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## STATES OF ISRAEL

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF READING THE STATE of David as the epistemo-political project of the Jewish episteme, of rabbinic torah? The Davidic state is doubtless a central political figure of the Bible, a focal point of its theo-historical narrative. As the theo-polis, the city of God, Zion, it is arguably *the* epistemo-political project of the prophets. The Bible, the Hebrew one, is not merely the theory or constitution of the Davidic state; it is its myth.<sup>1</sup> To posit the image or vision of the State of David as key to a political reading of the Jewish episteme articulated in the Talmud requires seeing the Talmud as a reading of the Bible, which is indeed the basic operation of Levinas's talmudic hermeneutics. In this chapter, I show how Levinas's early Jewish and talmudic writings transform rabbinic torah law into the life of the collective subjectivity of Israel as the citizenry of the Davidic state.

### The Negation of Galut

One of the major challenges facing this operation is that the Talmud, like the entire rabbinic tradition, is a postbiblical discourse that emerged and developed in the absence of a Jewish state—that is, in diaspora or exile, in *galut*. The Talmud is historically and existentially a project of statelessness. To be sure, talmudic discourse refers in a variety of ways to aspects of biblical narrative, including its political, statist elements. All these references, however, are arguably diasporic acts and perform *galut* as such. This condition is reflected in the hermeneutic quality of the references, which work to deconstruct the Bible. The same deconstructive operation of the biblical state through talmudic *galut* is also evident thematically.<sup>2</sup> Questions as to what this deconstruction means precisely, what diaspora or *galut* signify politically, and how to understand their negative and positive

performances vis-à-vis the state are all difficult to answer. Levinas does deal with the talmudic critique of the state when it comes to Rome, as I have shown. However, my own critical analysis shows that he does not extend the same critique to Jerusalem, rather **positing** that the pre-talmudic State of David is the Talmud's response to the State of Cesar. This operation excludes, as a possible response to the state, the Talmud's own political work of diaspora. Stated differently, within this perspective, the historical talmudic Israel, **as** *galut*, is posited as a purely *negative* political project, as an apolitical absence of state.<sup>3</sup>

The negation of talmudic *galut* through a portrayal of Jewish diasporic history as politically negative is a central operation of Levinas's historiography, in both his talmudic readings and his Jewish writings more broadly. Franz Rosenzweig and Hermann Cohen interpret historical statelessness as the uniquely positive social condition of the Jewish people. In contrast, for Levinas, diaspora means the condition of impossibility, or suspension, of torah.<sup>4</sup> This basic position manifests in his understanding of both the *genealogy* of Jewish diaspora—how it came to be, its sources and causes—and the *nature* of Jewish diaspora, namely of the quality of diaspora as the epistemo-political condition of historical Jewish culture.

Concerning genealogy, Levinas does not describe Jewish diaspora as having arisen from inner development of the Jewish episteme beyond the biblical project of the state. He therefore implicitly rejects a common feature of rabbinic narrative, namely that which ascribes the destruction of Jerusalem to internal failures of Jewish politics, such that statelessness, *galut*, is referred to as Jewish agency and diaspora is thought of as a positive, self-critical project of Jewish politics. This approach is legible first and foremost in the prophets themselves. The prophetic books of the Bible are based on a Deuteronomistic logic that repeatedly holds the kingdoms of Israel and Judea responsible through their sins for their own demise and consequent exile. This basic idea recurs frequently in the Talmud as well, for instance, in the “stories of destruction” in the Gittin tractate, which provide a narrative account of the destruction of Jerusalem as resulting from corruption. And it persists in modern accounts, such as that of Moses Mendelssohn, which Levinas discusses.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Levinas narrates the destruction as having arisen not from any inner deficiency of the Jewish state but as the work of outside forces.

The historiographical argument is first formulated in an essay from 1961: “Not imposing its thought through war, but also not seeking, in its

contact with different civilizations, the shocks from which clarity leaps—this earns prophetic Judaism a solid reputation as a particularism that cannot be shaken.”<sup>6</sup> Israel, an accomplished and ethical humanity that requires no further education, neither forces itself on other nations nor seeks to learn from them. Israel chooses isolation, such that its universalist particularism is perceived by others as radical particularism and leads to universal anti-Jewish persecution—both by other particularist nations and by the universalist empire. In the 1980s, Levinas described this process as a historical “misunderstanding” whereby Israel’s exemplary moral superuniversalism became perceived as nationalistic and racist superparticularism—the “paradox of Israel.”<sup>7</sup> According to this narrative, the biblical Jewish state had nothing wrong with it; it was just too good for this world. Jerusalem’s demise followed from no inner deficiency and signifies no fault. On the contrary, it manifests its absolute excellence.

From this genealogy of diaspora results its political meaning. If the biblical Jewish state was an instance of political perfection, its absence—which is to say, the postbiblical Jewish condition of statelessness, or diaspora—signifies an absolutely negative political condition. Diaspora has been the sheer absence of Jewish politics, a long period of Jewish existence outside of history.

The motif of diaspora as political negativity is recurrent in Levinas’s work. In an important early essay of 1951, “The State of Israel and the Religion of Israel,” to which we will return, he contrasts the social engagement of the young Israeli state with “the fervent mysticism that overexcites the orthodox or liberal tendencies of the diaspora living alongside Christianity.”<sup>8</sup> The apolitical nature of the Jewish diaspora assimilates it, in Levinas’s mind, to Christian Gnosticism, which abandons the world and simply lets it be. In a short text from 1961, Levinas interprets the image of the little bottle of oil the Talmud describes as the real miracle of Hanukkah in contrast with the celebration of the Maccabees’ military triumph in nationalistic versions. This oil, Levinas writes, signifies a “nocturnal existence turned in on itself within the narrow confines of a forgotten phial,” symbolizing the talumdic diaspora as “existence sheltered from all uncertain contact with the outside, a lethargic existence traversing duration, a liquid lying dormant on the edge of life like a doctrine preserved in some lost yeshiva, a clandestine existence, isolated, in its subterranean refuge, from time and events, an eternal existence, a coded message addressed by one scholar to another, a derisory purity in a world given over to mixing!”<sup>9</sup>

Ten years later, in 1971, Levinas published “State of Cesar and State of David,” in which he clearly states the political nullity of the Jewish diaspora: “For two thousand years, Israel was uninvolved in History. Innocent of all political crime, as pure as the purity of the victim, a purity whose sole merit was perhaps its long patience, Israel had become incapable of thinking a politics which would bring to perfection its monotheistic message.”<sup>10</sup> The postbiblical Jewish history of diaspora—the history of the Talmud—is for Levinas a history of no history, a collective existence of no politics, of no social investment in the world or in being, a time of Christianized Israel, “lying dormant on the edge of life,” in the shadow of the empire.

### France as a Modern State of Israel

Levinas’s historiography marks a dramatic turn from the advent of European enlightenment. “Since the eighteenth century,” he declares in his first talmudic reading from 1960, “reason has penetrated history.”<sup>11</sup> “Reason” here cannot mean the formal ontology of Greco-Roman knowledge. Rather, the reason that first penetrates world history with enlightenment is that which does not oppress individual ethics but, on the contrary, is grounded on the ethical individual. Remember how in *Totality and Infinity*, the constitution of the self through relation to the Other was epitomized in Descartes’s idea of the infinite. What enlightens Europe is the Jewish episteme—torah. In other words, the first *positive* political figure of Israel after the destruction of biblical Jerusalem is modern, enlightened Europe. This Europe, “ours,” is where the West recreates itself on the model of Jewish Israel.

Levinas formulated this idea early after World War II, for instance, in his 1947 essay “Being Jewish,” where he describes how Jews rediscovered “the mission of Israel” in the “Christian and liberal world.”<sup>12</sup> In a text from 1952, he suggests how, before the advent of Hitler, Jewish morality had become “European moral consciousness” in the nineteenth century: “Never has prophetic morality seemed more in consensus and the famous mission of Israel closer to its destination.”<sup>13</sup> In his seminal “A Religion of Adults” from 1957, Levinas identifies the revolutionary principle of Jewish collectivity, founded not on self-preservation in being (like Heidegger’s Germanic ethos of land, “houses, temples and bridges”) but instead on exiled existence in responsibility for others, as the very principle of “modern nations, defined by the decision to work together much more than by the obscure ways of legacy.”<sup>14</sup>

Here Levinas echoes Ernst Renan's famous definition of the modern nation not as an "ethnographic" entity based on objective reality of ethnicity, language, religion, soil, or culture but as a "spiritual family" based on subjective will, on "a daily plebiscite." Whereas, however, Renan narrates the birth of the modern nation as arising *against* Semitic racial particularism from the marriage of Christianity with the Germanic national principle, Levinas inverts the story by identifying race as German and "spiritual family" as Jewish. It was Judaism's "concrete universalism," he writes elsewhere, that attenuated "the alternative national-universal" and inspired nationality as the political principle of an enlightened Europe.<sup>15</sup>

If the modern European nation embodies the people of Israel, then the modern European nation-state, which emerged from the demise of Rome, the State of Cesar, is the postbiblical avatar of the Davidic State of Israel. Diaspora, as the negative political life of Israel, ends with the rise of the European nation-state. In "The State of Israel and the Religion of Israel" from 1951, Levinas describes the modern nation-state as possessing the same features as his ethically "superhuman" Israel, as an "accomplished humanity": "the state is not an idol because it enables full self-consciousness. . . . In the sovereign state, the citizen may finally exercise will. He acts absolutely. Leisure, security, democracy: these mark the inversion of a condition, the beginning of a free being. This is why modern man recognizes his spiritual nature in his civic dignity or, even more so, when acting in the service of the state. In the destiny of the Western peoples, the state represents their human accomplishment. . . . Modern man, man of humanism, is a man in a state."<sup>16</sup>

Although Levinas disagrees with Renan on the historical inspiration for the European nation-state, he nevertheless agrees regarding which is the *paradigmatic* nation-state in Europe, the first among firsts, the European State of David. "It is France's glory," Renan declares, "to have proclaimed, through the French Revolution, that a nation exists by itself. . . . The principle of the nations is ours." For his part, Levinas concurs that, prior to the Dreyfus affair, for "Jewish people of Eastern Europe France was the country in which prophecies came to pass." The French Republic was the first modern State of Israel, the emergent kingdom of the Messiah.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, this emergence of the messianic age was only in its beginnings and as such was germinal, rudimentary, incomplete. The budding, fragile European State of David was exposed to the fundamental evil that threatens any attempt to introduce otherness into being, namely the evil of

ontic abuse. The messianic coming risks the perversion of messianism. In an essay on Rosenzweig from 1959 titled “Between Two Worlds,” Levinas describes the age of enlightenment as “the end of philosophy,” not because philosophy disappeared but, on the contrary, because “everything is philosophy” in the sense that reason became the very foundation of individuality. We already saw how this messianic subject, with its full self-consciousness, is the emancipated modern subject, “man in a state.” Levinas indicates, however, that this accomplished individuality risks losing itself in reason, in ontology, and thus risks abandoning all individual responsibility in favor of a total understanding of the “march of history.” According to the logic articulated in *Totality and Infinity*, then, this accomplished individuality risks perverting the modern republic by turning it into “totalitarian tyranny.”<sup>18</sup> We already saw how Levinas identifies modern totalitarianism, the perversion of the good, in Stalinism and Fascism, two tendencies he also recognized in the movement of May 1968.

Nonetheless, some of his texts from the 1960s evoke another figure of perverted messianism, one that does not arise from totality’s suppression of individuality, from Greco-Roman totalitarianism, but, on the contrary, from the overempowerment of individual collective subjectivity, namely from a perversion of the modern, enlightened, Israel-like nation: the nationalistic perversion of Israel. Just like Israel, Levinas states in the talmudic reading from 1966, “every nation believes it is at the center of the world! The very idea of nation emerges whenever a human group believes that it sits in the center of the world.” Accordingly, as we find in a text from 1960, “every nationalism carries a messianic message and every nation is chosen,” the upshot of which is that the nation-state system of European modernity has produced “premature messianic claims.” Another text from 1963 bemoans “the tragic error of [Judaism’s] interrupted lesson” to “the political peoples” who, in their haste to redeem history, became “violent with messianism.” Here Levinas comes close to Arendt’s analysis of imperialist racism, which she deems a perverted Judeo-Christian messianism.<sup>19</sup>

Levinas concludes in these early Jewish essays that European nation-states, as budding modern States of David, need the older, original, Jewish Israel to resume the “interrupted lesson.” European Israel needs to learn Judaism’s “special patience,” which dismisses “all premature messianic claims.” Europe needs to learn a kind of messianism that knows how to avoid submitting justice to history. In the enlightened age of “everything is philosophy,” this means learning a form of thought, of reason, of Jewish

*episteme* that “becomes life instead of becoming politics.”<sup>20</sup> In the contemporary terminology of *Totality and Infinity*, to counter the threat of Stalinism and racism, the Western nation-state needs an ethical rationality that does not dissolve in the state or turn into nationalism. Instead, this ethical knowledge, or law, materializes in an individual collective subjectivity based on responsibility. Ethics should become embodied in an ethical nation, a moral superhumanity set on rebuilding the city of justice, Jerusalem, on forging a torah-based Israel that will serve as a state for cultivating a poststatist humanity.<sup>21</sup>

### Who Is *Not* Modern Jewish Israel

We thus come to the most burning and central question of Levinas’s historiography: what and where is modern Jewish Israel? And how can it resume humanity’s “interrupted lesson” and intervene in the European nation-state to remedy its totalitarian and nationalistic deficiencies, thus helping the State of David attain modern perfection?

Levinas begins his reply by stating who is *not* modern Jewish Israel, what modern Jewish project does *not* invest the superhumanity of Israel in the messianic age of the European nation-state. His negative answer negates the existing Jewish diaspora in its two basic forms of assimilation and isolation. It is worth noting that Levinas’s negative indication of which Jews participate in what he considers to be the modern fulfillment of the messianic mission of Israel entails a political and ontic negation. Not only does the modern diaspora mark a negative, Gnostic-Christian form of political existence—leading an apolitical existence like some premodern, “mystic” diaspora living “in a lost yeshiva”—but it can also be characterized as ontically negative, namely as doomed to inexistence. For the assimilated diaspora, this negation occurs through disappearance, and for the isolated diaspora, through extermination. We can say that the messianic age of modern Europe, inasmuch as it is redemptive for Jews, is also eliminatory—it terminates their unredeemed form of existence. Israel’s redemption from diasporic nonpolitics, its ascent to the polis, signifies the termination of *galut*.

This crisis stands at the center of Levinas’s first talmudic reading, “Messianic Texts,” from 1960. The messianic event of modernity, insofar as it reunited reason and history, subjectivity and polis, the fall of Rome and rise of the European nation-state, opened stateless Jewish Israel “to the political forms of this humanity.” Emancipation abolished the distance between

the state and the Jew, with the latter becoming a Jewish citizen, a man in a state. Emancipation marked the first end of the nonbelonging or statelessness of the Jewish diaspora. European nation-state messianism absorbed Jewish messianism. In this absorption, Levinas notes, “messianism in the strong sense of the term,” the specific Jewish messianic project, became “compromised.”<sup>22</sup>

The first form of dissolution of Jewish Israel within the European nation-state is *assimilation*. Assimilation means that Jews, in becoming citizens, leave behind their Judaism, their “universalist particularism”—their specific Jewish episteme, the torah, and their specific Jewish political project, the State of David. Assimilation means that Jews abandon the “mission of Israel” and in this sense become non-Jewish. In his 1982 essay on Mendelssohn, Levinas analyzes assimilation as “dejudaization” or “conversion.” In essays dated 1955 and 1966, Levinas fleshes out the epistemo-political meaning of modern dejudaization in the figure of Baruch Spinoza. Criticizing the secular Jewish—and also Zionist—trend of reconciliation with the excommunicated seventeenth-century philosopher, Levinas accuses Spinoza (and Mendelssohn) of having separated Judaism from philosophy, reason from political history, and thereby “subjugated the truth of Judaism to the revelation of the New Testament.” On several occasions, Levinas more specifically points to the abandonment by Jews of torah law, or the mitzvot, an abandonment that can “compromise the mysterious Jewish sense of Justice in us.” The assimilated Jew becomes a citizen with no Jewish practice but only Jewish faith, which is a private matter that has nothing to do with society, politics, the world, otherness without being, or—in Levinas’s terms—Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

Next to dejudaization by assimilation, Levinas identifies, especially in the talmudic readings, another form of how redemptive emancipation eliminates the Jewish diaspora. This time, elimination arises not through an abandonment of torah but, on the contrary, through an exclusive fidelity to it. Too zealous an attachment to torah amounts to a refusal to acknowledge the modern opening of Jews to politics and embrace emancipation, which means the end of diasporic existence. Instead, this attachment leads one to remain outside of the state, to persist in the traditional, premodern, and orthodox “ghetto.” This traditional diaspora is none other than the historic talmudic civilization, which, as I have shown, Levinas considers to be apolitical, alienated from the world in “mysticism.” In his Mendelssohn essay, Levinas describes this nonassimilated diaspora as a “minority



of strict observance”: “Throughout all the adventures of dejudaization, it was in these groups, which were indifferent to the changing times and as if devoid of any relationship with history, that the energy of the tradition and its invisible irradiation has been preserved.”<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, asserting the demise of talmudic diaspora in enlightened modernity is critical for Levinas’s talmudic readings, which seek to read in the Talmud not statelessness but the constitution for the Davidic nation-state. In Levinas’s narrative, the destruction that enlightenment inflicted on the traditional talmudic diaspora as a matter of necessity was not just conversion, or dejudaization, but extermination.

In the introduction to the first volume of talmudic readings published in 1968, Levinas presents the double destruction of the Jewish diaspora as a “contradiction that tears” asunder modern Judaism. Next to the problem of assimilated Jews, doomed to disappearance (dejudaization), Levinas raises the opposite problem of how “loyalty to a Jewish culture closed to dialogue and polemic with the West condemns the Jews to the ghetto and to physical extermination.”<sup>25</sup>

A further articulation of this thought is unfolded in the talmudic reading from 1975, “Damages due to Fire,” with Levinas’s comment on the following: “As soon as freedom is given to the angel of extermination, he no longer distinguishes between the just and the unjust; moreover, he even begins with the just” (BT Baba Kama 60a). For Levinas, the word *extermination* refers, beyond all war insofar as it is still governed by reason, to an abyss of nonsensical violence that indistinguishably devours both the just and the unjust. However, the fact that extermination “begins with the just,” Levinas continues, may suggest otherwise: “Does the madness of extermination retain a grain of reason? That is the great ambiguity of Auschwitz.”<sup>26</sup> His commentary offers a possible grain of reason for the extermination of the just—that is, of talmudic Judaism—in Auschwitz: “Saints, monks, and intellectuals in their ivory tower are the righteous subject to punishment. They are the Pharisees, in the non-noble meaning of the term which the Jewish tradition is the first to denounce. The righteous subject to punishment may also be the Jewish people when it closes itself off in its community life and contents itself with its synagogue like the Church satisfied with the order and harmony which reign within its precincts.”<sup>27</sup>

Once again, diaspora is understood as depolitization, which amounts, for Levinas, to the Christianization of Judaism. Depolitization after emancipation in the form of assimilation leads to dejudaization; in the form of

self-isolation, it leads to extermination. As already noted, for Levinas, statelessness refers to a negation of politics, such that throughout the centuries of its diasporic existence, “Israel became incapable of thinking a politics that would perfect its monotheist message.” As Levinas concludes in his 1968 introduction to his talmudic readings, “Diaspora, injured in its living forces by Hitlerism, no longer has the knowledge or courage necessary for the realization of such a project,” namely the project of the messianic State of Israel, the Davidic Jerusalem of Torah.<sup>28</sup>

### The Greek-Jewish State of Israel

Who, then, constitutes modern Jewish Israel, if not diaspora Jews? Levinas’s answer is that modern Jewish Israel emerges with dediasporized Jews or, more specifically, with *disassimilated* Jews—Jews who were assimilated to modern Europe, left the ghetto of tradition to become citizens of the modern nation-state, and then disassimilated from it. Citizens already, they became estranged from their states and disassimilated.

The initial production of disassimilated Jewish subjectivity, the creation of modern citizens without a state, is presented in several of Levinas’s texts as the work of modern **antisemitism**. We noted above how anti-Semitic racial persecution “reminded the Jew of the irremissibility of his being.” For Levinas, the anti-Semitic contestation of emancipation manifests the failure of assimilating the Jews, who remain “Marrano.” State persecution of Jews paradoxically redeems Israel, rescuing it from oblivion: “once again, Israel found itself at the heart of religious history.” Unlike Sartre, Levinas does not interpret this revival through persecution as the rise of the Jewish subject *qua* pure victim and mere opponent of **antisemitism**, the **antisemitic** subject whose essence is to fight anti-Semitism in the name of assimilation. On the contrary, what Levinas highlights in the Jewish reaction to anti-Semitism is the disillusionment of the promise of assimilation, a self-disassimilation that consists in a retreat from total identification with the modern European episteme and a return to the specific Jewish episteme, manifest for Levinas in the generalized return to talmudic sources—“the authentic access to the Bible.”<sup>29</sup> Anti-Semitism thus generates modern Jewish citizens who discard their states and rediscover the Jewish Bible.

For Levinas, these disassimilated Jews constitute the modern Jewish Israel. They are called not to abolish but to perfect the project of the modern European nation-state, which features the preliminary realization of

the State of David in modern times. The concrete project that fulfills this call is the state of disassimilated Jews, a nation-state for a stateless nation of European citizens, the State of Israel. In Levinas's historiography, the State of Israel is accordingly the messianic site for the completion of the Jewish project—a Western project for a new, responsible humanity in a novel ethical world.

The first basic feature of the State of Israel as the state of disassimilated Jews is that it perfects disassimilation, namely the break of Jewish citizens, as *citizens*, with the European nation-state. As citizens, Jews break with non-Jewish states by becoming citizens of a different state, a Jewish one. In the first talmudic reading from 1960, Levinas describes this operation as the “Israeli solution” to the challenge of modern Jewish messianism, that is, as performing a “collaboration with history” (becoming modern citizens) through “a movement of withdrawal, by exiting this history, in which, since emancipation, we exist as assimilated Jews.”<sup>30</sup> As Israelis, Jews enter modern political history by withdrawing from non-Jewish states and setting themselves apart.

It is worth noting that Levinas recognizes the disassimilating isolation the State of Israel operates for modern Jews not only in the general territorial, cultural, and political separateness of a sovereign nation-state. More specifically, on different occasions, Levinas points to the “danger” Jews expose themselves to by living in Israel, a clear reference to the violence of the Israeli-Arab conflict, which he compares to “the danger of persecutions.” We will see how Levinas's portrayal of the geopolitical conflict facing the Jewish state as a reenactment of historical persecutions inflicted on diaspora Jews comes to play a more significant role in Levinas's post-1968 historiography. At this point, however, the important motif is how, for Levinas, the revival of Jewish politics requires or implies not only separation but also, in a Schmittian vein, engagement in actual hostility against a mortal *enemy*. “Building a just state on an arid and dangerous land,” he writes in 1959, “brings back to Israel the Jews who left the synagogues.” Israeli disassimilation in the wild Middle East generates Jews as modern citizens who are liberated “from an obsession with the Western, Christian world” and can accordingly return not to apolitical diaspora but to “autonomous political and cultural existence.”<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, we see the second basic feature of the State of Israel as the state of a disassimilated Judaism, according to Levinas's early historiography, alongside the perfection of disassimilation from the European

nation-states: to present the contemporary site for the Jewish perfection of the European nation-state as the modern State of David. *In the State of Israel, Jews withdraw from Western history in order to complete Western history.*

This eschatological, messianic vocation, which Levinas ascribes to the independent Jewish nation-state, is articulated in its main aspects in a key text from 1951, “The State of Israel and the Religion of Israel.” In this essay, Levinas describes the young Israeli state as the “resurrection” of the collective project of Israel from its political death in diasporic statelessness, wherein the Torah and Talmud languished for two millennia in mystical paralysis. It is only in the form of the modern nation-state, as a Jewish nation-state, that the Jewish episteme is reactivated; Jews can “finally begin the work of their lives” and, namely, are given “finally the opportunity to carry out the social law of Judaism.” “The masterpiece has now finally come,” that masterpiece being the messianic project of the Davidic State of Torah, the incarnation of “God in social enterprises.” The State of Israel, Levinas writes ten years later, gives “body once more to the spirit that animated the prophets and the Talmud,” presenting Judaism with its “first opportunity to move into history by bringing about a just world.”<sup>32</sup> The State of Israel is where the people of Israel, as a moral superhumanity performing in and through its own collective flesh the inversion of the essence of being from selfness to ethics, will proceed to the ethical recreation of the entire world.

Levinas’s texts offer two central images of projects designed to realize this messianic vision of the Israeli state. Notably, some early texts evoke the Israeli project of the *kibbutz*, that is, agricultural community settlements established in Palestine from the early twentieth century by groups of young European Jews who saw in Zionist colonization the opportunity to realize a socialist utopia. For Levinas, the small kibbutz settlements epitomize *first* the danger to which Jews expose themselves in the State of Israel, which disassimilates them from Europe. As he puts it in the first talmudic reading, the “Messianic Texts” of 1960, “Israeli Judaism has accepted danger through its life in the State of Israel and what the State of Israel is to the whole of Jewry, its vanguard groupings are to the State itself.” He further writes, “Within the State, in its small grains scattered in the desert, in the remote frontier kibbutzim, men established themselves, who are indifferent to the seething world whose human values they nonetheless serve. They display their indifference in their daily lives of work and risks.” *Second*,

the strictly regulated social life in kibbutz communities appears to Levinas precisely as a political return to the uncompromising ethical demands of Jewish law. As he argues in the essay from 1951, “it is in the justice of the kibbutz that the nostalgia for ritual is once again to be felt.” *Third*, by realizing the Jewish ideal of social justice, of responsible humanity, the kibbutz supposedly provides Europe, and the West, with the ultimate model for a socialist nation-state: “Socialism in one country?” Levinas writes in 1961, “The collectivist society of the kibbutz attempts socialism in one village!”<sup>33</sup>

As the fundamental condition for kibbutz humanity as Levinas envisions it, his texts indicate the necessity of another messianic enterprise, beyond the kibbutz, for realizing the eschatological vocation of the State of Israel. This other, more fundamental project is properly epistemic; it constitutes a direct intervention of knowledge in knowledge, an epistemological intervention. The epistemic project takes place not in the fields, carried out not in “remote frontier kibbutzim” but instead in collectives such as the Colloquium of Jewish Intellectuals in Paris. It is in the epistemic project of the State of Israel that the essence of Levinas’s own messianic intervention lies, an intervention that may be considered as animating not only his talmudic readings but also the entire inter-epistemic event of his oeuvre.

The nature of this epistemic enterprise is discussed in his 1951 essay. The Davidic State of Israel, the city of justice, whether in the form of the kibbutz or something else, arises not from mere faith (like the Christian project) but (like the Greco-Roman project) from positive knowledge of the world, from torah as a proper episteme, as “science.” “Between the Jewish state and the doctrine which should inspire it,” Levinas declares in the first-person plural, “we must establish a science, a formidable one.” This “high science of justice,” he explains, is a scholastic science of study that elaborates contemporary sociopolitical knowledge out of ancient Jewish sources: “the social and political situation described by the Bible and the Talmud is the example of a given situation that is rendered human by the law. From it we can deduce the justice required for any and every situation.”<sup>34</sup> The messianic State of Israel is thus deemed to arise from the development of the Talmud, which Levinas understands as the ethical and legal constitution of the biblical State of David, and its adaptation to the needs of the modern nation-state. The creation of this modern Talmud, which constitutes the dediasporization and repolitization of the Jewish episteme through transformation of torah law into state law, is the messianic project of knowledge in which Levinas’s talmudic readings seek to partake.

Levinas's contribution to this project is focused not on the scholarly aspect but rather on the conceptual constitution. He seeks to lay down its theoretical foundations, to think it through. Formative thought is necessary, since the epistemic renewal of the Talmud Levinas envisions does not consist in mere repetition or reactivation, in the reinstitution of old traditions. Instead, it consists in creating something new: a new form of Jewish knowledge to serve a new form of Jewish existence. In an essay from 1959, "How Is Judaism Possible?" Levinas correlates the repolitization of Jewish thought in the State of Israel with the "renewal of Jewish studies" not in the university but among Jewish youth movements in France. This return to Jewish texts, of which Levinas's own talmudic readings constitute a central manifestation, is not merely academic but communal, producing "a Jewish school of a new type."<sup>35</sup> The novelty of this Jewish school nonetheless consists in the basic direction of its epistemo-political vector: beyond the Talmud in France and toward the biblical land. The high science of justice that comes from the new Torah for the modern Jewish State of David, as Levinas writes in "The State of Caesar and the State of David" from 1971, signifies "the formulation of political monotheism that no one has yet formulated. Not even the Talmudic scholars. Only the responsibility of a modern State, exercised on the land promised to Abraham's descendants, should allow his heirs to elaborate patiently, by comparing formulas to facts, a political doctrine suitable for monotheists."<sup>36</sup> The new Jewish episteme is not a prerequisite for the Jewish state but rather the state's *telos*, its finality, its basic vocation. The new Torah is to come from Zion.

The messianic vocation of the State of Israel for Levinas is thus an explicitly epistemic one: to produce the science of justice, ethical knowledge, law not only for Israelis or Jews but for the world. "The Judaism of Diaspora and an entire humanity astonished by the political renaissance of Israel await the Torah of Jerusalem," he declares in the introduction to his first collection of talmudic readings. This same introduction also expresses the trans-epistemic nature of the event of messianic knowledge the State of Israel represents: "The translation 'in Greek' of the wisdom of Talmud is the essential task of the University of the Jewish State."<sup>37</sup> As we saw, in Levinas's historiography, the project of the West, which consists in affirming otherness in being, has been split between the tendency to separate the Other from being (Christianity) and the tendency to submerge the Other in being (Greco-Roman civilization). Judaism seeks to transcend this split, to unite otherness and being, transcendence and polis, by recreating being

on the basis of otherness, by creating a moral world. The statelessness of the diaspora, however, kept Judaism in check, out of being, in a condition of apolitical mysticism—which is to say, Christianized and de-Hellenized. In this vision, by producing the “Torah of Jerusalem,” the new State of Israel, in which we see the long-awaited activation of the Jewish project, finally mends the break between Christian *pistis* and the Greco-Roman *polis*, between otherness and being, by dediasporizing the Jewish episteme and re-configuring the Talmud as a nation-state project.

Such is the trans-epistemic event that Levinas’s messianic project envisions. His own work in France sought to prepare the stage for an encounter between Talmud and Philosophy, “to give to such a study all the breadth it requires, to translate into a modern idiom the wisdom of the Talmud, to confront it with the problems of our time devolves, as one of its highest tasks, upon the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.”<sup>38</sup> Levinas’s vision reads as an epistemic eschatology, one that features the Hebrew University as a temple of wisdom and justice for all nations and thus harks back to Isaiah’s prophecy of Jerusalem in the end of days: “For out of Zion shall go forth the law. And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isa 2, 3).<sup>39</sup> Levinas’s version has the word of the Lord, namely the talmudic reading of the Bible, spread from Zion through its translation into Greek in the worldly form of science and philosophy; torah law spreads in the form of the polis, as a modern state. Levinas later calls this messianic union of Talmud and philosophy the “end of misunderstanding,” the reconciliation of Israel with Greco-Roman civilization. Such an epistemo-political union in modern Zion would engender a new, integrated, and complete human subject. The “most noble essence of Zionism,” the 1968 introduction to the talmudic readings concludes, “in the form of an autonomous, political and cultural existence, makes possible a Western Jew, Jewish and Greek, *everywhere*.”<sup>40</sup> The State of Israel stands here as the womb of a new, ethical humanity, a Western-Jewish humanity—that is, a humanity that is fully Western because fully Jewish, everywhere.

### Just State

The State of Israel is to become the State of David, the messianic state for preparing a world-to-come beyond all states, a state for poststatist humanity. Levinas draws from this conception of the modern Jewish state the basic principle that should guide its existence as a polis. The politics of the State of Israel, according to its noblest essence, should be based on the principle

whereby its existence as a state, its being, is not absolute, not a purpose in itself, but rather conditioned by a higher purpose of justice and responsibility, of being for others. In the Israeli polis, as Levinas writes in 1979, “self-assertion is responsibility for everyone. It is both politics and already non-politics.”<sup>41</sup>

This principle, which conditions the state through morality, is inherently ambivalent. It posits morality as both grounding and justifying the state. It is the same ambivalence indicated in Levinas’s earlier philosophical work, in *Totality and Infinity*’s demonstration of how the experience of totality (the self) is conditioned by the rupture of totality (the encounter with the other) while ontology is conditioned by ethics, which means that ethics grounds ontology and the relation to transcendence grounds totalitarianism.

In relation to the State of Israel, Levinas’s messianic vision of this state as fulfilling the eschatology of justice allows him to develop a critical position against certain forms of statist, chauvinist, or nationalistic ideologies concerning the young Jewish state. I have already noted his rejection of nationalistic or racial understandings of the nature of the collective “Israel.” The articulation of this position with respect to the Israeli state is the heart of the 1951 essay “The State of Israel and the Religion of Israel.” Since, as we saw above, Israel’s religion, Judaism, means “justice as the *raison d’être* of the state,” then the State of Israel, Levinas argues, “will be religious or it will not be at all”: “The subordination of the State to its social promises articulates the religious significance of the resurrection of Israel as, in ancient times, the practice of justice justified one’s presence on the land. It is in this way that the political event is already surpassed. And ultimately, it is in this way that we can distinguish those Jews who are religious from those who are not. The contrast is between those who seek to have a State in order to have justice and those who seek justice in order to ensure the subsistence of the State.”<sup>42</sup>

Levinas’s critique condemns all conceptions of the State of Israel, all Israeli politics, that consider the state’s existence, its territorial sovereignty, an end in itself rather than an instrument for realizing the Jewish science of justice. Some passages are more specific. The talmudic reading from 1963, for instance, warns against contemporary ideological idolatry that forgets God, the ultimate ideal of justice, and instead worships human agency called to realize justice, such as the working class or the Jewish people, “as some young people in Israel do.”<sup>43</sup>



Levinas elaborates this critique two years later in the talmudic reading of 1965, “Promised Land or Permitted Land,” first delivered at a meeting of the Colloquium of Jewish Intellectuals dedicated to the State of Israel. The reading refers to the talmudic midrah about the biblical story of the twelve spies Moses sent to explore the land of Canaan (Numbers 13, 1–33). Levinas comments on the spies’ “evil report” according to which the dwellers of the land “are very powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large”: “They are stronger than we . . . are men of a great stature . . . giants, the sons of giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers” (Numbers 13, 27–33). Canaan stands here for “building, dwelling, being—a Heideggerian order,” Levinas comments, going on to imagine the Canaanites as “magnificent beings, very tall, blond, I suppose.” It was the image of these Germanic pagans that terrified the biblical Children of Israel, “who had just come out of the Egyptian ghettos.”<sup>44</sup>

But Levinas also suggests a second contemporary interpretation of the stately dwellers of Canaan: “Perhaps the spies caught a glimpse of *sabras*. Fear seized them; they said to themselves: this is what awaits us there; these are the future children of Israel, those people who make holes wherever they set foot, who dig furrows, build cities, and wear the sun around their necks. But that is the end of the Jewish people!”<sup>45</sup>

Levinas’s reading is playful, but the rhetorical approximation of the Germanic and the Sabra marks a concrete target for his critique of Jews who put state above justice. Levinas’s remark may have been specifically directed at the subculture known as *ha-knaanim*, “The Canaanites,” which emerged in Mandatory Palestine out of intellectuals, such as Yonatan Ratosh and Adya Gour Horon, who had renounced their affiliation to the Jewish people, whom they criticized as inherently exilic. These intellectuals cultivated an autochthonous identity of “Hebrews” harking back to the supposedly ancient, pre-Judaic Semitic peoples of the land.<sup>46</sup> The explicitly anti-Jewish position of the Canaanites for Levinas clearly arises from the analogy he draws between the Sabra and the Germanic peoples, both of whom spell “the end of the Jewish people.” In contrast to the Canaanite Ratosh, the end of Judaism for Levinas does not mean the happy end of diaspora; on the contrary, it means the catastrophic demise of the messianic project of the just state, the State of David. Like the new Hebrews, Levinas rejects diasporic Judaism and projects his vision back to biblical Israel, where “the practice of justice justified one’s presence on the land.”<sup>47</sup> The relation to the land, as we saw, is central to Levinas’s conception of the State of Israel.

We may even wonder where one could go in the 1950s to see an authentic Sabra if not to a kibbutz. Would Levinas's talmudic readings prevent the kibbutznik from turning into Canaanites? Or would the translation of the Talmud into Greek return the Sabras to Judaism?

The proximity of Canaan and the kibbutz renders visible the aforementioned ambivalence inherent to Levinas's messianic vision of the State of Israel as conditioned by the quest for justice. As noted, the very positing of justice or morality as a condition for the state, inasmuch as it deabsolutizes the state's existence and subjugates it to the ethical demand of responsibility, simultaneously provides the grounds on which to justify the state and render it, as a *just* state, absolute. Furthermore, if the state's being is conditioned by the principle of justice, would the state's existence not *prove* its morality, serving as evidence that it is just? Would justice not be ultimately translatable into existence and otherness into being? If, for the State of Israel, "self-affirmation is immediately responsibility for all," would not the primary form of this state to exercise universal responsibility be to affirm itself, to ensure its own presence on the land?<sup>48</sup>

### Just Conquest

Here we encounter the paradox of ethical egoism which, as I have shown, arises from *Totality in Infinity*, namely from the claim of being, of a justified self-preservation based on ethical superiority. We will see that Levinas's late book epitomizes this paradox in the political figure of violence exercised in the name of nonviolence, of war fought in the name of peace, of war against war, *just war*. This is the paradox that I claim underlies Levinas's early historiography in his Jewish writings, with respect to its central epistemopolitical figure, the messianic Judeo-Greek project that is the State of Israel.

Just like in Levinas's phenomenology, in his historiographical narrative the political drama of this collective ethical subject, of the Jewish state, emerges most clearly in his account of this state's *war*. The war that has been interlinked with the historical existence of the Jewish State of Israel since its foundation on the territory of Mandatory Palestine and even before—which is to say that the violent conflict with non-Jewish Palestinians may be considered, hermeneutically speaking, as a moment of truth for twentieth-century Jewish thought. My claim is that in Levinas's earlier, pre-1968 Jewish texts, the Israeli war is conceived of and portrayed as a just war. Israel's is a moral, ethical, good war waged against an immoral, illegitimate war,

namely against a violence that is, properly speaking, not part of war but a crime against the fundamental ethical commandment “You shall not commit murder,” a fundamental crime against ethics itself. The war waged by the State of Israel, as a project for a good state, is portrayed by Levinas as a war against *evil*.

My analysis here diverges from the standard debate concerning Levinas’s position on the Israeli-Palestinian situation, which highlights and problematizes Levinas’s distinction between politics and ethics. The locus classicus for this debate has been Levinas’s 1982 interview with Shlomo Malka, conducted in the aftermath of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. In view of the mass murder, Malka suggested that the Palestinians are Israel’s Other. Levinas dismissed this proposition, noting, somewhat obscurely, that “in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least we are 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.”<sup>49</sup>

Why did Levinas deny the Palestinians otherness? Judith Butler interprets Levinas as saying that “the Palestinian had no face.”<sup>50</sup> Her remarks have been criticized as misquotes showing that she misunderstood the categorical distinction Levinas made between ethics and politics, with respect to which the relation between Israel and the Palestinians is not ethical but political. Butler’s rejoinder to the criticism is that the distinction between political and ethical is precisely the problem that led Levinas to deny ethical responsibility toward the massacred Palestinians. Howard Caygill has offered a more precise analysis according to which Levinas’s ethical commitment to the State of Israel, his “responsibility for the other,” takes precedence over his political responsibility to the Palestinians, which is a “responsibility for the third.”<sup>51</sup>

Caygill’s analysis reveals how the State of Israel actually features in Levinas’s work as a collective, or political, figure of otherness, as a State of Others. Accordingly, as I will now demonstrate in the broader scheme of Levinas’s Jewish writings, his position concerning the Israeli-Arab conflict is not predicated on a separation between politics and ethics but, on the contrary, on the politics of ethics. The State of Israel is understood to be the other because it stands for the ethics of responsibility to the other. In contrast, the Arabs, as enemies of Israel, paradoxically play the role of the egoistic, pagan “I,” who is deaf to the commandment “You shall not commit murder” and blind to the face, which is to say, “has no face”—has no ethics of otherness and therefore is not worthy to be considered other in terms of such ethics.

In his 1981 introduction to the collected **Talmud** readings *Beyond the Verse*, Levinas warns against analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Arab conflict in purely political terms, that is, using categories of democracy or human rights detached from “their prophetic and ethical depths.” The Zionist project of the Israeli state, he claims, is not just political; its purpose is not the state itself. Rather, it serves the biblical “eschatology of Israel,” seeking to create a new humanity founded not on self-interest but on responsibility for others. And this, he continues, “cannot be the cause of wars.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the eschatological quality of the Jewish state, its commitment to the messianic vision of the State of David, of Jerusalem as the city of justice, situates it beyond politics and thus precludes any justification of violent resistance to it.

Recall the 1959 description of the Jewish state as disassimilating, as reisolating Jews from Europe by situating them “on an arid and dangerous land.” In Levinas’s discourse, the Arab and Palestinian armed struggle against the State of Israel is often portrayed not so much as a political conflict with an enemy, a rival, but rather as an objective “danger” arising from the natural, climatic, geographical properties of the land. Arab violence is the inherent violence of the land, of land in general; it is the brute force of being. A text of 1969 referring to the war speaks of Palestinian refugees as representing the “call of the land,” in contrast to the “call of consciousness” represented by Jews, and invokes “the vast spaces inhabited by the Arabs” or “the Arab Fatherland.” Another text from 1979 makes a contrast between the State of Israel as “one of the most fragile things in the world” and Arab countries as “uncontested nations, rich in natural allies, surrounded by their lands.”<sup>53</sup>

The Arab collective subjects, including Palestinians, are presented as natural peoples, based not on ethics but on ontics, on subsistence and expansion. In other words, the Arabs—whom Levinas never conceives of as Muslims, as a configuration of God’s people, of Israel, just like Christians, an Islamic configuration that is absent from Levinas’s work—constitute no modern European nations (“defined by the decision to work together much more than by the obscure ways of legacy”) but rather particular peoples that arise from the Germanic (and Persian) principle, the principle of race. And considering that the Western project, as understood by Levinas from 1934 on, consists in opposing racial politics, the Arabs and Palestinians become embodiments of the non-West, which for the Western project, spearheaded by the State of Israel, stand for evil. The Palestinian cause is accordingly

conceptually affiliated to Hitlerism, such that the struggling Palestinians are placed beyond the scope not only of politics but of ethics, beyond the limits of Israel's superhuman infinite responsibility for others—which, as aforementioned, is limited to “others who are not Hitlerians.”<sup>54</sup>

The above elements of Levinas's conceptualization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict come together most coherently and render clearly visible the ambivalence of his early eschatological understanding of the State of Israel in the aforementioned talmudic reading from 1965, “Promised Land or Permitted Land.” In this text, Levinas chooses to contribute to that year's colloquium discussion on the State of Israel a reading that relates to the biblical episode of the conquest of the Holy Land, the seminal instance of a holy war—“a remarkably contemporary passage.”<sup>55</sup>

As we saw earlier, the text studied by Levinas approaches this episode through the story of the twelve spies who were sent by Moses before the conquest of Canaan to explore the land and brought back discouraging reports about the Canaanites, who were “stronger than we.” Levinas offers two interpretations for the Canaanites' power over Israel. The *first* interpretation concerns *physical* power, such that the Canaanites are portrayed as a material people of the land, an ontic, self-interested people opposed to and constituting the enemy of ethical Israel. I have already shown how Levinas portrays these Canaanites in the contemporary political situation as a figure for the Germans and the Sabra, both of whom spell, in different ways, the end of the Jewish people.

Levinas's *second* interpretation reads the Canaanite power over Israel not as physical but as *moral*, arising from the same “ethical impossibility” that in Levinas's phenomenology in *Totality and Infinity* the face of the Other posits against my own violence. On this reading, the fear reflected in the spies' description of the dwellers of Canaan concerns “moral qualms”: “they may have asked themselves whether they had the right to conquer what had been so magnificently built by others.”<sup>56</sup> Translated into contemporary terms, “into Greek,” the spies' apprehension pertains not to the Jewish people's fear of being subjected to violence of the Germans or the Sabra but, on the contrary, the Jewish fear of Jewish violence against existing non-Jewish dwellers of the Holy Land—Palestinians. Are not the Jewish people, the people of infinite responsibility for others, the people of the superhuman demands of morality, *constituted* by the “ethical impossibility” of exercising violence against others? Would not the armed occupation of Palestine from Palestinians contradict the moral essence of Judaism? Would not military

conquest turn Jews into Sabras, into Germans, such that the State of Israel itself would constitute “the end of the Jewish people”?

The main thrust of Levinas’s Talmud reading is to answer these questions in the *negative*. Quoting Rabbi Johanan’s phrase about the spies’ “bad intentions,” Levinas comments, “bad intentions which were good intentions: those of an overly pure conscience.” Moral qualms in view of the conquest of the land, in the face of the Canaanite dwellers of Palestine, arise from a good conscience that has turned bad, from a perverse sense of morality, from “moral delicacy that is rather condemnable and morally twisted.” Levinas’s text harshly condemns the moral perversity of “beautiful incorruptible consciences.” It castigates “the tears of beautiful souls” and the more sinister “plot of the righteous.” Morality becomes twisted for Levinas when fear of immorality leads to resignation, namely to refrainment from taking any action, to the pursuit of *purity*. In contemporary terms, Levinas scolds the “purity of egalitarian consciousness,” which seeks to be “pure like leftist intellectuals.” He also speaks of the “purity of atheism” and describes the spies’ ethical misgivings as “a crisis of atheism, a crisis much more serious than the crisis of the Golden Calf.”<sup>57</sup> If worshipping a false god leads to a false politics (state idolatry), then a godless morality, Levinas appears to be saying, *cannot justify any politics at all*. Atheist goodness precludes political action and consists in rejecting politics, in rejecting worldly justice. The apolitical atheism of “leftist intellectuals” is tantamount for Levinas to worshipping an a-worldly god, which is how Levinas understands Christianity.

In contrast to the leftist, Christian spies, Judaism—represented in the story by the two dissenting spies, Joshua and Caleb, who favored the conquest of Canaan—understands that God commands “what is above our strength or what is beneath our conscience.” In view of the ontic immanence of the Canaanites, Judaism asserts otherness not through apolitical morality but through a moral politics, through the people of Israel acting within the State of Israel on the land of Israel: “We will not possess the land as it is usually possessed; we will found a just city in this land,” which will thus be “sacralized,” become holy.<sup>58</sup> In other words, Levinas considers violent conquest of the land, violence against its dwellers, as justified by the cause, by the inversion of being, the conversion of reality from self-interest to responsibility, from violence to justice.

It is easy to observe here the violence done in the name of nonviolence that goes by the name of just war. In his 1965 reading, Levinas recognizes this concern, which he sees as an abuse of justice whereby a claim to moral

superiority is turned into a justification of colonialism. Nonetheless, he insists that such abuse is not a necessary but only a possible outcome, one that arises from false messianism and does not concern the real, Jewish messianism.

You will say that everyone can imagine that he is founding a just society and that he is sacralizing the earth, and will that encourage conquerors and colonialists? But here one must answer: to accept the Torah is to accept the norms of a universal justice. The first teaching of Judaism is the following: a moral teaching exists and certain things are more just than others. A society in which man is not exploited, a society in which men are equal, a society such as the first founders of kibbutzim wanted it . . . is the very contestation of moral relativism. What we call the Torah provides norms for human justice. And it is in the name of this universal justice and not in the name of some national justice or other that the Israelites lay claim to the land of Israel.<sup>59</sup>

Invoking the inner-Jewish term for designating Jewish immigration to the Holy Land, also used for Jewish immigration to the State of Israel, not “conquest” but “ascension,” *aliyah*, Levinas concludes that “those who are about to conquer a country the way heaven is conquered, those who ascend, are already beyond delicate tears.”<sup>60</sup> The message is clear: just as the messianic vocation of the Israelites justified the dispossession of the Canaanites, the messianic vocation of the Israelis justifies the dispossession of the Palestinians.

Levinas underscores the idea that the mission to create a just society not only justifies Israel’s political existence but also *conditions* it. The justice of the Jewish states is a condition of its legitimacy. The State of Israel “will be religious or it will not be at all,” he declared in 1951. In his 1965 reading, he notes with respect to the biblical conquest of Canaan that the Israelites’ “right to that country” arises from their willingness “to accept the consequences of their actions and to accept exile when they are no longer worthy of a homeland”: the land of Israel “is a country which vomits up its inhabitants when they are not just,” and the people of Israel “assume a responsibility without indulgence and are summoned to pay for their own injustice with their exile.”<sup>61</sup> Here we see the *critical* potential of Levinas’s ethical messianism vis-à-vis the concrete politics of the State of Israel.

Yet the position of moral superiority is, as we saw, ambivalent. To subject Israel’s existence to the condition of justice quickly shifts toward a perception of the sole fact of Israel’s existence as justice, meaning that its enemies are by definition enemies of justice—not opponents but evildoers,



not fighters but murderers. Do the conquering and violent taking possession of the land not *already* constitute acts of injustice toward its Canaanite or Palestinian dwellers? Is not their violent struggle against this occupation at least as justified? According to the logic of just war, the enemy is precisely precluded from having any justification to fight: a just war is fought by definition against unjustified violence, good against evil. Israel's moral superhumanity *categorically* casts subhuman shadows on those who stand in its way. When Levinas chastises the biblical spies, who, "in the purity of their egalitarian consciousness, denounced as antidemocratic the wisdom which excluded from freedom the murderers of freedom," he immediately qualifies this remark by saying "that in all this we are not dealing with a problem of history": "Were the Canaanites actually so mean? This is the hypothesis or the initial given within which we must place ourselves. Without it, everything we have just said is perfectly meaningless!"<sup>62</sup> The Canaanites are by definition "murderers of freedom."

This criminalization of Canaan's dwellers does not remain a mere literary observation about the biblical narrative but extends into Levinas's own contemporary geopolitical analysis. I have already indicated how his texts characterize the Arabs as peoples of the land, of immanent being, akin to Germanic race-based peoplehood, which in Levinas's intellectual historiography stands for the non-Western evil against which the ethical quest of the West is defined. In the 1965 reading, Levinas finds the literary trope of the murderous Canaanites to be "remarkably contemporary."<sup>63</sup> Commenting on the biblical spies' report according to which the Israelites looked to the Canaanites "like grasshoppers" (Numbers 13, 33), Levinas notes, "Didn't someone say recently: 'We are one hundred million strong to crush you.' When Israel arms itself against its neighbors, pacifists ask: How do you know that your neighbors do not want to make peace with you? Did they say so? Yes, they did say so; they told us we were like grasshoppers. It is a remarkably contemporary passage. That way of taking human faces for grasshoppers! Or that way of taking the historical act of Return for a movement of grasshoppers."<sup>64</sup>

It is unclear who Levinas is quoting here, and it is also unimportant. The alleged quote is a rhetorical device that puts words in the mouth of Israel's neighbors. It reproduces the language of bellicose speeches a Jewish audience would expect to hear from Arab leaders.<sup>65</sup> The important point is that, within the context of the geopolitical conflict in the Middle East, Levinas sees Arab hostility toward the State of Israel as arising from



a profound moral and civilizational attitude that consists in “taking human faces for grasshoppers.” The Arabs are portrayed as rejecting, according to Levinas’s philosophy, the constitutive experience of human consciousness, namely the ethical encounter with the face of the other as speaking the moral commandment “You shall not commit murder.” This violence done to the human face marks out Israel’s neighbors, including the Palestinians who struggle against Israel, as enemies of humanity, as evil.

Levinas’s 1965 talmudic reading thus deploys the biblical story of the Holy Land’s conquest by the Israelites from the Canaanites as a parable for the contemporary Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts. The messianic-ethical vocation that Levinas’s narrative transposes from biblical Israel to the State of Israel, as a state of justice, is not used to ground a prophetic, inner-Jewish moral critique against Israeli politics. On the contrary, Israel’s mission of justice projects a mission of injustice on its foes, such that Israeli violence against them takes the form of holy war. Levinas’s early eschatology corresponds to his early phenomenology by featuring the Jewish people as the redeeming epistemo-political figure of the West, and the State of Israel as the spearhead of the Western *mission civilisatrice*. The prophetic ethics of the Other thus works here to ground the messianic justification of Zionism as a form of colonialism.



## PART II. STATE OF PERSECUTION: LEVINAS AFTER 1968

THUS FAR, I HAVE PRESENTED THE INTER-EPISTEMIC PLOT in Levinas's early work, the unfolding tension between philosophy and Jewish thought staged in his phenomenology and eschatology, including the epistemic and political consequences of the ethics of the other to the State of Israel. Major elements of this drama continue to feature in later texts. Yet Levinas's narrative has its own essential history insofar as his narration responds to its time and shapes the latter in turn. The drama told corresponds to the drama of the telling, which is articulated through its own events. If the story of Levinas's telling begins with the pivotal moment of 1934, the center around which its meaning takes shape—retroactively—is 1968. My claim is that this year marks a watershed in Levinas's work that constitutes not just a shift but a trauma akin to the wound of 1934.

The year 1968 refers here to a series of events that took place in that year, such as the student demonstrations in Paris and elsewhere in May '68, that are commonly perceived as epitomizing a set of deep transformations in the intellectual, discursive, cultural, and political texture of Western societies after World War II. These transformations redefined the self-understanding

of the West in many ways that are still foundational today.<sup>1</sup> Some of these central shifts relate directly to the basic concerns of Levinas's project. As we saw, Levinas's endeavor responds to the crisis in European civilization after World War II, seeking to revisit the disoriented project of Western humanism and reorient it using Jewish coordinates. Correspondingly, the moment of 1968 may be described—and is registered in Levinas's work—as a moment where Western self-critique, not unlike the self-critique developed by Levinas himself, attains a level of intensity at which it begins criticizing not only the distortions, shortcomings, or side effects of Western civilization but also its very foundations. As *self-critique*, 1968 marks the emergence of an anti-Western West.

The anti-Western West criticizes itself not for failing to realize its ideals but for holding them as ideals in the first place. In other words, this critique perceives the evil of the West as residing in its very perception of what is good. Accordingly, if the Western project had consisted, as Levinas himself occasionally indicates, in promoting *human* well-being, in developing and spreading “humanism,” then the radical Western self-critique that came about with 1968 may be called, as Levinas occasionally does, “antihumanism.” From a different perspective, that which is allegedly good—humanism—is perceived as a historical evil, its promotion through Western humanism as the expansion of Western man, and Western universal humanism (including its dissemination in the Judeo-Christian message) as *colonialism*, so that the radical self-critique of 1968 takes the guise of a discourse of anticolonialism, decolonialism, and, later, postcolonialism.

That the Western project of spreading humanism around the globe amounted to a violent project of colonization, that the *mission civilisatrice* was a project of violence—was it ever really in doubt?—became a central concern in France in view of the wars of decolonization that took place in the aftermath of World War II, especially in Vietnam (1946–1954) and Algeria (1954–1962).<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, a prominent spokesperson of the non-Western world who was engaged in the Algerian National Liberation Front and gave voice to colonized peoples in the language of French colonizers, famously called the colonized, in his 1961 book of the same name, *Les damnés de la terre*, translated into English as *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>3</sup> More accurately, *les damnés* are not just wretched; they are damned, which is to say fated to demise by a higher power, here through a verdict of eschatological violence. “Pure violence” is how Fanon describes colonialism.<sup>4</sup> Colonialism's violence arises directly from its so-called humanist mission,

which, by asserting the West as the human, eo ipso posits the non-West as less than human. Accordingly, Fanon wrote, “the colonized world is a world split in two,”<sup>5</sup> two species, two races: the human and the nonhuman. Humanism is racism.<sup>6</sup>

In his 1961 preface to Fanon’s *Les damnés*, Jean-Paul Sartre converts the non-Western gaze on the West into a new Western self-conscience. Sartre transforms the non-Western critique of the West into an internal Western self-critique, generative of a new anti-Western Western collective conscience. “We too, people of Europe, are being decolonized,” he translates Fanon’s gospel: “A bloody operation removes the colonizer inside each one of us.” In Sartre’s sermon, Europe’s redemption from its own colonialism requires a radical *metanoia*, a total conversion in which the Western sinner not only denounces evil and commits to good but also, more radically, confesses as evil what he has so far held for good. “Our beautiful souls are racist,” Sartre repents, “We are the enemies of the human kind; the elite shows its true nature: it is a gang.” This self-denunciation, or Western self-unmasking, this “striptease of our humanism,” exposes it as “a deceptive ideology, the exquisite justification of pillage”: “the European was only able to become human by producing slaves and monsters.”<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to see how, conceptually, this call for self-decolonization directly concerns the “superhuman demands of morals” that stand at the center of Levinas’s vision of the West as portrayed in his Jewish writings and early philosophy. As I showed in the introduction to this book, postcolonial critiques of Levinas’s work have been increasing in number in anglophone scholarship over the last two decades.

However, already in the 1960s, the French critique of **its own** Western humanism was explicitly applied to Levinas’s early work in Jacques Derrida’s famous essay “Violence and Metaphysics” from 1964.<sup>8</sup> In contrast with the indication Levinas makes in *Totality and Infinity* of a difference within the West between philosophers and prophets, totality and infinity, theory and ethics, Greek ontology and Jewish metaphysics—a difference that, it is argued, stands for a conflict between war and peace, violence and nonviolence—Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics” points to the violence of metaphysics.

If, as Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity*, Western philosophy, as logos and light, as ontology, as phenomenology, has been producing violence, Derrida reminds us that the philosophical logos itself emerged as a form of resistance to a more fundamental violence—namely “the worst violence,

the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse,” “the violence of primitive and prelogical silence,” “when one silently delivers oneself into the hands of the other in the night.” Derrida’s notion of prelogical violence, which the Greek *logos* resists, brings to mind Levinas’s notion of animalistic violence, which his historiography attributes to non-Western epistememes such as the Germanic or Persian ones. But Derrida does not refer to this narrative. His point is that if discourse and light resist prelogical violence, “the worst violence,” then any attempt to resist light as violence, such as Levinas’s critique of Western philosophy, must reproduce light, discourse, reason: “If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse.” Accordingly, any attempt, such as Levinas’s, to assert a discourse of infinity, transcendence, and metaphysics—be it innerphilosophical or prophetic—against the discourse of totality, immanence, and ontology, according to Derrida, must remain light and violence. This violence is necessary to avoid the worst violence, such that metaphysics must always be “violence against violence. *Economy of violence.*”<sup>9</sup>

Discourse, Derrida argues, cannot seek to abolish violence but only to minimize it. Indeed, “the least possible violence, [which is] the only way to repress the worst violence,” requires acknowledging this situation; it requires the “avowal of violence” in discourse. All discourse, as nonviolent as it may seek to be, must acknowledge its own necessary violence. To overlook this irreducible violence, Derrida admonishes, means to overlook “the responsibility for [one’s] own finite philosophical discourse.” Derrida’s critique addresses the *disavowal* of discursive violence by a discourse such as Levinas’s, which, against the violence of philosophical *logos*, seeks to assert a prophetic language of nonviolence (as in *Totality and Infinity*)—or which, I add, seeks to assert the superhuman morality of Israel, as paragon of Western humanism (as in the early Jewish essays) against the violence of the Greco-Roman state. “The very elocution of nonviolent metaphysics is its first disavowal,” Derrida observes, since elocution is discourse and therefore a violent break with nondiscursive violence.<sup>10</sup>

But Derrida says more. He indicates that the disavowal of violence, the “elocution of nonviolent metaphysics”—which may serve as a title for Levinas’s early philosophy—is not just self-refuting: worse still, it *increases* violence. How so? Clearly the avowal of discursive violence “is not yet peace” or the end of violence but rather the avoidance of the worst violence, of

perpetual war. The avowal of violence, Derrida writes, is “the opposite of bellicosity”—“the bellicosity,” he continues, “whose best accomplice within history is irenics.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the worst violence, that which discursive violence seeks to avoid, not only arises from prelogical, prehistorical primitivism but is also generated *within* history, within discourse, by “irenics,” that is, by the pacifist discourse that disavows its own necessary violence. This disavowed violence of nonviolence, we may say, is precisely what constitutes the “bellicosity” of Western humanism. The worst war is the war against war, the just war, and with it just conquest, colonialism.<sup>12</sup>

This critique was not lost on Levinas—far from it.<sup>13</sup> It is one of my central claims in this book that, though Levinas was initially a *target* of radical Western self-critique, of the Western anti-Occidentalism of the French 1960s, he was quick to absorb and assimilate this attack and transform it into a productive *self-critical* development of his early, pre-1968 work into his later, post-1968 work, especially in view of the Six-Day War of 1967. In what follows, I demonstrate this claim in both main corpora of Levinas’s writings, first in his philosophy, in the language of phenomenology, and then in his Jewish texts, in the discourse of eschatology. The following chapters show how, in his later work, Levinas manages to formulate the basic elements of a decolonial Jewish thought—and a decolonial Zionism.