

BS”D

Levinas’s Ethics: Jacob and Esau as paradigm “same and other”

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Ethics.

Tonight I would like to do something a little different. I would like to present you (lehatzig bifnechem) a concise overview (mabat tamtziti) of a most revolutionary philosophy brought to light by French Jewish Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. He is famous for placing great emphasis on, as we have mentioned in the past, the “other”.

But why? And what does this entail?

ETHICS FIRST – I DON’T EXIST WITHOUT OTHERS

Levinas explains that the “first philosophy” is ethics – ethics comes before everything. That is, as opposed to the normative philosophical approach to life – ontology – wherein one asks: what is the meaning of my existence? One can only ask this question AFTER one has asked the ethical question: what is my obligation/relation to the other. Levinas holds this true because one does not have any true existence without a relation to an other.

Like “I think therefore I am” (אני חושב משמע אני קיים) comes first, but then we realize that we get to this only because there is a God – so too, I first recognize myself as an entity but then realize that I am because there are others. And even without God, “the self, who has not yet encountered the other, already has a relation to others that it has forgotten.”¹

So Levinas’s philosophy of ethics ultimately describes – in a general way – how people are to relate to each other. That is, he doesn’t lay down rules of morality, but rather describes a way the people are to relate to each other – the relation of me (what he calls, “same”) to “other.”

JACOB/ESAU

I believe that we can use the story of Jacob and Esau – that started in last week’s parsha and end in next week’s parsha – to explain (lehamshih) Levinas’s philosophy of ethics, of the relationship between “same and other.” (haAni vHaAcher)

Jacob and Esau represent the classic conflict between same and other. On the one hand they are really “same” – twins that they are. And this is indeed the first step in relating to

¹ My paraphrasing of William Large’s “Reader’s Guide” to “Totality and Infinity.” P.30.

the other – we note how they are indeed like us. This is the first critical step that allows us to feel empathy.

SAME SAME

But this understanding fails to appreciate the alterity (shoni and yihudiyut) of the other. To truly relate to the other, to arrive at a true ethic, one must appreciate the alterity of the other. Without this appreciation, there is going to be war. Take the conflict over the birthright between Jacob and Esau, they both want it, neither feels any obligation to the other – they are both, at this point, completely self-centered. (It could be that this is like the Gem (BM 62a) wherein two are walking in the desert and kiton mayim ehad beneihem – a difficult conflict [mahloket], but not a war). Jacob and Esau are not at the ethical level of R. Akiva and Ben Petora. Of course this is just as we would expect because Jacob and Esau have not developed yet.

OTHER IN SELF

For the individual to develop to appreciate the other, he must first actually appreciate himself. Not simply as one object of many objects in a “totality” – but as a subject in a system of subjects. For this, one must first and foremost recognize his own alterity, his own uniqueness. One must realize that he is unique to realize that others are unique. One must develop his own concrete ego.

I must first become an ego. Without this “concrete egoism”, the I would just be defined as opposing other and the 2 would together be a totality. The other is not just the reverse of my identity, not the resistance to the same, but he is “prior” to all “imperialism of the same” – meaning [it seems to me] he cannot fall under any definition or correlation of the same, the “I”.²

VAYEITZEI YAAKOV

To develop this “concrete ego” one must go out into the world. “Vayeitzei Yaakov.”

I must first and foremost identify myself, not as “I am I,” but “I” as “other” that is not an other. I do this by going in to the world: I v World. This going into world is “sojourning” – “identifying oneself by existing here at home with oneself.”³

Though Jacob was self-centered, he was not what Levinas would call a “concrete ego”, he did not really appreciate who he was as a unique subject. Was it not his mother who forced him to get the patriarchal blessings? And was he not afraid to do so? Was it not his mother who told him to leave home?

² My paraphrase of Levinas, Totality & Infinity, p. 38.

³ My paraphrase of Levinas, Totality & Infinity, p. 37.

So Jacob sets out on the journey of a life time, fleeing his brother, the ultimate “other” that is nonetheless “same” and preventing him from evaluating who he is, from becoming a concrete ego. For this he arrives at the home of Laban where he is, on the one hand accepted as “same” – same family – but on the other hand, completely rejected – “other”, outsider. He learns that he is different, unique, wholly other to the point that if he does not stand up for himself he will not exist.

DWELLING – AT HOME WITH ONESELF

Having completed this lesson in development – i.e., he is a concrete ego – Jacob is now ready to return home – on his own terms – against those of Laban. This too is a critical step in Levinas’s ethical methodology. That is, after becoming a concrete ego, one must now be “at home with oneself” and transcend oneself – i.e., seek to recognize the other too as a concrete ego, an alterity, that must be related to.

VAYISHLACH MELACHIM

And so Jacob seeks to reconcile (lehashlim) with Esau – Vayishlach melachim. Jacob sends messengers, people who will bring a communication. This too is part and parcel of Levinas’ ethical methodology – “conversation” “discourse” “speech” as the medium of relating to the other. But this is of course not enough – Esau still comes at him for war. There must be the *face to face* meeting (Levinas, p. 39). And so the twins that were two “sames” now confront each other as same and other – the ethical moment which will result in violence or peace according to the freewill of the two.

Levinas p. 40 – **Apology**, in which the I at the same time asserts itself and inclines [Jacob bows 7 times] before the transcendent, **belongs to the essence of conversation.**

Jacob goes on his way and Esau on his. The two have closed the rift between them, yet remain, importantly, each a unique individual. We see that they were mashlim with each other in that at the end of the parasha, they go to bury Yitzhak and Jacob gave Kavod to Esau (as the verse puts his name first – see all comms: Sechel Tov, Rashi, Rashbam, etc.), and Radak explains that Jacob honored Esau from the day they were reconciled:

רד"ק בראשית פרק לה פסוק כט - ויקברו אתו עשו ויעקב - הקדים עשו לפי שהיה בכור, ואף על פי שמכר בכורתו יעקב היה נוהג בו כבוד ומקדימו לפניו מעת שהשלים אתו ...

RELIGIOUS

Levinas calls this relationship “religious”: “We propose to call “religion” the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality” (Levinas, p. 40). Like the bond between man and God. Man is like God but very different. Man lives in his world (his totality) and God in His. Nevertheless the two have a relationship.

Similarly Jacob and Esau. That is the essence of ethics. That is the bond between Jacob and Esau.

So that is the essence of the philosophy of the other

- First we must realize that we are not alone, that our existence actually depends on others.
- Second, we must realize that others are indeed human just like us – empathize.
- Third we must realize that each of us is unique, special – a concrete ego.
- Fourth we must realize then that so is every individual
- Then we can begin build relationships

May we merit to achieve this bond of ethical respect and responsibility between our countryman and men of all countries.

Perhaps then we will merit the messiah, BBY.

Shabbat Shalom