Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Sparks and Ashes*

Jewishness and Ethics

Roberto Toscano

As a professional diplomat especially interested in the ethical aspects of international (and inter-group) relations, I have been led to look for a theoretical framework which could support my reflections.

Although my sources have been plural and somewhat diverse, there is no doubt that one thinker, Emmanuel Levinas, has been my fundamental intellectual reference.

Levinas is a French philosopher, but at the same time a profoundly Jewish thinker. Then, running through the sources I quote in what I have written on ethics, I found something that one would be hard put to define as coincidental or casual, i.e. a predominance of thinkers of Jewish culture or origin: Spinoza, Arendt, Buber, Jankélevitch, Berlin.

In trying to explain why this irresistible attraction to Jewish moral thought (for someone who is neither Jewish nor a specialist in Jewish studies), I have come to a few tentative replies:

In the first place, I see the very essence of the religion of the Jews as being an ethical monotheism. In other words, I was always struck by the centrality of ethics in Hebraism. Moving, as Levinas writes, 'from the sacred to the saint' marks this priority attributed to ethics, the ethical focus which, I believe, is the most significant innovation of Hebraism *vis-à-vis* previous religious experiences. What I mean is that the Jewish religion is not founded on abstractions: abstraction is Greek, not Jewish. It is not founded on orthodoxy, but rather on orthopraxy. What is important is not being, but doing At the center, we find behavior, and we also find the body. And we find the Other, towards whom one is responsible and who should be respected not only in terms of physical integrity, but also as far as dignity is concerned. I recall here the extraordinary Hebrew precept: 'Whoever causes his neighbor's face to turn pale with shame can be compared to a murderer'.

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* This is a column of no more than ten pages in length aimed at generating debate among our readers. How many of us have an idea that is not yet ready for publication as a fully fledged scientific article per se, but that we would not relish the opportunity to present and discuss? *La Revue* aims to provide such a forum. Once sown, who knows who will bring the seeds of an idea to fruition? In any case, we welcome your contribution on themes likely to spark discussion. As usual we remind you that papers relating to political events will not be considered for publication. Please send your articles of no more than 10,000 characters to the following address: Mino Vianello, Via Brennero 36, 00141 Roma, Italy.

Correspondence to: Roberto Toscano (Italian Ambassador to Iran), Ave Neauphle-le-Chateau, 81, Tehran, Iran
E-mail: roberto.toscano@esteri.it

In the second place, if it is true that group violence derives from the presence of closed, totalitarian, non-dialogic systems, then it is very important to note that Jewish thought is dynamic, plural, hardly conducible to a closed scheme. That being Jewish, from an intellectual and moral point of view, means knowing unease and self-questioning, and not the often murderous beatitude of dogma. The vast doctrinal body of Hebraism is characterized by a plurality of mutually conflictive interpretations that testify of a never completed, never systematized search, and especially of a search that can never be rigidly frozen into the strict binary logic of true/false: a kind of logic that, as a rule, tends to coincide with the frightening dichotomy friend/enemy.

What I mean is that Jewish thought seems to me to be in special harmony with the concept of a permanent tension between opposite polarities which is the necessary philosophical premise of a search for 'a space for ethics'.

Jankélevitch writes about Jewish 'ethical nomadism', and indeed, the ethical call urges us to go outside ourselves, leave the home of our self and embark on a journey, an endless, perhaps impossible journey toward the Other. Ethics is equal to nomadism, and it is hardly compatible with fixity, and especially with territoriality. Territory is inevitably perceived in terms of fear, of threat and defense, of survival, of a zero-sum situation where the Other threatens to take away what is ours. A territorial focus is highly inimical to ethics. Jews, having been 'strangers' (*gerim*) for so many centuries, are the 'ethical nomads' par excellence.

Hebraism values the word, language. But language does not only imply the great Jewish talent for story-telling, but also the refusal of the inarticulate silence where hate accumulates. It means communication with the Other—whose voice, as well as face (as Levinas has taught us), is a call to the ethical dimension of our being human.

Since violence and war are often exalted from an esthetic point of view, it is very significant that for Jews it is impossible to replace ethics with esthetics. The beautiful, for the Jew, is not necessarily good. This is a quote from Levinas's *Difficile liberté*: 'The Jewish soul, which disdains the dubious loves where the pure and the impure are intertwined, is diffident of those cultures where blood and death are allied with pleasure, where art and refinement combine with the utmost cruelty'. Far from the exaltations of the unutterable sublime (which Jews have the tendency to view with suspicion and to debunk with corrosive irony) the Jew remains faithful to an ethical vision.

Lastly, I will mention what I believe is the aspect of Jewish culture that is truly central in a discourse on ethics, and especially of ethics and conflict: the concept of idolatry. In Jewish culture idolatry is not the cult rendered to a false god, but rather a disproportionate importance attributed to one of the components of truth. In the Bible, we not only find the adoration of the Golden Calf by the Jews, but also the idolatry of the state of the Egyptians, the idolatry of sensuality of Cananeans, the idolatry of business of Assyrians. But indeed, if one abstracts from a judgment on the value of the object of idolatry, if we focus our attention on the loss of proportion and limit, on the unwarranted simplification of reality—then it becomes very easy to

realize that at the root of all violence, of all the instances of 'erasing the face of the Other' there is a sin of idolatry. Including the idolatry of the Self, the sacralization (on an individual or group basis) of Spinoza's *conatus essendi*, the absolute urge of what exists to persevere in its existence. An urge which should constitute the beginning of the human path, and not its final perimeter. Indeed, the unethical denial of the rights of the Other, and the ensuing violence, can only be a consequence of an idolatric process: a process which absolutizes the relative, mistakes the part for the whole, hypostatizes desire, erases all bipolarity and tension between principles, refuses the limit. As Professor Jean Halpérin once wrote: 'It is perhaps because of its rejection and fear of idolatry that the Jew has always been the great non-conformist in history.'

And also, let me add, among the most gifted for an ethical discourse. Having said this, no one—not even the Jews, ethically gifted as they are—can be considered safe from the temptation of idolatry, therefore of violence. One is confronted here with the issue of the ethical impact on Jewish culture of the shift from diaspora to Zionism, and of the existence of a Jewish state, and there are many Jews, in Israel and elsewhere, that are engaged in a profound and often painful debate on the moral implications of 'having a state as everyone else' and of defending it (idolatrically or not) against irreconcilable enemies. But this, of course, is another story.

References

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