

Beyond *Haverut*

Toward an Interfaith Hermeneutics

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H*averut* is a Jewish approach to reading Scripture, which acknowledges that the meaning of a given text can only be found with a partner, or friend (*haver*).¹ Such an approach recognizes that the meaning of Scripture always transcends individual subjectivity and is only available to a community of subjects. According to Levinas, this amounts “to understanding the very plurality of people as an unavoidable moment of the signification of meaning” (BV110). A pluralistic approach is thus necessary to the apprehension of the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures. While this pluralism seems to give way to a certain hermeneutical freedom, it is clear that, for Levinas the community engaged in *Haverut* must necessarily be Jewish. The Hebrew Scriptures remain inseparable from the tradition from which they have emerged and must be interpreted from within that tradition if one is to get to the correct meaning of the text. An approach that makes abstraction of the tradition surrounding the Hebrew Scriptures could only arrive to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the text. The partner in the enterprise of *Haverut* must therefore already have claimed a place within the Jewish community.

Although we understand Levinas's concern with guarding the text's intrinsic connection with tradition, one wonders as to whether the text's entrenchment in a given tradition does not run other risks. Levinas himself acknowledges those risks and proposes the broadening of the hermeneutical circle beyond an elitist circle of *connoisseurs* to include the "other" in order to avoid the crystallization of the text into dogma (*NT* 8). Yet these "other seekers" (9), although situated on the margins of the Jewish community, must, according to Levinas, remain part of that community if the text is to be salvaged from the dangers of misinterpretation. This is where I beg to differ from Levinas. Why not extend the identity of these "other seekers" to people beyond the Jewish community? Levinas's definition of pluralism as the confrontation between strangers already invites us to do so. The achievement of authentic pluralism, in the Levinasian sense, calls for a broadening of the concept of *Haverut* to the stranger and even to the enemy. But to do so would invite other problems. What then will safeguard the text from wild and subjectivist misinterpretations? What will protect the text from being misappropriated by commentators who feel no connection with the people to which it has been entrusted? It is again from the Levinasian perspective that we intend to resolve this problem and pave a way *beyond Haverut* toward an interfaith approach to hermeneutics of the Hebrew Scriptures.

LEVINAS ON *Haverut*

In an essay on the Jewish reading of Scripture, Levinas observes a "characteristic pluralism of rabbinical thought" (*BV* 101) in the interpretation and explication of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is, indeed, a unique characteristic of Jewish exegesis: the acknowledgment and celebration of diverging points of views in the approach of the Hebrew text. The rabbis never agree. The rabbinical commentaries often open the hermeneutical debate to three or more modes of interpretation of a given passage. As Psalm 62:11 says,

“Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this” (132). This psalm seems to imply that the word of God itself calls for multiple interpretations. This is in part due to the nature of the Hebrew language itself which, in the ambiguities of its syntax, calls for multiple interpretations. Levinas observes: “It is by going back to the Hebrew text from the translations, venerable as they may be, that the strange or mysterious ambiguity or polysemy authorized by the Hebrew syntax is revealed. . . . Returning to the Hebrew text certainly and legitimately makes it more difficult than one thinks to decide on the ultimate intention of a verse” (132). In other words, the Hebrew text, because of its lack of punctuation and lack of vowels calls for multiple interpretations, depending on the vocalization one chooses, or the syntax one decides upon.

But this polysemy testifies to more than mere syntactic ambiguities pertaining to the Hebrew language. Far from being a flaw, it constitutes, in the terms of Richard Cohen, a requirement: “Exegesis not only yields but *requires* multiple readings, multiple interpretations. This multiplicity however is not a flaw, as has all too often been asserted. . . . Rather exegetical pluralism. . . . is a reflection of lived ethics.”² And it is precisely this exegetical pluralism that will come to constitute for Levinas “the destiny of the inspired word” (*BV* 110). Indeed, far from being understood as an obstacle to meaning or as an indication of syntactic obscurity and ambiguity, the diversity of opinions about a given passage is celebrated as being all “for the glory of Heaven” (137). According to Levinas, the disagreements of the rabbis testify to the glory of God, that is, to the inspired character of the text studied. For Levinas, “the multiple stances of the scholars” constitute precisely an indication of its inspiration, of its “very life,” to the extent of being themselves identified with the “words of the living God” (101). In other words, the plural meanings found within a given passage not only testify to the inspired character of the text, but as such, are ultimately understood as themselves being inspired, as “words of the living God.”

The question of course remains as to how such diverging approaches to Scripture can remain compatible with its revelatory character. If the text is given over to divergent human interpretations, where then lies its inspired character, that is, its revelatory power as coming from a source that transcends human apprehension? Levinas himself acknowledges such a paradox and speaks, to that effect, of “the characteristic pluralism of rabbinical thought, which paradoxically aspires to be compatible with the unity of revelation” (*BV* 101). In order to understand this paradox, it is necessary to further explore how Levinas understands inspiration. Far from signifying toward a unity or homogeneity of meaning, the inspiration of a given text is signified precisely in the latter’s breadth and richness. Such is the “breadth of Scripture” (133), which constitutes its infinite character and, as such, its inspired character. But we need to further understand what Levinas intends by “breadth” and how the latter testifies to the inspired character of the text.

This breadth is significant for Levinas inasmuch as it testifies to an “inexhaustible surplus of meaning,” which exceeds any given interpretation (*BV* 109; cf. *x*). It is as such that the Hebrew Scriptures can be understood as “inspired,” ever transcending a given human subjectivity and thereby necessitating a pluralistic approach. Thus, far from desacralizing the text, the pluralism of rabbinical interpretation must be understood as testifying to a polysemy, to an “excess” of meaning (109), which, constitutes precisely the inspired character of the text. Levinas defines inspiration as the capacity of a text to contain “another meaning . . . beyond what is heard” (111), beyond the meaning constituted at a given moment or by a given interpreter. Interestingly, it is precisely in the dissonances within the rabbinic discourse that this “other meaning” is heard, that a meaning is apprehended which goes beyond each individual involved in the debate. Thus, the inspired character of the text paradoxically arises from within the heated debates of the rabbis. Indeed, inasmuch as the divergent opinions of the rabbis testify to an excess of meaning latent within the text and to its refusal to lend itself to a single

interpretation, they are revelatory of a given Scripture's inspired character.

The inspired character of the text is thus inseparable from a certain mode of approach: a pluralistic one that reveals this wealth of meaning, this transcendent character of the text. The wealth of meaning that makes for the inspired character of the Hebrew Scriptures can never be apprehended by a solitary subjectivity. It is only when that subjectivity partners with an other that, together, the truth of a given text can be approached. Richard Cohen speaks to that effect of "ethical exegesis" ever seeking to recover the "ethical in the ontological, seeing the lower in the higher, not anthropology but ethics,"³ that is to say, the wealth of meaning discoverable only in a context of dialogue with another. Only then will the text be guarded from crystallizing into a dogma or a creed thereby losing its infinite resonances, which constitute precisely its inspired character. It is in this sense that revelation may be understood in the Jewish tradition, not as an abstract gift from above, but as the very product of a confrontation or dialogue between the text and a community of readers. Revelation is therefore never a finished product that is given once and for all, but, to the contrary, constitutes an "invitation to seek and decipher, to *Mid-rash*," and as such, "already constitutes the reader's participation in the Revelation, in Scripture" (*BV* 133). The inspired character of revelation hangs upon the community of subjectivities or of readers that receive it. Revelation comes from above, but at the same time, dwells within "the person who receives it" (133).

It goes without saying, however, that for Levinas, this person must belong to the Jewish community. It is only as the member of the Jewish community that a given reader receives the status of commentator. For, according to Levinas, the text is intrinsically connected to the tradition and history from which it has originated. One cannot approach Hebrew Scripture as a separate entity distinct from the tradition that carries it. The infinite meanings of Hebrew Scripture resonate only when approached from the standpoint of

the Jewish tradition and history, as the “strings on a violin’s wood” (*BV* 137). Thus, for Levinas, the interpreter must always already belong to the Jewish tradition. The hermeneutical enterprise of the Hebrew Scriptures must remain, for Levinas, Jewish. And while the non-Jew is acknowledged in Levinas as having a possible interest in the Hebrew Scripture, he or she remains on the receiving end of the hermeneutical debate, as “cultured human beings . . . eager to know about the authentic civilization of Israel” but unable to participate in the constitution of that civilization (*NT* 9).

While the universality of the Torah is acknowledged and celebrated in an allusion to the “seventy nations, or seventy languages” represented at the giving of the law (*ITN* 1), the non-Jew remains ever on the margins of interpretation and is never directly engaged in the hermeneutical debate or community over a given passage in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Torah must be interpreted with the nations in mind, with “an incessant reference to the time of nations,” yet the hermeneutical process remains the prerogative of the Jew (2). The Jew speaks to the nations, but the nations do not speak to the Jew. And although Richard Cohen interprets correctly that Levinas’s teachings are meant to be “universal” and not just geared to Jews—“his readings are an affair neither for Jews or Judaism alone, nor for spiritually inclined individuals and religious communities alone”⁴—the fact remains that the readings still remain the prerogative of a Jewish reader. The Torah is thus never universal to the point that it might be appropriated by a non-Jewish reading.

BEYOND *HAVERUT*

Although it is possible to understand the concern Levinas has to protect the intrinsic connection of the Hebrew Scriptures to the tradition that carries it, one wonders, however, whether such an attitude can legitimately be called pluralistic. Levinas’s own definition of pluralism seems to contradict this position. Indeed, for Levinas, genuine pluralism does not constitute a stance which

remains entrenched within a community of like-minded people but entails the capacity to receive an *other* beyond the community of the same. Indeed, Levinas's critique of false pluralism is precisely directed against a community or "totality" that "remains exclusionary of every other" (TI 221). Such a stance constitutes "a suppression of pluralism" (221). Genuine pluralism is one where a given community is not exclusionary of the other, but on the contrary, welcomes that other within its borders. One wonders then as to how Levinas can still call his hermeneutical position "pluralistic," inasmuch as it precisely constitutes itself against the outsider, the stranger, the non-Jew.

Would not a genuinely pluralistic hermeneutical approach to the Hebrew Scriptures necessitate, on the contrary, the inclusion of the other in the hermeneutical debate? Levinas's own definition of pluralism seems to invite such a conclusion. In line with Levinas's understanding of pluralism, has not the time then come to broaden the concept of *Haverut* to include, beyond the friend or kinsman (*haver*), the stranger, and even the enemy? Levinas himself defines the inspiration of the Hebrew text as hanging upon a welcoming of the face of the other: "The message as message awakens listening to . . . the meaning of meanings, to the face of the other man" (BV 111). The approach of a given text as inspired can thus not be dissociated, in Levinas's mind, from an awakening to the "face of the other." Indeed, the very inspired character of a given Scripture, its infinite excess of meaning, hangs upon a receptivity to the hermeneutic presence of an other, of a subjectivity whose interpretative scope exceeds the self's solipsistic interpretations. Does not, then, this understanding of the truth of the text as intrinsically connected to a welcoming of the face already pave the way to a hermeneutical approach *beyond Haverut*, which acknowledges not only the friend (*haver*), but also the outsider, the other of the hermeneutical enterprise?

Such a broadening of the concept of *Haverut* to the stranger is a seductive idea, indeed, but it brings to the fore a number of

problems. Would not this broadening of the hermeneutical circle to the stranger endanger the text and expose it to all kinds of wild and subjectivist interpretations? Would not the text run the danger of being misunderstood and misinterpreted by commentators unfamiliar with its context of origin, with the tradition that bears it? In her book, *La trace de l'infini*, Catherine Chalié warns us of the ever-present dangers associated with such a broadening of the hermeneutical circle with a reference to historical Christian and, later, philosophical misappropriations of the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, it is precisely this dissociation of the Hebrew Scriptures from their context by Christian hermeneutical circles that has, according to Chalié, given rise to a number of misinterpretation and to the ensuing history of conflict between Jews and Christians.⁵ Levinas himself observes this risk: "How is such a call to the diversity of people insured against the arbitrary nature of subjectivism?" (*BV* 134). Our endeavor to broaden the concept of *Haverut* must take into consideration these objections. And it is from the Levinasian standpoint that we now propose to pave a way *beyond Haverut* toward an interfaith hermeneutics of the Hebrew Scriptures. Such an endeavor will prove delicate in that it must both seek to respect the text's particular appartenance to a specific tradition and community—the Jewish community—while exploring the possibilities of a broadening of the hermeneutical circle beyond that community to include the other.

Our attempt to welcome an other into the hermeneutical debate must, first and foremost, pay its respects to the otherness of the text itself. The text is not ours to dispose of as we will. It already belongs to an *other*. The Hebrew Scriptures have emerged in a particular history, among a particular people and have been borne and explored by a particular tradition. Any hermeneutical endeavor attempting to find the genuine meaning of the text must take this particularity of the Hebrew Scriptures into consideration. Indeed, according to Levinas, the first task of hermeneutics of a given text is to "respect its givens and its conventions" (*NT* 5). The meaning of the text is, in

this sense, inseparable from its context or “horizon.” Husserl already argued that an object cannot be properly understood without reference to its respective horizon.⁶ An object apprehended in isolation from its context will be misconstrued. A table taken outside of its context of the home—the kitchen, dining room, or office—cannot be rightfully understood. Likewise, a tool taken outside of its workplace or atelier will not be grasped in its essential purpose but could be mistaken for something else.

The same is to be said of a given Scripture. It too has a context, a horizon of meaning from which it must be apprehended if it is to be discovered in its genuine truth. This horizon is, for Levinas, the rabbinical tradition of interpretation and explication of the written text: “Clearly the oral teaching of the Talmud remains inseparable from the Old Testament” (*BV* 136). According to Levinas, the Hebrew Scriptures are inseparable from the people who received them and interpreted them. The text taken in isolation from its context will, according to Levinas, only be misunderstood and misconstrued. Thus, “through the apparent attachment to the letter, there is the extreme attention paid to the spirit of the biblical text and a hermeneutic which puts a passage . . . back into the context of (with a view of deepening) the totality of the Bible” (91). Just like a given object cannot be understood in isolation from its context of emergence, the Hebrew Scriptures cannot be understood in isolation from their own context: the people of Israel and their particular understanding and approach to the text. Indeed, the revealed text is embedded in a particular language, culture, history, and worldview that must all be understood if the proper meaning of the text is to be deciphered. To attempt to approach the text without knowledge or familiarity with its particular horizon can only lead to gross misinterpretations of its meaning.

We now understand why it is so crucial for Levinas that the Hebrew Scriptures be approached from their particular Jewish context. For only such a mode of approach would ensure that the text is rightly interpreted and ensured against the “arbitrary nature of

subjectivism” (*BV*134).⁷ The text must be salvaged from becoming reduced to the understanding of a given subjectivity. The text is itself an other, which must be apprehended and respected as such by the interpretative subjectivity. According to Levinas “this is made both by a necessary reference of the subjective to the historical continuity of reading and by the tradition of commentaries that cannot be ignored under the pretext that inspirations come to you directly from the text” (135). A subjectivist approach of the text, which would not take into consideration its historical and traditional context, that is the particularity and otherness of the text, can only miss the meaning of the text. Exegesis is in this sense inseparable from a respect of the text as an other, and as such, one might go as far as to characterize the text as an interlocutor, even a partner in the hermeneutical enterprise.⁸

Yet, this respect of the otherness of the text does not have to exclude a welcoming of otherness in the hermeneutical circle. We have already seen that for Levinas, hermeneutics must take the stance of a welcoming of otherness, of the face. But what does this entail precisely? And why is this welcoming of an other so crucial to a hermeneutics respectful of the text? One does not immediately see the connection between this welcoming stance geared to a human other and the respect of the text as other. According to Levinas, however, there is a direct correlation between the awakening to the otherness of a human other and the respect of otherness in general. Levinas speaks to this effect of an awakening to otherness, which occurs precisely in a “proximity of others” (*BV*111). One wonders, however, how an awakening to a human other is so crucial to an approach of the text that would respect the text’s otherness. What is it in the encounter with the human other that prepares subjectivity to this approach of the text? It seems as though for Levinas, the welcoming of the other is the prerequisite of respectful exegesis, or, as Richard Cohen put it, “ethical exegesis.”⁹ This is surprising, and one does not yet see the connection between the welcoming of the

face and a respectful approach to a given text until one realizes how a subjectivity yet unaware of a human other is structured.

According to Levinas, human consciousness is not naturally sensitive to otherness. Instead it is self-absorbed and self-interested. It is the self's encounter with the other, with a human face that marks the original interruption of the self's spontaneity: "It is the welcoming of the Other, the commencement of moral consciousness, which calls into question my freedom" (*TI* 84). When faced with the other, the self realizes the limits of its spontaneity. For the first time, the self finds itself in the presence of the genuine exteriority of a being which refuses to be encompassed or subjected to the self. For the first time, the self learns the limits of its spontaneity and apprehends a being exterior to itself. This awakening to exteriority can, in turn, inform the way that the self had heretofore apprehended the world and give it a renewed sensitivity to the otherness of that world. It is in this sense that "metaphysics precedes ontology" (42). Metaphysics, or the welcoming of the disruptive and irrecuperable face of the other, precedes any attempt at knowing the world, or ontology. And it is as such that ethics—the welcoming of the human other—constitutes the foundation of hermeneutics.

The welcoming stance that accepts a human other is thus the prerequisite of a hermeneutics respectful of the otherness of the text. And indeed, only such a welcoming of otherness in the hermeneutical circle is capable of revealing, within a text heretofore guarded by a particular tradition, possible significations that go beyond that tradition or historical context. Only the intrusion of an other in the hermeneutical debate is susceptible of extracting significations going beyond the comfort zone and answers given by a given tradition or worldview and as such, susceptible of revealing the text as *other* in a whole new sense. The other can prevent a given set of interpretations and worldviews from crystallizing the meaning of a text into a dogma or tradition. Indeed, Levinas himself recognizes this need to free the hermeneutical endeavor from the grasp of

a given minority who, while, incredibly well-versed and erudite in the tradition, can give way to a too narrow interpretation of a given text. In the introduction to his talmudic readings, Levinas speaks of this search for hermeneutical freedom without which “the sovereign exercise of the intelligence recorded in the Talmud can change itself, too, into the litany or pious murmur of a consent given before hand” (*NT* 8).

Thus, it is only when the text finds itself salvaged from its context or horizon that it recovers its character as an other, this time from the community and tradition that bears it. This might seem, however, to go against what we have said thus far about the importance for Levinas of situating a text within its context. An incursion into Levinas’s ethical writings, however, seems to support this understanding of otherness as that which transcends and overflows context. In his essay “Meaning and Sense,” Levinas speaks of the otherness of the face as that which appears “out of context” (*BPW* 53). Although this passage refers to the human other, it can here be applied to the otherness of the text, which, in another Levinasian passage is explicitly identified with the face inasmuch as, like the face, it “speaks” and teaches (*DF* 220). Although Levinas acknowledges the importance of context in the elucidation of the meaning of a given text, the otherness of the text cannot, as such, be reduced to context:

The manifestation of the Other (*Autrui*) is, to be sure, produced from the first in conformity with the way every meaning is produced. The Other is present in a cultural whole and is illuminated by this whole, as a text by its context. . . . But the epiphany of the Other (*Autrui*) involves a signifyingness of its own, independent of this meaning received by the world. The Other comes to us not only out of the context but also without mediation; he signifies by himself. . . . Its life consists in undoing the form in which all beings when they enter into immanence, that is, when they are exposed as a theme, are already dissimulated. . . . This is what the formula, “the face speaks” expresses. (*BPW* 52–53)

According to Levinas, then, the approach of a text as other also necessitates that it be salvaged from its horizon or context of origin! Indeed, its inspired character requires that it not be reduced to the interpretation of a given community thereby crystalizing it into an idol. Thus, Levinas speaks of a “reading or study of a text that protects itself from the eventual idolatry of this very text by renewing it through continual exegesis . . . the immutable letters and hearing the breath of the living God in them . . . incompleteness that is the law of love; it is the future itself, the coming of a world that never ceases coming” (*ITN* 59). The text must always exceed a given community’s hermeneutics; an “incompleteness” must be ever protected, and the unpredictability of future significations and meanings that cannot be appropriated or anticipated must be guarded. Richard Cohen defines exegesis as “the effort not to reduce transcendence,”¹⁰ that is to say, the effort to not reduce the inspired character of the text, which calls for a breadth of meaning and precisely such an incompleteness to a given community’s interpretations. What salvages the text from becoming an idolatrous object of study is then this open stance on the part of the hermeneutical community remaining ever vigilant as to the incommensurability of the text’s meaning with its own worldview and interpretations. Such a vigilance, however, is genuine only if that community shows itself capable of receiving other significations and meanings arising from without.

This is perhaps what Levinas meant when he defined exegesis as “unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights” (*TI* 30). Exegesis is the means whereby the meaning of the text is salvaged from its ossification in a said, that is, in a fixed dogma or creed. Such an exegesis seems, moreover, inseparable for Levinas from an attention to the other, and from a dialogue with the other, or discourse: “It is by the approach, the one-for-the-other of saying, related by the said, that the said remains

an insurmountable equivocation, where meaning refuses simultaneity, does not enter into being, does not compose a whole" (*OB* 170). The salvaging of the text from "being" or the "whole" of ossified interpretation rests upon a capacity on the part of the self for genuine discourse and dialogue with a face, with an other! For only the presence of an other, of a stranger susceptible of having a different set of interpretations, can remind a given community of its limits and awaken it to the essential incompleteness of its task. Only a genuine pluralistic approach, whereby the stranger is invited to the hermeneutical table and engaged in discourse (saying) will the biblical text be salvaged from crystallizing into a said. Perhaps one might understand in this way the opening lines of *In the Time of Nations*, wherein the Torah is said to have been given to "seventy nations, or seventy languages" (*ITN* 1), as an offering of that very Torah to interpretations overflowing the limited context of Israel. The Torah is a gift not only to the Jews but to non-Jews as well, and as such, it is susceptible of being fully appropriated not only by Jews but by the nations surrounding them as well.

CONCLUSION

The text must thus retain a two-fold otherness: that of being other with regards to a given interpreter, but also remaining other with regards its own tradition or origin. It is precisely this two-fold otherness of the text that gives it its inspired character. The text is primordially inspired in that it contains an excess of meaning with regards to the interpreter. It solicits the interpreter from the outside and beckons for significations heretofore unknown and sometimes unacceptable to the interpreter. As such, the text plays the role of the Buberian *Thou* who solicits the interpreter rather than submits itself to a given interpretation. But while the text solicits from a horizon foreign to the interpreter, the meanings of the text must, in turn, not be reduced to the context from which it has emerged. Its inspired character calls precisely for such an understanding. As

Levinas himself puts it, the inspired character of a text rests upon the realization that there is and must always be “another meaning” beyond the one presently being constituted by a given community (BV 110). Indeed, were a text to be reduced to the horizon of its emergence it would not carry the excess of meaning testifying to its inspired character. Thus, the inspiration of a given text necessitates that the text also remain other with regards to its own origin. However, this respect of the otherness of the text is possible only at the price of a broadening of the hermeneutical circle to the other of that community.

Beyond Haverut then means two things. First and foremost, it remains an emphasis on *Haverut*—this communal approach of the text from *within* a given community enrooted in the history and tradition which carries the text. *Haverut* thus constitutes the realization that the text transcends a given subjectivity, that it both precedes and goes beyond the individual reader, and that it is only *together* that we can approach the meaning of a given text. In this sense *beyond Haverut* is only the continuation of *Haverut*, of a communal and intersubjective approach to Scripture. Second, however, *beyond Haverut* is more demanding in that it initiates a confrontation from outside the community to which the text has been entrusted. Here the dialogue is more risky in that it does not just solicit and grapple with a text, but with a people who, throughout its history, has had to struggle to preserve its identity precisely with and against the other. Here the dialogue is harder, because it is riskier. But is this not the difficult destiny of the “people of the Book for whom the demanding reading of the Scriptures belongs to the highest liturgy” (BV 110)? Is not the destiny of such a people to always be on the move, always ready for new twists and turns in the reading of its Scripture, and as such, always on the road to “continued revelation” (110)?