**All things are possible: The life of Lev Shestov**

*By Richard Mather*

[In 1936, Jewish-Russian philosopher Lev Shestov was invited by the Histadrut to give a series of lectures in Eretz Israel. He was warmly received by audiences in Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv. But Shestov and his writings are now largely forgotten. Here is his story.]

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“Nearly every life can be summed up in a few words: man was shown heaven – and thrown into the mud” – Lev Shestov

Lev Shestov (born Yehuda Leyb Schwarzmann) was a Jewish-Russian polemicist, philosopher, theologian, literary critic and existentialist thinker. He was born on January 31, 1866, in Kiev, which was then part of the Russian empire. In his childhood and teenage years he immersed himself in Jewish and Russian literature. After attending Moscow University and working in his father's textile business, he temporarily left the Russian Empire and made his way to Rome.

The following year (1896) he married Anna Eleazarovna Berezovsky, a Russian medical student. It was around this time that he discovered the philosophy of Nietzsche, which had a transformative effect on Shestov’s thinking. Very soon he had completed two book-length manuscripts: *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes* and *Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche*.

Shestov's interest in Nietzsche prompted a third book, *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy*, which was published in St Petersburg in 1903. His next work, *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (published 1905), was a sardonic critique of academic philosophy and scientific positivism, and it was written in an aphoristic style reminiscent of his hero Nietzsche.

*The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* was translated into English and published in 1920 under the title *All Things Are Possible*. In the foreword to this edition, D. H. Lawrence said of Shestov: “‘Everything is possible’ - this is his really central cry. It is not nihilism. It is only a shaking free of the human psyche from old bonds. The positive central idea is that the human psyche, or soul, really believes in itself, and in nothing else.”

The book contains the assertion that because no grand theory can solve the mysteries of life, everything is questionable. “We know nothing of the ultimate realities of our existence, nor shall we ever know anything,” he writes. In other words, the world does not make sense and philosophers should not hope to find reason in it.

In the years leading up to the First World War Shestov and his family moved between Russia, Switzerland and Germany. In 1915, his illegitimate son, Sergei Listopadov, was killed in action in the service of the Russian military.

In the wake of the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, Shestov and his family moved to Paris where he was to live for the next decade. Although virtually unknown in French literary circles, his 1921 article commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of Dostoevsky's birth enthused the local literary scene.

During the 1920s he continued his literary endeavours, including a complete edition of his works in French. He taught and he lectured, and he was invited to speak in Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Netherlands. In 1929, Shestov acquainted himself with the work of Kierkegaard, whom Shestov immediately recognised as a kindred spirit.

Shestov struck up a friendship with Martin Buber in the late 1920s, which continued through the next decade. In a conversation with Buber (dated 1934), Shestov proclaimed that sin came into the world when man ceased to be nourished by the tree of life and instead took sustenance from the tree of knowledge.

“The very moment man ate from the forbidden fruit, he gained knowledge and lost his freedom,” he told Buber. “Man does need to know. To ask, to beg questions, to require proofs, answers, means that one is not free. To know means to know necessity.”[[1]](#footnote-0)

To stave off despair and to achieve victory over nature’s law of irreversible necessity (which dictates that certain things are unchangeable and impossible), we must believe that “all things are possible.” But this requires faith – faith that things can be radically different.

As Bernard Martin, a professor of Jewish studies, explains in his introduction to Shestov’s *Athens and Jerusalem*:

Faith, for Shestov, is audacity, the daring refusal to accept necessary laws [...] it is the demand for the absolute, original freedom which man is supposed to have had before the fall, when he still found the distinction between truth and falsehood, as well as between good and evil, unnecessary and irrelevant.

This notion of moving beyond and good evil is intimately tied to God’s groundlessness. According to Shestov, God is not limited by moral sanctions or reasons; God is someone in whom everything is possible. God does not need a reason, a support, or firm ground. He is groundless. He is the personal God of the Bible in whom there is no subordination, no limit; and therefore, once again, all things are possible. (This groundlessness is what Shestov describes as “the basic, most enviable, and to us most incomprehensible privilege of the Divine.”)

Consequently, our moral struggle will bring us to emancipation not only from moral valuations, but also from logic, reason and limited knowledge. “I know that this ideal of freedom in relation to truth and the good cannot be realised on earth - in all probability does not even need to be realised. But it is granted to man to have prescience of ultimate freedom,” Shestov writes in *In Job’s Balances*.

He then adds:

Before the face of eternal God, all our foundations break together, and all ground crumbles under us, even as objects - this we know - lose their weight in endless space, and - this we shall probably learn one day - will lose their impermeability in endless time.

In 1936, Shestov was invited by the Histadrut (the Jewish trade union organisation) to deliver a series of lectures in Israel. His appearances in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa were met with an enthusiastic response and Shestov was lauded as a great Jewish thinker. This was the fulfilment of a life-long dream for Shestov, whose grandfather was buried on the Mount of Olives.

The following year, Shestov finished the manuscript of his final masterpiece *Athens and Jerusalem*, in which he rejects the impersonal metaphysics of the European philosophical academic tradition (Plato, Hegel, Kant) in favour of the personal God of the Bible. As Shestov states in *Athens and Jerusalem*, “to find God one must tear oneself away from the seductions of reason, with all its physical and moral constraints, and go to another source of truth. In Scripture this source bears the enigmatic name ‘faith,’ which is that dimension of thought where truth abandons itself fearlessly and joyously to the entire disposition of the Creator.”

On November 14, 1938, he was taken to the Boileau Clinic in Paris where he died six days later. He was buried in Boulogne-Billancourt, where his mother and brother are also buried.

That Shestov is relatively unknown today is partly because he had no real disciples to continue his work. The exception was Benjamin Fondane, a young Jewish poet who was killed by the Nazis in 1944. Fondane had kept notes of his conversations with Shestov and they were found among his papers after his death.

However, Shestov’s work was influential in his lifetime. The writings of George Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus bear the marks of Shestov’s influence. And Hillel Zeitlin wrote that “if someone asked me who was the true successor of Friedrich Nietzsche, I would answer without hesitation, L. Shestov.”[[2]](#footnote-1)

Given his enthusiasm for Nietzsche’s work, Shestov would no doubt have considered this high praise indeed.

*Reference List*

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1. This conversation, which was noted down by Benjamin Fondane, is cited in Michael Finkenthal’s book, *Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker,* (2010), p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Cited in Finkenthal, 2010, p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)