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Sander Gilman and Steven T. Katz, Series Editors

DIFFICULT FREEDOM

Essays on Judaism

Emmanuel Levinas

Translated by Seán Hand

Freedom on tablets of stone
(Tractate of Principles, 6.2)

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discipline, things stronger than death, can break this freedom. Even in its final hiding-place, where freedom consoles itself for its powerlessness to act, and remains a free thought, the strange will penetrate and enslave it. Human freedom is thus reduced to the possibility of foreseeing the danger of its own decay and to protecting itself against such a decline. To make laws and create institutions based on reason which will steer clear of the ordeal of abdication is man's unique opportunity. The romanticism of the heroic stance, and the self-sufficient purity of feeling, must once more be substituted. This substitute must be given its proper place and be put first. It is the contemplation of ideas, something which makes republics possible. These republics crumble when one no longer fights for something but for someone.

The Name of a Dog,¹ or Natural Rights

You shall be men consecrated to me; therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs. (Exodus 22:31)

Is the biblical verse guilty, as one will later accuse it, of attaching too much importance to what 'goes into man's mouth' and not enough to what comes out? Unless the sight of flesh torn by beasts in the field seems meat too strong for the digestion of the honest man who, even if he is carnivore, still feels he is watched over by God. This flesh torn by beasts in the field, and the remains of bloody struggles between wild animals that half-devour one another, from the strong species to the weak, will be sublimated by intelligence into hunting games. This spectacle suggesting the horrors of war, this devouring within species, will provide men with the artistic emotions of the *Kriegspiel*. Such ideas make one lose one's appetite! In fact, they can also come to you at the family table, as you plunge your fork into your roast. There is enough, there, to make you a vegetarian again. If we are to believe Genesis, Adam, the father of us all, was one! There is, at least, enough there to make us want to limit, through various interdictions, the butchery that every day claims our 'consecrated' mouths! But enough of this theology! It is the dog mentioned at the end of the verse that I am especially interested in. I am thinking of Bobby.

So who is this dog at the end of the verse? Someone who disrupts society's games (or Society itself) and is consequently given a cold reception [*que l'on reçoit comme un chien dans un jeu de quilles*]? Someone whom we accuse of being rabid when we are trying to drown him? Someone who is given the dirtiest work – a dog's life – and whom we leave outside in all weathers, when it is raining cats and dogs, even during those awful periods when you would not put a dog out in it? But all these, in spite of their misery, reject the affront of a repulsive prey.

So does it concern the beast that has lost the last noble vestiges of

its wild nature, the crouching, servile, contemptible dog? Or, in the twilight [*entre chien et loup*] (and what light in the world is not already this dusk?), does it concern the one who is a wolf [*loup*] under his dogged faithfulness, and thirsts after blood, be it coagulated or fresh?

But enough of allegories! We have read too many fables and we are still taking the name of a dog in the figurative sense. So, in the terms of a venerable hermeneutics, more ancient than La Fontaine, orally transmitted from early antiquity – the hermeneutics of the talmudic Doctors – this biblical text, troubled by parables, here challenges the metaphor: in Exodus 22:31, the dog is a dog. Literally a dog! Beyond all scruples, by virtue of its happy nature and direct thoughts, the dog transforms all this flesh cast to it in the field into good flesh. This feast is its right.

High hermeneutics, however, which is so caught up here in a word-for-word approach, allows itself to explain the paradox of a pure nature leading to rights.

It therefore unearths some forgotten dogs lying in a subordinate proposition in another verse from Exodus. In Chapter 11, verse 7, strange dogs are struck by a light in the middle of the night. They will not growl! But around them a world is emerging. For this is the fatal night of the 'death of the first-born' of Egypt. Israel is about to be released from the house of bondage. Slaves who served the slaves of the State will henceforth follow the most high Voice, the most free path. It is a figure of humanity! Man's freedom is that of an emancipated man remembering his servitude and feeling solidarity for all enslaved people. A rabble of slaves will celebrate this high mystery of man, and 'not a dog shall growl'. At the supreme hour of his institution, with neither ethics nor *logos*, the dog will attest to the dignity of its person. This is what the friend of man means. There is a transcendence in the animal! And the clear verse with which we began is given a new meaning. It reminds us of the debt that is always open.

But perhaps the subtle exegesis we are quoting gets lost in rhetoric? Indeed?

There were seventy of us in a forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany. An extraordinary coincidence was the fact that the camp bore the number 1492, the year of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain under the Catholic Ferdinand V. The French uniform still protected us from Hitlerian violence. But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us or gave us work or orders or even a smile – and the children and women who passed

by and sometimes raised their eyes – stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes. A small inner murmur, the strength and wretchedness of persecuted people, reminded us of our essence as thinking creatures, but we were no longer part of the world. Our comings and goings, our sorrow and laughter, illnesses and distractions, the work of our hands and the anguish of our eyes, the letters we received from France and those accepted for our families – all that passed in parenthesis. We were beings entrapped in their species; despite all their vocabulary, beings without language. Racism is not a biological concept; anti-Semitism is the archetype of all internment. Social aggression, itself, merely imitates this model. It shuts people away in a class, deprives them of expression and condemns them to being 'signifiers without a signified' and from there to violence and fighting. How can we deliver a message about our humanity which, from behind the bars of quotation marks, will come across as anything other than monkey talk?

And then, about halfway through our long captivity, for a few short weeks, before the sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. One day he came to meet this rabble as we returned under guard from work. He survived in some wild patch in the region of the camp. But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men.

Perhaps the dog that recognized Ulysses beneath his disguise on his return from the Odyssey was a forebear of our own. But no, no! There, they were in Ithaca and the Fatherland. Here, we were nowhere. This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives. He was a descendant of the dogs of Egypt. And his friendly growling, his animal faith, was born from the silence of his forefathers on the banks of the Nile.

5. The Talmud's unbridled form does not express, as the profane who are quick to judge often think, the chaos of a disordered complication. The incessant seething mass that envelops the person who throws himself into it transcribes a way of thinking that is refractory to the always premature schematization of its object. Rabbinical commentary breaks and pulverizes what still seemed solid and stable in the first movement of the discussion. This is a sense of reason which never lapses into the virtual, a reason that runs the length and breadth of reality in multiple attitudes that retain the innumerable aspects of the world. No simple dialectical rhythm can scan this teeming plurality which plays with space and time and historical perspectives. In addition, one cannot separate these texts from the living study in which this frightening dynamism is reflected and amplified. The fact that Spinoza was not familiar with this kind of Talmud world is obvious. In our day, we need to have made the acquaintance of an exceptional teacher to divine its secret. In spite of the precision of his references to the Jewish sources and his rigour as a historian – and this is my only reservation on this point – Zac does not seem to have made this acquaintance. Taken out of the context of the talmudic discussions, the notions evoked are bloodless. A quotation from the Talmud cannot be made with the same method and aim that hold for the rest of literature (even biblical). It is as if one were quoting the Ocean.

6. The Word of God therefore opens up a dimension that is proper to the Spirit and like no other. We must not confuse it either with Philosophy or with Science or with Politics.

Spinoza the rationalist would have seen this admirably. Philosophical systems, scientific and political doctrines can, depending on the age, bring souls to the Word. The Word remains independent while being able to attach itself to a doctrine for a while. The figure designated by such an innexion of the Word to the activities – which resound from the outset – of the intellect has been noted in a very ancient rabbinic text (Siphri, which comments on Numbers 10:8): all the sacred objects of the Tabernacle are passed on from generation to generation, except for the silver trumpets used to call together the people's assemblies and arouse the camp of Israel. These must be renewed.

But a still young reflection confuses the Word with the cultural products of History and wants the Spirit to be gauged by their ringing and the breath that fills the wind instruments. To justify Judaism, the custodian of the Word, through psychoanalysis, Marxism or structuralism (why not through axiomatics?) is to close oneself to something that exists without beating a drum about it or blowing its own trumpet, and by not remaining attentive to the

latest tune; to condemn oneself to becoming religiously deaf, and no longer hearing 'the voice of fine silence'. In Israel, you have to know how to listen. We must not forget that a gathering in turn conditions dialogues, confrontations and 'round tables'.

7. André Amar, in a remarkable article ('Les deux poles de la science contemporaine', *Science et l'enseignement des Sciences*, 36 [1965], 10–19) showed that science does not think the world (even if Amar thought to contrast such weight and calculations to the philosophy of Heidegger).

Persons or Figures

1. Paul Claudel, *Emmaüs* (Paris, Gallimard).

A Voice on Israel

1. Paul Claudel, *Une voix sur Israël* (Paris, Gallimard).

Poetry and the Impossible

1. We cannot cite them all, but let us mention in passing the contributions from C. Vigée and A. Chouraqui.
2. On the other hand, of course, for the Jew the Christian, seen as a missionary by the peoples, will remain the person who waters down and annoys Judaism; but, if he practises justice, he will also be proclaimed the *equal* of the High Priest.

The Name of a Dog

1. [Translator's note: *nom d'un chien* [name of a dog] is also in French a mild expletive (crikey!), and recognizably a polite version of *nom de Dieu* [in the name of God/bloody hell!].]

IV Openings

Jacob Gordin

1. An extract from this was published in *Evidences*, 21, edited by Nicolas Baudy.

Israel and Universalism

1. On a talk given by Father Daniélou on the common foundations of a Mediterranean civilization.

V Distances

From the Rise of Nihilism to the Carnal Jew

1. [Translator's note: literally 'in which everything was consummated'. Levinas is recalling Jesus's last words on the cross: 'it is finished', '*tout est consommé*' (John 19:30).]