

HOW MANY MESSIAHS, HOW MANY *ALEPHS*? LEVINAS' TALMUDIC "MESSIANIC TEXTS" IN THREE NUMBERS, AND ANDRÉ NEHER'S BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT: This article approaches Levinas's 1963 Talmudic reading entitled "Messianic Texts" in light of the metaphoric numbers 0, 1, and 2. "Zero" will refer to unforeseen silences in the Talmudic text in question (here, Rabbi Eleazar's sudden silence in the debate about the conditions of redemption, as well as commentator Rashi's silence on Talmudic discussions about a certain "identity" of the messiah. The number "one" concerns a textual *hapax*: Rabbi Hillel's historicist dismissal of the messiah as promise and open future—a position virtually anathema to rabbinics (inter alia) *but nevertheless preserved* by the Talmud. My metaphoric numbers strategy turns, finally, to the curious presence of "allegorical doubles" in the Bible, which Levinas describes as a configuration of textual "eidetics." Using my three numbers (0, 1, 2) as an elementary analytic grid, I turn from Levinas' "Messianic Texts" to André Neher's biblical commentary on Levinas's presentation—a commentary similarly concerning messianism but no longer in the Talmud. My purpose is dual: to sketch the context of this complex Talmudic reading, to offer one (idiosyncratic) reading-strategy focusing on two events of "silence," the future anterior of the "messiah" who will have been but will come no more, and finally the play of identity-in-difference in the biblical doubles.

Keywords: "Messianic Texts," Vladimir Jankélévitch, André Neher, messianisms, world-to-come, the Samozvanetz.

RESUMO: Este artigo aborda a leitura talmúdica de Levinas de 1963 intitulada "Textos Messiânicos" à luz dos números metafóricos 0, 1 e 2. "Zero" se referirá a silêncios imprevistos no texto talmúdico em questão (aqui, o súbito silêncio de Rabi Eleazar no debate sobre as condições da redenção, bem como o silêncio do

comentarista Rashi sobre as discussões talmúdicas sobre uma certa “identidade” do messias. O número “um” diz respeito a um *hapax* textual: a rejeição historicista do messias pelo rabino Hillel como promessa e futuro aberto – uma posição virtualmente anátema para os rabínicos (entre outros), mas ainda assim preservada pelo Talmud. Minha estratégia de números metafóricos se volta, finalmente, para a curiosa presença de “duplos alegóricos” na Bíblia, que Levinas descreve como uma configuração de “eidética” textual. Usando meus três números (0, 1, 2) como uma grade analítica elementar, passo dos “Textos Messiânicos” de Lévinas para o comentário bíblico de André Neher sobre a apresentação de Lévinas – um comentário semelhante sobre o messianismo, mas não mais no Talmud. Meu propósito é duplo: esboçar o contexto dessa complexa leitura talmúdica, oferecer uma (idiossincrática) estratégia de leitura focada em dois eventos de “silêncio”, o futuro anterior do “messias” que terá sido, mas não virá mais, e finalmente o jogo de identidade-na-diferença nos duplos bíblicos.

Palavras-chave: “Textos Messiânicos”, Vladimir Jankélévitch, André Neher, Messianismos, Mundo por-vir, Samozvanetz.

*Les grandes idées naissent dans une situation donnée mais ont toujours
un sens métaphorique qui est plus réel que le sens concret.
Il y a dans la pensée juive telle qu'elle s'est manifestée
dans les grands siècles, entre le 1^{er} et le 4^e siècle,
des pensées tellement profondes...
que ceux qui les ont dites sont arrivés à les cacher aux historiens.
(Levinas, 1961)*

Levinas’ extensive essay “Textes messianiques [Messianic Texts]” appeared in 1963 in the collection entitled *Difficile Liberté*.¹ The essay was several years in

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Textes messianiques » in *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le Judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976, third edition revised), 89-139. The essay is placed in the second section “Commentaires,” of the collection, alone and by itself. All translations are mine. Hereafter TM with the third edition, French pagination.

preparation, as we will see. It comments four passages from the Talmudic tractate “Sanhedrin” concerning the meaning and possible identities of the “messiah.” It takes up rabbinical discussions, several of which already dispute popular and naturalistic conceptions of the latter “as a person who comes miraculously to put an end to the violences that rule the world” (TM 89). Thereby, it invites us to approach the messiah, variously characterized—though notably as the leper living in Rabbi Jehuda’s home (and by a certain extension, the rabbi himself)—as figures, tropes for suffering, rectitude, responsibility. This is largely in line with “Israel,” understood as a metonym for humanity or as a name that moves between the biblical tribes and other nations; in short, as an approach to the particular and the universal.

Attention to biblical tropes, Talmudic debate and polysemia, and multiple even irreconcilable presentations of meaning is hardly unique to this essay.² Yet it is original on several scores; for its contestation of Gershom Scholem’s respected *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (1971),³ for its skepticism about Maimonides’ “rationalist” reading of messianic figures (*Mishneh Torah*): “as though rationalism signified only the negation of the wondrous [*du merveilleux*], and as though one could leave behind contestable values without linking on to [*embrayer sur*] other values” (MT 89 n. 1). Instead, the essay *enacts* a perspectivalism on values through juxtaposition, the placement of commentary, and emphasis. As a declaration of aims and purposes, Levinas’s simple claim to bring to light “the positive signification of the messianism of the rabbis,” stands, deceptively clear.

² For an insightful discussion of Levinas’ conception of language as metaphoric on two levels, that of open semantics and that of intentionality or pre-intentionality, see Shira Wolosky, “Emmanuel Levinas: Metaphor without Metaphysics” in *Levinas and Literature: New Directions*, eds. Michael Fagenblat and Arthur Cools (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 259-279.

³ TM 89 n.1. What became the book of that title first appeared in 1959 as “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism.” It was published in the *Eranos Yearbook*, collection of conferences at the Eranos Institute (Ascona, Switzerland), devoted to discussing topics in religious practices and belief.

The origins of the essay tell a longer story—*inter alia* of what has been called the “Russian debate” between Levinas and Vladimir Jankélévitch around the *meaning* of Pushkin’s *Samoswanetz*. Jankélévitch condemns this figure for his arrogance, his false messianic ambitions; Levinas argues that by reading the text further, we glimpse his *dénouement* in a terrible dream. This rather brief debate took place in 1960 at the third meeting of the Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de langue française in Paris (Congrès Juif Mondial). Discussion would continue the following year, 1961, tensed between the Referendum of Algiers (Algerian self-determination), the violent *putsch* by French generals (21 April 1961), and the “Massacre de Paris” of 17 October, when police attacked 30,000 *Front de libération nationale* (Algerian independence) demonstrators, arresting, killing over a hundred, and drowning some in the Seine River. Justice, a contested colonialism, and questions of redemption were “*dans l’air*” in those years. Tragically, if predictably, Jewish intellectuals in French cities feared more than the street violence; even supporters of Algerian independence redoubted the spill-over of passions into anti-Semitic sentiments repeatedly voiced by the Paris police.⁴

⁴ Why “predictably”? In part because the chief of the police in Paris, Maurice Papon, was one of several French police to have served under the collaborationist Vichy government. Papon was the only one, ultimately, to be convicted for deporting Jews—but his trial and conviction would wait some thirty-five years, until 1997. History repeats: Papon was Prefect of police in Algeria (1956 until March 1958, when the Fourth French Republic crumbled). On 13 March of that year, 7000 police stormed the National Assembly, impatient to receive their “*risque prime*” (bonus for risks during the Vichy government) and encouraged by far-right deputy, Jean-Marie LePen. Their call to arms was: “Sales Juifs, à la Seine! Mort aux Fellaghas!” (Filthy Jews into the Seine; death to the Algerian resisters). An improbable ‘alliance’ was once again created between Jews and resisters to colonialism—improbable above all if we forget the plasticity of anti-Semitism and the ‘symptom’ that was the decade-long Dreyfus Affair. As to the police disruption of the peaceful demonstrations of 16-17 October 1961, see Soren Seelow, “17 octobre 1961: ‘Ce massacre a été occulté de la mémoire collective’” in *Le Monde*, 17 October 2011 (updated 17 October 2016).
https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/10/17/17-octobre-1961-ce-massacre-a-ete-occulte-de-la-memoire-collective_1586418_3224.html (Consulted 10 June 2021).

Glimpsing the socio-political context of protest, insurrection, and resistance *returns* between 1968 and 1970. In those years too, Levinas will choose themes related to the meaning of revolt and justice for his Talmudic readings (“Judaïsme et révolution [1969]” and “Et Dieu créa la femme” [1972]), emerging in the long shadow of *Mai soixante-huit*. Further Talmudic readings could be noted here, like the Talmudic lesson on justice (19...). Nevertheless, the complexity of the “Messianic Texts” is such as to warrant an approach to it alone. We propose to proceed unconventionally. Rather than truncating or reifying it with a summary, we will replace it in the context of discussions with Jankélévitch and Neher, thereby benefitting from Neher’s moving commentary on Levinas’ own 1960 presentation.⁵ In so doing, we shed light on Levinas’ evolving interweave of Talmudic insight and phenomenological hermeneutics—an *enchevêtrement* that he did *not* intend as a *synthesis*, but rather as a glimpse into the meaning of a “religion for adults.” Here, we can readily speak of a “messianism for adults.”

This essay proceeds in three steps, designated as “zeros, ones, and twos.” I concentrate first one two important silences in the text. I thereafter move from the ‘zero’ of silence to “ones”; indeed, to the *hapax legoumenon* that was Rabbi Hillel’s surprising, ‘historicist’ stricture: “there is no further messiah for Israel.” From the never-more of ‘no-further-messiah’, I turn to a theme that recurs in the two aforementioned Talmudic readings, “Judaism and Revolution” and “And God Created Woman.”⁶ The theme appears to me to be a variant of the 1974 figure “the

⁵ André Neher, “Le messianisme biblique d’après le début de la Genèse” in *La conscience juive; Face à l’histoire: Le pardon*, eds. Éliane Amado Lévy-Valensi and Jean Halpérin (Preface by André Neher) (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965), 118-126. Neher’s commentary follows Levinas’ reading during the fourth colloquium (October 1961).

⁶ The Talmudic readings “Judaism and Revolution” [“Judaïsme et Révolution”] and “And God Created Woman” [“Et Dieu créa la femme”] appear in Emmanuel Levinas, *Du sacré au saint: Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977), respectively 11–53 and 122–48, and in English, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

one-for-the-other.” It goes by several names including “le Moi en tant que Moi” (*the Me as Me*).⁷ In “Judaism and Revolution,” the figure indirectly defined “the true revolutionary”: he who “has sought neither distraction nor suicide, and who has not withdrawn from the tension in which the *responsible one* abides.”⁸ In the early version of the messianic texts, this is similarly expressed as “ne pas se dérober au point de répondre *avant que* l’appel ne retentisse [to stay the course to the point of responding *before* the call rings out]” (TM 129/139, *emph. added*). Already in 1961, this is Levinas’s ‘messianic’ response to Vladimir Jankélévitch’s criticism of the *Samozwanetz*, that figure who invests himself with the pomp of a fantasmatic mission of salvation (TM 129).⁹ It is thus Levinas’s early response to what will become Jankélévitch’s 1967 study entitled *Le pardon* (forgiveness). We find it again in 1974 in light of what I have called “twos,” or the allegoric doubles in the Bible.

Let us note that it is with the *Samozwanetz* (or false messiah) that the very notion of the messiah moves into a decisive temporal framework. After Levinas argues that “messianism is...not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops history, [but] my power to bear the suffering of all” (TM 130), he returns to a discussion he commented on between Rabbi Yehuda and Rav, only to focus on the temporal instant, a philosophical synonym for the decision or free leap or enactment.

1990), 94–119 and 161–77, respectively. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of *Du sacré au saint* are mine.

⁷ I deliberately do not write “ego” or “Ego” here, as “Moi” occurs in two basic instances in French: first, it is called a “stressed personal pronoun” (nominative case). For example, one may emphasize that: “*il me voit, moi*” (he indeed sees me, with stress on ‘me’ being the one ‘he’ sees). Or “*moi*” is the form of the accusative used with verbs *in the imperative case*, something quite fitting for Levinas’ thought of intersubjective responsibility.

⁸ Levinas, *Du sacré au saint*, 34; *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 107, *emph. added*.

⁹ In the shorter version of this reading, published in *Face à l’histoire: Le pardon*, the mention of the *Samozwanetz* occurs on page 111. See note 5 *supra*. In 1961, this is a *concept*: “le *Samozwanetz* par excellence, celui-qui-s’investit-soi-même. Et voilà pourquoi il peut prendre sur lui toute la souffrance de tous. » In *Difficile Liberté* the unifying hyphens disappear, changing a figure into predication.

My third point emphasizes the theme of biblical doubles; here, the double messiah. These pairs include, among others, the King David of Jewish history and a David to-come. The theme of doubles opens Levinas's jaunty discussion of a messiah and a vice-messiah, and his remark that "all the historic characters in the Bible have their double" (TM 130/140). In rabbinics, this is arguably one way to configure *eidetics* (a search for, or assertion of formal essences) with phenomenal content, ideas with the instances that participate in them, the universal and the particular. More interestingly, it is also a way in which the *irréel* double functions as ultimately "*plus réel que le réel*" (more real than the real, TM 131), like a sur-realism of the messianic imagination.

Three themes organize this essay: absence or silence (zeros), singularity (ones), and duality or dual figures (twos). The silences occur in the text itself when Rabbi Eleazar effectively ceases to argue; it is intimated in Rabbi Hillel's claim for the absence of a future messiah, a remark that *is cited, given a place in the Talmud*; recited but never rethematized. It denotes more than the uncanny past-time of the messiah under King Hezekiah; it is clearly also skepticism about messianism as nostalgic fantasy, misguided hope. Finally and relatedly, the biblical doubles, open discussion of what is real and what, surreal.

I. Two Silences in "The Messianic Texts"

The first silence in the rabbinic discussion puts an abrupt end to the extended debate between Rabbi Eliezar and Rav Yehoshua concerning the question of unmotivated redemption versus deliverance thanks to good works. It is interesting that, in the passages the rabbis cite from the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, a phrase that echoes repeatedly is "Come back (to Me)!" the supplication to the children or

spouse of the voice (“Israel” being an overdetermined figure here).¹⁰ After Eliezar repeats Jeremiah 4:1 “If you return, Israel, you will return to me,”¹¹ Rabbi Yehoshua

¹⁰ There are, in fact, four arguments turning around this and related invocations. First, Rabbi Eliezar cites “Return to me, oh rebellious children, I will heal your errancy [*vos égarements*].” For the Rabbi, the verb ‘to heal’ in the future tense [*guérirai*]” argues that human corruption descends to deeply, corrupts “being” so radically, that only a “medication” can heal it. However, the remedy requires that humans take the initiative to pursue it; the patient must want the medicament, though it will only come as a gift, as grace [*comme une grâce*] (TM 110). Second, based on the citation “Revenez à moi et je retournerai vers vous [*comme back to me and I will return toward you*],” suggests a reciprocity and Levinas states unequivocally, “Ici s’affirme encore une fois...l’exigence éternelle de la moralité: la *réciprocité* totale entre personnes libres [once again the eternal requirement of morality is asserted here: total reciprocity between free persons]” (TM 111). Eliezar’s first two arguments are thus homologous, though Levinas adds, of the second one: “C’est au nom d’une telle liberté que le salut de l’homme doit avoir son origine dans l’homme (it is in the name of such a freedom that the salvation of man *must have its origin in man*).” This fairly avoids anthropomorphizing God as the maker of contracts or assigner of human, versus divine, tasks. It is crucial to note that Levinas says twice that this unfolds “à l’opposé de la logique chrétienne de la grâce; l’erreur aurait besoin d’un secours extérieur [in a direction opposed to the Christian logic of grace; the error would require help from without]” (TM 111-112). Rabbi Yehoshua first responds Platonically. To the first argument, he urges that sin and errancy has its own foundation in error. The latter may be rectified by teaching. Like today’s moral intuitionists, he adds that “moral perversion rests on a lack [*insuffisance*] of culture and education [*culture*].” And this lack is translated by idolatry—the multiple forms of fetishism, reification and misguided worship that traverses the story of the tribes: “Une offense faite à Dieu, Dieu s’en arrange. C’est de l’inculture” (TM 111). But the offense against one’s fellow human requires reparation, the pardon from the one offended. Rabbi Yehoshua’s second argument takes aim at the aleatory nature of human freedom (TM 112). If we imagine two partners in a “union,” here God and humans, should we conceive this as between two ‘individuals’ free to come and go at will? Or would the union, the engagement not precede refusals and departures? Is it not more fundamental than, say, divorce and supplication? The return in question would thus be implicit in the nature of the supplication; it bespeaks the connection here. Rabbi Eliezar’s third argument again emphasizes the ‘works’ and initiative perspective: “Through peace and gentleness will you be saved” (TM 112). Levinas adds, “without these, the renewal of self [*renouvellement de soi*]—the return—is not possible” (TM 112). This echoes with Levinas’ definition of the self of the “true revolutionary” as an interiority that does not abdicate before doubt, dissent, or revolts. And Yehoshua invokes class-consciousness: “He who is an object of contempt for men”—what of him? How dare we assume, or require, that he or she follow an ethic of “peace and gentleness” (TM 113)? Eliezar’s last argument underscores the conditional: “If you return to me, then I will turn back toward you.” But Yehoshua has already argued that the Messiah will return whether humans are completely corrupt or completely ethical, saintly. Rabbi Eliezar struggles to preserve the dimension of free action, precursive and essential to human morality. Yehoshua’s theological historicism and skepticism: do not make the return of the Messiah a matter of human action, of whatever kind; that is anthropomorphism. That is *not* Rabbi Eliezar’s intent, and he falls silent before the apparent misunderstanding. Yet his argument does not go away; “Rabbi Eliezar s’est tu, mais sa these n’est pas abandonnée. Elle ressuscitera à l’époque de Rav et de Shmuel. *Et elle est encore vivante* [Rabbi Eliezar goes silent, but his thesis is not abandoned. It will be revived in the age of Rav and Shmuel, Amoraïm.

quits the discursive universe of the Prophets to turn to a document from the *Ketuvim* (poetics and hagiographic writings): Daniel’s apocalypse. Rav elaborates Daniel’s vision, where a great figure appears on the bank of the river Hiddekel (Tigris), dressed in linen and gilt silver, and recounts a vision to Daniel (10:4-21). Following the destruction of the vast empire of “the King of the Neguev,” two figures appear on each bank of the river. The figure dressed in white linen (Michael) now responds to the question posed by the other, “How long until the end of these awful things?” And he responds with an extraordinary interweave of *times*. André Chouraqui, whose translation strives to remain close to the Hebrew, gives us the words of the figure in white in these terms: “Oui, après un rendez-vous, des rendez-vous et une moitié [Yes, following a rendezvous, a rendezvous and a half]” (Daniel 12:7).¹² English translations leave the notion of an appointed time, a rendez-vous or *moed* (מוֹעֵד) indeterminate, preferring “in the time of times and a half.” But the word *moed* implies a time to be determined *and* an appointment already established by an addressor. Even in spite of its Levinasian resonances, the complexity of times here will be ‘concretized’ thereafter into “a thousand two hundred and ninety days”; that is, the time after which “the regular offering is abolished” (Daniel 12:11). The mystery of the revelation to Daniel and the repetition of the names of its addressees, who are called “the knowledgeable” (12:3 and 10), suggest that Eliezar falls silent by clear

And it is still alive]” (TM 114). The arguments come down to two equally defensible stances; to simply to the extreme: the significance of human freedom for any ethics, not to mention enactment of ‘transcendence’, *versus* the refusal of anthropomorphisation (God needing humans to decide how and when the Messiah will return), and the assertion of the absolute independence of the Messiah, and by extension of radical transcendence or G-d.

¹¹ Levinas translates it with an imperfect followed by a present indicative.

¹² André Chouraqui, *La Bible* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1989), 1410 : “Et j’entends l’homme vêtu de lin qui était au-dessus des eaux du Ieor. Il lève sa droite et sa gauche vers les ciels et jure par le Vivant de la pérennité: ‘Oui, après un rendez-vous, des rendez-vous et une moitié, à l’achèvement de la dispersion de la main du peuple consacré, tous ceux-là s’achèveront quand la main du peuple consacré sera accomplie.’”

choice. His act may even be motivated by the indeterminacy of these addressees: “the knowledgeable.” Eliezar’s wisdom is notorious. But is he one of “the knowledgeable”? Levinas writes: “this astonishes us initially. Is [Eliezar] short of verses?” Then Levinas again says, “mais *Rabbi Eliezer se tait* [but Rabbi Eliezar falls silent].” His repetition underscores the importance of Eliezar’s silence. At this point, the debate over redemption despite humans, and even for nothing, versus redemption following on repentance or good works simply comes to a halt. The point is that in Daniel 12, revelation *flows into time* and into knowledge, something into which Rabbi Eliezar chooses ultimately *not* to venture. It is never clear who are the “knowledgeable” ones, whom Chouraqui renders more intuitively as *les perspicaces* (the perspicacious). But I now pass to the second silence in the “Messianic Texts” (MT 124-126).¹³

Following the discussion of three then four eventual names of the Messiah (viz., Shilo, Yinnon, and Hanina, followed by Menahem—like a list of virtues), two themes are introduced: the first, that the messiah will come “the day when one repeats truth without dissimulating the *name* of him who first uttered it” (TM 126, *emph. added*), and the “form of existence” secured by the leper who lives with Rabbi (Yehuda ha-Nasi), and by association, with the Rabbi himself. Here, Rav Nachman proposes an interpretation that returns to the question of time. If the Messiah is among the dead, he ventures, then “it [the Messiah] is Daniel, the beloved prophet, who remained just despite the trials that Nebuchadnezzar imposed on him” (TM

¹³ This is section 5 “Who is [the] Messiah?”: The school of Rabbi Shila names the Messiah “Shilo” (peaceful) based on Genesis 49: 10; that of Rabbi Yanaï calls him “Yinon” based on Psalms 72:17—adding that the name will, associated with a psalm on teaching and justice, will increase before the face of the sun. “Hanina” is the name chosen by the school of Rabbi Hanina and denotes pity or compassion. As Levinas adds, essentially for all these cases, “Un contenu est donc prêté au messianisme [content is ascribed to messianism]” (TM 125). The name Menahem—importantly the son of Hezekiah, the king whose reign presumably enjoyed a messianic ‘presence’—denotes “the consoler” who provides courage (Lamentations 1:6) (TM 126).

128).¹⁴ Again the connection with Daniel, who is now doubles *King* David. Why does Rabbi Nachman choose the just Daniel, the dreaming Daniel, and not the comparably just prophets Isaiah or Jeremiah? Would Daniel be *exemplarily* just, and what would that imply? Or is Rav Nachman’s identification related to Daniel’s *vision*? Readers of the “Messianic Texts” will recall Rabbi Nachman’s unforgettable counterpoint: “if he [the Messiah] is from among the living, it [the Messiah] is then I. For it has been said (Jeremiah 30:31): ‘His leader shall issue from his own breast, and his sovereign shall come from his own ranks’” (TM 128). But whatever we make of the choice of Daniel as the messiah, more striking is that following Rabbi Nachman’s claim, the great commentator Rashi (1040 – 1105) also falls silent, *se tait*. And Levinas again underscores this falling silent two times. In between, he adds: “He [Rashi] who habitually explains each detail (there is no better teacher for the Talmud than Rashi).” Now, it is striking that in the wake of Rashi’s surprising silence, the Maharsha (1555 – 1631), writing some five hundred years later, scrambled to justify Rabbi Nachman’s claim about the living Messiah by numbering him among the descendants of King David. But because that does not explain Rashi’s silence, Levinas proceeds toward a more predictable theme, Jeremiah 30:21, the legitimating text used precisely by Rabbi Nachman, which refers to the prince who governs in a way that *no longer alienates* the sovereignty of Israel (TM 129). For Levinas, this form of rule is less a political affair than “the absolute interiority of government” (TM 129), which seems a big leap unless we recall his definition of “the true revolutionary.”

I might add that to govern in a way that no longer alienates sovereignty anticipates a theme we find in *Otherwise than Being*. Non-alienating governance means transparency, truthfulness. This can only begin with the self—not an ego, not a

¹⁴ Compare this with Levinas’ definition of the “true revolutionary” in “Judaism and Revolution”; see note 6 *supra*.

hypostatized subject from idealist philosophy. Indeed, Levinas writes “non-foreignness (*non-étrangeté*) par excellence—is *ipseity* (self-ness, self-hood)” (TM 129). Thus the argument Levinas makes in 1961, since it is not an echo of a rationalist (or Kantian) Jewish claim, shows that he is already working on themes that will return thirteen years later. Of course, by 1974, *ipseity* contains the other-in-the-same, such that it carries *both* transparency and *foreignness* (OBBE 106-107: AEAE 170-172). But in 1961, *ipseity* and self-government would account for Rashi’s silence. Levinas does not explain this striking moment, this blank in the text. I am convinced nevertheless that the two silences produce something like a force that runs through the entire reading. I will come back to this when we look at André Neher’s hidden messiah.

II. The Messiah as Historical, the Messiah as Absent

Following a discussion of Hilik and Bilik, two figures interpreted successively, first as “*Dupont et Durand*, the first on the scene” (TM 118), and then as the dual magistrates of Sodom—in short, as the common person and then as politicians dealing with justice in an unjust State, Levinas lets fall a dramatic claim: “Evil can take universal shapes,” he says, “and the very meaning of messianic hope perhaps consists in acknowledging that by itself evil could have taken on universal forms, become a *State* [*se faire État*], but a supreme will [*une volonté suprême*] shall prevent its triumph” (TM 119). As if by antithesis, Levinas now raises Rav Guidel’s objection to Rabbi Hillel, the rabbi famous for having spoken *once* in the Talmud. Rabbi Hillel said, “there is no further messiah for Israel. Israel tasted of the messiah [*y goûtá*] in the age of King Hezekiah” (TM 119). Now before we look at Levinas’s interpretation of one-time declaration, we should note that the (messianic) age of Hezekiah witnessed the singular miracle of the destruction of the Assyrian army in one night,

thereby sparing the Israelites from the Assyrian king's seizure of Jerusalem. Rabbinics appears nevertheless to argue that the pious King Hezekiah, in the council of the prophet Isaiah, was no more a candidate for the messiah than was the great psalmist, David. A distinction thus arises between piety versus praise, norms versus celebration, law versus poetry—need we add, rationalism and romanticism? And it is remarkable that beyond claiming that the tradition “rejects [Rabbi Hillel's] thesis” (TM 120) and observing that Rabbi Joseph enjoined that God pardoned Rabbi Hillel for having said this (Sanhedrin 99a), Levinas immediately underscores “*on ne passe pas purement et simplement sous silence l'opinion de Rabbi Hillel* [one does not pass over in silence, pure and simple, Rabbi Hillel's opinion]” (TM 120).

In *this* case, then, silence is *not* fitting. But before this hapax, which evokes what Rosenzweig would have called the ‘historic’ thesis of Christianity (the Messiah came at a certain age, taught, and died), we have a hermeneutics of suspicion set on messianism itself. I quote Levinas: “Rabbi Hillel's opinion contains a wariness with regard to the messianic idea, with regard to redemption by the Messiah: Israel awaits an excellence *greater* than that which would consist in being saved by a Messiah” (TM 120-121, *emph. added*). We can imagine many reasons why. But beyond the speculation about the identity of Israel which follows his observation, Levinas specifies that Rabbi Hillel's claim should no more be silenced than treated as “a pure paradox” (TM 121). It conforms to an old tradition that cautions against attributing a messianic quality to any man, even to a king; in short, to culture or to politics. Although of course the Messiah is not God, Rabbi Hillel is articulating “a fundamental possibility of Judaism” (TM 122), and if the age of the Messiah corresponds to Hezekiah's 25-year reign, then it does not correspond so much to politics or to the King himself as to *covenantal fidelity*. Indeed, King Hezekiah's fidelity

was so profound that he repaired the Temple and committed the improbable act of destroying the bronze serpent created by Moses himself whilst in the Wilderness.

To the hapax of Rabbi Hillel's utterance corresponds the hapax of his reading of history: the Messiah characterized an *epoch*, not necessarily a *being* and, to all intents and purposes, this need be said just once, even as there is no passing over it in silence. To the *content* of Rabbi Hillel's claim, the Talmud thus gives a *form*: you shall state this but once; we will not silence it, but neither will we repeat it. If this opens toward a new line of possibilities, as Levinas suggests, then it must be possibilities concerning the end of History. In short, the Messianic age was Hezekiah's. It came to pass, ended, and history, all-too-human history, carries on. What difference does the Messiah make? Or again, is there no correspondence between Hezekiah's messianic *age* and the Messiah that is hoped-for? Could the Messiah perhaps be hidden?

It is here that André Neher gives us an illuminating commentary.¹⁵ I do not know whether he is responding *specifically* to this idea of Levinas, but I will quote Neher at length because he points, in symbolic terms, to the improbability of messianism and with it, the end of History. He recalls that "The world-to-come is one of doctrinal givens. On every page there figures [the biblical] notion of the world-to-come." Yet this messianic omni-presence is not firstly Neher's concern. He has just finished speaking about many hidden messiahs, which he aligns with the letter *aleph* famously absent from the opening verse of the Torah. Having reminded us that the Bible begins with the *beit* of *Bereshit*, whose signification as 'house' implies that we are always already in being, always already in-the-world, Neher adds that where the *aleph* is absent, so too should be the *omega*. That is, if the first letter is absent, why

¹⁵ André Neher, "Le messianisme biblique d'après le début de la Genèse" in *La conscience juive. Face à l'histoire: Le pardon* (Presses universitaires de France, 1965), 118-126. All translations mine. Hereafter MB.

would not the last one be as well? To put it differently, Neher says “omega” because the letter *tav* does not carry the same symbolic weight as the Greek *omega*; yet the last, the ultimate unity of meaning, the letter, would similarly be missing. We are effectively thrown into both space and time, with control neither over our beginnings nor over our ends. Neher observes that, in this respect, we are dealing with a metahistory; the meta-history of beginnings and ends, parts and wholes.

Whereupon he opens the eventuality of hiddenness: if “the ‘A’ [*aleph, alpha*] is not there, it is therefore that it was taken from us [*qu’il nous est soustrait*]” (MB 120). If this means that beginnings and ends are beyond the reach of human *understanding*, then would the Messiah not stand in an analogous relationship to our comprehension? Neher does with the Messiah as he has done with the ‘A’ or aleph, arguing contrapuntally that “the ‘A’ is not taken from us, so much as it is hidden. This unity is hidden. When we enter into the Torah...into the history of the Bible and therefore into *our* History, we enter with this sentiment that not only the ‘A’ has been removed...but that it must [also] be...placed elsewhere. It is not at the beginning; it must therefore be elsewhere.” And Neher hammers this point: “*It must be elsewhere, and this is perhaps the fundamental messianic theme*” (MB 121, *emph. added*)! Whatever we make of the status of alpha and omega, indeed of omega as the end of history versus omega as the world-to-come, Neher uses this theme to address the danger of pseudo-messiahs, from the *Christ de Montfavet* (Neher is being delicate) to Shabbatai Tzvi. This leads him to pose a more painful question: “Is not the true ‘A’ the one that is *eternally* hidden from us? In any case, it is always a Messiah *displaced*” (MB 121, *emph. added*). Perhaps *that* is why Rabbi Eliezar fell silent about the “knowledgeable” ones. Some things that we imagine lies within the purview of the unnamed *perspicaces* are beyond our knowledge. However that may be, it is neither Rabbi Hillel’s thesis, which concerns no particular hiddenness except in form, as

hapax, nor does it correspond to Rav Nachman’s claim about himself as Messiah. What Neher seems to suggest will be clear only at the end of his talk, to which I now return. Having himself underscored the importance of the conjunction of law and poetry, of Hezekiah and David, Neher turns to Midrash and to a Hasidic tale “concerning the ends of history, eschatology, and... regarding an imagined narrative on the theme of the Messiah,” precisely as fidelity (MB 124).

One day, in the 18th century, a poor Jewish woman addressed her Hassidic rabbi, saying, “Rebbe, my son is ill, pray to the heavens that he should heal!” The rabbi prayed to the heavens and the heavens responded to him: “This child is destined to die, he shall die.” The woman returned and said: “My child is more seriously ill, rebbe, pray to the heavens that he be healed.” And the rabbi prayed to the heavens and again asked that the child be healed. The heavens responded: “no, this child must die.” And the woman returned again: “My son is now at the hour of his death, pray that the child be healed.” And the rabbi prayed that her child be healed. And the heavens responded: “the child will be healed, but on one condition; that you, the just, the rebbe, who have devoted all your life to works, to justice, to truth, be deprived of *Olam Haba* [world-to-come], that for you, everything now comes to an end, here below, with your death, that you be entirely and definitively annihilated in the tomb.” The rabbi prays and the child is healed (MB 125).

Is this another hapax? Does the righteousness of the unnamed rabbi echo the perfect piety of King Hezekiah? Is this a way of saying that messianic hope must be secondary to the healing of one child? We can anticipate the answer. Yet as Neher points out, amid the proliferation of themes and ideas about the world-to-come: “if one reduces *Olam Haba* to something purely temporary...[then] it is the world-to-

come that is taken from us, that is hidden, that becomes like an obligation suspended over us [*comme une hypothèque suspendue au-dessus de nous*], and that we cannot erase.”¹⁶

Despite the tale’s naïveté in expression, and certainly despite his awareness of the critique of messianism as fostering passivity, Neher offers a Hasidic tale intended to connect his commentary to Levinas’s presentation (MB 123). Let me turn therefore to the end of the story, which Neher cites following his remarks on the debate between Levinas and Jankélévitch.

Before dying, the same unnamed rabbi “calls his disciples together and says to them: ‘let us dance, this is my great day of joy, for up till now I served God, and I knew well that I served him according to the very principle of the Torah, that is, that we must serve God with *disinterestedness* and without casting our gaze toward the *Olam Haba* [world-to-come], which would be a world in which we folded our arms; indeed I know that *yelehou mi-hayil el-hayil*, the just will have no rest even in the *Olam Haba*... but I ran the risk anyway, firstly, in serving God and in serving men; I again ran the risk in coming one day to the heavens [that] God might say to me: ‘You have been so good that you should rest a little’. I no longer run this risk’, says the rabbi, ‘still I am sure now that, being deprived of the world to come, I have everything to accomplish here below,¹⁷ *I must stake my entire person on what I am, to the limit of what I know of my person and that I will reach on the day of my death*’” (MB 125).

¹⁶ The multivolume dictionary, *Trésor de la langue française* defines “*hypothèque*,” when figuratively used, as “*Engagement, obligation susceptible de compromettre l’accomplissement de quelque chose ou d’entraver la liberté de quelqu’un.*” This effectively echoes Levinas’s point (TM p. 91), made early on, that the Messianic Age should not be confused with the world-to-come, which no eye has seen and which may also explain Rabbi Eliezar’s silence following the invocation of Daniel’s vision.

¹⁷ Neher’s full statement allows him to link his observations about hidden letters, ages, and messiahs to Levinas and Jankélévitch’s presentations. “The world-to-come [different from the “messianic age”] is one of our doctrinal givens. On every page [of the Bible] figures the notion of the world to come. If one could reduce *Olam Haba* to something purely...passing, then it is the world to come that is taken from us, that is hidden” (MB 124).

The French expression “*toute ma personne*” can be translated “all that I am.” This too may be an answer to Rashi’s silence before Rabbi Nachman’s remark. For, is this not what it means that ‘it might be I, who am the Messiah’? Moreover, it is a useful way of understanding Levinas’s interpretation of the “absolute interiority” of government as ipseity, since clearly the unnamed Hasidic rabbi made the greatest choice conceivable—between due recompense for a pious life and the supplication of a mother. Or again, between this life and the world-to-come. As to the debate between Rabbi Eliezar and Rav Yehoshua, the renunciation of *Olam Haba* upsets Eliezar’s presumptive reciprocity (“Revenez à moi et je retournerai vers vous”) between partners. But it simultaneously affirms the freedom of the human (Yehoshua) and emphasizes that authentic liberty presupposes a fragile ground in engagement (TM 112). “La liberté en général ne suppose-t-elle pas un engagement préalable au refus même de cet engagement [does not freedom in general suppose a foregoing engagement, prior even to the rejection of that engagement]” (TM 112)? Levinas might say that Neher glimpses here an act with political ramifications.¹⁸ But the unnamed rabbi’s choice to sacrifice his own (due?) recompense—i.e., the world-to-come—to heal an infant *essentially* ‘condemned’ (‘this child is *destined* to die’), sets morality over divine dictate (which itself ultimately ‘negotiates’) *and* political service

¹⁸ Levinas *does* say, midway through what was the 1962 conference: “Si l’un de nos interlocuteurs du precedent colloque était là [Neher? Jankélévitch?], il aurait certes protesté contre cette idée de Rabbi Yehoshua, contre cette contestation de la liberté, contre ce coup du ‘tu me renies, c’est que tu m’affirmes [if one of our interlocutors from the preceding colloquium were there, he would certainly have protested against Rabbi Jehoshua’s idea, against that contestation of freedom, against the game of ‘you deny me implies that you confirm me]’” (TM 112). Though Neher’s story affirms the sheer, spontaneous freedom of the nameless rabbi who choses to save a dying child who is *meant* to die, *this* freedom has meaning *only in light of morality*. The rabbi’s freedom is used to allow him *to free himself from* all unnoticed ‘interest’ in serving the Absolute. As Levinas says, “Voilà pourquoi Rabbi Yehoshua aura éternellement raison (comme Rabbi Éliézer d’ailleurs [this is why R. Yehoshua will eternally be right, like Rabbi Eliezar moreover])” (TM 111).

(‘interested’ service). But the important point lies elsewhere still. *This* is precisely the occasion for dancing. On theology and ‘interested’ service...

III. The Doubles in the Bible

I turn now from the fulsome ‘zeros’ of our two silences, from the ‘ones’ of Rabbi Hillel’s formal and material hapax, to the ‘two’ of the biblical doubles.

In light of Neher’s emphasis on the Messiah being “*ailleurs*,” elsewhere, like the *aleph*, we should note that Levinas cites Rabbi Yehuda speaking in Rav’s name: “The Holy One, blessed-be-He, will one day raise for them *another David*, for it is said (Jeremiah 30:9): ‘But the children of Jacob will serve the Eternal, their God, and David their King, whom I will place at their heads’” (TM 130, *emph. added*). This impressive ‘telescoping’ of time, as Gérard Bensussan observed of Jewish ritual, leads to Levinas’ jesting about a “Messiah and a Vice-Messiah” (TM 130) in the figure of the historic David, whose lustiness offended even Ben Gurion, coupled with the cleaned-up David, because they are as if one *and* two, or two *in* one. Now, if Levinas is right and the “supra-historic phenomenon” of the doubles points toward a kind of biblical *eidetics*, such that “every historic event transcends itself, takes on a metaphoric sense that commands the literal or local sense of events,” then what better way to enact the idea that human history “is a spiritual work [*est œuvre spirituelle*]”¹⁹ (TM 131)? And even, that spiritual work must never be done, never come to an end. Pushing things farther, we might add that human history is as ‘spiritual’ as the work of the *dream*, with its telescoped persons and places. At stake here is not so much the

¹⁹ The expression “l’histoire humaine est œuvre spirituelle” expresses an equivalency: history–activity of the spirit, and by extension, the idea that just acts may the only human path of approach to God (Maimonides).

real *versus* the more ‘real’, but the real and the *surreal*, held together by a fixed signifier or a name.

Beyond a Platonic conception of the fall of ideas into the world, as a way of thinking about *methexis* from the ‘top down’, Levinas is responding this way to Jankélévitch’s dismissal of the *Samozwanetz* in Pushkin’s drama *Boris Godunov*. In the 1960 colloquium Jankélévitch had criticized this figure who, like yet another double, took the liberty of proclaiming his own sovereignty, setting himself close to one possible reading of Rav Nachman’s claim “the Messiah might be I.” In this “Russian debate” between Levinas and Jankélévitch, the latter clearly found this attitude unacceptable, while Levinas opened a different approach. In *Boris Godunov*, the young monk, Grigori Otrepiev, dreams three times that he is the future “false Dmitri,” the Dmitri to-come, who will one day accede to the throne of the Russian empire. Otrepiev’s pseudo-messianism rankles Jankélévitch, but Levinas interprets the dream further. Upon awakening, the novice monk explains that “I dreamed that a steep ladder led me up to the heights of a tower...below, people swarmed on the square; they pointed laughingly at me and I was ashamed, I was afraid, and I fell head first; [then] I awoke...” (OBBE 195 n. 15: AEAE 176 n. 2).

When a dream repeats three times, we can be sure that it is saying something to us. But here, against his ‘Russian’ colleague, Levinas is less concerned with messianic presumption than with the people placing the second, the dream Dmitri, in the position of someone *accused*. In the period 1961-1963, Levinas concludes that the *Samozwanetz* is “he who has put himself forward to carry all the responsibility of the world” (TM 129).²⁰ And this is why the *sur*-real sovereign—though dream-shamed to the point of death—still merits comparison with the Messiah. Levinas observes: “he

²⁰ Levinas, “*Le Messianisme d’après un texte talmudique [Traité Synhédrin 98b—99a]*” in *La conscience juive* (October 1961), 102-117, here 111. This is the original Talmudic reading from which the long essay, published in 1963, emerged.

can only call himself ‘I’ to the degree to which he has *already* taken this suffering upon himself” (TM 130, *emph. added*). Therefore, before we worry about Neher and Jankélévitch’s pseudo-messiahs, whomever they happen to be, we might think that “messianism is but this apogee in being that is...the concentration or the twisting-upon-self [*la torsion sur soi*] – of the I” (TM 130). Not unlike Levinas’ distinction between the egoic *Moi* and the suffering, bodily *Soi*, there would be, intimated in the two Dmitris and the two Daniels, a different intuition about the Messiah: “that each one must act *as though he were* the Messiah” (TM 130, *emph. added*). This strikes me as a double response, to Rashi’s silence and to Neher’s Hasidic rabbi...

At least, it *becomes* a response to Neher when, after some twelve years of maturation, the same example appears in a note to the chapter entitled “Substitution” in *Otherwise than Being* (Section “Le soi”; “The Self”). Levinas there writes of a glory “that is a sign given to the other...responsibility for the other, to the degree of substitution” (OBBE 148 and 195 n. 15; AEAE 176 n. 2). Now, if “glory” amounts to a present absence or an absent-presence, and “substitution” sets the one for the other—or better, *is* the one for-the-other—then one implication of the double figures, beyond Neher’s already discussed ‘here versus elsewhere’, would be what Levinas calls “ambivalence, whose diachrony [specific temporality] is signification itself, an ambivalence which, in the present, is an ambiguity” (OBBE 148: AEAE 176). It is toward this, I think, that Levinas is working *already* in 1961.²¹ To understand this, let us take another step.

Before discussing the Messiah and the Vice-Messiah, and just after rehabilitating Boris Godunov’s *Samozwanetz*, Levinas recalls Rabbi Yehuda’s claim of God raising up a new David, according to Jeremiah’s eschatology (30:9), and as

²¹ I thank Marc Zilbert (Université de Montréal) for pointing out that we should read Levinas’s Talmudic lectures as the privileged site for the gestation of his philosophy. Zilbert attributes this to Benny Lévy’s Jerusalem seminar.

cited by both Rabbi Yehuda and Rav Pappa. In the version that appears in *Otherwise than Being*, the reference to Otrepiev's dream is followed by a discussion of the "other-in-the-same," understood as inspiration and witnessing or as "Saying without a [word] said" (OBBE 115-116; 147: AEAE 182-183; 230-231). Levinas adds that what he calls the Saying without a said, is sincerity and approach (OBBE 142-144, 147-148: AEAE 223-224; 230-231); a situation in which "the subject quits his clandestinity as subject" and "by which the Infinite passes" (OBBE 147-148: AEAE 231). This is the situation, discovered in its unwilled enactment, in which one acts as though they were the Messiah and leaves their stance as *hidden* messiah, a theme Neher explores biblically.

Let us also attend to the note in *Otherwise than Being* that precedes Otrepiev's dream: a short reference to Lamentations 3:30. It refers to the text whose Hebrew title is *Eikha*, or *How?* which the Vulgate rendered as "Lamentations." Chouraqui translates the passage simply as "that he give his cheek to his smiter, that he fill himself with blemishes." For Levinas, this gesture is called a "transference" (*transfert*); it is "other than interested, 'otherwise than being'—is subjectivity itself" (OBBE 148; AEAE 176). In Lamentations, this is the last of three verses of admonition "for the salvation of YHWH [*pour le salut de IHVH*]"²² and Chouraqui recalls that the anonymous entreaties called "How?" are often attributed to Jeremiah himself. This would create a link between Rabbi Yehuda's evocation of David the King and, ultimately, what Levinas calls the responsibility-for-the-world of the *Samozwanetz* (TM, respectively 130, 129). *One* signification of the biblical doubles thus relegates the distinction between the historical and the mythical to a secondary status.

²² The Tanakh translates verses 28 to 30 as "Let him sit alone and be patient, when He has laid it [his yoke] upon him (28). Let him put his mouth to the dust—that there may be hope (29). Let him offer his cheek to the smiter; let him be surfeited with mockery" (30).

By 1974, indeed, the jeremiads of the monk Otrepiev and the prophet structure the argument that will link witnessing to the grounds of signification itself. Philosophically speaking, biblical dualism offers an an-archic foundation for the investiture of ipseity that is now *le Dire*, itself the answer to the question: Why do we speak to each other at all? And, by a hermeneutic extension: Why is there what-is instead of simply nothing? Must we not say what-is to one another? Is it enough to imagine that being ‘speaks through’ language? In a word, the logic of the doubles, the matter of the hidden messiah and the messiah as ‘I’, *evolve* from 1961 to 1974, into the ipseity that is *le Dire*, the fugacious foundation of signification, including that through which being speaks silently to our conscience. In short, it is thinking through Talmudic reflection that makes Levinas’s ultimate philosophical arguments possible—including against Heidegger.

Let me close with one of Neher’s insights into the doubles. I have deliberately avoided his remarks that might sound simply scholastic. I am therefore responsible for the interrupted reproduction of Neher’s arguments. Unlike Levinas, he was asked to speak on messianism in the Bible *not* the Talmud, and his response to Levinas is like Levinas’s response to Jankélévitch: indirect, but with multiple allusions. Having pointed out that the Torah begins with *beit*, and that *alephs* or authentic beginnings are to be sought elsewhere, like a hidden Messiah, Neher gestures to the *aleph* figures that are Adam and Abraham. These *alephs* anticipate a certain messianic idea, the way the light of creation also does for him. After all, Neher initially ventured that “the first word that appears at the outset, is the word *Ohr*, light” (MB 122). To this he adds: “In effect, there as well the Torah stops for a moment,” having mentioned the first *aleph* carried by the three words, “*Bereshit bara Elohim.*” The creation of this “primitive light,” about which there is a midrash, is said by some masters of the tradition “to have been placed on reserve and hidden for the world-to-come” (MB

122). Others say that the light was buried in the ground, awaiting a just man to foster its germination. Neher adds, “Each just one in each generation or, to speak in a language of Levinas and the Talmud, each rooster who feels the coming of the light in the darkness [believes], like Chanticleer...[that] he sees the light arise from his song itself” (MB 122). This conviction should not be taken to mean that the first light, the light that is creation itself, was brought forth by someone’s song. *That* light remains to-come, not unlike the Messiah.

By way of an impressive series of juxtapositions, Neher urges that the “Torah continues, having in a sense enclosed...the possibility of the light as the Messiah in its adventure...it goes farther and again encounters an A. This is man” (MB 122-123). In Genesis 26:1, God says “*We* would make man [*Nous voulons faire l’homme*]” (MB 123). But rather than speculating on the name *Elohim*, and vigorously setting aside Gnostic and Christian questions about the first-person plural (“*we* wish to make man”), Neher exclaims: “The *Jewish* reading is that God said to Adam himself, that is, to Adam *not yet created*: “You, man, and I God, we are going to create you. I cannot create you alone” (MB 123). It is not that this double, Adam, could create the *world* with God, nor did Adam have a hand in the pre-creation odyssey of God (that is an entirely different matter). Rather, it is that this being must be a dialogical co-creation, and God is “*always* in the process of creating man,” adds Neher, because “what is created here, and I refer you to the reading of the Hebrew text, is not Adam but ‘man’, with the definite article already attached to the word [literally, *Haadam*].”

This too is a reason why the doubles cross through the biblical narratives. Neher observes, “Now that Adam is *created*, his name no longer begins with an A”; [instead,] the man projected as co-creation by God and man, is not *a* man, which is to say any man, but really *all* men, that is, he is you and I. It is *ha-Adam*, the universal man, which can only be true...because it surpasses the contingency and the limits of

each of us” (MB 123). Thus an A, a beginning, is recovered or re-*discovered*, only to open to all of us, beyond any abstraction. Similarly, this ‘all of us’ holds time frames together, then *as now*. Hence the probity of telescoping time through ritual and text. Neher concludes, “because Adam was not Adam but *ha-Adam*, [it is] from within...this abstraction that is man defined, definite man, [that] are born all the indefinite men, the infinite men who have already crossed through history, who will yet cross it, and who are today brought together in this very room” (MB 123). Thus, the ‘technique’ of the doubles of the Bible would have been there from the beginning, with a specific lesson to teach.

Yet Neher then deems this “a salutary failure” (MB 123). Why so? It looked as though a unique passage had opened between the singular and the universal, and with that, a new insight into Levinas’s critique of Greek universality. That may be true. As much as the ‘salutary failure’ is the failure of the Adamic ‘project’, it is also its open-endedness. Abraham too must surpass the “universal [or indefinite] man” and take up the wager of being one with and for the others (MB 124). Here, with Levinas clearly in mind, Neher observes that these multiple indications of an “A” or an outset—a first time and place—leave us unsatisfied. “[W]e effectively want to assume *our* messianism, therefore it is not enough that we realize, for example, one of the four forms of Jewish messianism that we just evoked [Neher’s are the four forms of Adam, of Abraham, the messianism of *Anokhi* in the Torah, and that of Israel]” (MB 124).

‘Assuming one’s messianism’ seems to me to be one of two core teachings in Levinas’s Talmudic lesson, as well as throughout his philosophy. Here, assumption serves two ends: one negative, the other positive. The negative assumption, alluded to earlier, is to avoid ceding to idolatry—avoiding, in short, all the false messiahs and misguided eschatologies to which we might gravitate. For the pseudo-messiahs block

the movement of history in which *we* also move. That is, they write in, blacken or fill up the margins and blank spaces in the text, which must be read as carefully as Rav Eleazar and Rashi's silences, *because blank spaces, like silences, insert time* into our interpretations.²³ As to the positive end of Neher's 'salutary failure', I alluded to it already in the story of the rabbi who danced over his loss of the *Olam Haba*. That was for Neher the "ultimate engagement" (MB 125), the most fulsome assumption of messianism. And it would be Neher's reading of Rabbi Nachman's observation, "the Messiah may be 'I'."

²³ In light of this, it is hard not to think of a marginal word play added, then crossed out of, the Tractate Shabbat 116a, where the meaning of textual margins is discussed. Rabbi Meïr there reads, or puns on, the Aramaicised Greek word "*evangelion*" as *Aven-Gilayon*, which means "error at the level of the margins," where "margins" are the site of revelation (he is echoed by Rabbi Yohanan's *avon-gilayon*, sin at the margins). This temporarily self-censored insight points to what would be ontic, or anthropomorphic, versions of Neher's argument about "assuming one's messianism." See Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Le livre brûlé: Philosophie du Talmud* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2016), 412. Following an elaborate discussion of fire and the 'blancs' (*blancs*) in the 'book', Ouaknin reminds us that "The Hebraic text is a function of the blancs that open and close it (by opening it). The Hebrew term that designates a textual being is *Parashah*, that is to say 'cut', 'separated' by two blank spaces, the one of the opening and the other, of closure. A text *is the between-two-empty-spaces* [l'entre-deux-vides]. But the text lives from other empty spaces, those between the letters, the words, the sentences" (408, translation mine). That is why it shocks the Talmudic consciousness that a being, emissary, angel, 'messiah' should come to fill out or fulfill, once and for all, the text.