



A House for All

Challenging reflections out of the Temple Mount

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Levinas, French philosopher and Talmudic commentator, was born in Kaunas, Lithuania. He first studied at the University of Strasbourg, France (1923-28), and then under Edmund Husserl in Freiburg, Germany (1928-29). There Levinas also met Martin Heidegger whose thoughts, especially *Being and Time* (1927), had a lasting influence on him.

In France, Levinas became one of the most esteemed philosophers of the post-World War II period. His impact on the English-speaking world, however, was only felt shortly before his death. He understood to combine postmodern philosophy with Jewish religious thought and thus provided the possibility that religious and nonreligious thinkers could be brought together. Levinas is best known for his challenging (Jewish) ethical reflection. At the heart of Levinas' thought is the concept of Otherness ("alterity" is the term Levinas prefers), the Other, and the obligation each human has toward the Other. No wonder he claims that "Ethics is first philosophy." His two most influential works in this regard are *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). mp

"Underneath the argument about the future of the Occupied Territories lurks a deep division whose origins go back before the wars and the occupations. It is a division over the character of the State of Israel, over the nature of the Jewish existence at the present time, and over the meaning of the Jewish heritage. . . . Who are we? What is our purpose? What are we living for and how are we going to live here?"¹

The present debate concerning the Temple Mount, one of the last items of negotiation, should be addressed with the present questions in mind. Who are we? What is our purpose? I believe that we need to rethink the essence of Ju-

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daism as well as the meaning of the Temple in Judaism if we are to ever approach a solution to the present problem.

It must first be noted that Judaism has survived for centuries

without a temple. Its survival in no way depends on the palpable presence of the temple, nor of its ancient location. With the destruction of the temple and the ensuing diaspora, Judaism exploded out of the limits and boundaries of space and spread in the whole world. Judaism, according to Abraham Heschel, is a religion of time and not of space.² Other religions have their cathedrals, their shrines and sacred locations. Judaism, on the other hand, has built its monuments in time. In Judaism sacredness is an attribute of time and not of space. Holiness of time, as we experience it through the Sabbath and other festivals, is superior in Judaism to holiness in space. Judaism thus does not revolve around sacred sites but around sacred moments. In the preface written by Heschel's own daughter of one of his last books, *Israel: an Echo of Eternity*, we are reminded of the importance of such an understanding of Judaism in light of the present political events: "God is not dwelling anymore in Israel than anywhere else, because God is not reached through the physicality of space. . . . God is rather met in

moments of faith, in holy time. Jerusalem is not sacred in itself, as land; my father would have repudiated the idolatry of the land expressed by some contemporary Jews. He says it quite clearly: "We do not worship the soil."³ Judaism is a religion which evolves in time. It does not need the Temple Mount to be Judaism. This obsession with space, at the price of human life, is an attitude which is closer to paganism than to Judaism.

And yet, the temple did exist. It did hold an important place in space. The land of Israel has once again been reclaimed. No one can deny the importance that the Western Wall and the present Temple Mount hold in current Judaism as ancient witnesses of God's presence. The problem cannot be dismissed so easily. The fact that Judaism is a religion of time in no way dismisses space. Indeed, "space and time are interrelated." Let us then look more closely to the meaning of this space which once held the temple.

The temple was never understood as the sole possession of the Jews. First of all, the temple was the site of God's presence: "So I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. . . . Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God" (Exodus 29:44-45). And just as no one possesses God, no one may claim possession of the site of His presence.

Moreover, the temple is a site of gathering, not only for the Jews, but also for the nations: "The Sovereign Lord declares, he who gathers the exiles of Israel: I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered" (Isaiah 56:8). The temple has a dimension of universality. This is manifest in the very structure of the text relating to the building of the temple.

Indeed, the building of the temple follows a seven-step structure which echoes in form and in content the creation of the world (see Exodus 40:17-33). Furthermore, the building of the temple ends in Hebrew with the same technical phrase as the creation of the world: "and he finished the

work" (Genesis 2:1 and Exodus 40:33).⁴ The parallel between the building of the temple and the creation of the world is especially interesting in the context of our debate. The temple was supposed to represent the whole world. The universal character of the temple was especially relevant during the Day of Atonement when the cleansing of the temple followed the individual cleansing or atonement of each individual Jew. The cleansing of the individual thus pointed to the cleansing of the whole world.

And indeed, the Day of Atonement (or Yom Kippur) is not just a day of introspection and of prayer for one's personal sins. We do not just stand individually be-

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fore our Creator, but are judged as "sheep before a shepherd," that is, as a group. Forgiveness for our personal sins occurs only upon our turning to others in the gesture of charity. The real dynamic of Yom Kippur is not concentration on one's sinful self, but consideration of others' needs; it is not contraction but expansion. Forgiveness is not a lonely event. It demands a turning from oneself towards others. To save oneself must entail saving the whole world. The temple symbolizes the universe. It encompasses the nations. Likewise, the liturgy within its portals, best exemplified by the liturgy of Yom Kippur, points us to the others who surround us. The prayers we recite during Yom Kippur are construed so as to bring us out of ourselves to the greater realization of the needs of others. The temple of the Jews, in that it is the temple of God, of the Master of the Universe, cannot obliterate the nations. The very purpose of the temple is to speak and teach of the ideal of the Hebrew prophets that someday it will be a "a house of

prayer for all the nations" (Isaiah 56:7).

Finally, I believe that a Jewish state can survive while still acknowledging the presence of the Other in its midst. True individuation, according to E. Levinas, is found in responsibility for the Other. Indeed, it is only through responsibility that the Self is wholly individuated as something unique and irreplaceable. Responsibility is entirely mine. No one can be responsible in my place. In living up to my responsibility to the Other, I am being someone that no one can be in my place. I am being truly myself in a unique, irreplaceable way. I believe that the Jewish state will truly reach individuation the day it lives up to what it effectively is: a State, responsible for *all* its citizens. The true "redemption" of the Jewish state, its being at last out of danger, cannot be an individual one. Redemption is not an individual concept. Just as there was no individual redemption in the ancient temple service, one's sins being forgiven only upon manifestation of sensitivity to the needs of others,⁵ likewise, there is no individuation possible for the Jewish state without acknowledgment and acceptance of the Other in their midst, be they Christian or Moslem.

¹Amos Oz, "Whose Holy Land?" in *Israel, Palestine, and Peace: Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. 78-79.

²Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951).

³Introduction by Susannah Heschel in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, reprint edition (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publications, 1997).

⁴See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 142-145.

⁵See Yom Kippur liturgy, where forgiveness of one's sins comes only through charity. A parallel passage in the New Testament is Matthew 25:31-46.