

Session Four:

Revelation as Ethics: Emil Fackenheim, Emmanuel Levinas and Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought

1. The Holocaust's challenge to reason, revelation, and morality:
 - a. Is the systematic extermination of six million Jews the culmination of enlightened reason?
 - b. Why did God fail to save the Jewish people? (Fackenheim: "How dare a Jewish parent crush his child's innocence with the knowledge that his uncle or grandfather was denied life because of his Jewishness? And how dare he not burden him with this knowledge? The conflict is inescapable.")
 - c. Does the Nazi genocide show that might makes right? (Levinas: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.")
2. The need for revelation after the Holocaust
 - a. Fackenheim: a brief biography
 - b. Levinas: a brief biography
 - c. Rosenzweig: "Love is strong as death. Strong in the same way as death? But against whom does death display its strength? Against him whom it seizes. And love, of course, seizes both, the lover as well as the beloved, but the beloved otherwise than the lover. It originates in the lover. The beloved is seized, his love is already a response to being seized."
3. Fackenheim: the uniqueness of Auschwitz
 - a. "The Voice of Auschwitz commands Jews not to go mad. It commands them to accept their singled out condition, face up to its contradictions, and endure them."
 - b. The 614th commandment
 - c. implications for the state of Israel: "It is necessary not only to perceive a bond between the two events [the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel] but also to act as to make it unbreakable."
 - d. "What is this madness? Not insanity, if "insanity" is "flight from reality." It is just because it dare not flee from its reality that this midrash is mad. This madness is obliged condemned?-to be sane. Not "irrationality," if this is

ignorance or lack of discernment. There is, to be sure, rationality of a lesser sort which one displays by discerning the ways of one's world, by going about in it, going along with it. But just a rationality of this sort shows its own ultimate irrationality when it goes along a road descending into hell and beyond. After all is over, such a rationality can only plead that it "did not know." Midrashic madness, in contrast, knows, in some cases has known all along. Its discernment is informed by Truth transcending the world of which it is a victim. Irrationally the standards of lesser rationalities, its rationality is ultimate. Midrashic madness, third, is not mysticism, if "mysticism" is a rise to divine ecstasy in which innocence and guilt, joy and anguish, good and evil are all indiscriminately transcended. Midrash must hold fast to the world; mad midrash cannot but hold fast to its world, the anti-world. How then can it retain this stance and remain midrash, that is, hold fast to God as well as its world? Only by dint of an absolute protest against the anti-world and its God--as it were, an anti-God over against mad Moshe, a God mad with him, or a God torn between extremes. This protest is serious only if it turns to determination to restore the world. To be sure, the world to be restored will be, as it always has been, an imperfect world. But although tarnished by a thousand blemishes it is neither part of nor heir to the anti-world. On the contrary, the attempt to restore it strikes at the very core of the anti-world, thus aiming at its absolute overthrow. Thus, the mad midrashic Word turns into Kaddish for all the victims of the anti-world, "that solemn affirmation of grandeur and serenity, by which man returns to God His crown and sceptre."

4. Levinas: ethics as first philosophy

- a. totality and infinity
- b. Exodus 19:17: "And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the foot of the mountain."
Levinas: "Wouldn't revelation be precisely a reminder of this consent prior to freedom and non-freedom? Therefore it would not simply be a source of knowledge parallel to those which come from natural insight. Adherence to it [revelation] would not coexist side by side with the internal adherence which works through evidence."
- c. "The identity aroused behind identification is an identity by pure election. Election traverses the concept of the ego to summon me as me through the inordinateness of the other. It extracts me from the concept where I continually take refuge, for I find in it the measure of an obligation which is not defined by this election. Obligation calls for a unique response not inscribed in universal thought, the unforeseeable response of the chosen one."
- d. "What genuinely matters about the State of Israel is not that it fulfills an ancient promise, or heralds a new age of material security...but that it finally offers the opportunity to carry out Judaism's social law."