The Moral Relevance of Judaism to Modernity:
Levinas and Community

by

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My interest in this paper is to look to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, in particular his analysis of Judaism, for a model of what we could call an ethically viable sense of community. By an ethically viable sense of community I mean a community capable of fostering in its members an appreciation of why they should be just to one another and, beyond that, to outsiders, those who do not belong with them in the particular social-historical institutions and traditions which constitute their community. The sense of justice I have in mind, therefore, is one understood to be universal in scope and validity, a sense of justice which commands every human being to a sense of respect and consideration for every other human being, not just those who are in important ways like us or with us in some shared enterprise. And my concern is simply with asking what modes of community might be sufficient to foster and sustain this sense of justice in its members.

Thus, despite my assumption of a universalist sense of justice, my principal concern here might best be described as communitarian in that I take for granted the central insight of modern communitarian political theory: that sustaining a sense of justice in a community requires a meaningful sense of community through which its members can come to realize their mutual importance to one another and, consequently, see the point of being just to one another. This is the basic point, for example, of Michael Sandel’s critique of John Rawls’s liberalism. Rawls conceives of justice in the distribution of social and economic goods in terms of what he dubs the difference principle: all goods are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution should be to everyone’s advantage. But, Sandel asks, how could people without a strong sense of community and, hence, without a strong sense of their mutual importance to one another, come to see the importance of being just to one another in this sense? This concern with
community is put off the agenda by liberalism with its commitment to neutrality on the question of what modes of life people ought to be pursuing. Liberating us to pursue our own good in our own way, liberalism, therefore, neglects the communitarian conditions necessary to sustain the sense of justice it advances.

The problem communitarians such as Sandel correctly identify with liberals such as Rawls is that they work with a sense of justice which presupposes a sense of community which they then proceed to either neglect or to actually undermine. But the communitarian resolution of this problem typically seems to sacrifice our universalist aspirations with justice. Sandel’s own civic-republican ideal of community, for example, grounded in the shared understandings of a self-governing republic as a common good, may be sufficient to foster a sense of justice in us toward our fellow citizens. But it is difficult to see why it would necessarily contribute to sustaining a similar sense of obligation toward strangers, those who do not share the common good of “our” republic with us. Aware of this problem, Sandel comments that “At their best, local solidarities gesture beyond themselves toward broader horizons of moral concern, including the horizon of our common humanity.” But all he offers to support us in this hope is the observation that “In practice ... it is the savage in his poor hut who welcomes the stranger” before the cosmopolitan. 4 In fact, this may be true. But it leaves the grounds of this ‘gesture beyond itself’ mysterious and unexamined. Taken on its own, there seems to be no more reason why local solidarities should gesture beyond themselves as toward themselves, chauvinistically indifferent to the fate of the stranger.

Those of a more liberal stripe who have been wakened from their dogmatic slumbers, so to speak, by the communitarian critique have been more attentive to preserving our universalist
concerns with justice. In particular, there is the work of Jürgen Habermas who stresses the importance of a “constitutional patriotism” in which communities would cultivate a shared conception of the good at the level of a political culture, patriotically attached to the constitutional principles which form the basis of that culture, but neutral, in classically liberal fashion, to all modes of community which would flourish outside that political domain. By anchoring universalist principles of justice in a community’s shared political culture we can see how local solidarities can begin to gesture beyond themselves insofar as these local solidarities are formed precisely in terms of a shared appreciation of universal principles.

As promising and as insightful as Habermas’s work on this issue is, however, in the final analysis it seems to respond to the communitarian challenge in a way that merely displaces it. Seeking to understand how a community might sustain a liberal-universalist sense of justice, he answers that question by articulating a mode of constitutional patriotism that would be necessary for such a community. But why a community would sustain such a patriotic attachment to universal principles is left, once again, unexamined. Though we may have a shared attachment to constitutional principles just insofar as they are “ours”, a vital part of our political heritage, it is unclear how, in particular, a liberal community which places such emphasis on the pursuit of personal happiness and liberty would see the point of continuing its embrace of such principles as its own. What would prevent it, for example, from developing, as we actually seem to be developing in liberal-democratic communities today, an increasingly instrumental understanding of the point of our political principles, important to us as means to secure “my” personal liberty and happiness but as, more or less, annoying encumbrances when they call me to support and aid the other in ways that demand some degree of sacrifice? Left only with principles, we are not
given adequate resources to see the point of those principles, why we ought to regard them as important in ways that go beyond their instrumental value to my personal liberty and happiness.⁶ We fail to adequately examine what resources there could be in the life of a community to sustain that constitutional patriotism in the face of the increasingly individualistic tendencies of modern, commercially based culture which is all too happy to exploit the “rights of man” as a basis for the pursuit of personal gain but all too resistant to any hints of a sense of responsibility to the other that would compromise that individualistic project.

I. Levinas’s Judaism

It is in this context, in the light of such difficulties as these with constructing an ethically viable sense of community, that I come to my concerns with the work of Levinas and his treatment of what I gloss as the moral relevance of Judaism to modernity. For Levinas this issue is initially posed as a question concerning the possible irrelevance of Judaism to modernity. As he puts it in Difficult Freedom, “Can the whole of Western humanism pass for a secularization of Judaeo-Christianity? Have the rights of man and of the citizen and the new spirit that conquered in the eighteenth century not fulfilled in our minds the promises of the prophets?”⁷ From a certain vantage point it would appear that they have, especially given Levinas’s understanding of the uniquely moral significance of the Jewish faith. For Levinas, the word of God is revealed only in the Law of God which orders us to an unconditional sense of responsibility for the other person. Our vision of God is thoroughly ethical, accessible only in the practical observance of the Law, the mundane, human tasks of caring for our neighbor. “The Bible...,” as he emphasizes, “is a book that leads us not towards the mystery of God, but towards the human tasks of man.”⁸ But insofar as a modern, humanistic concern with human rights and
the dignity of each individual seem to appropriate these moral concerns it is, at least, arguable
that Judaism as a particular religious faith has outlived itself, surviving only as a sentimental
attachment to personally or culturally meaningful memories, not as a unique shelter for the word
of God.

If, however, modern humanism has been successful in appropriating something of the
core idea of the Jewish Law, our unconditional sense of obligation to the other as a unique
individual, it has been notoriously unsuccessful in realizing its vision of a humane society on
that basis. There are, of course, many reasons for this but, from Levinas’s perspective, the most
salient factor lies in the ways in which modern humanism has failed to adequately appropriate
important dimensions of a Jewish understanding of the Law. In particular, there is modernity’s
abstraction of the Law from any distinctive social mode of life in which it would be embedded.
Whereas for Judaism our obligations before the Law are not ultimately distinguishable from the
matrix of tradition and ritual commanded of us as Jews, modern humanism seeks to present our
duties as abstract matters of principle, incumbent on us not as a function of the particularities of
our history but of our universal status as rational beings. And this is, no doubt, in many ways a
gain inasmuch as it emphasizes the universality of our obligations to others, that we are
responsible not merely to those close to us or like us but to any other, no matter how distant or
different they may be - a consideration which leads Levinas to be sympathetic with the aims and
fate of modern humanism. But despite this important emphasis placed on the universality of our
obligations, modern humanism fails to appreciate the distinctively Jewish insight into the need
to anchor our rational judgements in a practical mode of life, the inability to ever adequately
sever affairs of the spirit from the observance of the letter of the law, our inner life from its
There are many reasons to stress this point with Levinas. It is not, for example, that far removed from contemporary communitarian critiques of liberal-universalism I have already touched on. Only insofar as I can see my relation to the other as an important aspect of my own identity as a member of some historical community, a community which the other, as a member, helps to sustain, can I see the point of my obligations to the other. It is our mutual solidarity in support of shared endeavors, the common good, which establishes the importance of the other for me as one who deserves my support. But, despite the parallels, Levinas’s reasons for criticizing the universalistic ambitions of modern humanism diverge from communitarian ones in, at least, one important respect. In a word, communitarian accounts of the need to anchor moral principles in social modes of life are centripetal, hinging an appreciation of the importance of others onto an essentially conditional understanding of their importance to me, to projects I value but cannot pursue alone. Apart from the other’s involvement in such common projects with me it is unclear how the other can have importance to me. Hence, the seemingly intractable difficulties in justifying a universal sense of justice and mutual responsibility from this communitarian perspective.

Levinas, on the other hand, gives what amounts to a centrifugal account of our appreciation of the moral importance of the other. I come to appreciate the other as deserving of my consideration not insofar as I can see his or her importance to me and my projects but insofar as I am “exposed” to what Levinas describes as the “height” of the other, his or her unconditional authority or right to command my consideration. "The very fact of being in a
conversation," he writes, "consists in recognizing in the Other a right over this (my) egoism..."\textsuperscript{12}

To speak with another person, Levinas argues, is to be delivered to a perspective where the other is revealed to me as someone who merits my consideration. For I cannot converse with someone without relating to them as someone whose positions are worth hearing, not to be dismissed out of hand, as dismissing them out of hand is, precisely, no longer to be conversing with them.

There are, no doubt, modes of speech which do not involve this exposure to the importance of my interlocutor. Perlocutionary uses of speech and, generally, communicative exchanges of a primarily instrumental character, where the point of my exchanges with the other are to marshal resources relevant to some project I am pursuing; these modes of communication seem not to fit Levinas’s conception of language well. They are ways of using language as a tool rather than living language as an exposure to the concerns of the other. As such, it is in non-instrumental, conversational relations with the other that I can see how the other can become important to me not centripetally or conditionally, in terms of his or her importance to my concerns, but centrifugally in terms of my appreciation of the other’s unconditional importance as other.

Hence, the importance of social modes of life which place me in habitual modes of intercourse with others of a non-instrumental nature, traditions and rituals which bring me into contact with others in a spirit of respect and deference. In this regard we would do well to speak of the Jewish tradition of Talmudic study, the study of the tradition of Biblical commentary inscribed in the Talmud, whose significance Levinas has taken great efforts to appreciate in his own work. Levinas emphasizes the way in which Talmudic study places me in a relation of deference to the text as inspired scripture, as the words of the other to whom I am obliged to attend.\textsuperscript{15} The attitude which informs Talmudic study is in touch with the spirit of teaching which
Levinas invokes in *Totality and Infinity* to describe our most fundamental relations with the other. There he emphasized a sense in which the other who teaches me is in a position of mastery in relation to me, bringing me to ideas I could not have produced on my own. In this spirit, Talmudic study fosters an attitude of submission on the part of the student to the mastery of the text, a veneration of a text able to teach us in a way we could not possibly foresee and would only miss in viewing it exclusively from the context of our own interests. In this way, a fundamentally non-instrumental relation is established with the text. The text is not a resource I can make use of, but an inspired word capable of inspiring me if only I submit to its teaching.

Implicit in this non-instrumental relation to the Talmud is a model of non-instrumental relations to others generally. The language of the Talmud is only exceptional in the way it brings out a way of reading and speaking implicit in every non-instrumental use of language. All language has this ethical potential within it, for Levinas, insofar as it opens me up, in the manner of a genuine conversation, to a non-instrumental consideration of the other. Hence, it is not surprising to see the dialogical character of Talmudic study stressed in Levinas’s account as well. The Talmud, written in a style emphasizing complex deliberation of interpretive options from one generation of scholars to the next, intrinsically opens itself up to a contemporary deliberation with others in the present. It is sustained not as an object of personal study, but as a social tradition of questioning and debate across the generations into the present where my teacher is not just the text, but my fellow students with their own unique vantage points on the text. My attitude to my companions in this tradition of study cannot be different from the attitude I maintain toward the text itself, in which I am open to the intrinsic value of the others’ perspectives onto the text, their authority to command my attention to readings that may have
little relevance to the aims that guide my own.

In this way, students of the Talmud are habitually drawn into a relation with others in which they are able to appreciate the importance of the other as someone who deserves the kind of deference and consideration to which the practice disposes them. And as a practice of reading and study which draws from an ethical potential inherent in every genuinely conversational use of language, it can serve as a model for other communicative contexts able to develop that ethical potential in a similar way. For whenever I am institutionally disposed to relate to others with this sense of deference, through a tradition of learned study or everyday ritual and observance of the Law, I am placed in contexts where I can habitually come to appreciate the non-instrumental significance of the other. And, on that basis, it becomes possible for me to understand myself as someone responsible, in a unique way, for the others whose importance I have come to appreciate in that institution. Here we touch on Levinas’s understanding of “election,” the way in which I gain a sense of myself as uniquely responsible for and to the other in my discursive relations with the other, a sense of responsibility for the other which constitutes the emergence of a morally charged sense of identity, a sense of identity that can only be fulfilled as I fulfill my obligations to the other. “To utter ‘I’... means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I.”

For Levinas, this sense of election to a morally charged sense of identity is not limited to one’s relations to others in social institutions. Whenever I relate to the other as a unique individual, as one who could address me in speech, whether it be a stranger who is suffering in the street or the televised image of a child in need I will certainly never come to know, I find
myself elected to this sense of unique and unshirkable responsibility for the other. I may be able
to do nothing for them but I sense myself as responsible anyway, as one who should help, if only
I could. But taken in the context of institutional relations, such as the tradition of Talmudic study
we have been examining, this account of election forms a bridge, so to speak, between what I
referred to as Levinas’s centrifugal approach to how we come to appreciate the importance of
others and a centripetal approach more characteristic of communitarian thought, a way in which
we can appropriate communitarian insights in a Levinasian context. A centripetal emphasis on
seeing the importance of others relative to their importance to me, to my sense of who I am in
relation to a common tradition or form of life we share, is not so much wrong as it is one-sided.
It is, perhaps, the most common way in which people with whom we share a common
institutional space come to matter to one another. And so one student of the Talmud must matter
to another to the extent that they understand who they are as wrapped up in an important way
with their engagement to a tradition they each support in their own way. They can no more be
indifferent to one another than they can be indifferent to themselves inasmuch as their sense of
self, by embracing their shared tradition, involves a reference to the others as members with
them of that tradition. But in the context of Levinas’s account of the sense of election I gain in
my non-instrumental relations to the other, it is possible to recognize a centrifugal core to this
otherwise centripetal account. For, to return to the example of the Talmudic student, what I gain
in coming to appreciate the importance of my fellow students is not merely the way in which
they matter to me, given who I am with my particular institutional commitments, but the way in
which their importance as an other person, as my interlocutor who intrinsically merits my
consideration and responsibility, matters to me, given who I am with my particular institutional
This way of speaking may appear needlessly awkward and repetitive. What do we add in speaking of the importance of the other coming to matter to me instead of simply speaking of the other coming to matter to me? Just Levinas’s emphasis on the way in which the formation of a sense of who I am in such institutional contexts can involve, in the first place, an appreciation of the other as other, as one who merits my consideration not merely in terms of our shared institutional commitments, but simply by virtue of being my interlocutor, of soliciting my consideration in speech. If, as is only reasonable with others with whom we share a mutually valued institutional relation, I then come to appreciate how the other matters to me given my institutional commitments, this provides an opportunity to further internalize this prior sense of election, of responsibility to the other, in a personally relevant way - to see how my sense of the unconditional importance of the other can also matter to me in a conditional way, relative to my concerns with myself. In this way my appreciation of the importance of the other relative to my sense of who I am is given a deontological significance it lacks in what is otherwise a teleological account, an appraisal of the worth of the other solely in relation to their relevance for my own aims in life. From this Levinasian perspective it is possible, therefore, to appropriate communitarian insights regarding the need to anchor our moral responsibilities in a sense of self gained in relation to shared traditions and common projects without reducing the scope of those responsibilities to just those who matter to me because of their relevance to projects I value. If this otherwise conditional appreciation of the worth of the other is gained in an institutional context informed by the kind of non-instrumental, communicative relations we see exemplified in the tradition of Talmudic study it will be an important way in which I internalize in terms of commitments.
my own aims my unconditional sense of election to the other - a teleological anchoring, so to speak, of my deontological sensibilities, a way in which I can come to have a deeper personally relevant stake in my moral responsibilities.

It is with this anchoring of an unconditional sense of responsibility to the other in my conditional concerns for my socially circumscribed sense of identity, that we find, at least a part of the practical genius of Judaism as a social mode of life - “a way of living,” as Levinas puts it, “that is a ritual and a heartfelt generosity.” Together, ritual and heartfelt generosity secure a public, institutional character for a mode of unconditional consideration of the other foundationally at home in more private, face to face encounters. And it is with such hybrid institutions, mediating the distance between a personal sense of responsibility and impersonal public duties that we can begin to understand how the public demands of a universal sense of justice can become important to those subject to it. For it is only in relation to an appreciation of the unconditional importance of the other, cultivated in modes of social life that combine these dimensions of ritual and heartfelt generosity, that we can come to see the point of justice, why we should be just. Abstracted from this substantive appreciation of the worth of the other the procedures which constitute a just social order can come to appear as so many pointless encumbrances insofar as they do not directly secure my own personal security and liberty. Insofar as they oblige me to consider the claims of the other their moral authority depends on my ability to discern the worth of the other to whom I am so obliged. Hence, the problem which haunts Habermas’s constitutional patriotism. Centering his account on our patriotic attachment to principles of justice, we are left without an account of the point of those principles, without an account as to how such a patriotic community would appreciate their unconditional importance.
Though Habermas is right, I believe, concerning the need for a political culture based in a constitutional patriotism, his account is silent on the need to develop, as Levinas would put it, cultures of “ritual and heartfelt generosity” capable of fostering an appreciation of the unconditional worth of the other as a singular being who deserves the sort of justice our constitutional principles are designed to respect.

This concern with grounding our support of universal principles of justice in our substantive appreciation of the worth of the other is also at least a part of what is at stake in Levinas’s concern with what he describes as “the tyranny of the universal and the impersonal” inherent in the administration of justice by the state. Levinas’s concern here is not with the way in which the state can fail to respect my uniqueness by imposing a range of impersonal restrictions to my personal liberties. The uniqueness of the individual which Levinas is concerned the state will come to eclipse is my uniqueness as a self elected to responsibility for the other as a unique individual. For it is the very perspective of equality, of impartiality inherent in a universal sense of justice which threatens to obliterate my appreciation of the other in his or her uniqueness, as my interlocutor. As all become equal as subjects under the Law, all become more or less anonymous, not unique interlocutors, but merely cases to which the law must be fairly applied. But this threat which justice poses to my sense of election is not a problem that can be resolved by dismissing the perspective of an impartial administration of justice.

Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, we cannot finally separate ethics and politics in Levinas’s thought. For my relation to more than one other, to what Levinas dubs the “third party”, demands the perspective of justice. A multiplicity of concrete others who all make moral claims on me demands an attitude of impartiality as I come to deal with their conflicting claims,
a recognition of their equality as moral subjects. This is why, as Levinas puts it, “justice summons me to go beyond the straight line of justice ...” As grounded in the demands of my personal sense of election to the other, it demands more of me than an impartial respect for fair procedures. It demands a unique sense of responsibility to the other as a basis for appreciating why any other, like the other to whom I find myself uniquely responsible, should deserve the same. Without this anchoring in social modes of life which foster and habituate me to these forms of personal responsibility to the other, justice cuts itself off from its own indispensable moorings. As Levinas also quite aptly puts it, "justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest." It is this “impossibility of passing by the closest” that a sense of justice abstracted from the mode of community we find in Judaism threatens to extinguish.

And yet, it could be objected, making it impossible to pass by the closest does not necessarily open us up to drawing no distinction between those close and those far off. To the contrary, whenever others come to matter to me in terms of my social-institutional relations to them, the way they belong with me in a common project which matters to us both, the seeds of intolerance to those who do not belong are sewn. Levinas’s emphasis on what I have been calling a centrifugal, deontological moment in this process does nothing to obviate this threat. For when I come to appreciate the unconditional importance of the other in these institutional contexts there is nothing to impel me to extend this sense of importance to outsiders. To appreciate the unconditional importance of my fellow students of the Talmud, for example, is not necessarily to generalize that recognition to anyone I might encounter regardless of the
context. It could be an occasion to merely emphasize the importance of all those who, like myself, value the study of the Talmud to the disdain of those who do not share this concern.

This is an important objection to which Levinas is particularly vulnerable. For the recognition of the worth of the other which occurs in my speaking with the other is, for Levinas, nothing articulate. It is only what Levinas describes as "an orientation" to my speech, my being for the other in my speaking. The signification of my saying is nothing said, but only a sense of responsibility that Levinas describes as a sense of "urgency", a sense of gravity to one's relation with the other which constitutes an implicit recognition of his or her worth. To speak is to find oneself impelled to take the other seriously, as if s/he mattered. But it is not to have an articulate idea of what Levinas characterizes as “the nakedness of the face”, “abstract man, disengaged from all culture” which he describes as the basis for that sense of importance, “the birth of morality.” This reference of the birth of morality to “abstract man” is an important point for him as it is what allows him to argue that the presence of many others, just insofar as they are human, capable, in principle, of becoming my interlocutor, entails an impartial sense of justice. It is because the other commands my consideration only in her/his abstract humanity, “disengaged from all culture,” that I realize I must extend the same consideration to all those who, like the other, embody this abstract humanity. But, without an articulate realization of this point, there is no reason why I should comprehend the need to extend that consideration. In fact, the predominant tendency with such group solidarities may be, contra Sandel’s observation of the way the best local solidarities “gesture beyond themselves”, not to extend it but to limit it on the basis of an understanding of the importance of the other gained as a function of her/his belonging to a context we both value.
But this is not the case with Judaism as Levinas understands it. An articulate understanding of the worth of the abstract humanity of the other is a constitutive dimension of Jewish modes of life - a Jewish universalism that is not inconsistent with the particularism of its traditions and rituals.

That is our universalism. In the cave that represents the resting place of the patriarchs and our mothers, the Talmud also lays Adam and Eve to rest: it is for the whole of humanity that Judaism came into the world. We have the reputation of considering ourselves to be a chosen people, and this reputation greatly wrongs this universalism. The idea of a chosen people must not be taken as a sign of pride. It does not involve being aware of exceptional rights, but of exceptional duties....

In particular, duties to “the stranger” which may decisively trump my loyalty to those close to me. Levinas emphasizes this point in a most dramatic way in his Talmudic commentary on the story of David’s execution of seven of Saul’s descendants. After three years of famine, God told David that Saul’s persecution of the Gibeonites many years before was the major reason for the famine. After the Gibeonites demand seven of Saul’s descendants to be nailed to the rock of the Mountain of Saul for retribution, David hands them over to a most brutal execution. Levinas comments: “Let passersby know this: in Israel, princes die a horrible death because strangers were injured by the sovereign. The respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the name of the Eternal are strangely equivalent. And all the rest is a dead letter.”

Only such a reflective articulation of the implicit deontological significance of our sense of election to the other in discourses and practices constitutive of our forms of life is capable of providing us with a sufficient basis, not to exorcise this threat of group chauvinism, but, at least, to combat it coherently - to understand why we should combat it. This reflective articulation of the implicit logic of our responsibility to the other is, as Levinas would put it, a matter of making
the significance of ‘saying said’, of sheltering and emphasizing the unconditional significance of the other implicit in the act of saying what is said to the other in what is said.27 In the light of Levinas’s analysis of Jewish modes of community, we can appreciate the importance of this practice of articulation in the life of a community - to shelter the implicit universalism of our responsibility to the other in particular modes of life which are important to us, to transform the particularity of those modes of life from breeding grounds for chauvinism and indifference to the stranger into self-conscious training grounds for a more unlimited sense of responsibility to humanity.

But, as Levinas also emphasizes, the moral significance of the other implicit in speaking with the other can never be adequately brought to articulate expression. Hence, the need as Levinas understands it of “unsaying” the said which attempts to articulate this significance, of drawing attention to the way in which the moral significance of the other we attempt to articulate in speech always transcends even our best attempts.28 For this reason, there is a critical sense of pluralism constitutive of the life of Judaism as Levinas understands it which gives to its traditions a distinctively non-dogmatic character. As the word of God is essentially revealed in the Law of God which orders us to an unconditional responsibility for the other, and as the grounds of this responsibility transcend any thematic account we might give of it, Levinas is logically drawn to stress the potentially unlimited ways in which the significance of God’s word can be appropriated.29 This pluralism quite reasonably gives rise to the way in which the tradition of Talmudic readings is maintained in an open spirit of debate and questioning in which the point of the debates seems not so much to reach any firm conclusions about a univocal meaning of the text which, as Levinas insists, does not exist anyway, but to open up a field of
multiple interpretations which can, in an unpredictable way, correct and nourish one another. This way of maintaining tradition by putting it up for question seems to be a practical way in Judaism appropriates Levinas’s philosophical strategy of “unsaying” the said in order to emphasize the way in which the moral significance of the other always transcends what can be said. The debates themselves unsay each attempt to say univocally what the Scriptures mean in the way they draw one from one position to another without a conclusive resolution. In this way, a critical pluralism is maintained internal to the tradition antagonistic to both the dogmatism of some presumptively absolute vantage point on the truth or the subjectivism of the denial of truth and consequent rejection of argument and debate as pointless. This Jewish sense of pluralism goes a long way, I believe, to overcoming our otherwise quite justifiable concerns with the potentially oppressive character of tradition by establishing a sense of tradition which is genuinely critical and inclusive.

Beyond this sense of pluralism internal to Judaism as a tradition there is also another sense of pluralism implicit in Levinas’s work which centers on the relation of Judaism to other modes of social life and expression. In relating the Jewish Scriptures to a potential of language itself to signify a sense of responsibility to the other beyond anything that can be explicitly said, Levinas lays the ground for a recognition of the manifold discourses which may, in diverse ways, shelter and articulate this sense of responsibility.10 As with the pluralism internal to Judaism, this external pluralism does not culminate in an uncritical celebration of every mode of cultural expression. Levinas defends the distinctive insights of Judaism, for example, in relation to Christian and Humanistic discourses. It is not that every culture has articulated our sense of responsibility to the other equally well or with the same insights. As with the internal mode of
pluralism, there are grounds for continuing debate and critical reflection on the value of various cultural contributions. And, in keeping with the principle of the inadequacy of every said to our sense of moral responsibility, there is no more reason to expect any univocal conclusions from this debate than from the one internal to Judaism. In this way the ground is laid for a critically informed pluralism which is open to the irreducibly distinctive insights of various cultures, forever anticipating the site of a universal culture that would appropriate the specific contributions of all, but aware that this universal site is always ‘to come’, that the only way to shelter a properly universal sense of responsibility is in the particularity of distinctive modes of life - “a particularism,” as Levinas puts it, “Like that of Abraham. The salvation of human universality perhaps once more requires paths that do not lead to a great metropolis.”31

This second sense of pluralism invites modernity to learn from Judaism without necessarily seeking to become Jewish or, more generally, to abandon our liberal-democratic commitments to a pluralistic society. But unlike a liberal sense of neutrality which seeks to distance itself from any evaluative judgments concerning the contribution of various cultures and modes of life, neither supporting nor inhibiting the efforts of individuals to maintain their traditions, this Jewish pluralism lives and thrives in such evaluative judgments. Critically attentive to the ways in which different cultures, in different and not altogether equal ways, may shelter this universal sense of responsibility, Levinas’s Jewish pluralism is based in a recognition of our need to support every mode of life which, like Judaism, shelters our universal sense of responsibility to one another in distinctive ways while remaining critical of those which, to one degree or another, foster indifference or, at the extreme, hatred of the stranger. We are not, therefore, called to abandon our pluralism, but only to a critical appropriation of it maintained,
as is the critical pluralism internal to Judaism, through the open debates and deliberations of what, at this level, would be a democratic political community. Concerned to give due respect and consideration to every distinctive contribution to the life of a multi-cultural society, such a community would also be concerned with fostering the social conditions supportive of that multi-cultural society, the modes of community which genuinely “gesture beyond themselves” toward a universal mode of solidarity with the other. And though the question of how this more centrifugal mode of social solidarity should be maintained must, in a democratic community, remain permanently up for question, it is not a question that can be coherently ignored out of a well-meaning, though ultimately misplaced concern with liberal neutrality.

Notes

1. Most of this paper is a summation or edited excerpt from arguments I have presented in greater detail in my From Communicative Action to the Face of the Other: Levinas and Habermas on Language, Obligation, and Community (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2000), Chapter 5.


8. Levinas, Difficult Freedom, p. 275. For more on Levinas’s understanding of the moral character of religion that is not, as he puts it, “the forever primitive form of religion”, see Totality and Infinity, pp. 77-79.


10. This is not to say that communitarian accounts of the importance of the other reduce the importance of the other to an instrumental significance. I do not understand my fellow citizens as important and deserving of my respect and consideration merely because I need their cooperation to attain things I enjoy on my own independent of them, as I might value the cooperation of others in support of such things as our local police force which enable all of us to enjoy greater security in our private lives. The other is not a mere means to the end of my private satisfaction with life. Rather, as Taylor so clearly brings out with his distinction between common and convergent goods in “Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate”, a common sense of the good is something that can only be enjoyed with others as, for example, I can only take pride in the achievements of my country as a citizen, with my fellow citizens. But this point still preserves what I am calling the centripetal character of the significance of the other to me.

11. Except, of course, in an indirect way as a function of the fact that it just happens to be important to “us” that those who are not a part of our community be treated as having the same or a similar sense of worth. For a good example of this approach to the problem of our relations with others who do not belong to our community, see Richard Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” The Journal of Philosophy (1983). The major problem with this approach is that it explains why we, in fact, value others outside our community, but fails to adequately justify why

12. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 40. Levinas uses the term “exposure” to indicate the passivity and affective character of my sense of responsibility to the other. See *Otherwise than Being*, for example, pp. 14-15. For Levinas’s use of the term “height”, see *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 75 & 200.

13. “My coordination with the other in language is the expression of commandments received: writing is always prescriptive and ethical, the Word of God which commands and vows me to the other, a holy writing before being sacred text.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans., Gary D. Mole (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. xii.

14. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 69. In the passage cited the most fundamental teaching the other brings to me is an appreciation of the idea of the infinity of the other, his or her moral authority in relation to me.

15. “The contribution of each person and period is confronted with the lessons from everyone else, and from the whole of the past. Hence the way that readings continually refer to origins across history going from pupil to master; hence the discussion in gatherings between colleagues questioning one another from century to century, the whole thing integrating itself as tradition into commented Scripture ...” Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, p. xiii.


19. This is a much too brief synopsis of Levinas’s ideas concerning the “third party” and the way in which this complicates the original ground of morality in our face to face proximity to a singular other and opens us up to an impartial, universal sense of justice before humanity. For a fuller account, see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 212-215 and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), pp. 157-161.


23. See Levinas, "Language and Proximity" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 120.


27. For Levinas's distinction between the "saying" and the "said", see, in particular, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 5-7 & 45-51.

28. See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 181. Levinas’s strategy of unsaying the said centers principally on the construction of paradoxes which call attention to the inherent limitations of the themes invoked. An example of such unsaying can be found in his description of "ethical resistance" as "the resistance of what has no resistance" (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 199) where the point is to stress the way the sense of resistance being invoked exceeds any sense of objective resistance to which the theme of resistance would be adequate.

29. See Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, p. xiii. Though Levinas does not relate this pluralism directly to his thesis regarding the saying and the said, it is reasonable to suppose a connection in the way I have elaborated it. Levinas’s emphasis on the way the revelation of the Scriptures implicates each person in his or her uniqueness, as a distinctive reading posed from his or her perspective, is convergent with his claims regarding the moral significance of the Word of God and his account of how the moral significance in my speech with the other cannot be appropriated except in a mode of election, the assumption of a unique sense of responsibility.

30. In this regard, Levinas speaks of “a religious essence of language, a place where prophecy will conjure up the Holy Scriptures, but which all literature awaits or commemorates, whether celebrating it or profaning it.” Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, p. xi.