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*Israel and the Palestinians:
The Challenge to Levinasian Ethics*

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Many readers of Levinas, if not most, find his interview with Malka and Finkielkraut¹ a perplexing, if not troubling, response to the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila² Palestinian refugee camps in which there is evidence (albeit contested) that Israeli forces were complicit. If not directly involved in the carrying out of the massacres it has been alleged that either passively or actively they allowed the Falangist militia to slaughter defenseless civilians at will. If ever an occasion called for a firm and unequivocal condemnation of Israeli behavior, if for no other reason than it happened on their watch, then surely this was it. For those who are hostile to Levinas's whole approach to ethical thinking, the manner in which he deals with the incident and its implications for Israeli-Palestinian relations is either wholly consistent with his *a fortiori* position of seeking to exonerate Zionism or else a demonstration of how it must inevitably succumb to ontological constraints. For more friendly critics there is a general sense of disappointment that the philosopher of alterity fails to recognize or acknowledge the Palestinian as the Israeli's other and indeed makes the somewhat chilling remark that "in alterity we can find an enemy."³

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 289-297.

² Alternatively spelled "Chatila" as in the version of the interview in *The Levinas Reader*.

³ Ibid. 294.

How is it possible to reconcile Derrida's acclaimed thinker in "hospitality" with sentiments that bring him paradoxically to a position that is not so far removed from Carl Schmitt, his polar opposite?⁴ Indeed as Žižek remarks, "horrible as it may sound, the Levinasian other as the abyss of otherness from which the ethical injunction emanates and the Nazi figure of the Jew as the less-than-human other-enemy originates from the same source."⁵ Indeed it is a horrible thought but one should be wary of denouncing Žižek's comparison as simply another example of a desire to conflate Zionism with Nazism. Both promote particularism although in Levinas's case his wish to see Israel survive is not simply for it to be a political entity and a homeland for Jews but rather the fulfillment of the messianic vision, as without an ethical foundation Israel's reason for existence ceases. Otherwise the comparison is invidious through its failure to acknowledge or mention that Nazism was unparalleled in the scope of its genocidal ideology and practice.

I have to confess that when Zahi Zalloua, as a Palestinian, talks of reading and rereading Levinas's reflections on the Sabra and Shatila massacres and of his "growing disappointment and anger" (ix) I find, as a Jew, that it does strike a chord and a sense of recognition that Levinas has failed the moral challenge with which he has been presented. It appears that Levinas was gifted an opportunity to take a moral lead by condemning Israel's involvement in the most uncompromising of terms. His response appears to be utterly counterintuitive when set against his ethical thinking and the proclamation of a philosophy that posits the origin and site of ethics in the self's response to the other and the positive, not to say unconditional response to her vulnerability; for there can be no escaping the conclusion that every other must be an other. To the question, "for the Israeli isn't the other above all the Palestinian?" there could surely be only one response: she is indeed and from that singular and emphatic acknowledgment all else would proceed, including the possibility of engagement and the ultimate goal of peaceful co-existence. Despite this, while the reaction to Levinas is entirely understandable, I have sought to explain, perhaps even defend his position,⁶ although feeling somewhat forced onto the back foot in order to do so and always troubled by the thought that I am in danger of defending the indefensible. It has to be acknowledged that a majority viewpoint is that Levinas's position is a moral failure and is either a rejection of his own ethical thinking or a demonstration as to its insufficiency once its platitudes are disrupted by politics, and among Levinas's supporters there has been much unease and soul-searching over the position he adopts. Much of the blame for this rests with Levinas not least because of the customary circumlocutory and elliptical style that he adopts when presenting his case, which will appear to many readers as being little more than a moral equivocation as he seeks to exonerate Zionism.

While there is certainly a disquieting aspect to Malka's invitation to acknowledge the Palestinian as other (not once can he identify the other as Palestinian by name), my position remains that the common view that Levinas's response amounts to an attempt to exculpate Israel with regard to the issue of Israel's guilt over Sabra and Shatila is actually a misrepresentation of what he is seeking to say. That was my position in response to Gillian Rose's claim with reference to the interview that he exonerates not only Israel in particular

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 146n95. Derrida identifies a difference between the two when he explains that Schmitt "not only situates the enemy at the center of a 'politics' that is irreducible to the ethical if not the juridical," he is compelled to adhere to a "thought of totality."

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 47.

⁶ Amanda Loumansky, "Levinas, Israel and the Call to Conscience," *Law and Critique* 16, no. 2 (2005): 181-200.

but the whole “political-historical structure of repetition which he evasively identifies.”⁷ As a general observation it contains an undeniable truth; unquestionably Levinas is a Zionist and is desperately anxious for the cause of Zionism to succeed. This inevitably means that it has to be grounded, for as he points out it must be separated from “the simplistic image of messianism, which is dangerous as a political principle.” Yet, it remains worthy of support for as long as it comprises a “genuine messianic element,”⁸ for it is that alone that prevents it from being just another political ideology or movement. Without a moral sense Zionism can have no justification whatsoever, for without a moral underpinning it loses its very *raison d'être*. For Levinas the moral life is hardly worth living and hence the question, “Is it righteous to be?” The need to uncover whether we can identify morality precedes the task of uncovering meaning, as existence without morality is meaningless. Hence the troubled statement with which Levinas opens *Totality and Infinity*: “everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance that we are not duped by morality.”⁹ To refuse to acknowledge the Palestinian as the Israeli’s other would surely be a betrayal, and not a validation of his own ethics, an abject failure to step up to the moral plate.

Indeed this is a point that Zalloua makes when he claims that, “Levinas refuses—at least where it concerns the Palestinian—to historicize and culturalize the neighbor, flatly rejecting the ontical nature of his interlocutor’s question” (24-25). It is certainly the case that Levinas is both abstruse and evasive in his response, and he will not allude to the Palestinian directly. However, it is clear that although Levinas balks at providing a direct answer, which the ethical crisis of the massacres clearly demanded (and this does provide some ammunition to his critics when they condemn his stance), he is actually steering the interview toward another issue, which is the dilemma of conscience. How is the Jew of the Diaspora to appeal to the conscience of the Jew of Israel? It is perfectly reasonable to object to this re-orientation of the discussion, for isn’t Levinas simply shunting the Palestinian into the sidings in order to leave himself free to explore the moral conundrum that is Israel (from an entirely Jewish perspective), thus betraying an unhealthy degree of absorption with Jews through an excessively partial identification with their ideology, culture, and historical experience? Yet, an analysis of what Levinas is saying reveals that within the praise that he heaps on Israel there is a risk that the messianic component of Israel and the sense of its destiny will be sacrificed on the altar of political exigency. The trump card that is always at hand to be played by Zionists is the claim that Israel is confronted with an existential struggle and this must be the paramount consideration, and this includes resolving the “Palestinian Question.” Nothing must be allowed to compromise the security of the State of Israel, into which a sizeable proportion of world Jewry has been gathered. Levinas himself lends support to this notion when he declares that “ethics will never, in any way, be the good conscience of corrupt politics,”¹⁰ thus willfully, it seems, paving the way for the political to override the ethical. This reinforces the point made by Žižek that “in short, in practical politics, the respect for alterity means strictly nothing.”¹¹

This might well be the case if Levinas was to be taken at his word, and yet the interview with Malka and Finkelkraut *is* an appeal to the conscience of the Israeli, although couched in

⁷ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 248.

⁸ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 295.

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21.

¹⁰ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 295.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2012), 95. (Quoted in Zalloua, 25).

terms that are intended to make it palatable to the latter. To that extent I think that Levinas is simply being honest about the scope of ethics in terms of its impact upon politics, which responds to its own dynamics and which will always place self-interest above concern for the other. That doesn't mean that the appeal should not be made, only that Levinas is realistic about its prospects of success, and to that end he is not seeking to justify politics overriding ethics but is rather resigned to the fact that it will. I do not agree with Žižek, therefore, that he seeks to nullify alterity in the political domain.

It is worth considering the flow of Levinas's thought in the interview. He does not directly acknowledge the Palestinian as other, but rather proceeds on the assumption that this is a "given." His discomfort in making specific reference to the Palestinian has rightly been criticized, but his answer is implicitly affirmative. His assertion that "the other is the neighbor, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be"¹² is all encompassing and extends to all humanity and that, of course, must extend to the Palestinian. We need to pay particular regard to the term "neighbor" because it is not simply an alternative signifier of "other," but rather arises when Levinas discusses the other ontically, outside the dyadic relationship, and when the self-before-the-others is forced to choose such as "when your neighbor attacks another neighbor or treats him unjustly, what can you do?" There can be no question then that the status of neighbor is conferred upon Palestinian and Jew alike, but Levinas is clearly moving beyond a straightforward acknowledgment of this ethical principle toward the problem that this creates when the self becomes an unwilling witness of conflict between neighbors. Choice is thrust upon the self as a moral obligation, for passivity is not an option, since "one is faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong."

According to Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani, Levinas "does not deny the Palestinian the status of neighbor, nor does he deny the face of this neighbor; rather, he sees the Palestinian as a neighbor whose aggression against another neighbor calls for defending the one who is under attack."¹³ This certainly is one of the conventional readings of Levinas's views as expressed in the interview, and it is one that I have inclined to myself. However, I now think that he intends there to be a deliberate ambiguity in the wording of his response. In a generalized sense he is suggesting that the Palestinian, as the neighbor, is an enemy of the Israeli because of the hostility they have harbored before, and since, Israel's inception thereby frustrating Israel's messianic vision and destiny exemplified by the "daily sacrifice" of a people "who've left secure positions and often abundance in order to lead a difficult life, to lead an ethical life, to lead a life which isn't disturbed by the values of our Western comfort."¹⁴ It is useless to pretend that sentiments such as these, unaccompanied by any assessment of the impact of the "ethical life" upon Palestinians, do anything other than place Levinas squarely in the Zionist camp. It is hardly surprising, then, that his remarks have attracted such criticism, not to mention outrage.

Nevertheless, I believe Levinas goes beyond a "profound attachment to Israel," which returns to my proposition that he is being intentionally ambiguous which begins with his declaration that "in alterity we can find an enemy," which must arise when the triadic relationship, created by the presence of the third party, disrupts the one-to-one encounter and problematizes ethics with the dilemma of choice. Just as the Palestinian can be neighbor

¹² Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 294.

¹³ Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani, *Emmanuel Levinas and the Politics of Non-Violence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 111.

¹⁴ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 295.

and enemy, so too can the Israeli, whose actions can also be “unjust” and will destroy the moral foundations of the State without which there can be no purpose for its existence. Finkelkraut mentions the “Israeli elite,” the “people who felt they had built Israel [and] no longer recognized Israel.” He refers to their “internal exile,” but sees hope in the protest march of “the three hundred thousand people of Tel Aviv [who] have proved that the Zionism of Ben Gurion and Levi Eshkol is still alive.”¹⁵ Levinas does not dissent from this viewpoint, and indeed he goes further by identifying Sabra and Shatila as the place where “everyone’s moral responsibility comes into play, a responsibility that engages even innocence.”¹⁶ What he is saying, in effect, is that from an ethical standpoint it is quite irrelevant whether or not the Israeli forces were guilty of the massacre (on that score he is prepared to give them the benefit of doubt). What matters above all else is that Israel shoulders the “honor of responsibility.”¹⁷ Nor does he accept that as a Jew of the Diaspora he is disqualified from holding Israel to account, for “everyone’s moral responsibility comes into play.... Over there, no-one can say to us: ‘you’re in Europe and at peace, you’re not in Israel, and yet you take it upon yourself to judge.’”¹⁸ Levinas cannot accept the proposition that his removal from the immediacy of the conflict compels him to silence. This explains much of the tone of his response because he has in mind a (potentially critical) Zionist audience whom he wishes to reassure by confirming that he is keeping faith with the founding principles of the State of Israel and acknowledging that politics establishes that “there is certainly a place for defense,” which is necessary in order to confront “all those who attack us with such venom.”¹⁹ The obvious rejoinder here is that it is the very politics of Zionism that poisons Israeli-Palestinian relations. What people would not be embittered by land appropriations, under the program to expand settlements, carried out at their expense? What people would not be driven to resist with all the means at their disposal? The failure to look behind the Palestinian “venom” toward Israel, and to investigate the causes that lie behind it, demonstrate a critical and fundamental failure on Levinas’s part to step outside the exploration of issues from an exclusively Jewish perception. Levinas recognizes that a wrong has been committed against the Palestinian people, but he chooses instead to express surprise at the vehemence of their invective.

On the one hand, Levinas is reluctant to abandon Israel’s messianic mission (although he seeks to “separate [Zionism] from the simplistic image of messianism, which is dangerous as a political principle”) and in that respect at least his position can be seen as a plea for forbearance on behalf of Israel and to exercise patience in order to allow the State to fulfill the ethical potential of its historic destiny; on the other, he realizes that patience is not limitless. The extent to which Israel merits any degree of forbearance will depend on the extent to which it keeps faith with “our souls” and “the books which carry us through history, and which, even more deeply than the earth, are our support”²⁰ Ultimately, the strength of the Jewish people cannot be vested in a homeland, however appealing its allure may be, but in their sense of identity through their adherence to a tradition of thought, both religious and secular, that imparts to them an ethical code not simply as Jews but as human

¹⁵ Ibid. The event to which Finkelkraut refers was organized by the Peace Now movement and occurred on 25 September 1982. Some figures place the number of demonstrators as high as 400,000, which would have been around 10% of the population.

¹⁶ Ibid., 293.

¹⁷ Ibid., 290.

¹⁸ Ibid., 293.

¹⁹ Ibid., 292.

²⁰ Ibid., 296.

beings as well. Levinas concludes with a reference to the Talmud and the fate meted out to explorers who vilified the land. If a “calumny” against the land merited the sentence of death, how much greater must be a calumny relating to human beings? He reminds us that, “a person is more holy than a land, even a holy land, since faced with an affront made to a person, this holy land appears in its nakedness but stone and wood.”²¹ Levinas has no need to identify that person as a Palestinian because who else can the person be who has suffered the affront? But I think also Levinas intends (as he often does) for there to be a *double entendre*. Jews are also a people who are more holy than the land. The land to which Zionism lays claim is not the be all and end all for the Jewish people who will survive an expulsion from the land, a fate that Levinas recognizes might befall them if they prove themselves to be unworthy if it. For “every time the Jewish people is implicated in an event, something universal is at stake—it’s there that the relationship between ethics and politics is being decided, it’s there and ‘in and for itself,’ as philosophical jargon puts it, is being defined; alas it’s a dangerous game that is afoot.”²² In other words, whatever may be held to be politically expedient for Israel must be accountable to ethics, and the more there is a separation between politics and ethics the higher the stakes are being raised.

Howard Caygill, according to Jason Caro, reveals that Levinas does not require Israel to owe to the Palestinians “the immense and obligatory responsibility so famously due to other.”²³ I see Caygill’s assessment as being somewhat more nuanced. The ethical, dyadic, relationship can never be fully replicated in an ontical setting because the pre-cognitive impulse to the other is always compromised by the arrival of the third. The political dynamic of the state cannot succumb to the exorbitant, unconditional, and non-reciprocal obligation of the ethical imperative, but must respond to the exigency of an event. Nevertheless, there is an ethical accountability to the other and it is for all Jews to remember that it is they who exercise the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the State of Israel is called to account, for unless it is, or is in the process of becoming, a moral entity, it will not be worthy of their support. This is why Levinas is torn between his qualified loyalty to the Zionist idea, as a political concept that may at last put “an end to the arbitrariness which marked the Jewish condition,”²⁴ and his recognition of the ethical duty of all Jews to speak out against injustice. This is why Derrida (see footnote 4) reminds us that, in contrast to Levinas, Schmitt’s other-enemy is never considered in ethical terms. And it is a point that needs to be made in response to Žižek’s claim that the Levinasian other-enemy has parallels with the Nazi conception of the Jew, for if one chooses to resort to such similarities it would be as well to acknowledge the *dis*similarities.

Of course there is much to criticize in Levinas’s stance towards the Palestinians, especially as it requires a forbearance and patience towards Israel that is paid for in Palestinian suffering. He does acknowledge that the time for patience is not unlimited but, were he still here, would he still be pleading for more time, some 35 years after the events Sabra and Shatila, when the plight of the Palestinians has never seemed more desperate or so far from a solution? Sadly, one suspects, that he might be still clinging to the Zionist vision persisting in the hope of an eventual expiation. It is important, however, that when Levinas conducts his forays into the political he is confining discussion to the quandary of the self’s conscience before the other. The Palestinian is never relegated, as Žižek claims, to an “abyss

²¹ Ibid., 297.

²² Ibid., 293.

²³ Jason Caro, “Levinas and the Palestinians,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35, no.6 (2009): 671-684.

²⁴ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 292.

of otherness,” but what is true is that it is Jewish conscience that obsesses him. And it is this troubled conscience that produces the evasions and ambiguities that have so infuriated his critics. And not without reason, for a troubled conscience cannot atone for the sin of oppression. At some point conscience needs to move away from excuses and prevarication to action and concrete solutions.

In common with many other pro-Palestinian commentators, Zalloua can resort to denunciations of Israel that part company with facts, such as when he refers to “Israel’s war of extermination” (245)—with reference to the policy of purging Hamas in the Gaza wars—which seems a conscious attempt to raise the Palestinian plight to the level of that of the Jews during the Shoah. Surely degree and intent would render such a comparison inapposite. Yet, this is a rare lapse and his examination of Levinas’s response to the plight of Palestinians sensibly avoids echoing Badiou when he declares that “every invocation of blood and soil, of race, of custom, of community, works directly against truths” in passionate denunciation of particularism. Although even he concedes that it has its place in anti-colonial struggles of resistance.²⁵ He recognizes that the drive to achieve sameness will not recognize difference but only unleash another form of intolerance. Zalloua’s participation in the philosophical discourse serves to disrupt its Eurocentric narrative and ensures that the Palestinian is not merely the victim (although he is keen to deny the Zionist claim that the experience of the Shoah bequeaths to Jews an exclusive claim to that status) but has a voice that must be heard. The real criticism of Levinas is not that he fails to appreciate that Jews have an ethical duty to the Palestinians, but rather that in failing to foreground them in his discourse he fails to exhibit the compassion and empathy that their plight demands. The challenge is not to fall back into habitual recriminations and denunciations of the other but to find a common ground that works toward a future of promise, hope, and a measure of common ground for Palestinian and Jew alike; a vision of mutual respect and tolerance while allowing for and respecting difference.

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²⁵ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 76.

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