

It will at least be admitted that this freedom does not have any leisure time in which to assume this burden and that, as a result, it is from the start as if compressed or un-done by suffering. This condition (or uncondition) of hostage is an essential modality of freedom—its primary modality—and not an empirical accident of a freedom always remaining above it all. In this impossibility of running away from the imperious cry of the creature, the assumption (of responsibility) in no way goes beyond passivity.

Certainly, my responsibility for everyone can also manifest itself by limiting itself: the ego may be called in the name of this unlimited responsibility to concern itself about itself as well. The fact that every other, my neighbor, is also a "third party" in relation to another neighbor, invites me to justice, to weighing matters, and to thought. And the unlimited responsibility, which justifies this concern for justice and for self and for philosophy can be forgotten. In this forgetfulness egoism is born. But egoism is neither first nor ultimate. The impossibility of escaping from God—which in this at least is not a value among others—is the "mystery of angels," the "We will do and we will hear." It lies in the depths of the ego as ego, which is not only for a being the possibility of death, "the possibility of impossibility," but already the possibility of sacrifice, birth of a meaning in the obtuseness of being, of a subordination of a "being able to die" to a "knowing how to sacrifice oneself."

## NOTES

1. Viazemsky, cited by Pushkin as an epigraph to the first Canto of *Eugene Onegin*. [Prince Peter Viazemsky (1792–1878) was a poet and one of Pushkin's best friends. (Trans.)]

2. The French reads *comprise comme antithèse de la générosité*. Throughout this section naivete has been associated with generosity, not its antithesis. It is difficult to interpret Levinas's meaning here. (Trans.)

3. *Eyn berera*: Hebrew expression meaning "no choice." (Trans.)

4. "Assumed" here means to accept consciously one's condition; the term figures prominently in the vocabulary of existentialist philosophy. (Trans.)

5. "An obscure light falling from the stars" (*Le Cid*, act 4, scene 3). (Trans.)

6. See note 3 of Levinas's Introduction. (Trans.)

7. The identification of the fruits which appear in the Bible has become a matter of linguistic habits. Why not take the liberty of translating as "citron" that which the tradition translates as "apple"? By what right, for instance, is the forbidden fruit, the cause of original sin, identified with an apple? The Rabbis of the Talmud maintain that the forbidden fruit, the eating of which led to the knowledge of good and evil, was wheat. They link the fall of mankind to its basic food. At least, we understand that botany is not at issue in all this.

## PROMISED LAND OR PERMITTED LAND

▪ From the Tractate *Sotah*, pp. 34b–35a ▪

That they may explore the land for us.

—Deuteronomy 1:22

*Rav Hiyya bar Abba said: The explorers sought only the shame of the land, for about this it has been said, "That they may explore (veyashperu) the land." And elsewhere it has been said (Isaiah 24:23): "The moon will be ashamed (veshapra) and the sun will be confounded. . . ."*

*"Here are their names: for the tribe of Reuben, Shammua, son of Zaccur" (Numbers 13:4). Rav Isaac said: We have a tradition according to which the explorers are named after their actions, but we only know how to interpret one name, that of Sethur, son of Michael. Sethur because he has given the lie to (sathar) the words of the Holy One, Blessed be He. Michael, because he has weakened him (mak). Rav Johanan has said: We can explain yet another name: Nahbi, son of Vophsi, because he hid (hahbi) the words of the Holy One. Son of Vophsi, because he jumped over (pasa) the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He.*

*"They went toward the South and he came to Hebron" (Numbers 13:22). The text should have been: and "they came." Raba answered: This teaches us that Caleb, separated himself from the "plot of the explorers," prostrated himself on the graves of the patriarchs and implored: My fathers, ask for mercy so that I may be preserved from the "plot of the explorers." For Joshua, Moses had already granted mercy, for it is written (Numbers 13:16): "And Moses gave the name of Joshua to Hoshea, son of Nun." May Yah (God) preserve you*

This reading was given in the context of a colloquium consecrated to Israel, held in November 1965. The proceedings were published in *Israël dans la conscience juive: Données et débats* (Paris: P.U.F., 1971). Levinas's commentary appears on pp. 151–166 and the discussion that follows on pp. 187–193.

from the "plot of the explorers." That is why it is written (Numbers 14:24): "As to my servant Caleb, since he was animated by a different spirit. . . ."

"There lived Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai . . . (Numbers 13:22). Ahiman, because he was the strongest amongst his brothers (Ah-Yamin); Sheshai, because he covered the earth with pits; Talmai, because he dug furrows in the earth. (Another explanation: Ahiman built Anath, Sheshai built Alash, and Talmai built Telbesh.)

Descendants of Anak: they surpassed (maanikim) the sun in size (or they wore the sun on a necklace around their neck).

"Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan" (Numbers 13:22). What does "was founded" mean? If "to found" is taken literally, how is one to accept that a father establish his younger son before his elder one? But is it not written (Genesis 10:6): "The descendants of Ham: Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan?" "Founded" can then only mean this: Hebron was seven times more cultivated than Zoan. And yet in all the land of Israel, there is no place with more rocks than Hebron; that is why the dead are buried there. Among all countries there is none more fertile than Egypt, for it is written (Genesis 13:10): "Like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt." And in the whole of Egypt, there is no place more fertile than Zoan, for it is written (Isaiah 30:4): "For his princes were at Zoan." And, despite this, Hebron was seven times more cultivated than Zoan.

Is Hebron full of rocks? Is it not written (2 Samuel 15:7): "After a period of forty years had gone by, Absalom said to the King, let me go to Hebron. . . ." And did not Rab Iwya (and according to others, Rabbah ben Hanan) say: He went to find sheep in Hebron. And is it not taught: the rams of Moab, the sheep of Hebron!—That is not an objection: it is because the soil there is barren that Hebron had pastures and that livestock grew fat there.

"They returned from exploring the land and went and came back" (Numbers 13:25-26). Rabbi Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon bar Yohai: the going is compared to the return. The return happened with "bad intentions"; the going was already with these "bad intentions."

They told him and said: "We went further" (Numbers 13:27) "but the people is strong" (Numbers 13:28). Rav Johanan said in the name of Rabbi Meir: Slander which does not have some basis in truth does not last long.

"Caleb calmed the people about Moses" (Numbers 13:30). Rabbah said: he seduced with words. When Joshua began to address them, they cried out: that lopped-off head seeks to speak! Then Caleb thought: If I admonish them, they will answer me in the same way and will reduce me to silence. So he said: Has the son of Amram done nothing but this! They then thought he was going to attack Moses and became quiet. He then continued: He brought us out of Egypt, split the sea for us and fed us manna. Shouldn't we listen to him, even if he were to tell us to build ladders and ascend to heaven? "We shall go up and gain possession of it" (Numbers 13:30).

"But the men who had gone with him said: 'We will not be able to . . .'" (Numbers 13:31).

Rav Hanina bar Papa said: the explorers uttered a great thing at that moment: "He is stronger than we are" (Numbers 13:31). Do not read "than we are." Read "than Him." Even the Boss, so to speak, cannot remove his tools from there.

"It is a land which uses up its inhabitants" (Numbers 13:32). Raba taught: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: I had a good intention but they interpreted it for the worst. My intention was good: wherever they went the leading citizens died so that, in the confusion, they could not be noticed. Some say: It is Job who died and all the inhabitants were in mourning. But they interpreted it in a bad sense: it is a land which uses up its inhabitants.

"And we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight" (Numbers 13:33).

Rav Mershasheya said: The explorers were lying. They could be grasshoppers in their own eyes; but how could they know that they were so in the eyes of others! That is not an objection, the latter—the inhabitants—were eating their funeral meal under the cedars. When the former—the Israelite spies—saw them, they climbed the trees; they sat in them. They would then hear the ones below exclaim: we see men like grasshoppers in the trees.

"Then the whole community broke into loud cries and the people wept" (Numbers 14:1). Raba said in the name of Rabbi Johanan: It was the ninth of Av and the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: They cried without cause; I will change this day into a permanent day of lamentation.

"And the whole community thought to stone them," and immediately afterward: "And the Glory of God appeared in

the Tent of the Meeting" (Numbers 14:10). Rav Hiyya bar Abba said: This teaches us that they took rocks and threw them against Him who is above.

"Those who spread such calumnies about the earth died of the plague" (Numbers 14:37). Rav Simeon bar Lakish said: They died an unnatural death. Rav Hanina bar Papa said: Rav Shila of Kefar Temarthah taught: This meant that their tongue was elongated and reached down to their navel and that worms issued from the navel to the tongue and from the tongue to the navel. Rav Nahman bar Isaac said: They died of diphtheria.

The text I have chosen in the Talmud is about the crisis which occurred at the end of the first year of the Israelites' journey in the desert and which explains why this journey lengthened by thirty-nine years, to become a forty-year journey. It is not by accident that this journey, meant to be very short, became a long wandering.

Numbers, chapter 13, tells the following story: The Eternal One advises Moses to send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which was promised to the children of Israel. These explorers are chosen. The Bible tells us their names; among the twelve are Joshua and Caleb; the explorers, upon returning, declare that the land promised to Israel is one that Israel will not be able to enter or to live in. It is fertile, to be sure, but it is also a land that kills or devours its inhabitants, a land that wears them down; moreover, it is a land settled and guarded by men too powerful for such as the Israelites. The community of Israel despairs. The ten explorers (only Caleb and Joshua had testified in favor of the Promised Land) then die stricken with a strange disease (strange according to the Midrash).

That is the biblical story, which is not for me to comment on. My task is to comment on the two pages of commentary that the Babylonian Talmud, in its tractate *Sotah*, devotes to this narrative. What seems so simple in the biblical text, the fear which seizes the children of Israel when they are just about to reach their goal, will become problematic in the Talmudic text we are reading. In the great fear of the explorers, we may discover anxieties more familiar to us, which were discussed here this very morning. You will see—I may be promising you too much and my lack of caution makes me nervous—that in the course of history, Jewish thought, like Jewish conscience, has known every scruple, every remorse, even when it came to the most sacred rights of the people troubled by this thought.

I will give my commentary based on the translation you have before you. It is a translation done in great haste, amidst a thousand other preoccupations. Do not be too demanding as far as its style is concerned: I am

nonetheless rather pleased that the somewhat dry nature of this unadorned text pierces through, even in translation. One would have to—but am I up to the task?—draw some water from this desert text.

I hope that our dear friend Rabi, who has always been sympathetic to my efforts despite the disappointment caused him by the obscurity of my method and its results, will allow me to dispense with methodological considerations, which perhaps will come into focus through the application I will once again make of this hermeneutic.

In the sentences immediately preceding the ones I have translated, we learn—let this not shock those used to the literal meaning of the Bible—that the sending of the explorers had not at all been commanded by God. The text in Numbers says the exact opposite, to be sure. But by combining this text with the one in Deuteronomy, the Talmudic commentators attribute the sending of the explorers to a decision made by men. To explore this Promised Land, which is so near, not to go toward it with all of one's might, but to try first to determine what is going on there, would be—and the Talmud shows its complete sovereign freedom here, its capacity to impart to the narratives and images of the Bible their profound, that is, their real meaning—a human thought. Consequently, the crisis which this story relates is also a human crisis.

Let us now look at the first paragraph of the text:

"That they may explore the land for us" (Deuteronomy 1:22).

Rav Hiyya bar Abba said: The explorers sought only the shame of the land, for about this it has been said, "That they may explore (*veyashperu*) the land" (Deuteronomy 1:22). And elsewhere it has been said (Isaiah 24:23): "The moon will be ashamed (*veshapra*) and the sun will be confounded. . . ."

*Veyashperu* does indeed mean "may they explore," but *veshapra* means "will be ashamed"; and "the moon will be ashamed and the sun will be confounded." The second meaning colors the first; those who will explore the land will cover it with shame. The explorers' intention was thus not honest. Instead of becoming acquainted with the land they were about to enter, the explorers would have decided in advance to put it to shame. What an odd method of exegesis! A forced reading [*sollicitation*] of the text, if ever there was one. But also an attempt to animate the text through correspondences and echoes. It will manifest its arbitrariness more and more as it goes along.

However, when the Talmudist, commenting on a biblical text, refers to another biblical text—even if the reference is arbitrary—one must read carefully the context of the quoted passage. What matters is not the explanation of a word. At issue here is the association of one biblical "landscape" with another, in order to extract, through this pairing, the secret scent of the first. In Isaiah, the prophet foretells of an anguished earth, but one de-

livered by the triumph of the Eternal One. When the Eternal One triumphs, "the moon is ashamed and the sun is confounded." The commentators of the text of Isaiah do not ignore the fact that this passage is about a cosmic event, but they note that the confounding of the moon and the sun can indicate the confounding of their worshippers. The worshippers of the sun and the moon will be ashamed when the pure truth of God manifests itself. Let us bring all this together: the explorers go toward this land so that this land will be shamed, so that the worshippers of this land—for example, the Zionists of that time—will be shamed. They have decided, in the name of truth, to confound the Zionists.

Please excuse these anachronisms, these excesses of language. We are among ourselves, we are among intellectuals, that is, among people to whom one tells the whole truth. The intellectual has been defined as the one who always misses the mark but who, at least, aims very far. Rabi has said that he is the one who refuses reasons of State, that is, who tells the truth. Here is a third definition: the man with whom one does not use euphemisms, to whom one tells the truth. Let us be fearless then. In the passage on which we are commenting, we are informed of the intention of a few men to put to shame all those who want and hope for the Promised Land. The Promised Land would not be allowed.

There is, then, a worship of the earth and a shame attached to this worship, and I am sorry that Domenach is not here, for he would have seen that there are Jews who, exactly like Christians, want land, but sense some shame in this desire, in this covetousness.

Let us read the second paragraph. There is obviously no text less in need of commentary than a list of names.

"Here are their names: for the tribe of Reuben, Shammua, son of Zaccur" (Numbers 13:4). Rav Isaac said: We have a tradition according to which the explorers are named after their actions, but we only know how to interpret one name, that of Sethur, son of Michael.

There are, in fact, twelve names in the biblical text: the first is Shammua ben Zaccur, and at the very end there is Sethur ben Michael. We are told, here at any rate, that these names are not without meaning, that these people bore predestined names, or that they were named as a result of their conduct. As if by chance, it is no longer known how these predestined names or surnames should be interpreted—the tradition would have been lost. Only one name is understood: Sethur ben Michael. Do admire the etymologies; they force [*sollicitent*] the text, they are far-fetched. Sethur comes from the verb form *sathar*, which means "he has given the lie to": he has given the lie to the acts of the Holy One. "Sethur because he has given the lie to (*sathar*) the words of the Holy One, Blessed be He. Michael, because

he has weakened him (*mak*)."

Not only would the name of Sethur be predestined but even also that of his father.

The first concern of the explorers would therefore have consisted in giving the lie to the legend about the acts accomplished by the Holy One, by contesting, demystifying, sacred history; all that was done, the coming out of Egypt and the miracles and the promises, all that is not true. Or at least it is possible not to talk about it. Sacred history can be passed over in silence. Sacred history can be perfectly explained by history itself, by political, economic, social history. Jewish history is like any other history. Michael may well mean in good Hebrew "Who is like God." (Do you know of a more beautiful name? A prayer made into a name!) Come on now! Michael comes from the word *mak*, which means "weak." Michael means "weak God." The Holy One is not only a God who has never done anything, He is a God who can do nothing. He will never be able to conquer the Promised Land. He is a soft God. It is insane to follow him!

Rav Johanan has said: We can explain yet another name: Nahbi, son of Vophsi, because he hid (*hahbi*) the words of the Holy One.

Rav Johanan is thus more learned than Rav Isaac. The piece of information he provides is valuable.

The explorers undermined the legend of sacred history; they said that God would not be able to fulfil his promises; but now, in addition, they are contesting that He has ever promised anything at all. He promised nothing. When one wants to criticize at any cost, one even uses arguments that contradict each other. He has done nothing, He has promised nothing, He is weak.

Son of Vophsi, because he jumped over (*pasa*) the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He.

He jumped over His attributes, and it is again very serious. The essential attribute of God is to reward virtue and to punish vice; they jumped over even His attributes. They were perfect atheists. God can do nothing, He has never done anything, He has promised nothing and does not care at all if virtue is rewarded and vice punished.

This then is the meaning of the revolt of these men: a crisis of atheism, a crisis much more serious than the crisis of the Golden Calf. The Golden Calf, that was still religious: one switched gods. Here, nothing is left, one contests the very attributes of divinity.

What makes this crisis yet more acute (or more interesting) is the dishonesty (or the irony) of those who tell about it. One must be suspicious of their references. When these references are convincing—but are they

ever?—they are not interesting. One must notice the way this apparent dishonesty is winking at us. They would have lost the tradition pertaining to the meaning of the other names of the explorers! Read these names. Does one need a tradition to understand the virtues registered in these names? One need only think about the roots of these words and show less imagination than that which drew from Vophsi he-who-jumped-over! Shammua ben Zaccur: he who listens, son of he who remembers; Shaphat ben Hori: he who judges, son of he who is free; Igal ben Joseph: the redeemer, son of Joseph; Palti ben Rafu: he who spares, son of he who was healed. I cannot indulge in this etymological game on all twelve names, but I understand why those who upheld that our explorers were corrupt from birth preferred to forget the tradition! What a lucky amnesia! They found *mak* in Michael but forgot that Michael means "Who is like God." For Gaddiel ben Sodi, they forgot that he is the son of the Mystery. All the noble meanings of the names of the guilty were miraculously lost! Don't we have here an effort to remove the suspicion that this whole hateful conspiracy was a plot of the righteous? Let us not in the least imagine that the denial of God's power, of sacred history, of divine promises and divine justice, occurred in the midst of people who were as pure as the intellectuals of the Left. You see then that with its "dishonesty" the Talmud has singularly deepened the literal meaning of the biblical text.

Now we can understand the third paragraph.

"They went toward the South and he came to Hebron" (Numbers 13:22).

Isn't there a mistake in agreement in this sentence? "They went" and "he came"; the first half of the verse is in the plural and the second half is in the singular—something which purists can obviously not forgive. Who has ever seen an error of syntax in the Bible? Have the Talmudists ever allowed themselves poetic license? In any case, here they cannot let the error go by: the text should have been "and they came," in the plural. If it is "he came" and not "they came," that is because they were numerous when they left but only one went all the way to the end.

Raba answered: This teaches us that Caleb separated himself from the "plot of the explorers," prostrated himself on the graves of the patriarchs and implored (listen to Caleb's prayer): My fathers, ask for mercy so that I may be preserved from the plot of the explorers.

Caleb resisted but there had been temptation, such an irresistible temptation, that upon the graves of the patriarchs no wish seemed to him more urgent than this one: "God, preserve me from my friends. . . . Make it so that I will not be tempted to follow the plan of the explorers."

But a second righteous man figured among the twelve: Joshua. Was he safe from the temptation that Caleb overcame? It was spared him in another way. Moses had taken his precautions (they had therefore been necessary). It is written (Numbers 13:16):

"And Moses gave the name of Joshua to Hoshea, son of Nun."

He placed the letter *yod* before his name, which joined to the *he* of Hoshea, becomes *Yah*, which means God: "May God preserve you from the plot of the explorers."

Here are indicated two ways of escaping temptation (I want to acknowledge those who have allowed me to penetrate into my text more deeply, in the study sessions and classes in which we "turned it every which way," and I want to cite not only my friend Dr. Nerson, for the whole interpretation, but also on this particular point my friend Theo Dreyfus): Caleb's way of resisting the seduction of the explorers (who, perhaps, sin only through an excess of justice) consists in staying within the ancestral tradition, in integrating himself within the rigorously national history of Israel, within its transmitted customs, in entrusting himself to this land in which his ancestors are buried, out of which good came into the world and from which no evil can emerge: Caleb prostrates himself on the grave of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at Hebron. Joshua's way is different. Through the first two letters of his name, the idea of God was inserted into his nature. Did he not accede to this honor through the teaching he received by serving Moses? No doubt this teaching received directly from the master was needed to preserve him from the temptation of the explorers. Caleb is preserved by his loyalty to an ancestral tradition, by his loyalty to the past. But here our conjecture is again confirmed: the explorers had what it takes to tempt the righteous.

The next paragraph seems to interrupt the narrative flow. It will tell us for the first time what this promised and explored land is like; it will let us know what the inhabitants of this land are like:

"There lived Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai . . ." (Numbers 13:22).

And the text continues:

Descendants of Anak. . . .

Using these proper names as a pretext, the Talmud will take complete license to inform us about the state of this land before the coming of the Israelites. These etymologies can certainly not convince anyone, but they only serve as pretexts.

First, Ahiman. It is broken down into two words: *Ah*, "brother," and *Yamin*, "straight" or "strong." A brother stronger than the two others. No equality between the three brothers; there was organization and hierarchy, which is the condition natural for society; but force counted in this hierarchy.

Next is Sheshai. Here matters are even less clear. The etymological reasoning follows obscure paths but the conclusion is clear. Sheshai, when walking, covered the earth with pits. Wherever he set his foot, a hole was dug. He undoubtedly did not have the sensitivity to inquire whether he was crushing someone or something while he was walking. He was a force of nature [*une force qui va*]. The third one was called Talmai. Here the etymology is easier. Talmai evokes furrows. The third dug furrows wherever he went: constructor, builder, farmer.

Another explanation—but some commentators feel that it completes the first one, and that is why the text which conveys it is put in parentheses:

Ahiman built Anath, Sheshai built Alash and Talmai built Telbesh.

These three cities do not appear on any map. As for the dictionaries, they refer us to our very text. Let us draw the main point from it. The inhabitants of Canaan—farmers as spontaneous as the forces of nature and yet capable of organization—are also builders of cities. To build, to dwell, to be—a Heideggerian order.

This then was what awaited the children of Israel there. We have not yet commented upon the words "descendants of Anak." *Anak*—"giants." These three men were giants. They were enormous, "they surpassed the sun in size." Other commentary: "They wore the sun like a medallion attached to a necklace." They were magnificent beings, very big, blond, I suppose, since they eclipsed or equaled the sun. I think of Sergei Essenin's poem: "I carry the sun in my arms, like a bundle of oats." Magnificent children of the Earth, who live side by side with visible celestial realities—that whole pagan communion of the earth and the sky—that is what the indigenous inhabitants of the country which was to become the land of Israel suggested to "twelve lowly Jews." We can now understand the anxiety of our men better.

Here then is the first and most banal hypothesis (first because in Talmudic texts multiple meanings coexist; it is a way of thinking in which the example is not the mere particularization of a concept but in which the example holds together a multiplicity of meanings): the strength of the inhabitants of Canaan frightened these puny Jews, just out of the Egyptian ghettos. How to oppose them in the name of a God who, heaven knows, never shows Himself, who does not speak, who did indeed speak on Mount Sinai, but about whom it was never known if He spoke at great length, if He said all that is attributed to Him, if He did not limit Himself to the first

sentence, to the first word or even to the first letter of the Decalogue, which, as if by chance, is the unpronounceable *aleph!* Of what worth are all the attributes and promises attributed to so enigmatic a God? Of what worth are all the abstractions and subtleties of Revelation before the splendid appearance of the children of the Earth who wear the sun as a medallion?

One can also suppose, and later this will become clearer, that the explorers, confronted by the inhabitants of Palestine, had misgivings—about what Vigée said yesterday and what many others have said when they speak of Israeli children. Perhaps the explorers 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!

One must not share these fears, but only understand them. Let us not forget the end of the story the Torah tells us: the explorers were severely punished for their doubts and—perhaps, as we shall see—for their scruples. Everything we are saying here and our entire endeavor to guess the interior crisis of these explorers should not make us forget the end of the story and the condemnation it teaches.

But the fear of the explorers can be interpreted yet another way. We will try to extract this third possibility, already suggested, from the rest of the text. Let us formulate it now: perhaps the explorers had moral qualms. They may have asked themselves whether they had the right to conquer what had been so magnificently built by others. How to dissipate so understandable an anxiety? But let us first take a look at the text:

"Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan" (Numbers 13:22).

The verses on which we are about to comment seem at first glance rather insignificant. They no doubt mention evocative names and places. These have for a Jew, a reader of the Bible, a poetic power similar to that contained in words such as "daughter of Minos and Pasiphae" for a reader of Racine. Caleb went as far as Hebron. There Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai dwelled, and Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan. But now let us take part in the playful discussion of the Talmudists. Let us, for the moment, wed ourselves to the apparently futile problems which seem to preoccupy them. They ask themselves: "What does 'was founded' mean?" Don't they know the word "to found"? Certainly. But if the word "to found" were to be taken in its literal sense, then it would have to be admitted that a father established his younger son before his older one. But it is written (Genesis 10:6): "The descendants of Ham: Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan." Canaan was therefore younger than Mizraim, Egypt. How is one to

accept that Ham established his younger son Canaan in his city seven years before building Zoan, the Egyptian city, for Mizraim, his older son? Ah, Ham, the venerable patriarch—what irony in this text!—imagine Ham having become a patriarch and establishing his children. The conflicts he had had with his father in his youth are forgotten. Now he is a venerable old man, just and respectful of the birthrights of his children. Not to acknowledge this right without which no tradition is possible, to steal this right from one's brother, is good only for a Jew like Jacob. Ham, on the other hand, rigorously respects the right of the elder son. He first founded cities for Mizraim, who is the elder, and only afterward for Canaan, the younger. How can it be then that a city intended for the elder is more recent by seven years than the city of the younger? What, in fact, is being discussed? Is the priority of the land in which Israel settles chronological? From the Canaanite perspective, this land can certainly not compete with the ancient civilizations. The Talmudists know very well that the priority of Palestine does not come to it from its pre-Israelite past. Hebron was not really founded seven years before Zoan, seven years before Egypt, but it received culture according to a different order. In the land of Israel, founding must have a new meaning:

Hebron was seven times more cultivated than Zoan. And yet in all the land of Israel, there is no place with more rocks than Hebron; that is why the dead are buried there. Among all countries there is none more fertile than Egypt, for it is written (Genesis 13:10): "Like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt." And in the whole land of Egypt, there is no place more fertile than Zoan, for it is written (Isaiah 30:4): "For his princes were at Zoan." And, despite this, Hebron was seven times more cultivated than Zoan.

Its superiority is not of the same order as that of the great Eastern civilizations. Hebron was not founded before Zoan but it was seven times more cultivated. Consequently, the poorest, the rockiest, the most wretched area of Israel's land, reserved for graves (and, as if by chance, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are buried there), is the most cultivated, the richest in spiritual potentials, richer than the land which had greater real antiquity and greater visible splendor. We have here a first answer to the question which troubles the explorers. When I give answers instead of deepening the questions, I take away from my text, but, after all, one also has to remember that here, in Europe, we like results. The first answer to the explorers' question, or, more precisely, to the third interpretation we have given to this question, is the following: The children of Israel will go into an already inhabited country; but in this country, the tombs of the ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are to be found. Despite the rocks, despite the vast quantity of sand, this country holds more possibilities than Zoan, which is located in the midst of Egypt, in the midst of civilization; it calls upon those who are

capable of realizing these potentials. Aren't some rights conferred through moral superiority? It must certainly be explained in what this superiority consists. But one can also doubt that moral superiority, of whatever kind, permits an expropriation. I think that Mr. Domenach doubts it. And I can calm him: the Talmudists who relate the entire story on which I am commenting also doubt it: the invocation of rights due to the moral superiority of Israel is improper.

In the first place, is this superiority evident? Does Hebron evoke only the moral grandeur of Israel? Is Abraham the only memory we have of Hebron? Is sacred history a history of holiness only? That is the awful question concealed in the banal discussion which follows, an awful question quite foreign to the notorious complacency associated with the conscience of the Pharisees. In our text, someone asks: Is Hebron really so poor? Isn't it written (2 Samuel 15:7): "After a period of forty years had gone by, Absalom said to the king; let me go to Hebron. . . ."? When Absalom plots against King David, he goes to Hebron to unite everyone against his father. "He went to Hebron." Why did he go to Hebron? He said to his father: "I will go to Hebron to offer sacrifices there." Did he need to go to Hebron for that? No. Then what did he go in search of there? He went to find sheep for his sacrifice. There were sheep then in Hebron? Hebron was therefore a rich country. And is it not taught elsewhere: the "rams of Moab, the sheep of Hebron"? Thus, the rams come from Moab and the sheep from Hebron. There is no contradiction! In rocky regions and not very fertile soils, pastures abound. Consequently, the text alluded to confirms that Hebron is the poorest city of Israel but more valuable than Zoan; because the soil there is barren, Hebron has pastures and livestock.

We have just summarized a discussion which does not change the situation one bit: Hebron was indeed the poorest region. Why this discussion then? Because it destroys the argumentation of a moment ago. Earlier we had said: We, the Israelites, have a right to this land because we have the Bible. The objection consists in reminding us of the very teaching of this Bible and of the deeds it relates. People of the Book? Nothing but sons who honor their fathers? Children who obey all the moral principles? What about Absalom? The example is wonderfully well chosen. Bad lots are not lacking in the Bible; but isn't Absalom in a certain sense the counterpart of Ham, the founder of the land of Canaan? Remember what Ham did. He made fun of his father's nakedness. And Absalom? Here a euphemism is in order, even in the presence of intellectuals: he cohabited with all his father's concubines on the roof of the royal palace. So much for the superiority of Judaism! Which obviously gives it the right to conquer a country! One can understand the explorers; one can understand the revolt of the pure. They asked themselves, dear Rabi: By what right are we going into this land? What moral advantage do we have over the inhabitants settled in this country? You see that the Talmud has thought of everything and that—much as

we may be sure, Mr. Neher, of our right attested to by the Bible—we will not be able to exercise our sovereignty, as President Goldman deplored yesterday, over the whole of the Diaspora, where all the books have been read.

Let us now go back to the text. It shows us that the plot of the explorers did not come about solely as the result of the exploration itself and that it was, like all questions of conscience, an *a priori* problem.

“They returned from exploring the land and went and came back” (Numbers 13:25–26).

The Hebrew text is redundant.

Rabbi Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon bar Yochai: the going is compared to the return. The return happened with “bad intentions”; the going was already with these “bad intentions.”

Bad intentions which were good intentions: those of an overly pure conscience. It begins to doubt God because God’s command asks us either what is above our strength or what is beneath our conscience. The Promised Land is not permitted land.

They told him and said: “We went further” (Numbers 13:27) “but the people is strong” (Numbers 13:28). Rav Johanan said in the name of Rabbi Meir: Slander which does not have some basis in truth does not last long.

We are being given a lesson in rhetoric, a lesson the Devil has learned well: to lie efficiently, start by telling the truth in order to give credibility to your lie. But it may be that Rav Johanan finds some truth in the words of the explorers regarding the moral problem they raise, independent of the details of the report. Our passage in its entirety can have no other meaning than to suggest that this is a blameworthy moral sensitivity and a morally twisted one. But the plot could never have corrupted so many consciences if none of the reasons governing the actions of the explorers and none of the arguments they put forward were justifiable.

Then “Caleb calmed the people about Moses” (Numbers 13:20). This is badly translated, for the word *el* in Hebrew indicates a direction, toward something or someone, and Caleb calmed the people *toward* Moses; his speech was directed first toward Moses, and that is how he got the people’s attention; he won them over. He began to speak as if he too were an enemy of Moses. By starting to speak against Moses, he won the trust of the rebels. Another lesson in rhetoric. Indispensable in the struggle against the beguilements of the Devil: one must use the Devil’s own tools. Here, there is an important detail: What about Joshua? Did he keep a prudent silence all the time? “When Joshua began to address them, they cried out: ‘that lopped-off

head seeks to speak?’ ” This is what had happened: The first protest against the report of the explorers and the call to carry out the great and noble deeds for which Israel was made came from Joshua. But he was reduced to silence by the crowd and insulted. An impaired man! A man without children, say the commentators. A man alone. A man who has nothing to lose in the enterprise he is urging forward. A pure cleric who has no earthly attachments and is by this very fact incapable of sacrifice. His renunciation proves nothing. In an enterprise one must be able to risk values acquired or established with difficulty—a patrimony, a family, a work, an institution. One should not be like the person who can say *omnia mea*, etc. Joshua would be a Zionist for others, a Zionist who cannot (or does not want to) engage his children—in either case, a bad Zionist. He has only the right to keep silent. That is why Caleb thought that a ruse was needed in order to make the impertinent people who managed to reduce Joshua to silence listen. That is why he pretends to attack Moses:

Has the son of Amram done nothing but this? They then thought he was going to attack Moses and became quiet.

Did he not call him the son of Amram? Has he done nothing but this?

He brought us out of Egypt, split the sea for us and fed us manna. Should we not listen to him, even if he were to tell us to build ladders and ascend to heaven?

Where does the idea of a ladder and of heaven, which are missing in the biblical text, come from? Doesn’t the text say: “We shall go up and gain possession of it” (Numbers 13:20)? It is this “We shall go up” which the Midrash uses as a pretext to introduce the idea of a “ladder to ascend to heaven.”

I apologize for completely neglecting rhetoric in constructing this commentary: I am yielding the secret to you without waiting until the end. What meaning do Caleb’s words have? Is he simply following the cult of personality, defending Moses’ policies, come what may? Or is he aware of the disproportion that exists between messianic politics and all other politics? Is our history an ordinary history then? Moses brought us out of Egypt, our history begins with an act of liberation. He split the sea for us; he conquered the forces of nature. He fed us manna. Miraculous food: the real miracle is not that the manna falls from heaven but that it corresponds exactly to our needs. To be nourished on manna: not to need to stock up; messianic times. One need no longer think about tomorrow, and in this sense too we are at the end of time. If Moses brought us out of Egypt, split the sea, and fed us manna, do you think, then, that under his leadership we are going to conquer a country the way one conquers a colony? Do you

think that our act of conquest can be an imperialistic act? Do you think that we will appropriate a plot of land for ourselves so that we can use and abuse it? We are going—and here the text is extraordinarily explicit—we are going toward this land in order to experience celestial life.

"We are going into this land to ascend to heaven." We will not possess the land as it is usually possessed; we will found a just community in this land. I am telling you this in a very flat way, but that is what it means to sacralize the earth. I very much liked Professor Baruk's comment yesterday: "To sacralize the earth is to found a just community on it."

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 kibbutzes wanted it—because they too built ladders to ascend to heaven despite the repugnance most of them felt for heaven—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.

"But the men who had gone with him said: 'We will not be able to . . .'" (Numbers 13:31).

Rav Hanina bar Papa said: the explorers uttered a great thing at that moment: "He is stronger than we are" (Numbers 13:31). Do not read "than we are." Read "than Him."

In Hebrew, the word *mimenu*, meaning "than we are," is punctuated and vocalized the same way as *mimenu*, meaning "than him." (In Aramaic, there apparently is a difference between the two vocalizations.) The explorers would have said: the inhabitant of this land is stronger than He. Stronger than God. And the Talmud adds:

Even the Boss, so to speak, cannot remove his tools from there.

A totally mysterious statement. And all this would be a "great thing"!

One can see rather well the meaning of the first reflection: the native inhabitant of Canaan is stronger than God. At least two interpretations are possible: against the strength of this indigenous population, nothing moral can hold its own. He is moral reality; they are historical reality. According to this first lesson, the great thing expressed by the explorers would be human despair before the failure of ideas, which are always crushed by history, the universal vanquished by the local.

But this text can be read differently, and the explorers will reveal themselves to be yet purer than we imagine: he is stronger than He. The right of the native population to live is stronger than the moral right of the universal God. Even the Boss cannot retrieve the tools entrusted to them, as long as the tools correspond to their needs, there would be no right on earth that could deprive them of them; one cannot take away from them the land on which they live, even if they are immoral, violent, and unworthy and even if this land were meant for a better destiny.

Earlier we put into question the morality of Israel, which was capable of producing an Absalom. Here the thought is more radical: even an absolutely moral people would have no right to conquest.

This is how far the second interpretation goes: it always accompanies the first and will accompany it to the end. This is how far the purity of the explorers, the purity of their atheism, would go: even the Boss cannot remove his tools from this land.

"It is a land which uses up its inhabitants" (Numbers 13:32). Raba taught: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: I had a good intention but they interpreted it for the worst. My intention was good: wherever they went the leading citizens died so that, in the confusion, they could not be noticed. Some say: It is Job who died and all the inhabitants were in mourning. But they interpreted it in a bad sense: it is a land which uses up its inhabitants.

The Talmud takes, or pretends to take, the expression "this land uses up its inhabitants" for a lived experience. It is a land where one gets used up easily. Heart attacks are frequent there. People work too hard and die early. The proof? There were only funerals around us during the exploration! The explorers want to frighten. In the desert, obviously, one lives much better! The bad faith of these people is beyond doubt. Oh, sublime plan of the Eternal One, which they misjudged! The God of Justice would have caused some people from there to die (especially renowned ones, which is not very serious for the population) so that rich funerals would take the attention of the inhabitants away from our ever so ungrateful explorers! And yet again we understand these people, oh beautiful incorruptible consciences. What, then, does the Talmud want?

Does it want to attribute such great Machiavellianism to the Eternal One or to say that the great designs of history must sometimes occur without the knowledge of individuals? Does evil not need to be put to sleep at times? Must freedom be granted to those who want to kill freedom? The explorers, in the purity of their egalitarian conscience, denounced as anti-democratic the wisdom which excluded from freedom the murderers of freedom, which reduced thoughts too oriented toward politics to their private concerns. Let us remind our listeners 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!

"And we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight" (Numbers 13:33).

Rav Mershasheya said: The explorers were lying.

Here, we catch them in the very act of lying.

They could be grasshoppers in their own eyes; but how could they know that they were so in the eyes of others?

That is, indeed, not possible; but there is a semblance of an answer, and it is very odd that the Talmudic text, which wants to attack the explorers, this time takes their defense.

That is not an objection, the latter—the inhabitants—were eating their funeral meal under the cedars. When the former—the Israelite spies—saw them, they climbed the trees; they sat in them. They would then hear the ones below exclaim: we see men like grasshoppers in the trees.

And that is how they knew they had been taken for grasshoppers by the Canaanites. It is a situation as strange as it is natural. 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. Oh, the forewarned intelligence of realists! Always, at the beginning, there is a dance of grasshoppers. On this point, the explorers tell the truth. They knew that the inhabitants took them for grasshoppers.

"Then the whole community broke into loud cries and the people wept" (Numbers 14:1). Raba said in the name of Rabbi Johanan: It was the ninth of Av and the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: They cried without cause; I will change this day into a permanent day of lamentation.

These were then useless scruples. They cried for no reason. The tears of beautiful souls are dangerous when they are without cause. They provoke real misfortunes which resemble the imaginary ones. Moreover, those who are about to conquer a country the way heaven is conquered, those who ascend, are already beyond such delicate tears. They not only commit themselves to justice but also apply it rigorously to themselves. Already, they are potentially exiled. The date of their exile is fixed before that of their con-

quest. They do not know that their crisis is the source of their right, for there is no right that cannot be revoked. They assume a responsibility without indulgence and are summoned to pay for their own injustice with their exile. Only those who are always ready to accept the consequences of their actions and to accept exile when they are no longer worthy of a homeland have the right to enter this homeland.—You see, this country is extraordinary. It is like heaven. It is a country which vomits up its inhabitants when they are not just. There is no other country like it; the resolution to accept a country under such conditions confers a right to that country.

And here is the last word.

"Those who spread such calumnies about the earth died of the plague" (Numbers 14:37). Rav Simeon bar Lakish said: They died an unnatural death.

Just as their protests were unnatural.

Rav Hanina bar Papa said: Rav Shila of Kefar Temarthah taught: This meant that their tongue was elongated and reached down to their navel and that worms issued from the navel to the tongue and from the tongue to the navel. Rav Nahman bar Isaac said: They died of diphtheria.

One death is less harsh than the other. Which one? That is not important. What matters is the idea of two punishments. The fault itself is thus open to two interpretations. This was our assumption throughout the whole of our commentary. Did the crime of the explorers consist of being too pure and of having thought that they did not even have rights to this land? Or did these people back off from a project which seemed to them utopian, unrealizable? Did they think their right lacked might or that they had no rights, that the Promised Land was not permitted to them?

In both cases, the explorers were wrong, but the two hypotheses formulated about the punishment which befell them indicate the difference between the two possible reasons for their guilt.

#### NOTE

1. Sergei Esenin (1895–1925), one of the great Russian poets of the twentieth century. This quotation is from his poem "Oktoif" (1917). (Trans.)