problem, to all its attributes, *needs* to be given by this rational modern science.[69]

Ontological sociology defines the Jewish community by what it can recognize as its "traditional" attributes using its own onto-sociological means. It misses, Levinas would assert, the authentic Jewish life it wanted to capture. The *added* mechanism of "religious practice" is supposed to fulfill the role of a mediator between the philosophical categories of "social" immanence and "divine" transcendence.[70]

Levinas presented his talk as a response to the upcoming Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne. It was set to discuss "the role of crafts and technique in modern life." To contrast it with the ethos of Jewish life, he focused on the *ritualistic* dailiness or the religious *labor*.

A month and a half later, Levinas wrote a paper named "La signification de la pratique religieuse" (The Meaning of Religious Practice), which was published on the front page of the Jewish newspaper *L'Univers israélite* a few days before the opening of the Exposition Internationale on May 25, 1937.

This paper, which has some conceptual similarities to the radio talk, was discovered and published by the scholar Joelle Hansel.[71] But the crucial difference between this paper and the radio talk is the context. It was written for a Jewish readership as part of an inner-Jewish discourse and has an educational appeal like that of the texts Levinas published in the Alliance's journal, *Paix et droit*. The exception is his first *Paix et droit* text, on Maimonides, which focused on the method most poignantly by exemplifying a hermeneutic reading and set forward the main themes of his 1930s inner-Jewish publications.

Levinas centered the talk on basic Jewish physical gestures, which seems to mark an acknowledgment of the work of another contemporary French sociologist who came from a Jewish family. In his 1936 "Les techniques du corps," Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) discussed the role of bodily techniques in the

69 Perelsztejn, "Forgotten Polemic." On Levinas's notion of the new science of Judaism in his later career, see Michael Sohn, "Emmanuel Levinas and the New Science of Judaism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41, no. 4 (2013): 626–642.

70 The scope of this paper precludes a discussion of the question of Levinas's assessment of Franz Rosenzweig, who is alluded to throughout Levinas's 1930s criticism of Heidegger. The question appears most poignantly when comparing Levinas's work with Rosenzweig's "New Thinking." Levinas does not mention Rosenzweig anywhere, but I suggest that in Hermann Cohen he found a needed mediator of Jewish sources. On Rosenzweig's "New Thinking" and epistemology, see Antonios Kalatzis and Enrico Lucca, *Into Life: Franz Rosenzweig on Knowledge, Aesthetics, and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), part 1.

71 See Emmanuel Levinas and Joelle Hansel, "La signification de la pratique religieuse," *Les cahiers du judaïsme* 6 (1999–2000): 74–75.

constitution of social order: the way the social machinery shapes the mechanism of the human body.[72] For Levinas, those physical gestures and bodily techniques occur in a religious context; they are a ritual, and they are the site where the phenomenon of transcendence is revealed.

This focus on the daily routine of life unveiled the "truth" Levinas had discovered about the "mystical resonance" of religious practice: a technique that transcends history. To convey this discovery with clarity to his non-Jewish audience, Levinas compared religious practice to the modern social and industrial technologies they were used to.

7 Conclusion: a Jewish Philosopher in Paris

Levinas's "escape" from Heidegger and from his German university at Freiburg brought him to the Jewish community in Paris, and in 1934 to the education department of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. He returned "back to the things themselves" as Husserl had taught him and arrived at Jewish religious practice.

The first stop on his contra-Heidegger journey was taken in the spring of that same year. He discovered a Soviet "psychology of action" and translated it into French, thereby beginning his response to Heidegger's call for scientific unification in the rectoral address. He did so by widening and developing the Husserlian phenomenological method he himself translated into French in *Méditations cartésiennes* (1931).

Once the method was set, Heidegger's own hermeneutic method enabled Levinas to turn the rectoral address upside down, which seems to have remained Levinas's point of reference to Heidegger at least until 1937.

Six months after the Jacobson translation, he made the second stop on his contra-Heidegger journey, publishing "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" in *Esprit*, edited by the Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950). This opened the way to his third stop: the reversal of Heidegger's structure of "German knowledge" as seen in 1935: the short exemplary "Jewish" article on Maimonides and the philosophical essay "On Escape."

All this suggests that what Levinas was searching for was a new answer to the Jewish question posed publicly by Gordin in the summer of 1934. Gordin answered this question using nineteenth and early twentieth-century

72 Marcel Mauss, "Les techniques du corps," *Journal de Psychologie* 32, nos. 3–4 (1936).

contributions of Jews to philosophy.[73] Levinas, on the other hand, approached this question by countering Heidegger's rectoral address.

The essential Judaism he spoke about in his fourth stop, the 1937 radio talk, was not meant to become a part of European history by introducing it to a superior ideal. Judaism "reveals" itself in Jewish ritual, which functions as a deferral of history:

> [M]an is absolutely free in his relations with the world and the possibilities that solicit action from him. Man is renewed eternally in the face of the Universe. Speaking absolutely, he has no history. […]
>
> Judaism bears this magnificent message. […] Man finds something in the presence with which he can modify or efface the past. Time loses its very irreversibility. It collapses at the feet of man like a wounded beast. And he frees it.[74]

Judaism interferes with European life by constantly performing a different role on the same stage where history is performed. Its "first philosophy" is that of a categorically separated praxis. Instead of emancipation, Levinas demanded that his fellow French philosophers and sociologists notice and accept the pluralism that Heidegger's address sought to either unify or offset.

Contrasting Heidegger's "authenticating" university, which produces a "spiritual" national-socialist order, Levinas assigned Jewish religious practice the role of an "interference" because "it is not a [social] technique" like a university is (i.e., as an educational one): "It is useless to expect a visible transformation of things. When the ritual claims to do so, it turns into magic. Authentic Judaism has always been suspicious of it."[75]

The "authentic" Jewish life is performed according to the *halakha* and traditional customs, and it unveils the divine universal scheme of a hidden Creator. This for Levinas is the meaning of Jewish exile (*Galut*), which forces Jews to adapt to their surroundings while keeping themselves actively separated:

73 Gordin and Levinas joined forces in the "Paris School" (L'école de Paris) of Jewish revival in post-Holocaust France. After Gordin's passing away in 1947, Levinas acted as president of the "Cercle des amis de Jacob Gordin" in Paris and asked Gershom Scholem for his assistance in publishing Gordin's writings. For Scholem's rejection of this request, see Perelsztejn, "Forgotten Polemic."

74 Levinas, "Reflections," 64.

75 Levinas, "Technical Crafts."

> It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident.[76]

Using Husserl's phenomenology and Jacobson's psychology, Levinas opted for stressing the nauseating *need* instead of the anxious *will*. This allowed him to use Heidegger's own method to "escape" from the nationalist philosophy of education he revealed in the rectoral address. Levinas could not yet "leave the climate of Heidegger's philosophy,"[77] because both his hermeneutic model and the French-Jewish life he escaped to were not yet free of the threat of Hitlerism.

History and Heidegger pushed Levinas to this moment, and they wanted a philosophical answer. He chose to act accordingly and tell them that the journey he took did not lead to the German university, but to the practice of everyday life. He lives and works with his community, but he is also a philosopher. He needs to answer their *actual* Jewish question together with other Jewish philosophers and "social" scientists. He masters the hermeneutic techniques to turn them against his rival. It is not yet a "free" Levinas. The young Levinas did not escape from Heidegger, and he still "plays" (and "fights") with him.

The analysis of Levinas's criticism shows how his "interference" with the method had changed it enough to counter it. It was a crucial change for Levinas and one which already in the mid-1930s set forth essential parts of his later, more calculated shift into "ethics as first philosophy" (*éthique comme philosophie première*). There, he would no longer seek to *escape from* Being but to *open toward* the other person and the future.[78] In the 1933–1937 journey that took him from Heidegger to Judaism, Levinas's first step toward becoming a Jewish thinker was a step back from the history of European philosophy.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful remarks on an earlier version of this article and to express my great gratitude to Dr. Cedric

76 Levinas, *On Escape*, 73.

77 Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 19. Translation slightly modified.

78 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1969), 46–47; cf. 304: "The ethical, beyond vision and certitude, delineates the structure of exteriority as such. Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy."

Cohen-Skalli for his instructive notes on this article and on the appended translation.

Appendix: Emmanuel Levinas, "Technical Crafts and Religious Practices"

The French text was published as "Arts techniques et pratiques religieuses" in *Les cahiers de Radio-Paris: Conférences données dans l'auditorium du Poste National Radio-Paris* 8, no. 5 (1937): 518–521.

The upcoming International Exposition is about to illustrate the role of crafts and techniques within modern life. This role is considerable, if not indeed unique. The most trivial gesture of our daily life relates to a technique. Eating. Dwelling. Commuting. Enjoying entertainment. It all becomes a preparation for complicated mechanisms that launch by simply pushing a button. Even social aspirations, which appear as the essential mark of our time, are often reduced to the pursuit of technical means that will ensure the better functioning of what is called the social *machine*.

Judaism has never been a civilization of techniques. It did not bring to the world the idea of a perfected tool, meant for subjugating matter. The Bible does tell us of the origin of the first works and of the first techniques, but these techniques and the necessity of them only appear at the end of the paradise period. The Bible does not ignore their value and tells of the admiration inspired by the industrious and generous inventors of trades who taught them to their fellows. But the Bible does not teach these trades itself. It ignores the myth of "Prometheus" [*sic*].

And yet the Bible, and especially the Pentateuch, the Torah, is full of prescriptions that command action. The imperative is the mode in which it prefers to conjugate verbs. The moral principles it sets forth are found in the midst of an abundance of prescriptions regarding what is permitted and what is prohibited, the discrimination of foods, the construction of the Tabernacle, the sacrifices for which each substance is weighed and each libation measured. It is to these prescriptions that most of the practices of Talmudic Judaism, both rabbinic and modern, are attached. They give Judaism its particular physiognomy, which it has retained to this day, and which is still the object of discussions contrasting orthodoxy and liberalism. In vain do liberals denounce it as bizarre and obsolete; in vain do they prefer the Bible's moral teachings; in vain do they present Judaism as no more than ethics. Religious practices seem

to constitute the very basis of Judaism, and it suffices to pay attention to the *Torah* [*sic*] to acknowledge that morality is inseparable from rites.

Instead of the ideal of a technical action Judaism superimposes the idea of a ritual action. What lies at the heart of this message?

The person who invents a technique knows only of an inert, raw, brutal material. Only elusive blocks of wood, stone, and metal. It is the cruel and impassable space which separates what our eye embraces from the reach of our hand, and which conceals from our sight the object of our nostalgia. It is our neighboring stranger, egoistic and hostile. It is our own body, which is always hungry and thirsty, which gets tired, which is sick and ages, that breaks our generous drive. Matter is everything that thickens up against us: everything that refuses us. It is endowed with obscure and malignant resistances. It is the resistance itself. The technique, then, comes to overcome it.

The tool, in fact, manages to deceive the vigilance of matter imbued with gravity. It discovers within its mass the point that will allow it to be lifted. It uses this discovery to make new instruments which lead it toward new conquests. The distances are crossed, the airplane and the radio tighten them. The solid blocks of matter are maneuvered by elementary gestures. The opacity of things lightens up and the world turns transparent and clear to us. We advance in the world with this ease which is none other than comfort itself. Sports and medicine make our bodies more and more bearable, and social institutions do the same regarding the presence of others. The things do not resist anymore. The intentions of persons pass through them without any obstacle. The material world acts as if it does not exist and the technology that is based in science allows us to ignore it. It is an action that allows us to pay as little attention as possible to things.

Religious practice recalls in a certain way the techniques. It also involves the slightest gestures in the life of the Jew. It also relates to material and sensorial objects and it, too, is worthless when it remains without an effect. The smallest detail of its material execution is clockwork-regulated, and every case one may face is planned for beforehand. It involves a kind of exactness like that which is used in the manufacturing of a precise instrument.

And yet, it is not a technique. It is useless to expect a visible transformation of things. When the ritual claims to do so, it turns into magic. Authentic Judaism has always been suspicious of it.

Does the practice then have only a moral value? Does its effect consist of edifying us, imposing a discipline on us? Will it form a person if it does not transform the world? Just go and ask the practicing Jew: he does not treat the rites as if they were an educational system. He attributes to ritualistic action a role in the universe and does not see in it only a means of self-improvement.

Neither a technique nor exclusively moral, what, then, is the religious practice?

It is first a discomfort. It interferes with the so-called natural approach we tend to spontaneously take with regard to things. Is prohibited meat not good to eat? Does Saturday's sun not shine on the people's labor like that of any other weekday? Is saying prayers not more natural in our language than in Hebrew? The rite interjects itself always between us and reality. It suspends the action that we sketch in our mind at the mere sight of the objects. Food is not just something to be consumed, it is "Kosher" or "Taref," permitted or forbidden. Before translating his religious emotion into words, the Jew looks for these words in the prayer book; they may come naturally, but they are not all equally effective. Prayer also presupposes a certain orientation in space, a determined attitude and often also the *tallit* and the phylacteries. The seventh day does not rise like others; it remains impervious to the concerns of the week. Before performing the most elementary act of eating, the Jew pauses to recite the blessing; before entering their house, they stop to kiss the *mezuzah*.

Everything happens as if the Jew does not fully step into a world which offers itself as a given; as if, in a world where the techniques have cleared for us an unresisting passage, the rite constantly signals a stop. Absurd and laughable from a technical point of view, rigid and embarrassing from a moral point of view, it suspends for an instance the natural relations which bind us to things.

Finally, the world does not appear to the practicing Jew as something very simple and very natural. Its existence is something infinitely astonishing. It strikes the Jew like a miracle and creates the feeling of constant wonder in the face of the fact, so simple and yet so extraordinary, that the world is there.

The belief in creation, which lies at the basis of the Jewish religion, is none other than this wonder experienced in the face of the world. Belief in creation is not an abstract dogma of theology. It is concrete and vivid in each of the daily surprises we experience in the face of the existence of things. It prevents us from seeing nature as a dazzling reality, as if it was an unresolved enigma. We sense the world as a mystery and our most familiar gestures extend into the supernatural.

The rite is precisely the behavior of someone who perceives the mystical resonance of things within the hustle of our daily action. It transforms the presence of the person in the world into a daily liturgy. It is an action to which we can find no equivalent either in technique or in morality, an action that touches on the sacred face of things – liturgical action, sacred work.

And it is work. It is not simply an evocation and commemoration of the highlights of sacred history. It is not only a symbol of creation, nor is it an expression of religious emotions that this idea provokes. It is neither a play nor

a ceremony. It is all of that, if you will, but above all it is an action. It is efficient and transitive, and its fulfillment plays a role in the universal order. It plays this role for those of us who work for our salvation, meaning, for our perfect adaptation to the universe. It plays a role in a world which bathes in the mystery of creation, and which by our action finds its created essence. The techniques free us from the matter, but they cannot restore to the matter its soul. The rite reveals within the clogged substance of matter the trace of its divine origin. It allows *the things* to regain their dignity as *creatures*.

Translated by Niv Perelsztejn