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LEVINAS' HERITAGE IN LITHUANIAN RABBINIC THOUGHT

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Emmanuel Levinas, the French and Jewish philosopher, was a Litvak, who was born and raised in Kaunas. In my paper I have set myself the task of outlining certain connections of his thought to Lithuanian Rabbinic Thought. The task is difficult, as it is generally known that while living in Lithuania he was more deeply familiar with Russian classic literature than with Talmudic studies. In that time, or maybe later, he had a special liking for Dostoyevski, and took to more profound Talmudic studies only in the postwar period, after the Shoah and his move to Paris.

It is also difficult to find connections between Levinas' philosophy and Lithuanian Rabbinic Thought because today the essential features of Lithuanian rabbinic thought or culture that distinguishes it from Central and Eastern European rabbinic thought in general are hard to pinpoint, except Hassidism. Though there exist some common images of features of Lithuanian rabbinic culture, such as 1) Mithnagdism, 2) image of a Jew of Eishishok, representing a kind of an alien to secular culture, prone to isolation, fanatic orthodox world, and 3) Yeshiva, as the basic institution of Lithuanian Jewish Orthodoxy. Perhaps the only thing that associates Levinas to Litvak culture, when defined in three abovementioned stereotypes, is Mithnagdism, as described by Salomon Malka (1984: 52):

"The Lithuanian Jews seem to have experienced in a way secularization within the Judaism itself. And at least this country in Jewish literature remains a symbol of the proud stronghold which resisted attack by Hassid movement to the end. (…) The tradition which seeks to integrate Hassidism in classics that sometimes also exceeds its reach. This culture of sobriety and real wisdom fully unfolded with *mussar*, literature of moral education that became known inter alia through Rabbi Israel Salanter. Levinas cherished a particular attraction to the activities of this Rabbi, whose phrase, so corresponding with his own thinking, he often used to quote: "My neighbour's material needs are my spiritual needs"."

In his book *Totality and Infinity*, which appeared in 1961 when he was already familiar with the Talmud and rabbinic thought, he questioned the idea of Being as Totality which has dominated Western philosophy for centuries and turned his eye to the *Other*. This is an absolute *Other*, an absolute transcendency which lies beyond the totality of Being. This absolute *Other* slips from the objectivating discourse, from the discoursive, descriptive objective thinking, escapes being objectively cognizable, in view of the modern conception of a cognizance as a power and mastering what has been cognized. The *Other* requires a different relation to him – not cognizable, and thus not reducing, mastering, subjecting. This totally different relation can be expressed by the word Ethics. However the word in Levinas' philosophy appears to be in some way different from that of classical Western philosophy, primarily oriented toward the search for the definitions and implications of the categories *Good*, *virtue*, moral law (as the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad, right and wrong), and system or theory of moral values or principles. This approach can be formulated as a question: *what must / can I do or from what am I obliged to restrain myself in order to be considered a good person?*

The approach of Levinasian Ethics can also be formulated as a question: *who is the Other person for me and what must I do in order to not hurt his dignity and, even more, to strengthen his dignity by taking into account his basic needs as living being and as a human person*?

In my paper I will argue that the conception of ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, even if he himself had unlikely undergone direct influence from the Lithuanian rabbinic thought of the modern period, or even earlier, notwithstanding is very close to some aspects of this thought.

One can distinguish two branches in Lithuanian Jewish Orthodoxy, crystallized in the end of the 19th through the beginning of the 20th century: a) under the influence of the mussar movement, whose "father" was Rabbi Israel Salanter, and whose center was the yeshiva of Slobodka in Kaunas (Kovno). This branch of Lithuanian Orthodoxy emphasized development of

personal integrity on the basis of Torah studies, religious zeal, purity of intentions and *gmillut hassadim* (deeds of kindness). The last aspect of *mussar* was particularly emphasized in the Kaunas Slobodka yeshiva by its spiritual leader, Rabbi Nathan Zvi Finkel, for several decades (end of 19th – beginning of 20th century). In narrative stories and anecdotes about Salanter, his aspirations for social ethics, social sensibility to the needs of his neighbor, and to the dignity of poor people are usually emphasized; and b) crystallized on the basis of analytical traditions of the study of Torah in the yeshiva of Volozhin. The best known modern authority of this branch of Lithuanian Jewish Orthodoxy is Rabbi Josef Dov Soloveitchik.

In classical Hebrew from the Bible, *mussar* (from *yassar*, to punish) most often means to take/give lesson, so to say, to take a lesson from consequences of non-convenient, not-sage behaviour, which usually is interpreted as divine punishment. In the Septuagint *mussar* is most often translated as παιδεία (fr. *instruction, correction, discipline, science, avis, leçon*; eng. *discipline, correction, doctrine*, germ. *Bildung*) or as τε στροφή.[1] Usually the word is used to refer to linguistic utterances and non-linguistic facts/happenings that have the function requiring a proper response: to change one's way of life, to act in a different way than before, to change one's relations with others and especially with the absolute *Other*, i.e., with God, although this in no way presents a discursive teaching of what is to be considered moral goodness, virtue, or perfection. In rabbinical Hebrew[2] *mussar* was used as discipline, morality, and also as socially convenient behavior. So, in biblical Hebrew *mussar* means various types of education (from bearing the consequences of ones own behavior to verbal castigations), and in the rabbinical Hebrew it means convenient behavior itself, morality. In the hands of Salanter and his followers *mussar* got back its biblical meaning, so to say, and became again an instrument of education, *paideia*, *Bildung*. In their analytical studies of the *mussar* thought of Israel Salanter and the *Mussar* movement, Immanuel Etkes (1993) and Hillel Goldberg (1982) have argued that despite of perceptions of early historiography and testimonies concerning humanistic and socially oriented *mussar* ideas and the personality of Israel Salanter, his main task was not as humanistic as it was thought. He was more oriented toward a close elitist group of advanced Talmud students, or/and

[1] For example, Deuteronomy 11:2 "And know ye this day: for *I speak* not with your children which have not known, and which have not seen the chastisement of the LORD your God, his greatness, his mighty hand, and his stretched out arm" (אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יְדְעוּ וַאֲשֶׁרלֹא־רְאוּ אֶת־מוּסַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶת־גָּדְלוֹ וְיָדֹעְתֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי לֹא אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶם
וְיָדַעְתֶּם הַיּוֹם כִּי לֹא אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶם
אֶת־יְדוֹ הַחֲזָקָה וְזִרֹעוֹ הַנְּטוּיָה׃יה:). Job 20:3 "I have heard the check of my reproach, and the spirit of my understanding causeth me to answer" (מוּסַר כְּלִמָּתִי אֶשְׁמַע וְרוּחַ מִבִינִי״נתי יַעֲנֵנִי׃). Psalm 50:17 Seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest my words behind thee (וְאַתָּה שָׂנֵאתָ מוּסָר וַתַּשְׁלֵךְ דְּבָרַי אַחֲרֶיךָ׃).

[2] *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, by Marcus Jastrow.

ba'alei batim. Widely accepted historiography on Israel Salanter and the *Mussar* movement interprets him as an opponent of the *Haskalah* movement, even if there is much evidence of *maskilim* who saw in his *mussar* teaching some features of humanistic ethics, linking him to them. However, Alexandr Lvov from St. Peterburg State University maintains a compelling opinion that despite the claims of followers and most researchers of Salanterian teachings and personality, Salanter shared with *maskilim* the same hopes and means of reorganization of the traditional Jewish way of life: formation of spiritual community leaders (rabbis), reorganization of the inert traditional religious life of the Jews after the abolition of the Kahals by tsarist authorities in the middle of the 19th century, and moral education of people. "Salanter's teaching, even being dressed in a traditional Jewish air, is quite compatible with the language of the 18th century philosophy, with that of European Enlightenment. The intellect identified by Salanter with the traditional concept of *yetzer tov* (a good intention) is the base and the means for the transformation of the human nature (for *tikkun middot*). Salanter is easily recognised as a sceptic criticising radically the base that seemed to be unshakeable and a moralist designing his construction only on the base of rationalism who were familiar from the European history" (Львов 2000).

In my dissertation *Israel Salanter and Mussar movement in Lithuania in the 19th century*, I argued that traditional Jewish religious life became inert in the middle of 18th century after abolition of Va'ad, a general historical crisis of Polish-Lithuanian society and a crisis of official rabbinate. In Eastern and Southern provinces of the State those crises were resolved in the Hassidic movement. In Western provinces, especially in Lithuania, this was resolved by attempts to begin the formation of spiritual rabbinic authority. Yeshiva of Volozhin was the place of this formation, as well as the place of this reorganization of traditional Lithuanian Jewish way of life into "Jewish orthodoxy". Although the *Mussar* movement in the second half of the 19th century sprang up as a rival movement of reeducation of people, especially its leaders, to Haskalah movement. But even as a rival movement, *Mussar* had many things in common with Haskalah. Even if Salanter himself did not welcome secular sciences in education, in the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century, he had achieved notoriety as a humanist. The very project (of maskilim as well as Salanter) of moral education as the means for the transformation and improvement of society was shared in common with the Humanistic project of Education (*paideia*, *Bildung*) in the era of Enlightenment.[3] Responsibil-

[3] See Giacomoni, Paola. "Paideia as *Bildung* in Germany in the Age of Enlightenment". *The Paideia Project Online: Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* (Boston, Massachusetts U.S.A., 10-15 August 1998) [von Humboldt]. Available: http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Mode/ModeGiac.htm; also Pažėraitė Aušra. Izraelio Salanterio *musar* kaip *paidea*: dar vienas Apšvietos amžiaus edukacinis projektas // Tarptautinės mokslinės konferencijos „Vilniaus žydų intelektualinis gyvenimas iki antrojo pasaulinio karo", vykusios Vilniuje 2003 m. rugsėjo 16-17 d., pranešimų medžiaga.

ity for community, for fellow human beings, and moral self-education were attitudes shared in common Enlightened Humanists, maskilim, and some proponents of the *mussar* movement. Latter hagiographic testimonies of the personality of Salanter and legends about him as a "good rabbi", his humanistic and social care for his fellow Jew contrasted to the traditional ritualistic, his rigorist approach of other rabbis (as has shown A. Lvov), reveal some general features and attitudes of the Lithuanian (as well as Russian) Jewish society in the beginning of the 20th century, in which Judaism became equated with Ethics. Dov Kac in the Introduction to his fundamental work on the *Mussar* movement[4] made the attempt to show how Ethics was fundamentally implicit in Judaism from the very beginning. So, through the general development of priorities Jewish society in Lithuania became more sensible to the questions of social justice and human dignity. The Judaism of Levinas, as we see in his *Difficile Liberté* and Talmudic Lessons, even ritualistic practices, is regularly equated with Ethics, the Ethics of justice and responsibility. So, even if in his Lithuanian period Levinas was not acquainted with proper Lithuanian rabbinic thought, his transfer of emphasis from ritualistic Judaism to Ethical, might be in common with changes in Lithuanian Judaism.

The idea of human responsibility, even cosmic responsibility for the world(s), is found also in the fundamental treatise of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin (beginning of the 19th century), *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (*Soul of Life*):

"Such is the Human law. God forbid that somebody in Israel says to himself: "Who ever am I? What can I do in the worlds with my miserly actions?" On the contrary, he is to know, to understand and to be penetrated by the thought that not a particle of his actions, words and thoughts is lost at any moment. How important, expected, complicated his actions are, because everyone reaches his roots in order to affect heights of heights, in worlds and the highest, purest lights. Really, an awake man who perfectly understands this will fear and tremble in his heart at the thought of how deeply his bad actions may reach, and what a rottenness and destruction his smallest error may cause…" (Hayyim de Volozhyn 1986: 1,4).

Levinas, writing a foreword for the commented French translation of "Nefesh ha-Hayyim" by Benjamin Gross, published in 1986 in Paris, noted: "Man is the soul of all "worlds", of all creatures, of all life, like the Creator Himself… Being *exists* through human ethics. The kingdom of God depends on me, God reigns only through ethical order, where exactly one creature acts as a response to another" (Lévinas 1986: X). I.e., the existence of Being depends upon Ethics, which in the philosophy of Levinas is perceived as all the sphere of human action, which is covered by *mizwot*: both ritual and moral, as action of response.

[4] See Kac Dov (1974).

Moreover the quoted thoughts of Hayyim of Volozhin were not new. Before him the idea of the absolute human responsibility for the very existence of the worlds, of the Being, was expressed by a one of the authors of classical *mussar* texts, mystic and philosopher Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto. In his book *Meamar ha-Ikkarim* (2002), in which he explains the basics of Judaism, Luzzatto states that God has given to man the power of affecting (awaking, *le'orer*) the *Highest Roots.* God has defined the actions through which holiness is transmitted – (as *mizwot)*, as well as those transmitting impurity (as transgressions). The *Highest Roots* is a Cabbalistic notion pointing to the mystical Tree of *Sephirot*. Through the righteous actions of man (by observing *mizwot*) Holiness, like tree sap from those roots, gets into man and through him into the world, whereas through the wrong actions, some sort of dirt, contamination, "poison", or disease gets into them, and brings destruction to the world. Despite this, as has been noted, the novelty of Hayyim of Volozhin was his activity of beginning the shaping of modern Lithuanian Jewish Orthodoxy through the educational project in Yeshiva, continued with some features shared in common with Haskalah educational projects, in the *Mussar* movement.

In the book of Hayyim Volozhiner, who utilizes cabbalistic terminology in order to give arguments for people to keep the commandments (even ritual) because of the cosmic responsibility human beings have for the world, we find a mystical approach to Being as Totality, enrooted in the impenetrable Godhead, which is an overabundance of existence. This world and even the World(s) of that beyond-Being can not be mastered by the simple act of objectifying cognizance, but only experienced as correlated existence, enabled from the part of human being by the means of proper action, by keeping divine commandments, and by restraining oneself from transgressions, in halakhic perfection. Global human responsibility is the response to the act of Divine Creation.

Salanter reduced this Volozhiner's global, cosmic responsibility to the responsibility toward one's neighbor, toward very concrete other human being, even transgressing certain ritual commandments. His method of *mussar* study was primarily the method of purification of one's own heart, inconceivable to consciousness depths of the heart, through *teshuvah*. Maybe this point – personal responsibility for the other, for the community, - was the point shared in common by Volozhiner, Salanter, and Levinas himself.

Conclusion

In the conception of ethics of Levinas do appear some aspects close to the modern Lithuanian rabbinic conceptions of the meaning of the human action in the economy of the correlation of human beings and God, rooted in Jewish mystical tradition as well as in classical *mussar* literature, especially in the *mussar* conception of Salanter. Volozhiner's equation of keeping mizwot with human responsibility, transferring the emphasis of traditional ritualism to humanist (responsible) attitude toward fellow human beings in modern Lithuanian Judaism from the beginning of the 20th century, influenced by maskilic humanism, and in more religious layers enveloped in *mussar* ideas, resulting in the modern equation of Judaism with Ethics, could be appreciated as the Lithuanian heritage of Levinas.

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LEVINO PALIKIMAS IR LIETUVOS RABINIŠKOJI TRADICIJA

SANTRAUKA

E. Levino etikos koncepcijoje pasirodo keletas aspektų, artimų modernioms Lietuvos rabiniškoje mintyje XIX a. plėtotoms sampratoms: žmogaus veiksmo reikšmingumo ir prasmės žmogaus ir Dievo santykių koreliacijoje sampratoms, ateinančioms iš žydų mistikos tradicijos, taip pat ir klasikinės *mussar* (rabiniškos dievoieškos ir moralės) literatūros. Žydų mistikos tradicijas naujai interpretavo Vilniaus Gaono mokinys Chaimas iš Valažino (1749-1821), kuris savo veikale "Nefeš ha-Haim" ("Gyvenimo siela") išplėtojo mintį, kad net ir menkiausias žmogiškas veiksmas neišvengiamai turi pasekmių visuose egzistuojančiuose pasauliuose, net ir tuose, kurie arčiausiai dieviškų visa ko kilimo šaknų, todėl kiekvienas yra atsakingas ne tik už save, bet ir už Būtį, net jos buvimą. Idėjas apie šias absoliučios atsakomybės už savo veiksmų, savo ketinimų, intencijų, kylančių iš širdies gelmių, kuriose jie slypi ikisąmonės būklėje, pasekmes plėtojo ir Izraelis Salanteris (1810-1883), tiesa, labiau psichologiškai nei mistiškai. Žydų Apšvietos judėjime (*Haskala*) ir Izraelio Salanterio paveiktame *musar* judėjime tradicinė ritualistinė mistinė atsakomybė buvo perkelta į humanistinę atsakomybės už artimą (kaip viršijančios ritualinę atsakomybę) nuostatą. Gana dažnai XIX a. pb. - XX a.pr. judaizmas Rusijos imperijos (taip pat ir Lietuvos) žydų (net ir nelabai religingų) ir jiems prijaučiančių sluoksniuose (nors toli gražu ne visuose) imamas prilyginti Etikai. Šie judaizmo sampratos aspektai galėtų būti laikomi litvakišku Levino paveldu, kurį jis perėmė gal ir ne tiesiogiai iš religinių žydų mokyklų Lietuvoje, bet iš humanistinės aplinkos, kurioje augo, o vėliau, jau gyvendamas Prancūzijoje, giliau studijuodamas rabinišką literatūrą ir tradicijas, iš kurių jam ypač artimos buvo Haimo iš Valažino bei Izraelio Salanterio mintys.

Raktažodžiai: Levinas, etika, Lietuvos rabiniškoji tradicija, litvakai.