

ture me to death—I will always believe in You, I will always love You! Yea, even in spite of You!

And these are my last words to You, my wrathful God: Nothing will avail You in the least! You have done everything to make me renounce You, to make me lose faith in You, but I die exactly as I have lived, an unshakable believer!

Praised forever be the God of the dead, the God of vengeance, truth, and law, who will soon show His face to the world again and shake its foundations with His almighty voice.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.¹⁰

Into your hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit.¹¹

10. Deut. 6:4. The first line of the daily Shema, recited also as the conclusion of the Vidui, the deathbed confessional prayer.

11. Ps. 31:6. Recited as part of the Vidui.

To Love the Torah More Than God



Emmanuel Levinas

Among the recent publications devoted to Judaism in the West, there are a great many beautiful texts. Talent is not a problem in Europe. Rarely, however, are the texts real. Over the past one hundred years, Hebrew learning has faded, and we have lost touch with our sources. What learning is still being produced is based on an intellectual tradition; it remains self-taught and untutored, even when it is not improvised. And what worse corruption can befall an author than being read only by people who know less than he does! With no one to check them, no one to put them in their places, authors tend to mistake the lack of counter-pressure for freedom, and this freedom for the touch of genius. Small wonder that the reading public remains skeptical; for them, Judaism, with its few million unrepentant adherents left in the world, is no more than a matter of quibbling over religious observances—something uninteresting and unimportant.

I have just read a text which is both beautiful and real—as real as only fiction can be. An anonymous author published it in an Israeli journal; under the title “Yossel, Son of Yossel [sic] Rakover of Tarnopol, Speaks to God,” it was translated for *La terre retrouvée*, the Zionist paper in Paris, by Mr. Arnold Mandel, who, it would appear, read it with deep emotion. The text deserves even

more. It conveys an intellectual attitude that reflects something better than the reading habits of intellectuals—something superior to the handful of concepts borrowed, for instance, from Simone Weil, who, as everyone in Paris knows, is the latest fad in religious terminology. What this text provides is Jewish learning modestly understated, yet full of assurance; it represents a deep, authentic experience of the spiritual life.

The text presents itself as a document written during the last few hours of the resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto. The narrator is a witness to all the horrors. He has lost his young children under brutal circumstances. As his family's last survivor, and that for only a few more moments, he bequeaths to us his final thoughts. A literary fiction, certainly, but a fiction that affords each of us, as survivors, a dizzying view of ourselves and our lives.

I am not going to recount the whole tale, even though the world has learned nothing and forgotten everything. I pass when I am asked to stage the Passion of Passions as if it were a show; I refuse to derive any author's or theatrical director's glory from those inhuman cries. They resound and reverberate, never to be silenced, through the everlasting ages. Let us listen only to the thought that articulates itself in them.

What is the meaning of the suffering of the innocent? Does it not witness to a world without God, to an earth where only man determines the measure of good and evil? The simplest, most ordinary response would indeed be to draw the conclusion that there is no God. This would also be the healthiest response for all those who until now have believed in a rather primitive God who awards prizes, imposes sanctions, or pardons mistakes, and who, in His goodness, treats people like perpetual children. But what kind of limited spirit, what kind of strange magician did you project as the inhabitant of your heaven—you who today state that heaven is deserted? And why are you still looking, beneath an empty heaven, for a world that makes sense and is good?

Yossel son of Yossel experiences, with renewed vigor, beneath an empty heaven, certainty about God. For his finding himself

thus alone allows him to feel, on his shoulders, all of God's responsibilities. On the road that leads to the one and only God, there is a way station without God. True monotheism must frame answers to the legitimate demands of atheism. An adult's God reveals Himself precisely in the emptiness of the child's heaven. That is (according to Yossel ben Yossel) the moment when God withdraws Himself from the world and veils His countenance. "He has sacrificed humankind to its wild instincts," says our text. "And because those instincts dominate the world, it is natural that those who preserve the divine and the pure should be the first victims of this domination."

God veiling His countenance: I think this is neither a theologian's abstraction nor a poetic image. It is the hour when the just person has nowhere to go in the outside world; when no institution affords him protection; when even the comforting sense of the divine presence, experienced in a childlike person's piety, is withdrawn; when the only victory available to the individual lies in his conscience, which necessarily means, in suffering. This is the specifically Jewish meaning of suffering—one that never takes on the quality of a mystical expiation for the sins of the world. The condition in which victims find themselves in a disordered world, that is to say, in a world where goodness does not succeed in being victorious, is suffering. This reveals a God who, while refusing to manifest Himself in any way as a help, directs His appeal to the full maturity of the integrally responsible person.

But by the same token this God who veils His countenance and abandons the just person, unvictorious, to his own justice—this faraway God—comes from inside. That is the intimacy that coincides, in one's conscience, with the pride of being Jewish, of being concretely, historically, altogether mindlessly, a part of the Jewish people. "To be a Jew means . . . to be an everlasting swimmer against the turbulent, criminal human current. . . . I am happy to belong to the unhappiest people in the world, to the people whose Torah represents the loftiest and most beautiful of all laws and moralities."

Intimacy with this virile God is attained in passing an ultimate test. Because I belong to the suffering Jewish people, the faraway God becomes my God. "Now I know that you are truly my God, for you cannot possibly be the God of those whose deeds are the most horrible expression of a militant absence of God." The just person's suffering for the sake of a justice that fails to triumph is concretely lived out in the form of Judaism. Israel—historical, carnal Israel—once again becomes a religious category.

God veiling His countenance and recognized as present and intimate: is He possible? Or are we dealing with a metaphysical construct, with a paradoxical *salto mortale* in the style of Kierkegaard? I think something very different manifests itself here, namely, the characteristic features of Judaism; the relationship between God and the human person is not an emotional communion within the context of the love of an incarnate God, but a relationship between minds that is mediated by teaching, by the Torah. The guarantee that there is a living God in our midst is precisely a word of God that is not incarnate. Trust in a God who does not reveal Himself through any worldly authority can rest only on inner clarity and on the quality of a teaching. There is nothing blind about it, much to the credit of Judaism. Hence this phrase of Yossel ben Yossel's, which is the highpoint of the entire monologue, echoing the whole Talmud: "I love Him, but I love His Torah even more. . . . And even if I had been deceived by Him and, as it were, disenchanted, I would nonetheless observe the precepts of the Torah." Blasphemy? Well, in any case a protection against the folly of a direct contact with the Sacred not based on reasonable grounds. But above all, a trust not based on the triumph of any institution, but on the inner clarity of the morality conveyed by the Torah. A difficult journey this, already being undertaken in spirit and truth, and which has nothing to prefigure! Simone Weil, you have never understood anything about the Torah! "Our God is a God of vengeance," says Yossel ben Yossel, "and our Torah is filled with death penalties for venial sins. And yet it was enough for the Sanhedrin, the highest tribunal of our people in its land, to sentence a person to

death once in seventy years to have the judges considered murderers. On the other hand, the God of the Gentiles has commanded to love every creature made in his image, and in his name our blood has been poured out for almost two thousand years."

The true humanity of man and his virile tenderness come into the world along with the severe words of a demanding God; the spiritual becomes present, not by way of palpable presence, but by absence; God is concrete, not by means of incarnation, but by means of the Law, and His majesty is not the felt experience of His sacred mystery. His majesty does not provoke fear and trembling, but fills us with higher thoughts. To veil His countenance in order to demand—in a superhuman way—everything of man, to have created man capable of responding, of turning to his God as a creditor and not always as a debtor: that is truly divine majesty! After all, a creditor is one who has faith par excellence, but he is not going to resign himself to the subterfuges of the debtor. Our monologue opens and closes with this refusal to settle for resignation. Capable of trusting in an absent God, man is also the adult who can take the measure of his own weakness; if the heroic situation in which he stands validates the world, it also puts it in jeopardy. Matured by a faith derived from the Torah, he blames God for His unbounded majesty and His excessive demands. He will love God in spite of His every attempt to discourage his love. But, Yossel ben Yossel cries out, "do not put the bow under too much strain." Religious life cannot come to fruition in this heroic situation. God must unveil His countenance, justice and power must find each other again, just institutions are needed on this earth. But only the person who recognizes the veiled God can demand His revelation. How vigorous the dialectic by which the equality between God and man is established right at the heart of their incommensurability!

And thus we are as far removed from the warm, almost palpable communion with the divine as from the desperate pride of the atheist. An integral and austere humanism, coupled with dif-

ficult worship! And from the other point of view, a worship that coincides with the exaltation of man! A personal God, one God alone: that is not revealed as quickly as a slide shown in a dark room! The text I have commented on shows how ethics and the order of first principles combine to establish a personal relationship worthy of the name. To love the Torah more than God—this means precisely to find a personal God against whom it is possible to revolt, that is to say, one for whom one can die.

Meditations on Yossel Rakover



Rudolf Krämer-Badoni

Yossel Rakover!

I have just read the letter which, twelve years ago, with death waiting for you to finish it, you wrote to God.

How great must your soul have been, that in such an hour it showed no sign of faltering, but instead was able to utter words of strength and wisdom to your God. And how great must your God be, who undertakes to awaken such souls in man. You belong to the people of God, a people who at all times, before anything else and no matter what happens to them, know how to find a common language with their Lord.

You were right, Yossel Rakover. There is no greater evidence of your being the chosen people than your sufferings. But no evidence of boundless faith in spite of boundless pain is greater than yours, Yossel Rakover!

I belong to a people to whom you would have been ashamed to belong. You can say: "I would have been ashamed." I have no choice but to say: "I am ashamed!" Why, then, do I laugh and joke and work in spite of my shame and as if I were not ashamed at all? Who are we that we unashamedly continue to complacently inhabit the earth instead of striving, in the face of unavoidable death, to live up to the grave responsibility ordained by God for