The encounter between Judaism and modern philosophy is complex. Within Judaism, the encounter occurred when Jewish philosophers and thinkers, seeking to articulate the meaning of Jewish existence, either employed philosophical resources for their own purposes or sought to demonstrate what Judaism could contribute to philosophy itself. Within modern philosophy, the encounter occurred when Judaism and Jewish thought were addressed by philosophy directly or when they were shown to be deficient because they failed to do so. In short, for both parties, the engagement has been vital and intriguing, even if it has not been widely appreciated by either Jewish thinkers or by philosophers in general.

The problem of Judaism and modern philosophy is one dimension of the more general problem of Athens and Jerusalem, of Hellenism and Hebraism. Figures such as Leo Strauss, Emmanuel Levinas, and Emil Fackenheim took this relationship to be deep and important, not only for Judaism but indeed as well for all of Western civilization and culture. For Levinas, Judaism and Jewish thought...
contained a core of teaching, an understanding of the fundamentally ethical character of social existence, that was hidden from Greek and Western civilization and that needed to be recovered or disclosed. Hence, to him, philosophy and Jewish philosophy were not different enterprises, in a sense. Rather, traditional philosophy was part of a world that needed to recall its roots, so to speak, and in this regard Western philosophy and Jewish philosophy did not differ. All philosophy needed to be refashioned to see its way to a new understanding of human existence and its ethical foundations; all philosophy needed a new first philosophy.

1. Philosophy and the Holocaust

In the twentieth century, an especially important barometer of this complex relationship has been the way philosophy in general and Jewish philosophy in particular have dealt with and responded to the Nazi genocide, the Holocaust, and the death camps. Here we see some large problems come into focus regarding philosophy and evil, philosophy and politics, and philosophy and history itself. Moreover, here, in the case of a genocide in which anti-Semitism and the ideological commitment to annihilate Jews and Judaism were arguably so central, we can see what Judaism thus might have to contribute to philosophy and at what cost philosophy itself ignores or rejects Jewish particularity. These are issues that pervade all modern engagements between Judaism and philosophy; they arise with powerful effect in this case.

At the Eastern Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, held in December of 1984 in Washington, D.C., there was a symposium on the theme “Philosophy and the Holocaust.” The featured speaker was Emil Fackenheim, and the respondent was Berel Lang.4 At that time Fackenheim was the most important living North American philosopher to have dealt with the Holocaust; his work was then viewed—and still is now—as primarily theological,

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