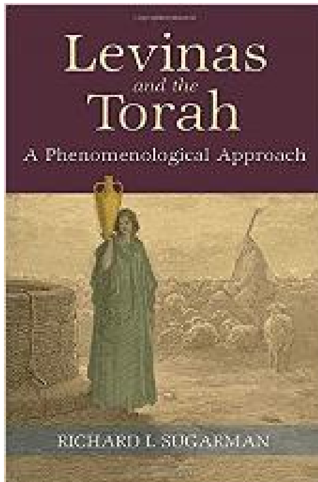
Levinas and the Torah



Book review

Matthew LaGrone | 01.03.2020

Richard I. Sugarman:
Levinas and the Torah: A Phenomenological Approach.
SUNY Series in Contemporary Jewish Thought. Albany: SUNY Press, 2019. 384 pp. $95.00 (cloth)

In his *Big Gods*, psychologist Ara Norenzayan argues that “religion is more in the situation than in the person.” Norenzayan locates a set of conditions that need to be present as the motivating determinants in shaping religiosity more than personal inclinations and contends that there must be some “salient norm,” a spur to the mind and the heart, that causes us to be awake to the divine.[1] It is in that spirit that I confess to having started Richard I. Sugarman’s *Levinas and the Torah* in the time between mincha and neilah on Yom Kippur.

Levinas and the Torah is an unexpected book. And it is unexpected in two ways. First, Sugarman employs Emmanuel Levinas’s work as *divrei Torah*, a pathway to deepen our appreciation of the parshiyot, the weekly cycle of Torah readings. One way to read the book is as an act of devotion, of religious belief rather than scholarly position-taking (though it can be read that way as well). Second, and this term understates the case, the book is atypical of SUNY Press publications, which incline to the sociological and certainly not the devotional.

Sugarman’s book is a welcome contribution to the maturing field of Levinas studies. Beyond the work’s unique integration of Levinas and biblical interpretation, it serves as a gentle introduction to major themes and terminology in the philosopher’s oeuvre, a different key in which to access Levinas’s conceptual language. The book assumes no prior familiarity with Levinas, requiring only a commitment to engage with a challenging mind and the curiosity to follow sometimes byzantine routes to new ideas. Within Jewish studies, it is understandable why so much attention has been devoted to Levinas’s Talmudic studies. His writings tilt in that direction. As many others have noted, the Hebrew Bible is the foundation and starting point of Levinas’s thought.

For Levinas, and contrary to Philo and contemporary heirs to his legacy, the Torah is not philosophy. While philosophy is defined as the love of wisdom, Sugarman writes that for Levinas the heart of the Torah is holiness, which is the “wisdom of love” (p. xxiv). From this starting point within the Torah

itself emerges Levinas's guiding claim: ethics is the first philosophy. If discovering or recovering wisdom remains the *telos* of philosophy, a philosopher can be left to themselves in contemplation, sitting in front of a blank page, urging knowledge into being. Torah, on the other hand, converts wisdom into a conduit for love and holiness, and thus the personal encounter with Torah always intends another, as "explanation is always an explanation to a *someone else*" (p. 11).

Sugarman returns persistently to this One Big Theme: ethics, not ontology, is the root and branch of everything human. From this core idea flows the prioritizing of the other, not the self; responsibility for and to others, not self-fulfillment; the actual face of the other as central, not transforming the other into yourself, a mirror of what you want them to be. In the Torah for Levinas, we confront the other as she is: humans are not ideas, chess pieces to be moved around to satisfy some philosophical or sociological fantasy, not soft clay to be molded, nor statues to be chiseled out of marble. The ethical demand, then, emerges out of an obligation that precedes provisional social encoding or an evolutionary account about the need for social cooperation.

So much of post-emancipation Jewish thought (and pre-emancipation, for that matter) has been an attempt to secure a passport to Athens, and thus Levinas's insistence on the priority of the ethical lashes against the main streams of Western thought, with its privileging of knowledge and being. Sugarman threads this narrative throughout the book, while acknowledging Levinas's debts to that tradition. In the long run, the emphasis on knowledge—and knowledge as power—kicks the bottom out of the transcendent, and this matters precisely because the transcendent emerges out of the relational and thus the ethical. Pushing against developments within Western philosophy, Levinas finds in the Torah the radical reality of the priority of the other before myself, which "is the beginning of a new paradigm of the human person" (p. 21). Philosophy fails the stranger; the Torah commands that she be loved, along with the orphan and the widow. Sugarman adds: "Before I can recognize this specific widow or orphan or stranger, I am aware of and always see in another the widow, the orphan, and the stranger" (p. 207). Archimedes exclaims "eureka!" as the beginning of wonder and discovery; the Torah, for Levinas, begins with "'Do not kill me' ... as the first expression of the other" (p. 117). Immanuel Kant stalks lonely on his walks; Abraham invites the unknown into his tent—hence the centrality of hospitality for Levinas. Hospitality engenders a welcoming attitude but more importantly it obliges me to attend to the material needs of the other. Sugarman quotes Rabbi Israel Salanter: "my spiritual needs are the other person's material needs" (p. 29). The author draws throughout the book helpful parallels between Levinas and the *musar* tradition.

In his *drash* on Parshat Tazria, Sugarman invokes Levinas's important discussion of the face in relation to the other. Some of the skin diseases mentioned in the parsha can afflict the face; these bodily diseases appear on the face of someone who has violated the moral dignity of another. They are physical manifestations that also blemish the soul. Sugarman asks: why the face in particular? For Levinas, "meaning arises and is confirmed in the facial expression of the other.... There is nothing more naked for [him] than the human face" (p. 187). It is turning to see the face of the other that "allows the trace of the Infinite to appear" (p. 188).

Sugarman correctly places Levinas's work within a sustained argument against sameness, which is traced back to Socrates and Plato. Sameness is the reduction of you to me, or the creation of taxonomic categories that I choose, pinning you like a butterfly's wings to a mounting board. If sameness is rejected—as the epistemological hubris of claiming the other—what remains is an existential strangeness and irrevocable incomprehensibility of the other. Sugarman maintains that, for Levinas, "other people cannot merely be the occasion for my reflected self-discovery" (p. 21). We must resist the desire to catalogue someone else, and even our encounters with them do not relinquish their continuing otherness.

The source for this disordered desire for sameness, the craving to trap the other in the web of me, is the ego. Simon Critchley says it well: philosophy, with its accent on the self, is an "alchemy whereby otherness is transmuted into sameness by means of the philosopher's stone of the knowing ego."[2]

Or, as Iris Murdoch put it, “In the moral life, the enemy is the fat relentless ego.”[3] Sugarman, using Levinasian categories, suggests a possible way out of this. Exploring the famous divine charge to Abraham—*lech lecha*—the author notes that Rashi reads the command to mean leaving your family and home for your own advantage. Sugarman, however, reverses the direction of the verse: “go out from yourself.” Leave the ego behind, without diluting your integrity. The author continues: “The subject becomes fully human when it recognizes that its central purpose is a responsibility to and for others. As Levinas argues, Abraham as human subject signifies that the other comes *before* the self” (p. 19). Such a challenge is a bracing one, and certainly counter-instinctual. But what makes it morally attractive is Levinas’s refusal to let *anyone* off the ethical hook. Ultimately, it is the demand to be better than we know we are.

As the subtitle of the book indicates, Sugarman interprets and situates Levinas within the phenomenological tradition. Levinas was a student of Edmund Husserl but also a critic. He appreciated his teacher’s emphasis on intentionality and the concrete but maintained that in the end Husserl’s work was too abstract, too much in the mind, and did not really represent the tangible conditions in which women and men find themselves. The book would have benefited from a fuller picture of Levinas’s ambivalence toward the phenomenological method. Despite this lacuna in the book, *Levinas and the Torah* is a morally serious work, helpful in clarifying Levinas’s sometimes foggy conceptual vocabulary—so remote from any definition captured in a dictionary—and a stimulating approach to presenting Levinas’s work, fastened to the central work in Jewish tradition. Throughout most of the book, Sugarman (blissfully, at least for me) avoids writing *like* Levinas instead of *about* Levinas, though a few times he slips into the density of Levinasian prose.

An aesthetic/tactile sidenote: *Levinas and the Torah*, as a physical book, has the artwork, feel, and weight of the Covenant and Conversation series by former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and issued by Koren Publishers. This homiletical collection is also devoted to the weekly Torah reading. In fact, when it arrived by post I thought it was a new Sacks book! It was not, of course, but in the acknowledgments section of Sugarman’s work he mentions the Lubavitcher rebbe as a significant influence. Sacks has spoken often that his encounter as a young man with the rebbe set him on his future path.

Footnotes

[1] Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 39-40.
[2] Simon Critchley, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16-17.
[3] Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 51.

Editorial remarks

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