

RADICAL JEWISH ETHICS MEETS THE REAL WORLD

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to The College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus, and your host. Welcome to this episode of The College Commons Podcast and a conversation with Professor Annabel Herzog. Annabel Herzog is Professor of Political Theory at the School of Political Science and Director of the MA Program in Cultural Studies at the University of Haifa. Her work focuses on the great Jewish philosophers of the 20th century, Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, for example, on the topics of philosophy and literature, memory and trauma, and ethics and politics. Herzog's book, *Levinas's Politics: Justice, Mercy, Universality*, won the 2021 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award in Philosophy and Jewish thought. Professor Herzog, thank you for joining us.

Annabel Herzog: It's a pleasure being here.

JH: To get us started, introduce us if you would, to the historical person of Emmanuel Levinas, the subject of your book?

AH: Emmanuel Levinas was a French Jewish philosopher. He was born in Kovno, which is Kaunas today in Lithuania, in 1906. And he grew up there and he then moved to France to study philosophy. Then he studied philosophy in Germany too, with Husserl and Heidegger for a short time and he came back to France before World War II. And during World War II, his wife and daughter had to hide, obviously, in France, while he was taken as a prisoner in a German camp where he spent the war years. His family in Lithuania were all murdered by the Nazis. And after the war, he continued his philosophical career in Paris, France, while he was also working in a school for Jewish students from North Africa. And so he was working in that school where he became the director of the school later on, and in this very unique situation, he was very active in renewing Jewish studies and the reading of the Talmud and especially, but also of the Torah. And so he was... He had these two things that interested him. But in fact, and I show that in my book, the two were totally connected.

JH: Before we get into Levinas's Politics, the subject of your book, I'd like to spend one brief minute on his interpersonal philosophy for which he's perhaps better known. And additionally, many of our listeners may be acquainted with another 20th century philosopher, Martin Buber, who is best known for his idea of the I-Thou relationship. Levinas's personal ethical philosophy refers to a face to face relationship. How are these ideas related and different to help orient our audience?

AH: They are very related. They are very close with very subtle differences. Levinas read Buber and he knew Buber's philosophy quite well. According to Levinas, the interpersonal relationship that Buber describes is too symmetrical, too equal. What's important for Levinas is that, when I meet another person, when I face another face, another person, someone whom I don't know at all, I meet something that is so unique, and so ungraspable, that this thing that I perceive in the face of the other is above me, is superior to me. By this, Levinas means that I'm in a kind of awe in front of this uniqueness, which he also calls the trace of God. So what I see in the face of the other is the face of God. It's something that is infinite, that is transcendent, and that is... Doesn't appear in Buber's. So it's the same initial model of interpersonal relation between one person and the other. But in fact, there's a very important difference between Buber's version of it and Levinas's, which is that, in Levinas what the eye sees in the face of the other is in a way, God.

JH: How is it in this deeply, deeply transcendent relationship as you put it, that politics and political thinking, and political ethics barge into this seemingly one on one relationship?

AH: I wrote my book because there was a double difficulty or I thought that there was a double difficulty in Levinas's philosophy. And the double problem that I saw in his thought was first that Levinas wrote two kinds of books. He wrote his philosophy, which is very full of jargon, very difficult to read. Sometimes it doesn't really look like philosophy, it looks more like poetry. And in parallel, he also published books that are... That he called Talmudic readings, which are in fact sermons that are short on Talmudic folios, on suite from the Talmud. And these two different kinds of publications are parallel to each other and they don't seem to have any connection. And I found that weird. And in fact, for a long time, philosophers didn't read at all the Talmudic readings. Jewish scholars read the Talmudic studies but they didn't read the philosophy, so there was this kind of two different paths in reading Levinas. So that was one problem that I wanted to look into. The other problem is that Levinas describes this interpersonal relation that we talked about, and he calls it the ethical relation. So when I'm facing one other person, I am in this kind of asymmetrical relationship where I owe something to the other and where the other demands everything from me. And that's very strong and this ethical relationship is a kind of sacrifice. What I see in the face of the other is the demand of sacrificing myself for the other.

AH: So that's the ethical relationship that Levinas describes. Levinas describes a situation. That's what he does in his ethics. But at the same time, he says that politics is very important and politics means that we are more than myself and the other. There are other people around, and this situation is the concrete situation of social life. He says, "We're always more than two." Because even when we are only two, myself and another person, he says that I see the other

people in the eyes of the other that is in front of me. And so there's a very heavy philosophical problem here because why does he spend so many pages and so many books in describing a relationship between the eye, the ego and the other while this situation never happens, because there are always more than two people. And this more than two people is what he calls politics. So I wanted to understand the relationship between the ethical relationship and the political situation that's always there. Many people talked about that before me, but I wasn't convinced by the explanations that I found in most other books. And what I did in the book, in my research, is discover or argue, that in fact it's in the Talmudic readings, in the Talmudic text, the Talmudic books that Levinas published, that he had described how politics and ethics are related. He didn't do it in his purely philosophical books, but he did it in his Talmudic readings.

JH: So you argue that Levinas's Talmudic studies ground his philosophy in some kind of pragmatic or political context, so that effectively they compliment each other in a shared system. Would you say that rabbinic Jewish thought itself is actually already entirely about grounding the abstract religious values in the real world, and in this way, is it possible that Levinas rides the tide of what we would call Jewish thinking, going back to antiquity?

AH: Yes, absolutely. That's my argument. And I think that what he did, you know, in writing two kinds of books is in fact reenacting the distinction between Torah Shebaal Peh and Torah Shebichtav.

JH: The oral Torah Talmudic law and the written Torah, which is what we think of as the Torah or Tanakh, the Bible, or the first five books of the Bible.

AH: Exactly. So if the Talmud grounds the Bible in specific cases and in specific discussions, and in fact in real life, the Talmud deals with real cases. I think that it's exactly what Levinas tried to do in the... In making this distinction between a very abstract, pure, and impossible ethics and a more grounded political discussion that he writes in relation to the Talmud. I think that what he tried to do is to bring this model of two different kind of thinking. The more abstract and the more grounded, he tried to bring this model into modern philosophy.

JH: It seems to be the case that Levinas himself wanted to preserve the distinction between these two genres of writing that he authored. So I wanna ask you to take a step back and share your thoughts with me, because I'm curious, not about Levinas, but about your work and the work of scholarship. What does it mean for a scholar to read against the grain, even against the wishes of the person whom she studies?

AH: I'm a scholar in philosophy and in Jewish thought, and I try to find meaning in what I read and finding meaning means going further beyond what the philosophers say about themselves. I mean, philosophers obviously know what they do, but they don't always explain what they do in the clearest way. And my job is to read these texts and try to find first their meaning, second, their meaning within the general work of the person I'm reading, and third, meanings for us today. So when I see for instance, the philosopher that I'm studying, Levinas, and he says, "I

publish two kinds of works, these Talmudic readings, my Jewish work," he said, "And my philosophical work." And I think as a scholar, how is that possible? I mean, it's the same person. And he had a very, very strong philosophy, he had a very strong vision of the world and of our place in the world and of interpersonal relations and what we have to do in this life. And how is that possible that it is totally disconnected from his Jewish work? Why would it be that way? And why does he insist so much about separating these two kind of works? And so I think that we have the duty to try to understand what philosophers or thinkers said when they didn't explain absolutely what they were doing and to try to do it for ourselves, for us to understand the world better.

AH: So I don't have the feeling that I did something against Levinas or against what he wanted us to do. I have the feeling that I tried to find a new meaning in his Talmudic readings, and... Which is not only a renewal of reading of the Talmud in the 60s for Jews who were not used to read the Talmud, but it's obvious to me that such a philosopher would put his philosophy in his Talmudic readings. And my question was, how did he do that? Did he use the Talmud only as an illustration of his philosophy? Is it exactly the same thing in philosophical jargon and then in Talmudic words, or is there a difference? And when I started to read these Talmudic readings in depth, I discovered that there was a difference between the philosophical work and the Talmudic one.

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JH: In the course of your book, you argue, by grounding his otherwise relatively uncompromising view of ethics as you yourself just described, in the reality of politics that Levinas in some ways maybe he softens the ethical demand or makes it more practical, but he also elevates political ethics by giving us a view on politics that can be more ethical, more demanding of ourselves. And I know that you're not a political scientist, but can you give us a nugget, an idea, a sliver of wisdom from Levinas's political thoughts that might improve our political ethics today?

AH: The core of the innovation that Levinas does is that ethics means to recognize or to be awake to the uniqueness of the other people around us, to see that they are not like us. Moral politics tell us that, we are all human beings. And if we recognize that we're all human beings, there won't be wars anymore because we're all the same. And Levinas says exactly the opposite. It's only when you see that the other person in front of you is totally different from you. Of course, the person in front of you is not only totally different from you, he or she's also like you in many aspects, but there's something that you cannot grasp in the other. When you recognize that, you start becoming awake, you pay attention to the others. And when you do that, there's less violence in the world. That's very quickly what Levinas would say of the relationship between ethics and politics.

AH: What this means is that politics is not only an enlargement of moral principles, which is something that we usually think when we think in terms of liberal politics, liberal politics are like, "Okay, we have basic rights, which are moral, we must respect each other. We must respect other people's property and other people's right to live and to be themselves." And let's enlarge that to a community. So there's no real difference between politics and morals. It's just a question of numbers. For Levinas there's a real difference between ethics and politics. Ethics is about absolute sacrifice to the other, which is impossible to do all the time, or even once, because if you sacrifice yourself totally to someone once, you would be dead. So it's not possible, but the core of the ethical demand is that you owe everything to the other, but that cannot be realized in real life. So you need politics, which is something totally different about, comparison, and about calculation, and about knowledge, and about distribution.

AH: And so it has nothing to do with this owing something to the other, or sacrificing myself to the other. It's something else, but you need that political organization to ground, as you said, the ethical demand. So what does that mean for us? That mean for us, that we should change our way to look at politics. We look at politics either in terms of real politics, meaning that, we need to do what we need to do to survive. That's one way to look at politics. Sometimes we need to kill, and sometimes we need to lie, or the moral, liberal way to look at politics, which is that politics should be good, meaning that it should simply enlarge basic moral duties to the community and Levinas says, "No, these two models are not enough." We should understand that ethics and politics can combine each other, but they are not the same. They never synthesize. There are two totally different things that in fact, upset each other, transform each other. And if we looked at politics in that way, we would indeed try to elevate politics, to paying attention to the face of the other, and politics on the other side would make ethics more real, more grounded.

JH: If we were to take all of these ideas and continue to think of Levinas as a Jewish philosopher, perhaps the culmination of the ethical and the ideal, the irredentist and the political would be the case of Zionism. What do we take away from Levinas in relation to Zionism, which he espoused?

AH: That's a very tricky question because many people have written on Levinas and Zionism, and some thought he was a Zionist and they love him for that. Others thought he was a Zionist and they hate him for that. And some wonder if he really was a Zionist or... So it's a bit of an open question. In my book, I dedicated a chapter on that and I tried to read everything he ever wrote on Zionism, but I don't think he was 100% this or that. I think that basically he was totally for the creation of the state of Israel, because he thought that after the Holocaust, the Jews needed a safe place to be, and also a place to renew the Jewish schools of study that had been destroyed during the war.

AH: So he was very in favor of that, but at the very beginning, in the same years in '47 already, he was already afraid that this state would become a state like every other state. And a state like every other state means that it's a state that will use violence, that will do things that are not always good things. And he was afraid of that. And he was critical of that. He was critical of this wish of the Jews to become like everybody else. And, he thought that a Jewish state should be a state dedicated to grounding ethics, to deal with the ideals of the Bible of the prophets and to respect the other and to take care of the poor and that everything else would be a waste of the Jewish ideals and of the Jewish way.

AH: From the very beginning, he thought that way. Later on when they were in wars between the Arab states, around the neighbors of Israel and the state of Israel. So his views at some point were more like something like Israel has the right to defend itself, which made a lot of scholars say that he was contradicting himself because in his ethics, Levinas says that you have to sacrifice yourself for the other, so it's totally the opposite of saying that you have to defend yourself. So there's a whole issue here. And I think that in the Talmudic readings, he shows that the grounding of ethics that we talked about already give some legitimation to self defense. So, but that part of his theory, we find only in the Talmudic readings and not in the philosophical books.

AH: So Zionism is important, or the state of Israel is important, because it gives the Jews a place to be when... After the Holocaust. And a way to defend themselves, which in a way is a contradiction with what Levinas said in other places where he criticizes the violence of the states in general, political violence in general, and where he says that the Jews shouldn't want to be like everybody else. So there are contradictory messages here, but when you read everything together, we come back to the basic idea that we talked about already, which is that you need concrete political organizations to ground the ethical ideas.

JH: In your book, you conclude with, Levinas's concept of laicite. Laicite is the French national closest analogy to what in the United States we call the separation of church and state, something very, very much on the minds of Americans today. What does Levinas bring to that conversation?

AH: It's a difficult discussion. I mean, it's hard to understand in Levinas himself, it's extremely weird that he uses the word laicite in the Talmudic context, because the Talmudic context is a

religious context. So why use that word? And what I try to explain in the book is that what he means is that ethics has to withdraw, the very pure and transcendent ethical demand has to withdraw to let the real world exist in a certain way. So laicite means not only the separation of church and state, in France it's even stronger than that, it's the fact that church won't appear at all in the public sphere.

AH: Okay. So it's a different model from the American model in, if I understand well enough, the American model, it means that the state will not interfere in religious questions. And so the various churches have the right to appear on the public sphere and try to convince people. And the state will not pay for them and will not interfere in what they do. So that's the American model more or less. The French model is totally different. The French model of laicite means that the churches won't, will not appear in the public sphere at all, they won't be there. They won't interfere in anything that is connected to the collective life. They will be only private. They won't be seen at all. So they have to withdraw to leave the political sphere alone. So it's a, it's a very, very different way of, of looking at the separation between church and state. And when Levinas uses this word of laicite in the Talmudic context, it's very weird. It certainly doesn't mean a secularism in the American sense. He means that the ethical ideals, this notion of a pure relation to the other, cannot exist without material grounding, which is the political one.

AH: And to leave this political one appear, ethics has to withdraw. The principle, the ethical principle are still there, but they do not control the public sphere. So laicite in the Levinas context, it doesn't mean the separation of church and state. It means the withdrawal of ethics for the sake of politics, a politics that will keep the memory of the ethical ideals, but that will manage by itself, disturbed by ethics if you want. But what laicite means here is that ethics had to let life be, to become less visible for real life to be possible. But this real life must be infused with the ethical demands. If not, we have politics without ethics and that's horrible. That's pure violence. So we don't want that. But Laicite means this kind of withdrawal or removal of ethics for the sake of politics.

JH: You described Levinas's philosophy as very technical and the study of such things can often feel very remote. What about him or his philosophy might you share with us that might surprise our audience or connect with our audience?

AH: Levinas is a very difficult philosopher and to understand him properly, you need really to study him and to study other philosophers around them. It's not an easy job. But I can give you a kind of story that will make you understand Levinas, I think. Let us imagine that your home and it's winter, and it's very cold outside. It's raining or even snowing, your home and it's warm and all your family and friends are around you, and you are not waiting for anyone and you're... You've baked something. So there's a amazing smell in the house, that you baked bread or you baked pizza. And it's warm inside and outside it's windy and cold. And so you are in this situation with your family and friends, and suddenly someone rings at the door. Levinas's philosophy asks you one thing to imagine how you feel when you hear the door ringing. What you feel is a disturbance. What you feel is something that wants to get into you, your home, your

world, everything that's yours. You open the door, try to feel that feeling of opening the door and seeing this person and this person by definition wants something from you, because if he or she didn't want something from you, he wouldn't be ringing at your door in such a day, soaked, wet outside. So this person needs something from you.

AH: And what he needs is huge because you have everything inside. The food, the friends, the family, the heat, the house, and this person is outside in the wind, in the snow, in the rain, hungry. So if you focus on that feeling, that meeting with this person outside at your door, and you focus on what you feel and you think, you feel and you think two things. On the first hand, you feel this person needs so much from me, that's ethics. On the other hand, you think what can I give him? I cannot give him or her everything. I mean, I can give him a bowl of soup and some bread, but I cannot give him my house and my kids and my friends and myself. And that's the other side of Levinas's philosophy, his politics. And if you focus on the meeting between these two different thoughts or feeling that you have, you have first Levinas's philosophy, but you also have something to take in your everyday life. To remember each time you eat your food and you are with your family and you are in your house, to remember the need and the demands of people who are outside. And each time you simply think that you should give everything to someone who's outside, which doesn't happen that often, because usually we're not that ethical. We're more having our kids with our friends now.

AH: But each time we feel like thinking that we are so good with wanting to give everything to the other. So to remember that we also have to take care of our family and our friends, but the important thing is to notice the contradiction and the clash between these two kind of feelings. When you open the door and you have someone outside, and what can you do to be aware, to be awake to this situation, to be awake to the fact that people around us need us all the time. And to be also awake of the fact that you cannot give them everything, but you can give them something.

JH: Well, professor Annabel Herzog, thank you for letting us knock on your door and for opening the door and sharing the conversation and your ideas. It's been a real pleasure.

AH: Thank you very much.

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