

happiness tasted in the garden of paradise. It is this idea of the fecundity of time and the positive value of history that Resh Lakish wishes to add to R. Johanan's opinion.

A few words about the method my commentary has adopted up until now, to which I'm also going to adhere for my following texts. In no way do we wish to exclude from the reading of our texts the religious meaning that guides the reading of the mystic or naive believer, nor the meaning that a theologian would extract. But we none the less begin with the idea that this meaning is not only transposable into a philosophical language, but refers to philosophical problems. The thought of Doctors of the Talmud proceeds from a meditation that is radical enough also to satisfy the demands of philosophy. It is this rational meaning which has been the object of our research. The laconic formulae, images, allusions and virtual 'winks' through which thought finds expression in the Talmud can release their meaning only if one approaches them from the angle of a concrete problem or social situation, without worrying about the apparent anachronisms committed as a result. These can shock only the fanatics for historical method, who profess that *it is forbidden for inspired thinking to anticipate the meaning of all experience* and that not only do there exist words that, before a certain time, are *unpronounceable*; but that there are also thoughts which, before a certain time, are unthinkable.

We begin with the idea that inspired thinking is a thought in which everything has been thought, even industrial society and modern technocracy. It is by beginning with real facts and problems that these formulae and images (through which these scholars speak to scholars over the heads of the masses), which are shown to be more precise, studied and daring than they at first seemed, reveal at least part of their thought. Without this, Judaism, of which they make up most of the content, would be reduced to folklore or anecdotes from Jewish history and would not justify its own history, nor even be worth continuing. It is not a question of contesting the value of the historical method and the interesting perspectives it opens up; but to remain at the level of this method is to transform into incidents and little local histories the truths that have given life to Judaism. Even if these truths were determined by circumstances, conflicts and polemics long since forgotten and rendered insignificant, the words of the Doctors of Israel fix categories, intellectual structures that are absolute in thought. This confidence placed in the wisdom of the wise men is, if you like, a faith. But this form of faith which we proclaim is the only one that

does not have to be kept discreetly to oneself, acting like those shameless professions of faith that echo indiscreetly in every public square.

### *Is the Coming of the Messianic Era Conditional or Unconditional?*

Our second text is on pages 97b and 98a of Tractate Sanhedrin. We witness virtually the same protagonists as before. Samuel is there, but his contradictor is not R. Johanan but Rab, Samuel's usual protagonist in the Talmud.

Rab said: All the predestined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Samuel maintained: It is sufficient for a mourner to keep his [period of] mourning.

We can see that for Rab, the objective conditions for deliverance have come together: history is over. One need not have waited for the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and the nineteenth century to recognize the end of history. It is not that there is no more future, but the objective conditions required for the appearance of the Messiah have already materialized in the third century of the common era. *Everything depends on repentance and good deeds*: the messianic coming is to found *at the level of the individual effort that can be produced in full self-control*. Everything is already thinkable and thought; humanity is mature; what is missing is good deeds and repentance. Moral action, *the individual's work*, is not alienated by a history that denaturalizes it and, consequently, does not have to attempt to impose itself by taking the detour of politics and having recourse to reasons of State.

To bring a just course to triumph, one is not obliged to become politically allied to assassins, so separating the action from its moral source and its real intention. All the predestined dates have passed: good deeds are efficacious. That is the Messiah.

This stands in contrast to Samuel's thesis. He attached importance to political realities. Only messianism can undo the destructive effects they wreak on a moral life. For him, in a word, *messianic deliverance cannot ensue from individual effort* which it makes possible only in terms of efficacy and harmonious play. What does Samuel say? – 'It is sufficient for a mourner to keep his period of mourning.' To understand this sibylline statement, we

must first of all find out who it is who is said to be in mourning. There are three opinions.

The first states that it is God Who is in mourning. This can be said in another language: objective will, which directs history, is in mourning. God is in mourning and He has kept His period of mourning – *The objective order of things cannot remain eternally in check*: it cannot remain eternally in a state of disorder; things will work out, and they will do so objectively. One does not need to wait for the individual effort, which is virtually negligible and gets drowned in the magnificent and reasonable course of historic events. The individual effort depends, on the contrary, on this arrangement. The mourner, who suffers because of this different humanity – in theological language God, at all events the will that guides history, torn assunder by its contradictions – will bring about deliverance and return to order whatever happens. But this appeal to a necessary and objective arrangement of history is not only a rationalist demand; as we shall see, it is an opinion absolutely necessary to religion.

The second conception believes that the mourner is Israel. Israel is in mourning. Israel is suffering. This suffering, in the absence of repentance, is the condition for its salvation. This interpretation brings together Samuel's thesis and Rab's conception. The objectivity of deliverance here postulates, all the same, a moral event at its source. But this event is not repentance, in which the individual, fully conscious of evil, undertakes a fully conscious action in order to rectify the situation. It is suffering which is the condition for deliverance. *While laying hold of the individual, it is received from outside*, and so does not place the individual at the absolute origins of his deliverance, but leaves him only the status of a second cause.

This idea of a suffering distinct from repentance situates the martyrdom suffered by Israel throughout the terrible years, as throughout its whole history, somewhere between life in the strict sense of the term and the dignity of the victim who, without having deserved it, suffers absurdly the repercussions of historical necessities. This creates a dignity that is not merited as such.

The third conception belongs to a seventeenth-century commentator, who figures in the classic editions of the Talmud – namely, Maharsha. His view is that the mourner is indeed Israel, but Israel's suffering does not by itself determine deliverance. The commentator is probably shocked by the idea of a redemption which is obtained by the sole effect of suffering and without any positive virtue being required, something that reeks of Christianity. It is

sufficient for a mourner to keep his period of mourning – suffering incites him to repentance. And it is repentance that causes deliverance.

In the economy of being, therefore, suffering has a special place: it is not yet moral initiative, but it is through suffering that *a freedom may be aroused*. Man receives suffering, but in this suffering he emerges as a moral freedom. The idea of outside intervention in salvation becomes reconciled in suffering with the idea that the source of salvation must necessarily lie within man. Man both receives salvation and is its agent. Samuel, sensitive to the political obstacle – that is to say, the outside obstacle encountered by morality – and calling on an outside act to bring deliverance, an act transcending simple morality, concurs with Rab, who believes the time has come, and 'the matter now depends only on good works'.

It is perhaps interesting at this point to relate another passage of the Talmud, a very beautiful one, which certainly illustrates Rab's radical position but can also act as a fourth reply to the question: 'Who is the mourner?' The mourner is the Messiah.

R. Joshua b. Levi had the good fortune one day to meet the prophet Elijah. Such meetings happen in the talmudic apologies. The prophet Elijah, as we know, is the Messiah's precursor. R. Joshua asks him the only interesting question: 'When will the Messiah come?' The prophet Elijah cannot answer; he is just an underling: 'Go and ask him himself.' 'Where is he sitting?' – 'At the entrance. He is sitting among the poor lepers.' R. Joshua goes to him, and finds him in a veritable court of miracles. The bodies of these poor wretches are covered in bandages. They untie them, treat their sores, and rebandage them. He has no trouble in recognizing the Messiah. To treat his sores, he does not untie all the bandages at once, as do the others: at any moment he might be called upon to appear as the Messiah. So instead of untying all the bandages at once, he tends each sore separately, uncovering the next wound only when he has rebandaged the previous one. He must not be delayed by the time it takes to perform one medical act.

R. Joshua recognizes him, rushes up to him and asks: 'When wilt thou come, Master?' 'Today', is the answer. R. Joshua returns to the prophet Elijah, asking: Was this 'today' not false? But Elijah answers: 'This is what he said to thee, *Today, if ye will hear his voice*', a reference to Psalm 95, verse 7. Today, on condition that...

What we have here, therefore, is a Messiah who suffers. But salvation cannot ensue from the pure virtue of suffering. None the

less, the whole of history has been crossed, and every time completed. The Messiah is ready to come this very day, but everything depends on man. And the suffering of the Messiah and, consequently, the suffering of humanity which suffers in the Messiah and the suffering of humanity for whom the Messiah suffers, are not enough to save humanity.

The two theses propounded by Rab and Samuel seem clearer; they testify to a basic alternative. Either morality – that is to say, the efforts made by men who are masters of their intentions and acts – will save the world, or else what is needed is an objective event that surpasses morality and the individual's good intentions.

Our text then says, in effect, that the discussion between Rab and Samuel takes up an old debate between Tannaim, which set R. Eliezer against R. Joshua.

R. Eliezer said: If Israel repent, they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed.

Here we are given Rab's thesis:

R. Joshua said to him: If they do not repent, will they not be redeemed! But the Holy One, blessed be He, will set up a king over them, whose decrees shall be as cruel as Haman's whereby Israel shall engage in repentance, and he will thus bring them back to the right path.

Here we can recognize Samuel's thesis in the interpretation given it by Maharsha. R. Joshua repudiates the idea of a free deliverance. The phenomenon of Haman (or Hitler) is placed in the perspective of messianism. Only repentance can cause salvation, but objective events of a political character produce this repentance which is both a manifestation of human freedom and a product of an external cause. Samuel's thesis appears in a form much closer to Rab's position, to judge from the version of it which we have just read in the discussion between the Tannaim. *But this is only one version.* Our text reproduces another, given by the *Baraita* – that is to say, by the collection of teachings of the Tannaim which were excluded from the Mishnah and compiled by R. Hiyya and R. Oshaia at the end of the second century.

We are confronted by a characteristic passage of the Talmud in which we have the impression that we are simply witnessing a combat that trades verses like blows.

R. Eliezer said: If Israel repent, they will be redeemed, as it is written, *Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings* (Jeremiah 3:22).\*

This time R. Eliezer supports his opinion with a verse beginning 'Return'. The children of Israel are being invited to return. When this return has occurred, the Messiah will come. Salvation depends on man.

R. Joshua said to him: But is it not written, *ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money* (Isaiah 53:3). *Ye have sold yourselves for nought, for idolatry; and ye shall be redeemed without money* – without repentance and good deeds.

Curiously, the Tanna identifies selling oneself with the vanity of idolatry, and money with repentance and good deeds.

R. Eliezer retorts: But is it not written, *Return unto me, and I will return unto you* (Malachi 3:7).

There is still insistence on the word *return*, the condition for salvation.

R. Joshua rejoined: But is it not written, *that I am master over you: and I will take you out of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion* (Jeremiah 3:14).

R. Joshua seems to forget the start of the verse quoted which also begins with the word 'Return', supporting his thesis by pointing to the violence of 'I will take you' and 'I will bring you'. This forgetfulness is already an indication that the argument is less formal than it appears.

R. Eliezer replied: But it is written, *In returning and rest shall ye be saved* (Isaiah 30:15).

Here R. Eliezer is playing, we might say, on words, for he is giving the verse from Isaiah a translation that is not impossible, but

\* *Translator's note:* In each case I have given the Talmud version, rather than Collins.

doubtful: 'In returning and rest you shall be saved'. As always, he is subordinating deliverance to repentance.

R. Joshua goes on the attack again:

But is it not written, *Thus saith the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nations abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship?* (Isaiah 49:7).

This is an unconditional promise.

We then get R. Eliezer's fourth retort:

But is it not written, *If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return unto me?* (Jeremiah 4:1).

R. Eliezer reads this with the sovereignty of someone who has his own idea: *if you return, O Israel, to me you should return*. R. Eliezer once again proves the priority of repentance over free salvation.

But R. Joshua does not have to search hard to find another verse in support of his thesis:

But it is elsewhere written, *And I heard the man clothed in linen, which was upon the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand unto heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever that it shall be for a time, times and a half; and when he shall have accomplished to scatter the power of the holy people, all things shall be finished.* (Daniel 12:7).

In this verse R. Joshua reads the announcement of unconditional deliverance.

And R. Eliezer? R. Eliezer remains silent. This is at first surprising. Has he run short of verses? The combat between erudite scholars could have continued indefinitely. Could not more verses have been found which begin with 'Return', as well as others announcing: 'I shall none the less save you ...'? But R. Eliezer remains silent.

To interpret the strange text I have just been questioning, we must first neglect the points that initially seem to carry the force of the summarized argument, and we must neglect less the verses themselves to which the interlocutors have recourse.

The first force of the arguments seemed indeed to reside in the fact that R. Eliezer produced verses which place a moral condition on deliverance, whereas R. Joshua located his argument in texts dealing with unconditional deliverance.

Let us take the first argument. R. Eliezer said: 'Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backsliding.' The essential words are 'I will heal'. Man's backslidings involve such a radical corruption that this corruption needs medication, a medication also considered ineffectual without some initial effort on the part of the sick person. For R. Eliezer, if evil corrupts being to the extent that medication is required, the cure cannot be obtained from outside, like grace. The external act no longer has any hold over a corrupted being. Nothing can penetrate a person closed in on himself by evil. He first of all has to get a grip on himself in order to be healed from outside. Precisely, *because evil is not simply a 'backsliding', but a profound illness in being, it is the sick person who is the first and principal worker of his own healing*. This is a unique logic, and the opposite of the logic of grace. I can save you on condition that you return unto me. The sick person must retain sufficient lucidity to return to the doctor; if he cannot his illness is madness – that is to say, the state of one who cannot even spontaneously summon the doctor. This is the eternal requirement of a thought that regards sin as breaking with the eternal order, a free being in selfish isolation.

However, R. Joshua's reply emphasizes a requirement that is no less eternal. The sin that separates and isolates is based in turn on a lapse, and a lapse is open to the outside action of teaching. If for R. Eliezer every backsliding is a sin, for R. Joshua a sin, in turn, is based on a lapse. Moral perversion rests on an indifference of culture. This lapse is idolatry. For R. Joshua's Judaism, it is at the base of all moral depravity, but on its own it is just a lapse. 'Ye have sold yourselves for nought', says Isaiah, and R. Joshua is quick to add: 'for nought, for idolatry'.

An offence committed against man proceeds from a radical evil. It can be effaced only when the offended party offers pardon and demands reparation from the offender. An offence against God is something God takes care of. It is due to lack of education. This is precisely what R. Joshua replies: Is there not something intellectually inadequate at the root of a sin that cannot be redeemed by purely external intervention and requires good deeds and an attempt at regeneration that comes from the individual? Should the fall brought about by a (gratuitously) inconsistent lapse not be redeemed from outside without expecting good deeds (money)? Isn't the human fall

primarily intellectual and doctrinal? And doesn't this mean that the Messiah must come through the outside influence of teaching? This is why R. Joshua will always be right (just as R. Eliezer will be). Beyond the corruption of evil, he perceives an intellectual flaw which can and must be redeemed from outside.

Let us come now to the other arguments. *Return unto me, and I will return unto you.* Here R. Eliezer once again affirms the eternal requirement of morality: the total *reciprocity* between free people, the equality found between freedoms. What I am in relation to God, God is in relation to me. It is in the name of such freedom that man's salvation must have its origins in man.

The whole discussion is, as I have already said, curiously opposed to the Christian logic of grace: a lapse needs external aid, for true knowledge cannot be self-learned; but sin can be atoned for only from within.

What is R. Joshua's response? This sovereign freedom being put forward is by no means cut and dried. Doesn't freedom rest on a preliminary commitment to the being with regard to whom one puts oneself forward as free? Are not the two free beings, God and man, like an engaged couple freely deciding to be united, when they could reject such an option? Are they not tied henceforth by a bond similar to marriage? It is precisely this image of conjugal union in which the initiative belongs to one of the spouses that is evoked in the verse quoted by R. Joshua. Is God a partner Whom one accepts or rejects? Has one not accepted Him even when one rejects Him? Does not freedom in general presuppose a commitment that precedes the very rejection of such a commitment? Let us transpose all this on to the political plane, for example. Has the person who rejects the State not been formed for this rejection by the very State he rejects?

If one of our speakers from the previous conference were here, he would certainly have protested against R. Joshua's idea, this contestation of freedom, this 'if you deny me, it is because you support me; if you are looking for me, it is because you have already found me'. His protest would not put him outside of Judaism; he would find himself agreeing with R. Eliezer.

R. Eliezer's third argument is: 'In returning and rest shall ye be saved.' Here he once again involves an eternal condition of messianism or deliverance: the possibility of suspending the hold things have on us, and of distancing ourselves from them. This is the place and *leisure* of being aware, the freedom of thought. Without it, self-renewal, the returning, is not possible. It is the prerogative of any

conscience as conscience, assuring us of this renewal and this mastery over our inner destiny.

R. Joshua's reply is peremptory. What about the servant, the worker, the underdeveloped nations, 'him whom man despiseth'? Have not these people already alienated their self-consciousness, do they have peace and leisure, which are the conditions for becoming aware of oneself again? Isn't external intervention in this case necessary?

If moral action must therefore begin from inside, from the 'interval' of consciousness and meditation, in a concrete situation a preliminary and objective event must fulfil its conditions. There has to be outside intervention, whether in the shape of the Messiah or revolution or political action, if only to allow men to accede to that leisure and self-consciousness.

Finally, there is the fourth argument, which gives the debate a dramatic turn. For the first time, the particle 'if' figures in the quoted text: *Return unto me, and I will return unto you.*

To require absolute morality is to require absolute freedom. This creates the possibility of immorality. What will happen in fact if men do not return to God? The Messiah will never come, the world will be turned over to the wicked and atheist belief that it is governed by chance, and evil will triumph. Morality requires absolute freedom, but within this freedom there already exists the possibility of an immoral world – that is to say, the end of morality. The possibility of an immoral world is therefore included in the conditions for morality. It is for this reason that R. Joshua's final argument consists in brutally affirming the deliverance of the world by a fixed date, whether or not men deserve such deliverance.

And this is why R. Eliezer on this occasion remains silent. He does so because this time the requirements for morality reach a point where, in the name of man's absolute freedom, they deny God – that is to say, the absolute certainty of the defeat of Evil. There is no immorality without God; without God morality is not preserved against immorality. God emerges here in His purest essence, one distant from all imagery of incarnation, through the moral adventure of humanity. God is here the very principle of the triumph of good. If you do not believe this, if you do not believe that in any case the Messiah will come, you do not believe in God. This helps us to a better understanding of the famous paradox that the Messiah will come when the world is wholly guilty. This statement is the extreme consequence of an obvious proposition: even if the world is absolutely plunged in sin, the Messiah will come.

R. Eliezer remains silent, but his argument has not been abandoned. It will be resuscitated in the age of Rab and Samuel. And it is still alive. Judaism adores its God while remaining acutely aware of all of atheism's reasons, or Reason.

### The Contradictions of Messianism

The passage concerning the internal contradictions of the messianic coming, which is also taken from Tractate Sanhedrin (88b), will be commented on more loosely.

Here is the start of the text:

Ulla said: Let him [the Messiah] come, but let me not see him. Rabbah said likewise: Let him come, but let me not see him. R. Joseph said: Let him come, and may I be worthy of sitting in the shadow of his ass's saddle.

Abbaye enquires of Rabbah the reason for such an attitude. The coming of the Messiah is accompanied by catastrophes; is it this that causes you fear? But is it not written that the man of good deeds who studies the Torah will escape the upheavals of the messianic era? Are you not that good deed, are you not the Torah itself?

But Rabbah is unsure of being without sin, and unsure of his future: Jacob had received every promise from God, yet he was greatly afraid and distressed to face Esau. Was he not afraid that sin might somehow cause the nullification of God's promise?

And why did Israel on the flight out of Egypt to the Promised Land benefit from miracles, when no miracle occurred on the return to Babylon? Do we not know that miracles were promised for both circumstances, since in the Song of Moses about the Red Sea, we read: 'till thy people, O Lord, pass by [out of Egypt], till the people pass by whom thou hast purchased [in Babylon]' (Exodus 15:16). But sin caused the promise not to happen.

The subject is therefore never a pure activity, but is always placed in question. The subject is not in possession of himself in a relaxed and unalienable way. He always has more asked of him. The more just he is, the more harshly is he judged. Can one therefore enter the messianic state without fear and trembling? The hour of truth is fearsome. Can man match the clarity he wishes to call up? Through the growing demands which it places on the Self and the scruples by which it lives, does not morality exclude the messianic era in which things are brought to fruition?

This text is Pharisaic, but of a kind unknown to the Gospels. Note the precise nature of Rabbah's reply. He refers to Jacob facing Esau and Israel's returning from Babylon, Jacob and Israel, Mr Israel and All Israel. The nations in revolt are no more sure of their cause than are individuals.

But there is a second reason for evading the messianic era. R. Johanan said likewise: 'Let him come, and let me not see him.' Resh Lakish asks:

Why so? Shall we say, because it is written, *As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on a wall, and a serpent bit him?* (Amos, 5:19).

But is this situation more horrible than the era in which we already live? Have we something to lose in the horrors of revolution?

That is not, then, what R. Johanan fears. Instead, he anguishes over a verse from Jeremiah:

Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? Wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness? Alas! that day is so great there is none like it (Jeremiah 50:6-7).

This is the verse that frightens R. Johanan, for he naturally reads it in his own way. 'Every man' [*geber*] is not the totality of man; every man designates Him who is virility itself [*geburah*]. 'Every' is here the abverb 'all'. He who is every man is all man, all humanity, all virility. At the end of time God holds His hands on His loins, as though in labour. Why does He hold His hands on His loins? Because at the messianic moment He must sacrifice the wicked to the good. Because in the just act there is still a violence that causes suffering. Even when the act is reasonable, when the act is just, it entails violence.

But the verse is not finished. R. Johanan discerns two other partners, those whose faces are turned into paleness. He says: 'This refers to God's heavenly family [i.e. the angels] and his earthly family [i.e. Israel]'.

The heavenly family and the earthly family are pale. Why? Because they are afraid in case God changes His mind and removes sanctions. For the family on high, the angels, pure Reason, injustice