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Michael Fagenblat. *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. xxviii + 281 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6869-6; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-6870-2.

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Levinas as Jewish Philosopher

The benefit of completing a kindly solicited review assignment in an unkind timeframe is the tacit or self-granted permission to move from detailed summary to a focus on a central theme or thread. Michael Fagenblat's intricate reading of Emmanuel Levinas in *A Covenant of Creatures* has already been reviewed widely in leading journals, and is the subject of a recent review and response in *AJS Review*.[1] Fagenblat's clear and mostly Levinasian-rhetoric-free writing helps to make the book teachable. This review will focus on the method or approach to Levinas that defines the volume–another aspect of the book that lends it very nicely to teaching about Levinas and the field of Judaic studies, generally. This review leaves out a particularly interesting rereading of the influence of Martin Heidegger on Levinas, certain to be commented on in any forthcoming literature on Levinas.

Fagenblat rejects the argument, attributed to both "Jewish" and "Christian" thinkers, that "Levinas's philosophy is intimately if not entirely bound to his Judaism." This is often then viewed "as a fatal flaw or even a bluff, behind which stands an antiphilosophical rhetoric of blind faith, dogmatism, and piety" (p. 2). The group of Levinas critics to which Fagenblat responds here includes Dominique Janicaud, Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, Oone Ajzenstat, and Catherine Chalier. It is not clear what role the critics' religious affiliation or lack thereof plays in the details of their reading of Levinas. Fagenblat attributes the misreading of Levinas (and of Judaism) to a "recapitul[ation of] the modern philosophical critique, instituted by [Baruch] Spinoza and adopted by [Immanuel] Kant, of the nonphilosophical character of Judaism as such" (p. 4). These readings, according to Fagenblat, present Levinas and Judaism as Jewish at the expense of philosophy (p. 6).

Fagenblat rejects the antithesis, too. Responding to Samuel Moyn, as well as Robert Gibbs and Leora Batnitzky, Fagenblat refuses to dismiss Judaism or the Judaic roots of Levinas's work. As he does with those who criticize Levinas for exerting Judaism in his work (again, for Fagenblat, a misunderstanding of Judaism), the author identifies this group of critics as offering the exact reading of Judaism corrected by Maimonides himself: "Batnitzky and Gibbs, in different ways, also frame their concerns about Levinas's work in terms of its elision of some authentic difference. According to Maimonides, however, this is precisely the view of the perplexed" (p. 9). Though in an endnote he does credit Batnitzky with an "astute" reading of Levinas and Maimonides in her *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (2006), he notes that these philosophers have not taken to heart the teaching of Maimonides' *Guide*, "aimed at ridding Jewish intellectuals of the idea that there is a core to Judaism at variance with philosophical wisdom" (pp. 204n26, 10). The argument Fagenblat attributes to Batnitzky, Gibbs, and others goes like this: "It makes the unintelligible assumption that Judaism is a conceptual scheme with its own contents (revelation) that are impenetrable to philosophy, and that philosophy provides its own independent scheme (reason) for thinking about the world" (p. 12). This strategy–"Athens" v. "Jerusalem"–is deployed by "parties with opposing values and agendas, such as atheistic philosophers and neo-Orthodox Jews," he states, "who produce a determination of Judaism that authorizes their respective … claims, that Judaism is the authen-

tic custodian of a revelation given without the consent of reason–*torah* as positivist *nomos*–whereas philosophy is the exercise of reason liberated from absolute givens, pure *logos*" (p. 13). Here the function of the "affiliation" or identification of the critic becomes clearer: atheists denude philosophy of religion; the neo-Orthodox build a wall around Torah. Fagenblat's attributions, then, identify modern scholars as falling into one of these camps based on their own identities.

Instead of perpetuating this false "partitioning" of Judaism from philosophy, Fagenblat proposes that "there is no Judaism *and* philosophy, no *between* Athens *and* Jerusalem" (hence the title of chapter 1: "Levinas's New Creation, without *And* or *Between*") (p. 14). One significant hurdle to this reading of Levinas is Levinas, as Fagenblat notes. The response is to "recast" the "ahistoricist horn of the dilemma." Levinas offers the "ethical commandment of the Other" as "an allegedly ahistorical interruption of historical time." Fagenblat counters that "the Other who interrupts history *cannot be separated* from the hermeneutic fabric of this philosophy and *does not transcend* its textual horizons." In other words, Fagenblat concludes: "The Other is not a pure interruption of revelation, and the trace or trail of the Other leads to the Judaic tradition within which Levinas philosophizes" (p. 15). Only through this reading, according to Fagenblat, "can the charge of dogmatism be overcome" (p. 17). Levinas's Judaism and philosophy are midrash, "the way Jewish thinkers have reread their tradition in order to reconceive their world.... Accordingly, ethics is not the passive reception of an absolute given, that mystical face of the Other, but a construction wrought from the ongoing relationship between moral experience and tradition" (p. 20).

Fagenblat's rejection of the appellation of dogmatism looks something like this: dogmatism requires or assumes the appeal to an ahistorical tradition (or revelation); Judaism is midrashic and not absolute or ahistorical; Levinas really is more midrashic, and his ethics are "the exegetically constructed experience of another human being as it signifies within the horizon of our tradition-infused philosophical imagination"; and therefore, Levinas's ethics is not dogmatic (p. 18). So, though the book claims not to be a reduction of Levinas to his Jewish sources, Levinas remains for Fagenblat what Grammy Hall would call a real Jew. Exactly which type of Judaism Levinas recovered occupies much of the book, including especially the reading of Levinas alongside Maimonides in chapter 3, "Ethics in the Image of God: Anthropology ex Nihilo"; chapter 4, "Ethical Negative Theology"; and chapter 5, "Secularizing the Covenant: The Ethics of Faith."

Fagenblat argues that Levinas's midrashic Judaism of his later *Otherwise Than Being* (English, 1981) recalls Maimonides' negative theology through its rejection of metaphysics. "Levinas 1," the Levinas of *Totality and Infinity* (English, 1969), offers a free metaphysical subject that grounds the ethical encounter (this claim is not without its own criticism). In "Levinas 2," "we hear echoes of mystical and martyrological exegetical traditions in which the inspiration of the One becomes the soul's expiration and self-abandonment" (p. 106). For Fagenblat, Levinas eventually offers a "Judaic theology without metaphysics," or a secularized Judaism. Secular means *anthropological* for Fagenblat, and represents in Levinas the shift from an account of ethics rife with metaphysics (and the language of transcendence) in *Totality and Infinity* to a "*via eminentia*." "Levinas's new 'ethical language' strives to account for the anteriority of obligation over identity and thus of obligations accrued without experience, without fault or choice, in the very passage or the awakening of the self to itself. One is beholden to the Other before one beholds her particular attributes" (p. 107).

Here, Fagenblat's approach to reading Levinas does run into some rhetorical troubles. Levinas secularizes Judaism, by ridding it of an event of ahistorical revelation, and rejecting metaphysics and transcendence as the forms or proper interest of speculation about others. Levinas is secular, then, because he is religious in the correct, midrashic way: "Like Maimonides, Levinas reduces discourse from nouns (or essences) to verbs (or actions) and finally to an approach to the proper name.... Ethical negative theology is the avowed response to proper names that designate the 'realism' of the Other in a nonessentialist, nondescriptivist, non-metaphysical sense" (p. 131). I am uncertain that this makes Levinas (or Maimonides) secular, or antidogmatic. The Other might not be reducible to an essence, but being bound to another as a condition of ethical negative theology, or "captivated and entwined and having no choice in the matter of ethics" strikes me as a fundamental premise or *dogma* of Fagenblat's Levinas (pp. 103-104). Even if this still represents a removal of "theological postulates" or "positive theology," by precluding subjective priority over the Other (again, a claim Fagenblat makes of early Levinas that does not go without question), the advantage of calling this religion-without-theology "secular" is decidedly unclear.

In the preface, Fagenblat writes: "Levinas sought to restore a new sense of an unconditional ethical imperative that could not be dismissed as merely abstract, formal, ahistorical, inauthentic, and ontologically inadequate. He did this by developing a phenomenology of the moral imperative that was derived not from the fact of Reason but from the face of the Other. This account of a pre-rational but still categorical imperative constitutes his signature contribution to contemporary phenomenology and moral philosophy" (p. xix). This sounds secular. In chapter 5, Fagenblat offers that "what we find in Levinas is an ethics of faith the points beyond modern epistemology to the earliest articulations of Jewish *emunah*" (p. 144). This does not sound secular; this sounds essentialist. On the following page, Fagenblat drives home the point of Levinas's Jewishness: "Contrary to the metaphysical and largely Christian picture of religion as a set of beliefs or symbolic meanings about God that regulate the universe, Levinas regards religion as a set of historical and normative practices that are themselves the ground, or the glue, for faith" (p. 145).

It is possible to be secular in more ways than one. In the concluding chapter, "The Ambivalence of Fraternity: Ethical Political Theology," Fagenblat continues an earlier discussion of Levinas's atheism: "By deploying a phenomenological interpretation that passes through Judaism and Christianity, Levinas's work effectively secularizes this ethical heritage of thinking, as Kant, for example, had formerly done. The idea of ethics as a covenant of creatures is in fact profoundly secular, even rightly passing for atheistic. It supposes no idea of God, neither positive nor negative" (p. 177). Again, I am not convinced that this makes Levinas (or Kant) secular in any meaningful way; grounding transcendence through the inescapable obligation to another, and tracing this tradition back to Abraham's faith is to make a deeply religious (Jewish) claim. Levinas, like Maimonides, might not speculate about God in certain ways, but if Fagenblat is correct, he–Levinas–finds God in the details. "That is to say," Fagenblat writes, "the social and historical are the milieu in which God makes sense" (p. 145). In this way, Fagenblat's book on Levinas recalls part of the mission statement of Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason* (1919) to read Judaic sources into Kant's moral thought (or to read Kant's moral sources as founded in Judaic sources). This very language appears in the preface, where we are promised an "interpretation of Levinas's philosophy from the sources of Judaism" (p. xii). In the end, it is not that Levinas's philosophy is *not* bound up with his Judaism (p. 12 cited above); it is that Levinas is not that kind of Jew.

Fagenblat achieves a great deal in this text. Pairing Levinas with Maimonides provides a teachable and engaging discussion. The insistence of reading Levinas back into his Judaism (or his faith), as opposed to turning to Levinas's writings on Judaism to elucidate his work more generally, strikes me as wrongheaded. Let us parse Levinas without defining him.

Note

[1]. See Annette Aronowicz and Michael Fagenblat in *AJS Review* 35, no. 1 (April 2011): 105–124.

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