



EMMANUEL LEVINAS MINI-COURSE DOES THE WORLD NEED JUDAISM?

By the time of his death in 1995 Emmanuel Levinas had become one of the leading Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, with a long list of books and essays on topics ranging from abstract philosophy to Talmud. In the past 20 years his fame has only increased as his ideas have spread throughout the Jewish world and beyond.

In 1968 he published a little book in French with the title Four Talmudic Readings. Here, for the first time in print, he showed how ancient Rabbinic writings addressed deep concerns of Justice and Equality in ways that he claimed differed substantially from the Western Philosophical tradition that started in Ancient Greece. We will read one of these essays, entitled ‘As Old as the World,’ originally given as a talk in a Seminar in 1966 in Paris with the title ‘Does the World Need Judaism?’ which discusses some Mishnah and Gemara from the Tractate Sanhedrin.

In this essay, Levinas recalls the play The Eumenides by the Greek playwright Aeschylus, because it shares many of the concerns raised in Sanhedrin. After re-reading the play and responding to its powerful enactment of the implantation of Justice and the rule of law in human society, he wonders to himself whether ‘there is anything else one needs to read’ and whether Jewish texts have anything to offer that can add to what Aeschylus has said.

We will follow Levinas’ footsteps and (re-)read The Eumenides. We will then take a close look at the sections from Sanhedrin that he comments on before plunging into his commentary. Time permitting we will set some of Levinas’ thinking against the ideas of the late Rabbi David Hartman. All of the

materials for the course will be in English, hard copy will be provided for those attending and the materials will also be available electronically on the Beth El website. The course will take place on five Saturday afternoons, after Kiddush in the Beth El Library during February and March.

Date, Times and Locations

Saturday, February 14 (~1PM, Beth El Library) – Introduction to Levinas' life and work and outline of the course.

Saturday, February 21 (~1PM, Beth El Library) – Reading and discussion of Aeschylus' The Eumenides.

Saturday, February 28 (~1PM Beth El Library) – Reading and discussion of BT Sanhedrin 36b-37a. Begin discussion of Levinas' commentary.

Saturday, March 14 (~1PM Beth El Library) – Continue discussion of Levinas' Commentary.

Saturday, March 21 (~1PM Beth El Library) – Conclude discussion of Levinas' Commentary, compare with Chapter 5 of David Hartman's Israelis and the Jewish Tradition.

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Detailed Syllabus

Session 1 - February 14 , 1P (Beth El Library)

Background Information:

- Emmanuel Levinas Biography
 - Origins
 - Education
 - Early Career
 - Meeting with Shoushani
 - Lectures Talmudiques
 - Later Career
 - Posthumous Fame
- Jewish Intellectuals in 20th century France
- Levinas: Athens and Jerusalem

Handouts:

Selected Levinas Bibliography
Selected Events in Levinas' Biography
Jewish Intellectuals in 20th century France
Psalm 1/Pindar-Nemean 8/Celan-Psalm

Optional Readings:

E. Levinas, Discovering Existence with Husserl
E. Levinas, Totality and Infinity
E. Levinas, Otherwise than Being
E. Levinas, Nine Talmudic Readings
E. Levinas, Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism
J. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in J. Derrida, Writing and
Difference
J. Derrida, Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas
R. Alter, The Book of Psalms
A. P. Burnett, Pindar's Songs for Young Athletes of Aigina
M. Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness

Session 2 – February 21, 1P (Beth El Library)

Background Information on The Eumenides:

- The role of The Eumenides in “As Old as the World”
- Aeschylus
- The Oresteia Trilogy

Reading and discussion of The Eumenides

Handout: Aeschylus, The Eumenides, (tr. A. Shapiro and P. Burian)

Optional Readings:

- G. Thomson, Aeschylus and Athens
- Aeschylus, Eumenides (ed. A. Sommerstein)

Session 3 – February 28, 1P (Beth El Library)

Reading and discussion of “As Old as the World”

Handout:

- “As Old as the World”
- Gemara, Sanhedrin 36b-37a

Optional Readings:

- B. Cohen, Jewish and Roman Law

Session 4 – March 14, 1P (Beth El Library)

Reading and discussion of “As Old as the World” – Continued

Handout: D. Hartman, Israelis and the Jewish Tradition (Ch. 5)

Session 5 – March 21, 1P (Beth El Library)

Discussion of Hartman and Levinas on ‘uniqueness’ and ‘inclusiveness’