MICHAEL L. MORGAN: AN INTELLECTUAL PORTRAIT

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Biography and Career

Michael L. Morgan has been a leading Jewish philosopher for four decades, during which he has brought a unique combination of analytic insight, hermeneutic sensitivity, and historical awareness to some of the most pressing and intractable problems of contemporary Jewish life and thought. For thirty-three years, he was the celebrated teacher of generations of students in philosophy and Jewish studies at Indiana University Bloomington, where he now holds the distinguished title of the War Years Chancellor's Professor (Emeritus). Among the institutions at which he has taught in a visiting capacity are Australian Catholic University; Leo Baeck College, London; Northwestern University; Princeton University; Stanford University; Yale University; and the University of Toronto, where he has occupied the Senator Jerahmiel S. and Carole S. Graffstein Visiting Chair in Jewish Philosophy.

In addition to the many undergraduates and graduate students whom he has taught, Morgan has also been a peerless and beloved mentor to many young Jewish philosophers and theologians, as they have sought to determine for themselves what Jewish thought can be and what it can contribute today, in a post-Holocaust, ever-changing, and increasingly globalized world. Above all, Morgan exemplifies the possibility of rigorous Jewish thinking that is at once rooted in Jewish tradition, responsive to the challenges and opportunities of twenty-first-century Jewish life, and in mutually productive conversation, not only with the history of philosophy since antiquity, but also with philosophy as it is practiced today, both analytic and continental.

Much of Morgan's work is in the mode of history of philosophy. Indeed, Morgan's version of history of philosophy is more historical than most versions, since it pays attention to social and especially religious context. But this should not be taken to mean that it is only historical rather than philosophical in its significance. Above all else, this historical form is required by the main question that animates Morgan's thinking: if objectivity requires a transcendent ground, as both Athens and Jerusalem have insisted in
different ways, then how is objectivity possible in light of the historicity of human life? To put the question in an even starker way: once the Holocaust has exposed the radically historical condition of humanity—which seems to show either that there is no transcendent ground, or that, if there is, we are entirely cut off from it—is objectivity possible at all?

Morgan grew up in Syracuse, New York, and graduated from Syracuse University in 1965, when he moved to New York City in order to study for rabbincic ordination at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. There, in 1967, he had an intellectually and existentially decisive encounter with Emil Fackenheim (1916–2003), one of the two great twentieth-century masters of Jewish philosophy with whom Morgan’s work has been intertwined.

Born in Halle, Germany, and interned at Sachsenhausen concentration camp before emigrating to Britain and being deported to Canada, Fackenheim must have seemed both to come from the alien yet familiar place of the prewar German-Jewish past, and to do Jewish philosophy in a way that mattered—not only in the eternal sense in which philosophical truths matter, but also in the immediate sense in which morally and religiously urgent thinking matters to the present and the future. In 1970, Morgan began his graduate studies in philosophy at the University of Toronto, where he became Fackenheim’s assistant, and where, in 1978, he earned a Ph.D. on the completion of his dissertation, “Forms and Form-Interrelations in Plato’s Middle Dialogues,” supervised by R. E. Allen. By then, Morgan had already embarked on his illustrious career at Indiana University, home not only to a distinguished philosophy department but also to a vibrant Jewish studies program.

Morgan’s extensive publishing activity began with an apparent bifurcation, although its unity has since become apparent. He began by publishing on Jewish topics—such as theology in an age of uncertainty, heresy, ritual law, historicity, and post-Holocaust ethics—and by editing Fackenheim’s essays—while also writing about apparently unrelated topics in Plato’s philosophy, including the theory of reality in the *Hippasus Major*, the inquiry into *aitiai* in the *Phaedo*, sense-perception and recollection in the *Phaedo*, and the paradox of inquiry in the *Meno*. However, in the 1990s, starting with the publication of *Platonic Piety* (1990) and *Dilemmas in Modern Jewish Thought* (1992), and culminating in the appearance of *Beyond Auschwitz* (2001) and *Interim Judaism* (2001), the underlying unity of his concerns—which I will try to illuminate below—became clear.

Around 2001, Morgan began his engagement with the second twentieth-century master of Jewish philosophy who has been especially important to him: Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995). Like Fackenheim, Levinas was deeply impressed by Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), and, like Fackenheim, Levinas philosophized under the shadow of the Holocaust, to whose victims he dedicated his second major book, *Otherwise than Being* (1974). So far, Morgan’s interrogation of Levinas’s work and his project of setting it in conversation with contemporary analytic philosophy has generated no less than three monographs: *Discovering Levinas* (2007), *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (2011), and *Levinas’s Ethical Politics* (2016). At the same time, he has continued to interpret, criticize, and present the work of his teacher in *Fackenheim’s Jewish Philosophy* (2013), and to develop his own views through conversation with the works of Fackenheim, Levinas, and others.

As I will explain in what follows, Morgan’s unifying theme throughout has been the complex and mutually challenging relationship between the philosophically eternal, the Jewishly eternal, and the historical character of human life in general and of Jewish life in particular—a relationship brought into sharp relief by the horrors of the Holocaust. By raising what is at once the most theoretically intractable and the most practically urgent question—not only of contemporary Jewish life, but also of contemporary human life, and by pursuing that question in a rigorous way through dialogues with great philosophers from Plato to Fackenheim, Levinas, and others, Morgan exemplifies the very best of contemporary Jewish philosophy.

**The Philosophically Eternal in its Ancient Context**

Although Morgan’s first book, *Platonic Piety* (1990), concerns ancient Greek rather than Jewish philosophy, his characteristic concerns are—in retrospect—already discernible. To a crisis of objectivity brought on by social change, the solution is an affirmation of the transcendent and eternal ground of objectivity: in Plato’s case, the Forms. But this affirmation raises difficult questions about our access to this ground and about how to negotiate the transformative effect of this access on social and political

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arrangements. In a context marked by Judaism, these would be called the problems of revelation and redemption.

The difference between Morgan's concerns in Platonic Piety and his concerns in his dissertation, "Forms and Form Interrelations in Plato's Middle Dialogues," is striking. Morgan's dissertation deals with abstract, metaphysical questions about Plato's Forms. It is in the tradition of analytic philosophical work on Plato, such as the work of Gregory Vlastos and R. E. Allen. Apart from the chronology of Plato's composition of the dialogues, historical issues do not feature in the dissertation. In Platonic Piety, however, the dialogues are placed in a social and historical context, and this contextualization both contributes to the interpretation of the dialogues and at the same time helps to show Plato struggling with important and difficult problems about our access to the Forms and its impact on society. In order to deal with Plato in this historicized manner, Morgan had to break with the analytic approach to Plato in which he had been educated, striking out on a bold, new path.

What especially interests Morgan in the context of Plato's dialogues is Plato's relationship to the emergence of new religious cults in Athens in the turbulent, final decades of the fifth century. These included the cults of Asclepius, Bendis, Ammon, Kybele, and others from Epidaurus, Thrace, Egypt, Phrygia, and elsewhere. Where the traditional Delphic theology emphasized the fundamental distinction between human beings and the gods, some of these new cults emphasized the continuity between the human and the divine, and even held out the promise of divinization, whether permanent or momentary. On the one hand, conventional ritual sacrifice, placual and petitionary, expresses a cosmos in which man and the gods are radically separated and in which the distance between them is bridged, if at all, only by divine action according to divine rules or will. On the other hand, however, possession rites and ecstatic initiation ceremonies express belief in a different cosmic scheme, one in which the human can, in various ways, attain divine status. As Athens underwent traumatic social and political changes from 415 to 399, some Athenians must have turned to the traditional rites for security, while others looked to the new forms of piety. Morgan's question is: how did Plato draw on this complex religious context in his articulation of the transcendence of the Forms as resolving the Athenian crisis of objectivity?

As Morgan notes, there are clear signs that Plato dissents from the Delphic theology. Traditionally, daimonic beings were intermediaries between the human and the divine, bridging the gap without closing it. But Plato emphasizes the presence of the daimonic within Socrates and, indeed, within each human. "The desire for the good, for beauty and divinity, is not a matter of privileged access; it is a universal possibility... this universality does not obviate the need for training and education, but it does make both possible. Plato is taking a stand against the prerogatives of Delphic polis religion in favor of a universal capacity for and a common aspiration to divinity." The image of the philosopher comes to represent the possibility of divinization, and the philosopher is as divine as humanly possible in virtue of contemplating that which is preeminently divine and orderly: the Forms.

To convey this image of human life and its possibilities, Plato draws on the newly imported cults that promised divinization. However, according to Morgan's interpretation, Plato is careful not to present the philosophical life as an open threat to Athenian tradition. In particular, Plato draws on the mysteries of Eleusis in order to portray the philosophical life in as non-threatening a manner as possible:

The mysteries of Eleusis mediate between Bacchic frenzy and philosophy—the desire for the good, for knowledge, for immortality and the rational inquiry that serves that goal. In the end, then, Plato does not so much appropriate the vocabulary of the mysteries as he replaces the mysteries with philosophical inquiry and the joint desire for this-worldly and other-worldly immortality. Eleusis represents the capacity of the polis tradition and Delphic theology to co-opt its ecstatic opponents. Philosophy, the new Eleusis, is the Platonic reinstatement of that opposition and thereby a Platonic response to the Athenian tradition.

Moreover, recognizing that not everybody is going to be a philosopher, Plato incorporates into the ideal city a form of religion to be established by the Delphic Apollo. In other words, "Traditional polis religiosity—with its temples, its cultic acts, its system of sacrifices and festivals, its burial rites—is appropriate and suitable for the vast majority of its members.

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3 Ibid., 20.
4 Ibid., 83.
5 Ibid., 123, commenting on Republic, 508b8–d1.
7 Platonic Piety, 107.
In a series of insightful readings of Platonic dialogues, Morgan paints a rich portrait of the role played by religion in Plato's developing response to the Athenian crisis of objectivity. On the one hand, Plato is drawn beyond the traditional religion of the polis to the new cults of divinization in order to articulate our human access to the transcendence of the Forms; on the other hand, as the Republic shows, "The philosopher...must live in the polis, and the necessity of historical existence forces the issue."  
8 So Plato must mediate between new and old versions of piety.

In the Republic, this mediation—which Morgan calls "Platonic realism"—occurs only in writing about the ideal city. To achieve realism at the level of the real city is, of course, infinitely more difficult. In the conclusion to Platonic Piety, Morgan briefly sketches Plato's two visits to Syracuse—the Sicilian namesake of Morgan's hometown—where there was, for a time, the hope of realizing Plato's vision through his student, Dion, brother-in-law and adviser of the ruler, Dionysius I.  
9 Ultimately, Dion came into conflict with his nephew, Dionysius II, and the attempt to rule the city, supposedly in the name of a philosophical ideal, led to decades of chaos. Plato's political hope may have died, but the intensity of his vision and his literary skill in conveying that vision continued—so Morgan avers—to animate the late dialogues of the 360s.

This is the occasion not to examine the details of Morgan's interpretations, but to trace the significance of Platonic Piety for his later work. Here, in Morgan's first monograph, we already see the themes that will continue to occupy him: a crisis of objectivity, for which the solution is a mode of transcendence to which access is far from unproblematic, and the ongoing challenge of realizing this solution within a redemptive politics.

The Jewishly Eternal in its Modern Context

These themes are further developed in Morgan's account of what he calls the modernist thought of a group of thinkers who experienced the First World War. This group includes Georg Simmel (1858–1918), Martin Buber (1878–1965), Franz Kafka (1883–1924), Georg Lukács (1885–1971), Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), Karl Barth (1886–1968), T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), and Gershom Scholem (1897–1982). What interests Morgan in this group is that they encountered a distinctive and still resonant crisis of objectivity, that they sought relief from this crisis in various versions of transcendence, and that they struggled with the political realization of their visions. In particular, Buber, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Scholem, in conversation with Jewish texts and traditions, developed conceptions of revelation and redemption that continue to shape Jewish thought to this day.

Members of this group grew up in a late-nineteenth-century/early-twentieth-century world in which traditional values could not be taken for granted. The corporate life of Jews within officially recognized communities (kehilot) had been terminated, and Jews were now free—in principle, at least—to lead their own lives as individuals, whether as Jewish, or as Christian, or as neither. At the same time, there was mass migration from rural areas to cities. Life was no longer lived in small communities where families had known each other for generations, and the division of labor, along with the commodification of the products of labour, led to alienation from one's labor and its products, from one's neighbors, and ultimately from oneself.  
10 Meanwhile, in intellectual life, there had been major developments in the methods of historical study, and a new consciousness had emerged, emphasizing the distinction between those methods and the methods of natural science. Even if natural science was understood to transcend historical conditions, it was hard to see how any other aspect of human life, including ethics and religion, could be anything other than relative to its specific historical context. The most radical thinkers, such as Nietzsche, extended this historical understanding to natural science as well. How, then, could objectivity be claimed for any values whatsoever?

Under these conditions, parents experienced great difficulty in transmitting their values to their children, and the new generation had to seek their own answers to questions that now seemed like crises. Morgan distinguishes between three kinds of question: (1) What should we believe and how should we act? (2) Is there an obligation to believe or act in a certain way, or is it a question rather of taste or decision? (3) If and when there is obligation, what is its ground, or why is it obligatory at all?

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8 Ibid., 157.
9 Ibid., 188–89.
11 Ibid., 25–29. Morgan has engaged on several occasions with the thought of several contemporary philosophers who have sought to philosophize in light of this historicist challenge, notably Stanley Cavell, Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, and Charles Taylor.
Following a pattern of thought that we have already seen in Plato, but that has been developed in the Abrahamic faiths, these figures sought a transcendent ground of obligation. But to say anything intelligible about this ground, let alone to achieve access to it, must have been more challenging for the members of the First World War generation than it had been for Plato. There was an old problem, which all Platonists and Abrahamists have had to negotiate:

Revelation succeeds only when both occur [i.e., when the divine reveals and the human receives]. But, one might ask, how can both occur, for after all the divine is divine and the human human? How can the absolute reveal itself, communicate, touch the relative and limited, and still be absolute? And how can the conditional and finite receive the absolute and survive the encounter?13

But there was also a new problem, or at least a newly conceptualized problem: how could human experience ever transcend what these thinkers understood to be the thoroughly historical conditions of human life?

Several of these figures felt the attraction of ecstatic experience, in which the individuality and historicity of the subject is overcome. Simmel and, in his early thinking, Simmel’s student Lukács found such experience to be accessible, if at all, only in art. Before the First World War, Buber was enthralled by the mystical experiences of Nicholas of Cusa, Jakob Boehme, and the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism. Unlike Simmel and Lukács, however, Buber was committed to finding a way in which the experience of transcendence could go beyond episodes affecting individuals—a way in which this experience could orient communities. Buber sought this way in cultural Zionism.

In the eyes of both Morgan and his teacher, Fackenheim, however, the idea of a transcendent ground, developed in response to the crisis of objectivity and in conversation with Jewish texts and traditions, came into its own after the First World War, with the publication of Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption (1921) and of Buber’s I and Thou (1923). Rosenzweig rejected the notion of a mystical union in which:

The divine remains divine, but the human does not, as it were, remain human…Rosenzweig’s response to the need for revelation and transcendence and the challenges of historicism, relativism, and nihilism was, in a sense, to grab hold of both horns [of the dilemma], to hold together the divine and the human, to argue for the integrity of each and to accept their ultimate incommensurability, and yet to remain with the immediacy of their encounter. Buber, in his conception of dialogue, came to agree to something similar.14

This was possible “only by means of an act of divine grace…God and God alone can enter history and nature, open itself to human acknowledgment, and call forth human response.” Revelation, so understood, was communicative—essentially directed and second-personal—but not mediated by concepts or language. “What language there is in the orbit of revelation occurs before and after, most notably as one mode of response to the orienting directedness itself.”15 Revelation was not a mystical experience but a communicative event, an encounter between the divine and human, that provides an objective orientation for one’s life. And this orientation could be expressed through a relationship to time other than the merely historical, a temporality manifest in the daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly cycle of Jewish life.

It was this conception of revelation as orienting Jewish life that deeply impressed Fackenheim at the outset of his career. As he sometimes put it, God is the Jew’s existential a priori.16 In Morgan’s gloss, “the single person-like, historical God is an unassailable feature of Jewish existence and Jewish life. And since God is only present to the Jew in revelation or in the memory of past revelations, these too are irreducible.”17

Of course, there is much room for disagreement about this conception of revelation. Buber and Rosenzweig themselves disagreed about the extent to which it could secure a life of observance of commandments (mitzvot), while Schollem was critical of the very idea of nonlinguistic revelation. However, for present purposes, it will be sufficient to note that Fackenheim accepted Rosenzweig’s affirmation of mitzvah observance, and that Morgan defends Buber and Rosenzweig against Schollem’s criticism.

In “The Dilemma of Liberal Judaism” (1960), Fackenheim argued that liberal Jews were too convinced by the Kantian notion of autonomy to accept a religion of law, and they were “too deeply imbued with the modern historical spirit” either to accept Judah ha-Levi’s argument for the authority of Sinai on the basis of the testimony of 600,000 Israelites, or to accept

13 Ibid., 54.
14 Ibid., 55.
16 Morgan, Fackenheim's Jewish Philosophy, 27. As we will see, this sense of irrefutability
outmoded practices such as animal sacrifice. But, Fackenheim argued, echoing Rosenzweig’s argument against Buber, “traditional Judaism was always a religion, not of law, but of commandment.” Jews are challenged, not merely to receive and fulfill commandments, but to appropriate them in joy. And the meaning of these commandments could be regarded as given only by somebody who accepted verbal revelation. Liberal Jews could accept a nonverbal version of the revelatory event, along with Rosenzweig’s sense that the language and understanding of mitzvot was “the human reflection of a divine revelation…a human book which is the legitimate object of historical criticism.” Thus liberal Jews could have autonomy, historical consciousness, and access to a revelation that connected them both to their ancestors and to the divine, transcendent ground of obligation.

Fackenheim’s resolution depended on the nonlinguistic conception of revelation developed by Buber and Rosenzweig, and criticized by Scholem. Morgan defends this conception by invoking the Buber-Rosenzweig method of bible translation:

The method is oral, focusing on the vocal character of the text and the original auditory character of the narratives, poems, and more… Hence, the goal of the translation and then of interpretation of it is to reveal, expose, and understand the oral teaching that eventuated in the written text before us. The identification of cola and the use of the Leitwort to identify affinities of passages had as a goal the uncovering of the Bible’s original message. That message, moreover, originated with the people’s response to the address at Sinai and the teaching of that response, its transmission, and its reformulation, until it was canonized, as it were, by the author of the biblical text.18

The immediacy of the original revelation, Morgan explains, underlies and anchors the objective reality of its conceptualization and verbalization, in the way that, for Kant, the immediacy of sensible intuition underlies and anchors the objective reality of conceptualization and judgment. One may wish that Buber and Rosenzweig had said more about the way in which “the Divine Presence is the hedge against relativism and anarchism”—more about the relationship between revelatory immediacy and language. In particular, Morgan wishes that they had developed “a doctrine of analogy” of the sort found in the work of Karl Barth.19 “But one is hard put to imagine how the absolute equivocality between human language and the Divine Word is a better safeguard. Nor is it obvious how this positing of an original Ursprache, the Divine Language, can save a written tradition, if the relation between the two is itself unconditionally equivocal.”

This conception of revelation, embedded within a version of liberal Judaism that is at once both historically conscious and open to the meaningfulness of traditional mitzvah observance, was the mainstay of Fackenheim’s early thought. It was an alternative both to the rationalisms of Hegel and Hermann Cohen, and to the naturalism of Mordecai Kaplan.20 The tortuously difficult question that Fackenheim began to confront in the 1960s, and that Morgan has continued to pursue with tremendous courage, is whether this response to the crisis of objectivity is still possible after the Holocaust. It is in this context, I suggest, that it is helpful to consider Morgan’s relationship to his second major interlocutor: Emmanuel Levinas. For Morgan has found in Levinas a view that is closely related to Fackenheim’s Rosenzweigian approach, but that is also importantly different.

The Holocaust and Radical Historicization

How does the Holocaust change the situation confronting Jewish thought and life? First of all, it was—as both Fackenheim and Levinas agreed—so obscenely evil as to render unavailable all the traditional theodicies, all the traditional theistic responses to the problem of evil. Strikingly, in his essay, “Useless Suffering,” Levinas actually cites Fackenheim on this very point:

Whole peoples have been killed for ‘rational’ (however horrifying) ends such as power, territory, wealth…The Nazi murder…was annihilation for the sake of annihilation, murder for the sake of murder, evil for the sake of evil. Still more incontestably unique than the crime itself is the situation of the victims. The Albigensians died for their faith, believing unto death that God needs martyrs. Negro Christians have been murdered for their race, able to find comfort in a faith not at issue. The more than one million Jewish

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18 Morgan, Interim Judaism, 61.
children murdered in the Nazi Holocaust died neither because of their faith, nor despite their faith, nor for reasons unrelated to the Jewish faith [but] because of the Jewish faith of their great-grandparents [who brought] up Jewish children. 22

Even the consolation of faith and the meaningfulness of martyrdom were denied to the victims of the Holocaust.

Second, the Nazi project was not only evil in the enormous suffering that it inflicted on its victims. It was also evil in its specific targeting of the Jewish people, the bearers of the message that every human being was created in the divine image. The very essence of Nazism was the death camp, and the very essence of the death camp was the systematic destruction of the reality of the divine image, embodied above all in the Jew, Nazism’s essential victim. Thus the most characteristic product of Nazism was not the corpse, which is alas hardly new, but rather “the Muselmann, ‘the living dead,’ in whom the divine spark is dead, that is, in whom the divine image is no longer acknowledged.” 23

Once Fackenheim undertook to reflect philosophically about the Holocaust, Rosenzweig’s conception of revelation no longer seemed adequate. 24 Rosenzweig contrasted the historical temporality of the political world with the eternal, calendrical temporality of Jewish life. He did not foresee the radical historicization of human life in the camps. If the Nazis did not fully succeed in destroying knowledge of the divine image, they may be said to have accomplished the destruction of our last illusions about the ultimately progressive character of the modern state. Rosenzweig’s disillusionment with political life led him to see it, not as the arena for the realization of freedom portrayed by Hegel, but merely as the backdrop for a life oriented by the transcendent yet revelatory God. The Nazis showed that the state could be the weapon wielded against divinely oriented life. If history were not merely meaningless, but could be organized to annihilate meaning, then how could revelation break through? How could we bear to receive it? After Auschwitz, would talk of divine love be any less obscene than talk of divine justice? 25

Morgan explores three distinct but related approaches to the question of access to the transcendent ground of objectivity after the Holocaust. The first approach, developed by Fackenheim and then by Morgan himself, focuses on the Rosenzweigian conception of revelation and is particular to the covenantal life of the Jewish people. The second, developed by Levinas and expounded by Morgan, is a universalization of Rosenzweigian revelation into universal ethics. The third, developed by Morgan himself, fully universal from the outset, is a response to genocide focusing on the role of shame in our ethical lives. The relationship between these approaches will emerge in the course of my discussion.

The first approach is an attempt to apply the Rosenzweigian conception of revelation as directly as possible to Jewish life after the Holocaust. At the core of that conception is the idea that Jews have experienced the Sinai event as an immediate manifestation of God’s commanding presence. Now Auschwitz itself is seen as just such an event. Fackenheim’s first articulation of this approach is the famous 614th commandment, articulated at a symposium in New York in 1967: “The authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory.” 26 In its original version, however, the question of how this is possible after Auschwitz—the question of the obscenity of continuing to speak of revelatory love in light of the rupture of life in the camps—is evaded. Fackenheim writes:

The Voice of Auschwitz commands Jews not to go mad. It commands them to accept their singled out condition, face up to its contradictions, and endure them. Moreover, it gives the power of endurance, the power of sanity. The Jew of today can endure because he must endure, and he must endure because he is commanded to endure. 27

Later, in To Mend the World (1982), Fackenheim gives a different answer. We can endure, because there were people who endured even in the worst moments of the Holocaust: “Authentic thought was actual among resisting victims; therefore, such thought must be possible for us after the event; and, being possible, it is mandatory.” 28 I suggest comparing this second answer to Kant’s appeal, in the Critique of Practical Reason, to the fact (Faktum) of reason as the epistemic ground

23. Ibid., 44.
26. Fackenheim, God’s Presence in History, 82; Morgan, Fackenheim’s Jewish Philosophy, 60.
for belief in the actuality of human freedom. Kant had long struggled to find a proof of the validity of the unconditional, moral law for human action. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he had concluded that:

It is... no censure of our deduction of the supreme principle of morality, but a reproach that must be brought against human reason in general, that it cannot make comprehensible as regards its absolute necessity an unconditional practical law (such as the categorical imperative must be); for, that it is unwilling to do this through a condition—namely, by means of some interest laid down as a basis—cannot be held against it, since then it would not be the moral law, that is, the supreme law of freedom. And thus we do not indeed comprehend the practical unconditional necessity of the moral imperative, but we nevertheless comprehend its incomprehensibility; and this is all that can fairly be required of a philosophy that strives in its principles to the very boundary of human reason.

In other words, we cannot comprehend the validity of the moral law for our actions if to comprehend it is to understand its conditions of validity, for it is precisely the character of the moral law to oblige us unconditionally. The most we can do by way of understanding, then, is to comprehend the principled reason for its incomprehensibility. However, Kant’s point in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is that there is more that we can do than understand. We can also acknowledge the actuality of the moral law. And we can acknowledge that actuality insofar as we actually find ourselves to be commanded by it. Moreover, even if we are unsure that we would be able to act out of the motivation of the moral law in a real-life situation, our acknowledgment of the law’s actuality is not merely idle. If we contemplate such a situation—for example, a situation when we are called upon either to give false testimony against an honorable man or else to face certain execution—then we feel the force of the obligation. We feel

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29 Here I am supplementing Morgan, *Fackenheim’s Jewish Philosophy*, 219: “Earlier, in *God’s Presence in History* and the writings of the late 1960s, Fackenheim had taken the imperative to be a divine command, at least for the believing Jew. Here [in *To Mend the World*] he says nothing like that. He notes that at least one resisting victim, Pelagia Lewinska, had felt ‘under orders to live.’ She had experienced the horrors as an assault on her dignity and on her life and had felt a sense of duty to go on, to struggle to maintain her self-dignity and to survive. Her thought was an imperative; so is ours as well. To be aware of what threatens our humanity and our lives, we think that we must resist and go on. Her thought was normative and obligatory; so is ours. In lieu of deference to a divine commanding presence, Fackenheim gives us a minimum—a sense of duty or obligation without any effort to locate its source.”

30 Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 108.


acknowledged as unconditional by those who disagree—or by those who do not claim to know—what its source is.33

Nevertheless, although the commanding voice of Auschwitz is not understood by Fackenheim and Morgan to address religious Jews or even Jews in particular, its content appears to concern the Jewish people in particular. As we shall see, Fackenheim’s articulation of the content focuses on the State of Israel. Morgan discusses whether the halachic question of abortion in the absence of any serious threat to the mother should be treated differently in light of Nazi prohibitions of pregnancy in the Kovno ghetto and, no doubt, elsewhere. It is presumably the particular fate of the Jewish mother and fetus that concerns him here.34

In the thought of Emmanuel Levinas—who, like Fackenheim, experienced life as a Nazi prisoner, if not in a death camp—Morgan finds an alternative, closely related, but more universal approach. Levinas marked his debt to Rosenzweig in the Preface to Totality and Infinity, where he remarks: “We were impressed by the opposition to the idea of totality in Franz Rosenzweig’s Stern der Erlösung, a work too often present in this book to be cited.”35 This would seem to indicate that Levinas learned from Rosenzweig’s opposition to something, but not from his alternative to it. However, Levinas elsewhere suggested a more positive lesson. He wrote about “the ethical moment of our European crisis…” (attested in particular by the philosophical work of a Franz Rosenzweig, reared in Hegelian thought, but experiencing the First World War, though only the First), we may wonder whether peace must not respond to a call more urgent than that of truth and initially distinct from the call of truth.36

Yet Levinas did not seem to see the ethical call that is more urgent than that of truth as grounded in the revelation of the transcendent God in the way that Rosenzweig did, and he was notably universal even when he explicitly mentioned the Holocaust. He dedicated Otherwise than Being, “To the memory of those closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man [l’autre homme], the same anti-Semitism.”37 While he referred here to the six million Jewish victims of Nazism, and indeed to his own close family members—named in the Hebrew dedication on the same page—he also characterized the other, non-Jewish victims as victims of “the same hatred for the other man, the same anti-Semitism.” This is a universalization of anti-Semitism to which, I think, Fackenheim would have objected. Fackenheim saw the anti-Semitic singling out of Jews as targets for annihilation as essential to Nazism. Levinas saw the singling out of Jews as a particular manifestation of the general “hatred for the other man.”

Levinas’s central notion—the primacy of the face-to-face encounter between persons—is a reworking of Rosenzweig’s conception of revelation. Or, better, the face-to-face is a reworking of Rosenzweig’s conception of redemption, “the transcendence of man to man,” but a reworking that does not think of redemption as the fulfillment of the promise of divine revelation.38 In the face-to-face encounter, the Other—described in

33 Kant says the same about the obligatory force of the moral law. See “On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority Adopted in Philosophy,” S.105. in Theoretical Philosophy after 1780, ed. Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 444: “The veiled goddess, before whom we both bow the knee, is the moral law within us in its inviolable majesty. We hearken to her voice, indeed, and also understand her command well enough; but on hearing are in doubt whether it comes from man himself, out of the absolute authority of his own reason, or whether it proceeds from another being, whose nature is unknown to him, and which speaks to man through this his own reason. At bottom we should perhaps do better to desist from this inquiry altogether, since it is merely speculative, and since what we are (objectively) obliged to do remains always the same, whether we base it on the one principle or the other.”

34 Morgan, “Jewish Ethics,” 269–70.

35 Fackenheim was arrested on Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, and interned at Sachsenhausen concentration camp for three months. Levinas served in the French army, was captured in 1940, and spent the rest of the war in a German prisoner of war camp, confined to a special barrack for Jewish prisoners.


39 Emmanuel Levinas, “The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig,” in The Time of the Nations, 155–59. See Morgan, Discovering Levinas, 103, n. 57: “That Rosenzweig’s whole approach is theistic, in the sense that for him Revelation is the encounter between the divine and the human, is clear to me. This conception of Revelation is the one that Rosenzweig inherits from Eugen Rosentock-Huessy and develops in his early writings and then in the Star of Redemption (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). See Franks and Morgan, Franz Rosenzweig: Philosophical and Theological Writings and also the many comments on Rosenzweig in the work of Emil Fackenheim, among other Jewish thinkers of the postwar period. For the past several decades, this reading of Rosenzweig has been controversial: indeed one regularly finds Levinasian readings of Rosenzweig that take Revelation for Rosenzweig to be interpersonal. But this, I believe, is a serious mistake. For Rosenzweig, Redemption, or at least human conduct in behalf of it, is interpersonal, an expression of love for the
This Levinasian operation figures notably in a paper discussed at length by Morgan: "Meaning and Sense."41 In this paper, Levinas sought "to return to Platonism in a new way." The old Platonism was the view that the Forms—or, in the terminology of the paper, meanings—are transcendent and eternal, beyond history. Against such a view, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology—presented as the optimal version of contemporary anti-Platonism—maintains that all meanings are historical and cultural, constituted by us humans in the context of the ongoing synthesis of totality. However, in that case, there would be multiple totalities, and there would be no guarantee that they would be mutually intelligible. Engulfed in history, meanings would be threatened "incomprehension, war and conquest." Levinas sought, not to return to the old Platonism, but to ensure transcendence and to save meanings from historicism in a new way: by means of an orienting transcendence that was not a meaning, but rather what Levinas called sense. This orienting sense was, to be sure, encountered in the midst of historical meanings, but it could nevertheless break through this whole, putting all meanings to a question prior to all history and culture: the ethical question. The phenomenon of this sense was the epiphany of the Other, signifying by himself, independently of all synthesis.

The notion of orientation in this account is surely drawn from Rosenzweig's account of revelation. In the final section of the paper, "The Trace," Levinas made explicit the relationship between his old-new Platonism and Neo-Platonism, and transitioned—explicitly, at last—to Judaism. He did so in order to respond to a problem: "Is not the 'beyond' from which the face comes, and which fixes consciousness in its straightforwardness, an idea understood and disclosed in its turn?"42 In Morgan's helpful gloss, "The question of its last section, 'The Trace,' is whether the absolute or the One, from which the face comes, is not another philosophical idea or principle. In other words, perhaps there is no transcendence here at all; the One, or God, is just another element in the idealist system."43 Levinas's answer involved the connected notions of the trace and illeity. The bearer of sense is characterized as a trace—not a sign, but something that can play the role of a sign—in accordance with a passage from Plotinus:

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42 Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 59.
43 Morgan, Discovering Levinas, 188.
When the issue is the principle anterior to beings, that is to say, the One, this remains in itself, but although it remains in itself, no thing that is different from it produces the beings which conform to it, the One is enough to engender them [...] Here, the trace of the One gives birth to essence, and being is only the trace of the One.\textsuperscript{44}

As Morgan explains, "The face is not a thing or an appearance of a thing, the Absent not an entity"—in other words, no realm of meaning beyond ordinary meaning is intended. For it is not a question of something that is present in some extraordinary way, or that could be present. It is a question, rather, of that which is never present. There is a trace, as of something that has already passed.

Since what has passed could never be addressed, 'It can never be a you; it is always detached, out of the line of meeting; it is what Levinas calls 'illeity' ('that-ness' or 'he-ness').\textsuperscript{45} At this point, 'Lévinas also turns to the biblical text. He interprets 'being in the image of God' as meaning 'to find oneself in his trace.' The trace of God is in the face of the other person; hence, to find oneself, to find who one is, is to respond to that face. Then, Lévinas turns to Exodus 33: The God who has passed by is forever absent, never present.'\textsuperscript{46}

Is Platonism a guise for Judaism? Or is Judaism a guise for Platonism? Or has something new emerged? First, I note that Judaism has already implicitly appeared in Levinas's text prior to the citation of Plotinus. According to Levinas, 'The trace is the insertion of space in time, the point at which the world inclines towards a past and a time. This time is a withdrawal of the Other and, consequently, nowise a degradation of duration, which, in memory, is still complete.'\textsuperscript{47} The withdrawal of the Other is surely an aspect of tsimtsum, already invoked by Levinas in Totality and Infinity:

Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being. Thus relationships that open up a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a place for a separated being exists divinely. Over and beyond the totality it inaugurates a society. The relations that are established between the separated being and Infinity redeem what diminution there was in the contraction creative of Infinity. Man redeems creation.\textsuperscript{48}

Morgan discusses this passage and Levinas's relation to Kabbalah in a forthcoming paper.\textsuperscript{50} But, if the Plotinus passage is introduced in a context that is already kabbalistic, is the trace of the One not to be identified with the trace or reshima left by the infinite in the space constituted by contraction and withdrawal? By the same token, is the illeity of the Other not to be understood as the concealed or nistar aspect of divinity in itself, prior to all relation? According to the kabbalists, every blessing in the Jewish liturgy begins by addressing the revealed or nigleh aspect of divinity in the second person (“Blessed are You”), but ends by characterizing the concealed or nistar aspect of divinity in the third person—for example, "who brings forth the bread from the land," not "who bring forth."\textsuperscript{51}

Seen in this way, Levinas's Platonism can seem to be a guise for Judaism. But this is not the end of the story. As Morgan notes, the divine is only ever to be characterized as illeity, while whoever addresses me and whoever can be addressed as you is only ever human:

A key term in Levinas's account, perhaps the key term, is illeity. There is a tendency for commentators to treat it as any other name or designation and to look for its referent. But this is a mistake; the term does not denote. It does signify something by helping us to appreciate that the face does not suplicate and command in virtue of its own features, shape, skin color, expression, and so forth; the face calls me into question insofar as it is a trace of a distant thing that is nothing, of an absolute absence. That absence, as present in the face, so to speak, is illeity. It is not a thing or entity or object nor literally a manifestation of one. It is not a you or Thou. In a sense, it is not. But without illeity, the face cannot mean what it does to me. It is what accounts for the particularity and transcendence of the face and for the infinity of my responsibility, for illeity is why the face carries weight with me and demands of me—why it matters to me. It is that about the face of the stranger, the widow or the orphan that calls, cries out to me, single me out, and registers with me as binding. Hence, the word "God" comes to my lips when I realize that I am responsible, when I appreciate my social condition and take it seriously.\textsuperscript{52}

Here we see that Levinas's Platonism is not so Jewish after all. For Levinas, there could never be any revelation at all. There was only the ethical call

\textsuperscript{44} Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 50, quoting Plotinus, Enneads, 2.5.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{47} Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 62.
\textsuperscript{48} Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 104.

\textsuperscript{50} Morgan, "Traces of Tsimtsum: Berkovits, Fackenheim, Levinas" (forthcoming).
\textsuperscript{51} Every blessing begins with a second-person address (nokhah) and ends with a third person description. See Bahir, 184; Zohar, Ekev 271b, Hazainin 259a. See also the thirteenth-century kabbalistic commentators: Nachmanides, Ramban al ha-Torah (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1959), Exodus 15:25; Todros ben Yoel ha-Levi Abulafia, Qotser ha-Kavod (New York: Dwor Yaakov ben Naftali Tzvi Yoles, 1863), Berakhot 44a, s.v. ‘amar R. Yohanan; Baba ben Asher ibn Halawa, Rabbenu Babba al ha-Torah (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1966), Exodus 15:2.
\textsuperscript{52} Morgan, Discovering Levinas, 303.
with Fackenheim. For Fackenheim's position alone is compatible with an ongoing commitment to Judaism, understood theistically in accordance with the Rosenzweigian conception of revelation developed, not only by Fackenheim, but also by Morgan himself.

At the same time, it would appear that Morgan is sympathetic to the thought that Fackenheim's concerns are too narrowly focused on Jewish particularity. For Morgan articulates an alternative, third approach in his book On Shame (2008), of which universality is a hallmark.

Shame is, in the first place, according to Morgan among others, to be distinguished from guilt. Whereas guilt is felt for what we have done, shame is felt for who we are—perhaps for what we have done, perhaps for other reasons. This makes shame an appropriate response to the Holocaust and other atrocities, not only for victims and perpetrators, but also for bystanders. Primo Levi, in addition to writing often of the victim's sense of shame, writes:

And there is another, vaster shame, the shame of the world. It has been memorably pronounced by John Donne, and quoted innumerable times, pertinently or not, that "no man is an island," and that every bell tolls for everyone. And yet there are those who, faced by the crime of others or their own, turn their backs so as not to see it and not feel touched by it. The majority of Germans did during the twelve Hitlerian years, deluding themselves that not seeing was a way of not knowing, and that not knowing relieved them of their share of complicity or connivance. But we were denied the screen of willed ignorance.

Morgan argues that we who were not alive during the Holocaust, or who were not actively involved in the Rwandan genocide or other atrocities, can and should feel shame at being people who live in a world where such things are done. It follows that, whereas guilt may lead to a change in how we act, shame may lead to a change in who we are. Accordingly, Morgan proposes that we voluntarily and deliberately elicit shame "in order to unsettle and disturb ourselves, that it is an emotion we can and should share with our fellow citizens and with all humankind, and that it is an emotion that can, if properly confronted, lead to productive action to prevent such atrocities now and in the future."

There are three puzzles about this proposal that Morgan considers. First, can shame be voluntarily elicited? Second, since shame involves how we

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53 Ibid., 383–84.
54 Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 164.
55 Morgan, Discovering Levinas, 367–68.
57 Michael L. Morgan, On Shame (London: Routledge, 2008), 34.
think other people see us, is it morally relevant? Third, how can shame be morally relevant?

Morgan argues that shame can be elicited, not only through personal experience, but also through the watching of films and the reading of literature. Since most of us have no first-hand experience of atrocities, works such as *Ghosts of Rwanda*, *Night and Fog*, *Shoah*, and *Survival at Auschwitz* therefore have an extremely important moral function. Morgan gives insightful readings not only of some of these works but also of his reactions to them.

The moral relevance of shame comes into question because, unlike guilt, it depends on how we think that we are seen by others. If emotions are morally relevant only if they are autonomously grounded, then why should it matter how others see us? Presumably, it matters only if we autonomously subscribe to the standards of these others. But then why are the others necessary? At most, they are helpful only to the extent that they overcome our resistance to self-judgment in accordance with our own standards. Bernard Williams tries to avoid this problem by specifying that the others in question must have sufficient standing and respect that we are prepared to take their judgment seriously—presumably even if we do not already share their standards. But Morgan rejects this move: “While this might be true for certain cultures and societies, it is hardly true of our own, especially those cases of shame associated with racial persecution, the oppression of women, child abuse, and drug use, where either that respect does not exist or should not exist and yet where shame is rampant.”

Although Morgan appeals explicitly to Levinas in answering the third question about how shame can be morally productive, I think that he could also appeal to Levinas in responding to the second. For Levinas, morality was fundamentally *heteronomous*. Whereas since Kant understood morality as autonomous, because morality is rational and reason is autonomous, he construed heteronomy as the very essence of immorality, since he took heteronomous motivation to be motivation by something other than reason—by sensuous desire or by the unconstrained pursuit of happiness. For Levinas, in contrast, heteronomy is responsibility to the Other, which is the very essence of morality—and, arguably, the essence of reason too, understood as practical. This gives rise to shame in two ways: “Each of us, as a person in society with others, is responsible—in an unbounded way—to and for each and every other person… First, each of us confronts every other person with shame at always already being called into question by that other person… Second, if our responsibility to others is unlimited and infinite, then we will always fail to satisfy it.” Now, Morgan does not endorse the infinite character of our responsibility, or at least he does not ask his reader to. “But one does not have to be a Levinian, of course, to see how shame can be a motivation to care for others.” In other words, we do not need to say, with Levinas, that our responsibility to each other is infinite and that we therefore always fail and should always feel shame. But we can say that, in the actual case of atrocities, we have failed—collectively as human beings—and therefore we should, in these instances, feel shame in the face of the Other.

Finally, how is shame morally productive? Of course, shame may be morally unproductive or worse. It may lead to immobility, depression, rage, and violence. But it need not. What Morgan values about shame is that it is directed, not to a specific action, but to the whole self; that it involves responsiveness to the actual or imagined perspective of others; and that, instead of calling us directly to specific action, it calls us to attention and reflection, which can in turn lead to transformative action. In other words, shame is a recognition of our failure to meet our responsibility to the Other that is capable of jolting us out of our complacency, bringing about reflection on who we are, not only as individuals but also as human beings; a transformation of the self; and, ultimately, transformative action in which we change the world we inhabit.

Morgan’s position, then, seems to be twofold. On the one hand, he holds a modified version of Fackenheim’s view about how to respond to the commanding voice of Auschwitz: a Jewish ethics that is specifically attuned to the defeat of the Nazis and in which both religious and secular Jews can participate, notwithstanding their disagreement about the ground of their obligation. On the other hand, he holds a modified version of Levinas’s view about a universal response to all atrocities: by eliciting shame for being the kinds of human beings who inhabit a world in which not only Auschwitz but also Hiroshima and Rwanda are possible, and who have therefore failed in our responsibility to the Other, we can motivate the transformation of ourselves and of our world. What he does not hold, I believe, is the strictly

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60 Ibid., 89–90.
61 Ibid., 91.
Levinasian position that focuses on the human redemption of the world to the exclusion of divine revelation.

Redemption, Messianism, and Zionism

How, then, does Morgan view redemption? Here, I believe, he draws upon Levinas to correct Fackenheim and to arrive at a vision of the political realization of the ideal that is fully cognizant of the history of philosophy's struggles with political reality, of the diversity of Jewish traditions of messianism, and of the atrocities of the twentieth century.

As we have seen, Fackenheim argued that the voice of Auschwitz can and does command both the religious and the secular Jew. He also maintained that there was a specific project in which both can participate: the establishment, maintenance, and furtherance of the State of Israel. After the Six Day War and Fackenheim's first visit to Israel in 1968, "Israel became for him an exemplification of (and an opportunity for) obedience to the 614th commandment."62 Religious Jews could see Zionism as the fulfillment of a divine command, while secular Jews could see it as an obligatory response, no matter what the ground, to the Nazi attempt to annihilate the Jewish Jew as such. In Fackenheim's words, "The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz singles Jews out. Jewish survival is a commandment which brooks no compromise. It was this Voice which was heard by the Jews of Israel in May and June 1967 when they refused to lie down and be slaughtered."63

Moreover, Fackenheim came to see the State of Israel as the embodiment of messianic redemption. To be sure, it was odd, as he was well aware, to regard an historical and political reality as redemptive. We may add, recalling Morgan's work on Plato and Plato's involvement with Syracuse, that it is also dangerous: the attempt to realize the ideal city may not only fail, it may produce a monstrosity that compromises the ideals that it is meant to exemplify. But Fackenheim came to think that, just as the Holocaust had radically historicized human existence, including revelation, which was now to be encountered, if at all, then in the depths of the Holocaust, so had messianism been historicized:

Whereas in 1964, he had taken the doctrine of messianism to be a permanent, absolute guarantee that history would be redeemed, even if we could not count on human effort and abilities to accomplish that task, here in 1974

Fackenheim argues that for the doctrine of messianism to be recovered for the Jewish present, it must be historicized. This is part of what it means to say that after Auschwitz, Judaism has returned to history... There are no permanent, unconditional guarantees about the world's redemption; all we can hope for are temporary guarantees—some confidence and some hope, even if unqualified. In a sense, for Fackenheim after the late 1960s, Israel and the conduct it exemplifies have replaced God and divine agency in the messianic scheme of things.64

This is understandable, especially in the immediate wake of the Six Day War, when many experienced the Holocaust-echoing threat of annihilation, followed by a victory that seemed miraculous, as the redemptive antidote to the Holocaust. But it is nevertheless a problematic position, which left Fackenheim, as well as many others, ill-equipped to address the moral and political challenges confronting Israel after 1967.

A rabbinc source for Fackenheim's historicized messianism is the statement of Samuel of Nehardea, cited in BT Berakhot 34b and codified by Maimonides, that, "There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except servitude to kingdoms alone." If Samuel is making the particular claim that Israel will be free from foreign servitude, then does it matter that Israel is in fact dependent on foreign powers? Or, if Samuel is making the universal claim that, in the days of the Messiah, no people will be in servitude to any kingdom except for the kingdom of God, then has Israel itself become a kingdom to which a people is in servitude?

Morgan is extremely critical of Fackenheim's position on Israel:

Caught in a fog of idealization, he was insufficiently attentive to the intense and often embarrassing conflicts generated by religious pluralism. Moreover, while he was clear about Israel's need to be a liberal and democratic state, his single-mindedness about Israel's security prevented him from responsibly considering and reflecting upon the problems of her democratic ideals, even when he acknowledged the problems and even though in his private life he was sensitive to others in a wholly open spirit.65

In Morgan's view, Fackenheim has no serious response to one of the most pressing problems of contemporary Jewish life and thought: how can Israel be both a Jewish and a liberal democratic state? And how can this question be addressed in a way that engages with the idea of messianic redemption? For a more helpful interlocutor on these questions, Morgan looks to Levinas, whose conception of the relationship between

62 Morgan, Fackenheim's Jewish Philosophy, 178.
63 Fackenheim, God's Presence in History, 86.
64 Morgan, Fackenheim's Jewish Philosophy, 184–85.
65 Ibid., 190–91.
morality and justice—or, equivalently for Levinas, between Judaism and the state—Morgan seeks to unlock.

Levinas introduced this relationship by distinguishing between the second-personal neighbor and the third person:

The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow. What then are the other and the third party for one another? What have they done to one another? Which passes before the other? The other stands in a relationship with the third party, for whom I cannot entirely answer, even if I alone answer, before any question, for my neighbor. The other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of one another, put distance between me and the other and the third party. “Peace, peace to the neighbor and the one far-off” (Isaiah 57:19)—we now understand the point of this apparent rhetoric.66

The third-personal character at stake here is not illusory, for we are dealing here with people who are also second-personal neighbors. The question, then, is how to negotiate these distinct roles. Does ethics give way to justice? Or does ethics constrain justice?

As Morgan interprets Levinas, the ethical is prior to the political in the sense both that the former is “a kind of metaphysical or transcendental condition” of the latter, and in the sense that there is and should be an ethical critique of the political. The realm of justice consists of arrangements and institutions whereby we negotiate between competing ethical responsibilities. Both ethical responsibility and justice are unattainable ideals to which we can only approximate. As ideals, both ethics and justice have a part to play in redeeming the world.67 But ethics has priority:

justice is a second best with respect to infinite responsibility… That is, infinite responsibility to others is the ultimate justification for all our life’s experiences, including all we do in the domain of justice. Justice is the best we can aim at, but it is always a second best, and approximating to just conduct and practices is the best we can do, given the natural and historical limits on our infinite responsibilities.68

Thus ethics is the enabling condition and critique of justice, which is nevertheless a distinct ideal, and Judaism thinks both in its conceptions of the messianic age.

66 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 157.
68 Ibid., 80.

Morgan puts special emphasis on Levinas’s relation to the aforementioned statement of Samuel of Nehardea. According to the Talmud, R. Yohanan disagrees with Samuel when he says, as R. Hyya bar Abba reports, that the prophets prophesied only about the messianic age, while only God knows the world to come. It is less than obvious in what the disagreement consists. On Levinas’s view, the key point emerges when one considers Samuel’s proof-text, given in another tractate: “The poor shall not cease from out of the land” (Deut. 15:4). This is what R. Yohanan disagrees with. On his view, there will be no poor in the messianic age. In other words, both Samuel and R. Yohanan see the messianic age as continuous with history, rather than as supernatural in character, but R. Yohanan sees the ethical redemption of the world by the human as simultaneously instituting economic justice, while Samuel does not. According to Samuel, the removal of servitude to kingdoms—of human subjugation—does not suffice for the achievement of justice. Something else—divine or political, but at any rate, other than ethical action—must intervene. In Morgan’s view, “even though Levinas reads the Talmud as hovering between one view and the other, it seems clear that it is Samuel’s view that is closer to Levinas’s understanding of the social and ethical character of the human condition. For Levinas surely takes it to be the case that there is a kind of violence that separates human freedom and the accomplishment of the good.”69 Ethics, then, is the condition and critique of justice, and the distinctness of the two ideals is such that even the messianic fulfillment of ethical responsibility would not accomplish the realization of justice.

Just as ethics is universal so, for Levinas, is messianism universal. But, just as Judaism embodies the universality of ethics in an exemplary particular, so does Jewish messianism exemplify “universalist particularism.” After emancipation, Judaism found “an opening—not on to humanity, for which it always felt responsible—but on to the political forms of that humanity. It enabled it to take history seriously.” Messianism now took the historicized form of Zionism.70

As we have seen, Morgan does not endorse a strictly Levinasian view that focuses on ethical redemption of the world by humans to the exclusion of divine revelation. Nevertheless, his universalist view of how to respond to atrocities incorporates Levinasian elements, while remaining compatible
with a more Fackenheimian, Jewish response. Similarly, it would seem that Morgan is attracted to a modified, Levinasian version of Zionism, one that is compatible with but does not require a religious interpretation, one around which both secular and religious Jews can form an alliance. For, although Morgan appreciates Ruth Gavison’s work on the possibility of Israel as at once both Jewish and liberal democratic, he rejects her conception of the Jewish identity of Israel as fundamentally secular and national.

“What Levinas’s conception of Judaism provides is a nontheocratic sense of what Jewishness means and yet one that has serious implications for social and political life. Moreover, it brings with it the grounds of a normativity that applies both to Israel’s Jewish character and to its aspirations regarding democracy and human rights.”

So understood, Zionism is a messianic project that both has a particular relationship to Jewish faith and tradition, and is universal in its aspiration to realize justice. At the same time, Samuel of Nehardea’s position expresses a certain political realism: no amount of ethical action can solve the problems of justice. Accordingly, this modified Levinasian Zionism is guarded—in a way that Fackenheim’s anti-Nazi Zionism is not—against the danger of the idealization of the state. Without divine intervention, there is no end to the ethical critique of justice. To this extent, the messianic age is continuous with history and not an escape from it, and we cannot escape the obligation to shine the light of the transcendent—both Platonic and Jewish—on political reality.

In *Interim Judaism*, Morgan makes a proposal that is meant to appeal to a wide audience of American Jews:

American Jewish life might take the shape of an interim activism, a commitment to worldly acts that seek to repair what is broken but that are performed independently of any messianic expectations... For some Jews, it might seem necessary to maintain the link between messianism and politics; for others it may be neither necessary nor possible. But what both views share would seem to be a firm commitment to the political, to human action to “mend the world.” It may be difficult to decide among these options, for it might very well seem unacceptable to be either wholly optimistic or wholly pessimistic—about both God and human beings. Thus, human action in the world may be a desideratum in our post-Holocaust world, whether it is conceived as a contribution to the messianic or not. What we learn, then, from the debates of the century is not something we learn from any one thinker alone; it is the need for modest but engaged action in a world urgently in need of it.”

What Morgan has learned from Levinas since then, it would appear, is that messianism need not be thought of solely in terms of expectation. It may be understood instead in terms of the unending imperatives of responsibility and criticism. This too is a project to which all Jews, religious or secular—and indeed all human beings—are called.

Reflecting on the full sweep of Morgan’s life and work so far, we may say that a major thinker from the Syracuse of the New World, at once both philosophically sophisticated and ethically sensitive in the best traditions of both Platonic and Judaism, has taken up the challenge, now compounded by the horrors of the Holocaust, that Plato found in the Syracuse of the Old World.

The Essays That Follow

In “To Setse Memory: History and Identity in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought,” Morgan approaches the philosophical and theological responses to the Holocaust of North American Jewish thinkers in the late 1960s and early 1970s from the viewpoint of the historicity of life and thought. These responses developed at a specific moment in history—when the Six Day War of 1967 made it possible not to repress the horrors of the Holocaust, but to understand them in relation to the reunification of Jerusalem. It was also a moment when the fragmented American Jewish community, no longer united by the liberal agenda of Civil Rights and the Great Society as they had been earlier in the 1960s, were brought together into a new unity. Consequently, this was a fitting historical moment at which to grapple with history itself in the reconstitution of Jewish identity. In a daring comparison with the German Historikerstreit of the 1980s, when German intellectuals struggled with the reconstitution of German identity after the Holocaust, Morgan compares the responses of Eliezer Berkovits, Irving Greenberg, and Emil Fackenheim. While each certainly deals with the universal problem of evil, Morgan argues that each also does something else, confronting the question of Jewish identity and its historicity.

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72 Morgan, *Interim Judaism*, 16.
in light of an event that is at once both thoroughly historical, cut off from all transcendence, and at the same time and precisely for that reason, discontinuous with prior understandings of Jewish history.

In “Shame, the Holocaust, and Dark Times,” Morgan explains one aspect of his own response to the Holocaust. It is a universalist response, intended for Jews and non-Jews, and attentive to all the atrocities with which our world is tainted. Morgan notes that films such as Night and Fog and Hotel Rwanda—which remind us not only that atrocities continue to occur but that they also continue to be forgotten, denied, or repressed—solicit in their audiences a feeling not necessarily of guilt, but of shame. Associating this feeling with what Primo Levi calls “the shame of the world,” Morgan explores the distinction between the nonsocial feeling of guilt for what one has done and the essentially social feeling of shame for what one is. He argues that shame is well-suited for the overcoming of forgetting, for confrontation with the fact of atrocity, for the recovery of responsibility to the other person, and for the transformation of the self.

“Emmanuel Levinas as a Philosopher of the Ordinary” exemplifies Morgan’s expansive view of philosophy and his gift for illuminating comparisons. At first, it does not seem promising to pair Emmanuel Levinas, who sought to restore a kind of Platonism against the background of phenomenology, and Stanley Cavell, who undertook to thematize the ordinary as that which philosophy—from Platonism to logical positivism—has fled. However, Morgan traces in Cavell a project of recovering, after a loss in conviction in a transcendent ground of our relations to one another, the ethical dimension of those relations regarded as everyday, along with all the risks and opportunities that this involves. It is marriage that exemplifies our relations to one another for Cavell, and he pursues the question of the ground of our responsiveness to one another in his readings of films belonging to two genres that he named “remarriage comedy” and “melodrama of the unknown woman.” In particular, Cavell argues that, although there are no transcendent guarantees, everyday life, including marriage, can be redeemed in the name of a perfectionist dimension of ethical life that may also be traced back to Plato, among others. Despite appearances, as Morgan points out, Levinas’s project is similarly to redeem the everyday as ethical without any transcendent ground other than the Other who commands through the face of the particular other human being. Levinas uses traditional theological language, but he does so metaphorically. Cavell’s project is illuminated by Levinas’s recovery of transcendence within the everyday, while Levinas’s project is illuminated by Cavell’s conception of modernism as the general framework for these attempts at recovery after crisis, as well as by Cavell’s construal of melodrama as the hyperbolic expression of crisis.

In “Providence: Agencies of Redemption,” Morgan examines the meaning and significance of messianic redemption in Judaism and Jewish philosophy. Setting aside the question of divine agency and of the personal Messiah, he focuses on the idea of the reestablishment of a Jewish state with universal implications. In a wide-ranging discussion, Morgan examines alternatives to the nation-state as agent of redemption, both in Jewish thought and in recent political philosophy. He argues that Jewish thought can benefit from considering the political philosophical arguments for such alternatives, since Jews today support action by state and nonstate agents other than Israel. He also argues that political philosophy can gain from Judaism’s ethically committed realism, which maintains both that we should do all that we can for the sake of justice and peace, and that human action alone is insufficient.

Finally, in “Historicity, Dialogical Philosophy, and Moral Normativity: Discovering the Second Person,” Morgan reflects on the way in which philosophical issues—especially the central question of the historicity of human life and its relationship to transcendence—arose for him within a religious setting. He discusses in particular Elizabeth Anscombe’s challenge to modern moral philosophy: can it continue to make use of the notions, moral laws, and obligations without commitment to a lawgiver? Although they did not know of Anscombe, twentieth-century Jewish thinkers such as Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas developed a response to this challenge in the idea that the key to the normativity of divine commands lies in their second-person character. Comparing their accounts to the recent account of second-person reasons given by Stephen Darwall, Morgan brings out some important differences, notably the fact that Darwall and other analytic philosophers are dealing with a restricted domain within everyday experience, whereas Jewish thinkers have sought to account for all human existence. As he often does, Morgan argues that general and Jewish philosophy have much to learn from each other.