LEVINAS

THE YOUTH OF ISRAEL

▪ From the Tractate *Nazir*, pp. 66*a* and 66*b* ▪

Mishna *Samuel was a nazirite, according to the words of Rabbi Nehorai, for it is said (1 Samuel 11): "And the razor* (morah) *will not touch his head." For Samson the word* morah *(razor) was said (Judges 13:5) and for Samuel the word* morah *(razor) was said. Just as the word* morah *in the case of Samson indicates the nazirate so it also indicates the nazirate in the case of Samuel. Rabbi Jose objected: Doesn't the word* morah *mean the fear inspired by creatures of flesh and blood? Rabbi Nehorai answered: But isn't it written: " 'How can I go,' said Samuel. 'If Saul hears of it, he will kill me' " (1 Samuel 16:2)? He thus, in fact, knew the fear inspired by a creature of flesh and blood.*

Gemara *Rab said to Hiyya, his son: Snatch (the cup) and say grace. And, similarly, Rav Huna said to Raba, his son: Snatch the cup and say grace. Which means: greater is the one who says grace than the one who answers* Amen. *But don't we have a* baraita? *Rabbi Jose taught: He who answers* Amen *is greater than he who says grace. I swear that this is so, Rabbi Nehorai answered him. Know that it is the foot soldiers who begin the battle and that victory is attributed to the elite troops who appear as the battle is finishing. This problem was discussed among the* Tanaim. *There is a* baraita: *Both the one who says the blessing and the one who says* Amen *are included in the reward, but the one who blesses receives the reward first. Rabbi Eleazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: the disciples of the sages* (talmide hakhamim) *increase peace throughout the world for it is said (Isaiah 54:13): "All your children will be the disciples of the Eternal One; great will be the peace of your children."*

This reading was given in the context of a colloquium consecrated to "The Youth of Israel," held in October 1970. The proceedings were published in *Jeunesse et révolution dans la conscience juive: Données et débats* (Paris: P.U.F., 1972). Levinas's commentary appears on pp. 279–292; there was no discussion.

The Selection

The text which has been distributed to you has, on the surface of it, no connection to youth.

More serious still is the little connection that the various parts seem to have to each other. But their most suggestive teaching may lie in the underlying unity which they invite one to discover. That was one of my reasons for choosing it. There is, however, a less eccentric reason in its favor, which will not have escaped you. This text is about the *nazirate*, an institution explained in Numbers 6:1–21. The *nazirite* is a man who does not let his hair be cut: "throughout the term of his vow as nazirite, no razor shall touch his head." And the text of Numbers adds a justification to the prohibition, which, less contemporary than long hair itself, will certainly not convince everyone: "For the glory of his God is upon his head; as long as he wears this glory, he is consecrated to the Lord."

It is not in order to cut the verse in two and separate the law from the reasons adduced for it that I have chosen a text on the nazirate in regard to the youth of Israel. But while reading *Le Monde*, which knows everything, I was struck by the fact that long-haired youth wants to express, through its cumbersome hair style, its disagreement with the unjust society to which it nonetheless belongs. "We will not cut our hair until society changes," these young people say. Whether they want to or not, they are consecrated to the Lord! The second half of the verse reappears. It is here that we have the glory of God! I am convinced that the biblical text would never want a glory of God on the nazirite's head which did not mean or express before all else a demand for justice in the depths of his heart.

Acknowledging the Terms of the Text

But the institution of the nazirate, in the Book of Numbers, includes other rules. Let me set them forth before commenting on the text before you. It is indeed a pleasure for me to be able to say something precise in a talk on the essence of Judaism! These precise matters, apparently without mystery, are not least to yield precious suggestions. Of course, everything in the text is said in religious terms; but, in opposition to widespread prejudices about the particularism of Jewish religious thought, this language retains a quite rational and universal meaning, even for those who are sure—even absolutely sure—of their irreligion. An admirable certainty, let it be said in passing. To be sure of one's irreligion does not seem, to me, easier than to be sure of one's religious certainties. But let us leave that aside. The irreligious are people of firm beliefs. They do not doubt their freedom of thought.

Let us enter, then, despite our mistrust, into this religious language or imagery. Let us accept the givens of the text without devoting ourselves too

soon to the psychoanalysis of its author—or authors—without suspecting anyone's intentions. Let us suppose that the text is sincere, and let us ask what it wants to say. Let us suppose that there is thought in the terms it makes use of and, consequently, that its words and representations can be transposed into another language and into other concepts. It is in this transposition that interpretation probably occurs. It would be impossible without a prior presentation of things, according to the very words of the text: "God," "consecrated to God," "glory of God." Let us not back away from these terms, but let us hope that from their very constellation in our text a meaning independent of any catechism will arise. Maybe we will even discover that the complex structures and unexpected meanings that our text teaches can only be said, in their multilateralness, in this religious language, from which interpretations—our own included—can only extract one aspect. Besides, I have never understood the radical difference one makes between philosophy and simple thought, as though all philosophies did not derive from non-philosophic sources. Often, all one needs to do is define an unusual terminology with words derived from Greek to convince the most difficult to please that one has just entered philosophy.

The Nazirate and Its Prohibitions

I come back now to the description of the nazirate. It is a condition the Israelite adopts for a set period as a consequence of a vow. Besides the promise not to cut one's hair, it includes two other prohibitions: during the entire period of the nazirate, the nazirite will drink no wine and will consume no product that comes from the vine: neither raisins nor the skin of grapes. Here, the text of the Bible itself extends the prohibition concerning wine to the products of the vine. As if the Law, in order to preserve from transgression, itself excluded anything which could, one thing leading to another, lead to transgression. As if the text of the Bible itself outlined the model for the "Fence around the Torah" to which the Rabbis' work will be devoted. It is to their work that countless prohibitions date back, prohibitions added to those stated in the Torah in order to ensure that the latter will be respected.

One last point: the nazirite forbids himself, during the period of the nazirate (which is a minimum of thirty days), all impure contact which is, *par excellence*, contact with the dead, or even being present in a room in which there is a dead person. It is certainly possible, through restraining one's will, neither to drink wine nor to consume any product of the vine. It is also fully within our power to keep our hair from a razor. Samson's hair, to be sure, was cut while he was sleeping; but the adventures that befell Samson do not occur frequently. It is obvious, however, that one can find oneself, without intending to, in a room in which a sudden death takes place. The nazirite can thus become impure despite himself. That, nonetheless, is enough to cut short his nazirate. He must then shave his head, offer a sacrifice called *Asham*, and begin the period of his nazirate again as he had established it when he made his initial vow.

This is the regulation of the nazirate, summarized in a very imperfect manner: besides the twenty-one verses of Numbers which institute it, a whole tractate of the Talmud—seventy double pages, one hundred thirty-two pages—are devoted to it. And at the end of these one hundred thirty-two pages are the thirty lines I have translated in order to comment on them.

But before going into my commentary, will you again allow me to guess at one of the 2,400,000 meanings that the prohibitions I have just summarized comprise? This no doubt assumes an infinitely greater knowledge than the one I possess but that certain orators imagine sufficient to exercise themselves on "Jewish thought." I hope that the Talmudists present here—and who at least know the extent of my ignorance in the matter—will forgive me for this attempt to explain. I consider it necessary so as not to disappoint the attentive gathering listening to me, which might be led to rebel against those eternal prohibitions with which every attempt to approach Judaism seems to end. What I am going to say will, therefore, be a way of understanding in conformity only with the little I have learned.

The Motivation

Why would contact with the dead render one impure? In Judaism, death is indeed a principle of impurity. It is even called the principle of principles or, according to a colorful but strictly technical expression, the grandfather of impurity: all spiritual impurity derives from contact with the dead. A mythological belief, you will say, and with the help of ethnography you will find it in other creeds. In the Jewish tradition, however, the impurity of the dead does not refer to the realm of the sacred and the profane. Contact with the dead is not a violation of a taboo. Death is the source of impurity because it threatens to take away all meaning from life, even when one has philosophically triumphed over death! For with each new contact with death, all meaning immediately risks being reduced to absurdity; the race to enjoy the moment, the *carpe diem*, may then become the only—sad—wisdom. Great engagements and great sacrifices are about to degenerate. Death is the principle of impurity.

Why the prohibition against wine? Because drunkenness is illusion, the disappearance of the problem, the end of responsibility, an artificial enthusiasm; and the nazirite does not wish to be deceived, or to be relieved of the weight of existence by forgetting Evil and misfortune. Lucidity, realism, absolute fidelity in a lucid state and not in drunkenness and exaltation.

Why long hair? What I will tell you about it later will justify somewhat the interpretation that I am attempting right now. Not to let one's hair be cut for the duration of the nazirate and the necessity of shaving one's head

at the end of the nazirate, that is the Law. When the nazirite comes to the end of the period of his vow, he presents himself before the altar of the Temple, offers a sacrifice, has his hair cut, throws it in the fire, and drinks wine. But isn't letting his hair grow during the period of the nazirate a way of being "straightforward" *[droit devant soi]* without worrying about one's appearance? A way of being, "without a mirror": to be, without turning toward oneself? Anti-narcissism! Why is one obligated to shave one's head as soon as the vows of the nazirate are over? Perhaps to prevent the noble violence one has done to oneself from becoming sweet custom and the protest against institutions from becoming an institution. To let one's hair grow, not to look at oneself, not to come back upon oneself, not to be concerned with the effect one is having, not to measure the extent of one's daring—nothing is more beautiful, as long as purity and lucidity remain! But beware of audacity that has become a profession! Beware of the insolence practiced when all revolutionary consciousness has been extinguished. One must let one's hair grow, certainly, but at a certain point it must be cut. It threatens to become the uniform of the non-conciousness of self. Indifference toward self, contempt of appearance, undoubtedly, but also youth becoming a business firm and soon laying claims. Long hair worn as a uniform, that is the great scandal of long hair.

Here, then, is the possible motivation of several rites. The Talmud warns us against seeking for such motivations. Knowing the reasons for an imperative is sufficient to render it hypothetical, both in the Kantian and in the common meaning of the term. One immediately begins to think that the dangers warded off by the imperative surely threaten everyone in the world but me. This was, apparently, the misfortune of King Solomon: he was no doubt convinced that too many wives will make any man stray, as Scriptures point out, but thought himself above such contingencies. You know what became of him. I have thus committed a serious transgression in seeking reasons for the three prohibitions of the nazirite regulation. But at least I have given a glimpse of the loftiness of this condition, to which one can consecrate all of one's life, just as one can commit oneself to it for a limited time of at least thirty days.

Nazirate and Priesthood

The high priest is its model. Will what I have said about the nazirate rehabilitate, in the eyes of some, notions as suspect of clericalism as the Temple, the cult performed in it, and the priests consecrated to it? Whatever opinion one may have about the historicity of the institutions these suggest, one must read in their own language the books in which the norms expressing Judaism's vision of the world and its message are established, the books in which Judaism is being thought out. Before any history or sociology, one must decipher the texts' own language.

The high priest and the priests who are on duty—their turn comes periodically—are subject to the same prohibitions as the nazirites. They do not touch their hair for thirty days, do not enter the Temple if they have drunk wine. The commentators explain the violent death of the two eldest sons of the high priest Aaron, described in Leviticus 10, by the fact that they had gone into the Tabernacle without respecting this principle. Lastly, contact with the dead is permanently prohibited to the priests. Is the priest a permanent nazirite? Is the nazirite a temporary priest? The analyses of the Talmud shy away from such formulations, which are lacking in nuance. But doesn't the obvious analogy between the two sets of prohibitions and rituals provide an additional metaphor for expressing the loftiness connected to the nazirate, to the consecration to the Lord? The nazirite experiences the exceptional state of the priest penetrating the Temple, the metaphor for access to the Very High, and for a liturgy which one person alone performs for the collectivity, the peak of election: the service of one for all.

Lovable Youth

Where, in all this, is youth? After this morning's debate and what was said about it, particularly by Vladimir Jankélévitch and Mlle de Fontenay, youth appeared to us as a certain instability, if defined by age, as a notion insignificant in itself, dangerous when one recalls the usage which fascism made of it, using it to make people forget the real oppositions and conflicts of men.[3] And yet the attraction which the ideal of youth exercises on men is great, even if one refuses such definitions of it as youth-pride, youth-spontaneity, youth-denial of the past, youth-freedom, under the pretext that all these attributes have their other side of cruelty, barbarism, facileness. Nonetheless, youth is eminently desirable and eminently lovable in another. One could not speak of it in a pejorative fashion. When one contests youth one says that true youth is elsewhere. One is already using youth to attack youth.

Isn't the text to which I refer guided by a less dialectical concept of youth, less likely to allow the grace of youth to be parodied into egoism, and above all—and paradoxically—into the designation of that which is eminently perishable in human nature?

The Nazirite of Simeon the Just

Before getting to the text in front of you, I am going to start with another passage in the same tractate, page 4*b*. At issue there is a noble mode of existence, in which the phenomenon one can call youth appears. It is the story of an altogether unusual nazirate; many among you probably know it; it is a story that some of us, if not all of us, have been cradled by in our childhood: "Simeon the Just said. . . . " Simeon the Just is an extremely well known person. In the *Sayings of the Fathers*—in the *Pirke Avoth*, which you cited today, Mlle de Fontenay—right at the beginning, among

the first "sayings" there is the one from Simeon the Just. "Simeon the Just was among the last sages of the Great Synagogue." A quite ancient scholar of the Law. He was the one who received Alexander the Great in Jerusalem. This makes us go back to rather out-of-the-ordinary relations; and Alexander the Great, who was no less a Greek for being Macedonian and who had Aristotle himself for a teacher, forms an opinion of traditional Judaism to which the young men of today, who think themselves profoundly Greek for having studied a bit of philosophy, do not always rise. Here, then, is what Simeon the Just says, according to page 4*b* of the tractate *Nazir* (without mentioning Alexander the Great, he makes us think of a Greek story): "Simeon the Just said: In my entire life, I have never participated in the meal accompanying the sacrifice of the nazirite who has become impure." The sacrifice referred to is that of the nazirite who has become impure through contact with a dead person, who is obligated to cut his hair before starting the period of his nazirate again; the sacrifice includes a meal in which the priest participates. And Simeon the Just was a high priest. He never in his life participated in such a meal. Why? The commentator explains: because he doubted that a nazirite whose nazirate had been interrupted could have the courage to begin the ordeal in its integrality again. He feared that the offered sacrifice would be without sincere intention, which would be a complete profanation of the sacrifices. Simeon the Just never wanted to participate in an act of profanation:

> In my entire life, I have never participated in the meal accompanying the sacrifice of the nazirite who has become impure, except for the meal accompanying the sacrifice of a young man who had come from the South. He had a nice appearance and beautiful eyes and hair falling in beautiful curls. I said to him: "My son, why did you decide to ruin such beautiful hair?" [Did he not, in fact, come to offer a sacrifice and to have his hair cut but, above all, would he not, in any case, have had to cut it at the end of his nazirate?] The young man then answered: "I was a shepherd in my village and watched my father's flocks. I would go to drink in the stream and, one day, I saw my image in it—my evil inclination. [Or my "instinct"? Or my "evil instinct"? Or my "person"? Or my "self"? The term used here, which I have tried to translate, is *Yitzri*, my *yetzer*, a noun which refers to the verb *Yatzor*, to create. *Yitzri:* perhaps "what there is of the creature in me."] And then, *yitzri* flew into a passion [or got drunk] and tried to chase me from the world [or from my world]. I said to it: 'Good-for-nothing, you derive pride from a world which isn't yours and in which you will finish as food for worms. By God, I will have your hair cut.' " Then [Simeon the Just adds] I got up, kissed the young man on the head and said to him: "Let nazirites like you be numerous in Israel; it is of you that Scriptures say: 'If a man expressly vows to be a nazirite, wanting to abstain in honor of the Eternal. . . .' "

And the Tosafist[2] comments: "From the start, this one's vow was dedicated to Heaven," was disinterested. Simeon the Just correctly understood

that this one would not go back on his vows from having become impure through an unforeseeable contact with a dead person; but most nazirites make vows either when they are in trouble or to atone for a sin. The act of penance is thus considered by our commentator as an act done in self-interest. With the light shed by the Tosafist, this text reveals the meaning of the nazirate: disinterestedness. Not only in the exclusively moral sense of the term which disinterestedness without a doubt includes but in an even more radical sense. At issue here is a disinterestedness opposed to the *essence* of a being, which essence is precisely always persistence in essence, the return of essence upon itself, self-consciousness and complacency in self. As the young shepherd saw so well, it is not only a persistence but a growing old and dying. Self-consciousness, the forgetfulness of senescence, senseless pride! That is what the nazirite *par excellence*, which Simeon the Just met, resisted. It is that self-contemplation he shunned: what he objected to was not being beautiful but looking at oneself being beautiful. He rejected the narcissism which is self-consciousness, upon which our Western philosophy and morality are built. I say *our*. But the young shepherd of Simeon the Just rejected thought thinking itself, by which Aristotle's God is defined and with which Hegel's *Encyclopedia* and perhaps Western philosophy end. Did he feel that he was leaving the world, leaving the order that was his? Did he feel that in self-contemplation he was losing himself? His nazirate must be perceived at this level.

Engagement and Freedom

The text we are about to begin must be read as a continuation of what came before. It will teach us something new about the nazirate. It may bring out an idea about youth which is altogether different from the one our nazirite fought with when he felt himself triumphant but mad before his own image.

> Samuel was a nazirite according to the words of Rabbi Nehorai, for it is said [1 Samuel 11]: "And the razor *(morah)* will not touch his head. . . .

The problem of the Mishna, which is very elliptically stated, is the following. There is a whole ritual through which the vows of the nazirate are taken. One is committed to them immediately; for one can die at any moment and find oneself unable to keep the commitment one has taken on. The future is present and cannot be deferred. (I cannot go into the meaning of this urgency here, which stands out in many of the discussions of the tractate *Nazir*.) But you can also take the vows by simply saying before a nazirite passing before you: "I want to be like this one." Can one become a nazirite by saying: "I want to be like Samuel?" (Samuel is the prophet Samuel, with whom 1 Samuel begins in the biblical canon.) Yes, if Samuel is

considered a nazirite. It is precisely this that our Mishna discusses. In the biblical text, the word nazirite is not used in regard to Samuel. Rabbi Nehorai nonetheless thinks that Samuel was fully a nazirite. How does he know? For it is said: (1 Samuel 1:11): "And the razor *(morah)* will not touch his head."

What an odd nazirate! In the biblical text it is Samuel's mother who makes the vow: "The razor will not touch his head." Samuel himself has not yet been conceived when the promise is made. It is a vow which concerns only the hair. Not a word about impurity, not a word about the vine. But everything happens as though the vow made by the mother counted, as if personal engagement, freely undertaken—the guarantee of spirituality in our philosophical West—was not the supreme investiture of a vocation. As though, beyond the cult of youth, of newness, of the personal engagement which this liberalism contains, a high density of obligation could begin before our beginning, in the internal value of the tradition. That is at least what is at stake here.

To prove that Samuel is a nazirite, as if the problem at issue here were purely practical (does one become a nazirite when one says: "I want to be like Samuel?"), Rabbi Nehorai reasons by analogy:

> For Samson the word *morah* (razor) was said (Judges 13:5). Just as the word *morah* said in the case of Samson indicates the nazirate so it also indicates the nazirate in the case of Samuel.

Samson also is a nazirite engaged without having made a personal decision. It is not even his mother who pronounces the vows but a messenger of the Lord or an angel. And a vow which is God's command. Samson will be a nazirite by divine will. The nazirate of Samuel would thus be of the same kind as that of Samson. An angel of God utters the vows for you and, there you are, committed! Nothing is more scandalous to a consciousness for which everything must begin in a free act and for which self-consciousness, completing consciousness, is supreme freedom. But the biblical text about Samson explicitly calls him a nazirite, even before his conception. The angel says to Samson's mother: "Now be careful not to drink wine or any other intoxicant, or eat anything unclean. For you are going to conceive and bear a son; let no razor *(morah)* touch his head for the boy is to be a nazirite to God (to Elohim—God as God of strict justice) from the womb on" (Judges 13:4–5). And later on the angel—or the emissary of the Lord—as if referring to the regulation of the nazirite, forbids the mother to eat "what the vine produces" (Judges 13:14).

Would Samson of the long hair also be the prototype of the nazirite, just like Simeon the Just's young shepherd with the magnificent curls? Must Samuel, whom the tradition compares to Moses and Aaron, be recognized as a nazirite by analogy with Samson? For isn't it written (Psalm 99:6): "Moses and Aaron among His priests, Samuel among those who call on His name: when they called to the Lord, He answered them"? Both are dedicated to a vocation they had not chosen. But Samson is a youth. His whole tragedy is a tragedy of youth, made of the mistakes and loves of youth. That the loftiness of the nazirite could find a norm in the destiny of Samson leads us to question ourselves further about the possibilities of youth and about the essence of spirituality. We seem to be outside the meaning that Simeon the Just gives to the nazirate. Rabbi Jose's intervention is therefore fully understandable:

> Rabbi Jose objected: Doesn't the word *morah* mean the fear inspired by creatures of flesh and blood?

Fearless

Morah would mean "fear" and not "razor" if the Hebrew word is written with an *aleph* at the end instead of a *he!* "The razor will not touch his head" would become "Fear will never be above his head." Besides, one can find the same meaning in the verse, without substituting an *aleph* for a *he*, by deriving, according to the suggestion of the commentator Maharsha,[3] the word *morah* from *maruth*, meaning "power" and "lordship." The translation would then be: "And upon his head the power of another will never be exercised." And then, indeed, our text becomes very significant. The nazirite would be defined, according to Rabbi Jose, as the one who fears no one or, more precisely, as the one who does not fear power. Definition of the nazirite or definition of youth? They overlap in the person of Samson. Definition of youth which has not yet been attempted today. It is, in any case, better than the one, so vague, evoking "creativity," which is almost as irritating and as trite as the word "dialogue."

Unfortunately, the opinion of Rabbi Jose is contested:

> Rabbi Nehorai answered: But isn't it written: " 'How can I go,' said Samuel. 'If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' " He thus, in fact, knew the fear inspired by a creature of flesh and blood.

Rabbi Nehorai's answer refers to the text of 1 Samuel 16:2. When Saul, going against the order given him by Samuel, spares Agag, king of Amalek, Saul's reign is virtually over in the Lord's eyes; God therefore sends Samuel to Bethlehem so that he can anoint as king the man who will be pointed out to him there. It will be David. But Samuel is afraid of this mission. If Saul were to find out about it, he would put him to death. And, strange text, the Lord shares this fear!

Would God not have enough power to ensure the security of his emissary? He prefers to teach Samuel a ruse. Samuel's coming to Bethlehem will be under the pretext of a local festival. Probably the Lord thinks that the

government has some rights and some reasons for being. There is, in this text, a backing away from the revolutionary act. According to Rabbi Nehorai, at least, it is not in rash courage and in contempt of established power that the nazirate resides. If nazirate and youth go together, youth must not be reduced to the revolutionary spirit!

Nonetheless, I liked what Rabbi Jose said very much and I am sure his position appealed to everyone here. One can even suspect that it appealed a great deal to the sages of the Torah, who could have dispensed with reproducing a refuted opinion here. It is nevertheless reproduced. To challenge power in the name of an absolute is an unreasonable thing, but daring and noble. Should one say that because the nazirite is consecrated to God, he does not fear anyone, or is it because he does not fear anyone that he is consecrated to God? The two propositions are not equivalent! As for me, I do not seek the meaning of the term "God"—at once the most understandable and the most mysterious—in some theological system. I will try to understand it on the basis of a situation in which a man appears who truly does not fear anyone.

It is nonetheless Rabbi Nehorai who has the last word.

It is not, after all, courage and the challenging of power that define the nazirate and youth. With courage, one never knows exactly where one is going. There may be in that rash fearlessness and in its violence an element of pride and facileness: of cruelty, no doubt. A just violence: when, around us, all is pitiable creature! Think of the text of the tractate *Sanhedrin*, p. 93*b*, in which Ullah and Rabah and Rabbi Johanan[4] prefer not to experience messianic times so as not to witness the violence with which the triumph of absolute justice will have to be surrounded. Permanent theme. It is perhaps this that Rabbi Nehorai had in mind when he recalled the fear that Samuel experienced one day in thinking of King Saul's revenge, and when he recalled the Lord, our all-powerful God, who shared this fear, in order not to identify the nazirate with the end of the fear that human government can inspire.

Methodology

> Rab said to Hiyya, his son: Snatch (the cup) and say grace.

I am now coming to the Gemara, where one would expect a commentary on the Mishna but where, to all appearances, something else is at issue. In fact, the entire Gemara of this last Mishna of the tractate *Nazir* seems to be made up of selected passages. The beginning of the text can be found in the tractate *Berakoth*, and the end of our text makes up the last part of three tractates: *Yebamot*, *Berakoth* once again, and *Nazir*, where we are. Would the Gemara be purely decorative here, ending a tractate of Halakhah with a few aggadic words to leave us pensive or to inspire us with pious

thoughts? Such a way of reading should not be excluded; but it is not forbidden to be more demanding.

Let us ask ourselves what themes are broached in our Gemara. They are two: the first, concerning the merit one acquires by saying grace—grace over wine, in our example—is compared to the merit of answering *Amen* when hearing the blessing. Which is greater? Just think how important this is! Already, I can hear the outcry of short-sighted people, the famous "Let's be serious!" It permits you not to enter into the intention of your opponent when it makes you uneasy, especially when it is too lofty for the physical condition of your eyes. To know whether the merit of the person who blesses is greater than the merit of the one who answers *Amen* would in no way be a serious problem for a modern person who has read so many books. This remains to be seen.

As to the second theme evoked by the Gemara, it seems to be a pious thought and nothing more: the sages of the Talmud claim to make peace reign in the world:

> Rabbi Eleazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: the disciples of the sages increase peace throughout the world, for it is said (Isaiah 54:13): "And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children."

Should we nonetheless ask ourselves whether there is something serious in this frivolous piety? Two problems arise: a) What does this Gemara mean? b) What is the intrinsic connection between the Gemara and our Mishna? There is even a third problem: the link between all this and youth. This last problem calls to account the one who has chosen this text to interpret to you.

What is the meaning of the text "Rab said to Hiyya, his son: Snatch (the cup) and say grace"? People are gathered together. A goblet of wine is brought so that a blessing can be said over it. Who is going to say this blessing? The father teaches his son: Grab the cup, say the blessing. That is worth more than saying *Amen* to a blessing said by another. And this teaching of the father to his son must be significant. Doesn't Rav Huna also say to his son: "Snatch the cup and say grace"?

From which we get the impossible conclusion of the Gemara, words hardly decent in their apparent egocentrism: "Which means: greater is the one who says grace than the one who answers *Amen*." But there is a problem. "Don't we have a *baraita*?" That is, a Mishna that has not been included in the collection of Rabbi Judah Hanassi, which states: "Rabbi Jose (the same Rabbi Jose who speaks in our Mishna) taught: He who answers *Amen* is greater than he who says grace." Rabbi Jose was thus in favor of a doctrine in which the merit of the one who says *Amen* surpasses the merit of the one who says the blessing. To which Rabbi Nehorai—this time in

agreement with Rabbi Jose, who had contradicted him in our Mishna—added: "I swear that this is so. Know that it is the foot soldiers who begin the battle and that victory is attributed to the elite troops, who appear as the battle is finishing." This was, then, already known at the time: the poor soldiers get themselves killed; the officers attribute the victory to themselves!

But what is the connection between foot soldiers and the saying of grace, between elite forces and the *Amen*? Seemingly an altogether external connection: the one who comes last carries the day; thus the one who says *Amen* carries away the merit. What old wives' tales! What a foolish story! What strange logic, which goes from the realm of blessings to military images. This is not something to be taken seriously.

I am greatly assisted in getting out of this uncomfortable position by a commentator of the seventeenth century, whose texts, signed Maharsha, have great authority and are present, in the good editions, in the very text of the Gemara itself.

Here is his remark. His—religious—language must, to be sure, still be interpreted in order to reveal the additional, profane meaning it contains. But reading the Gemara is a permanent deciphering and, what is more, a deciphering without a code.

Saying Grace and the Third World

Saying grace would be an act of the greatest importance. To be able to eat and drink is a possibility as extraordinary, as miraculous, as the crossing of the Red Sea. We do not recognize the miracle this represents because we live in a Europe which, for the moment, has plenty of everything, and not in a Third World country, and because our memory is short. There they understand that to be able to satisfy one's hunger is the marvel of marvels. To return to a stage of indigence in Europe, despite all the progress of civilization, is a most natural possibility for us, as the war years and the concentration camps have shown. In fact, the route which takes bread from the earth in which it grows to the mouth which eats it is one of the most perilous. It is to cross the Red Sea. An old Midrash, conceived in this spirit, teaches: "Each drop of the rain which is to water your furrows is led by 10,000 angels so that it may reach its destination." Nothing is as difficult as being able to feed oneself! So that the verse "You will eat and be full and you will bless" (Deuteronomy 8:10) is not pious verbiage but the recognition of a daily miracle and of the gratitude it must produce in our souls. But the obligation of gratitude goes further. According to the Rabbis' way of speaking, saying grace arouses favorable angels, intercessors capable of fighting the evil spirits who place themselves between food and those who are hungry and who watch for and create any occasion for preventing bread from reaching the mouth. Isn't all this the form of a bygone rhetoric? But

perhaps what we have here is a description of the charming society we live in, the society of free competition and capitalist contradictions.

If one agrees with this last proposition, the linking of the saying of grace with military combat is more understandable. But how will saying grace create champions of the good cause? Let us not stay within figures of speech! It is obvious that what is suggested to us here are peaceful struggles: the problem of a hungry world can be resolved only if the food of the owners and those who are provided for ceases to appear to them as their inalienable property, but is recognized as a gift they have received for which thanks must be given and to which others have a right. Scarcity is a social and moral problem and not exclusively an economic one. That is what our text reminds us of, through old wives' tales. And now we can understand that this internal and pacific war is to be waged not only by me, who in saying grace gives up possession, but also by those who answer *Amen*. A community must follow the individuals who take the initiative of renouncing their rights so that the hungry can eat. Very important, then, are these ideas of food and of struggle, all this materialism extending the laws of the nazirate.

The linking, apparently with so little basis, of our Gemara and our Mishna, is not due to some concern for piling up homiletic texts. Nor is it due to the fact that the protagonists of the Mishna are the same as the ones in the cited *baraita*. It teaches us that there must be a nazirate in the world—a source of disinterestedness—so that men can eat. To feed those who are hungry assumes a spiritual elevation. There must be a nazirate so that the Third World, so-called underdeveloped mankind, can eat its fill; so that the West, despite its abundance, does not revert to the level of an underdeveloped mankind. And, inversely, to feed the world is a spiritual activity.

Here, then, is a good reason for linking the theme of the nazirate to the theme of saying grace and the *Amen*. It does not matter whether the initiative of the individual who "snatches and says grace" carries more weight than that of the masses who imitate him or say *Amen* and follow him upon this path, which is the giving up of one's rights, the recognition of non-Roman property. This makes understandable for us the conciliatory but firm text which follows and which reminds us of the great antiquity of the problem:

> This problem was discussed among the *Tanaim*. There is a *baraita:* Both the one who says the blessing and the one who says *Amen* are included in the reward, but the one who blesses receives the reward first.

The Student of the Torah and Youth

A final problem remains: that which lies beyond this pacific struggle and is the condition for its success. To redeem the world through daring and renouncement, to redeem the world through goodness and struggle—to

succeed in this, isn't it necessary to rise even higher? Is the nazirate to be limited to the vocations of priest, hero, or social reformer?

It is at this point that the types who hold the highest place in Judaism come into view: the *talmid-haham*, the student of the Torah, and the judge who has studied the Torah and applies it. There are the scholars of the Torah. And here again the commentator Maharsha has helped me a great deal. What is even more important than good will between men or, according to the words of Maharsha himself (and it is really a very beautiful language, probably much richer in meaning than the one I have extracted from it might lead one to suspect), what is more important than the creation of intercessor angels is the judge who reconciles men. Both Samuel and Samson were judges. We forget this about Samson; we always see in him the handsome fellow who rips apart the front gate of a city and who strikes down a crowd of Philistines with one stroke of an ass's jaw.

The Bible says: He was a judge in Israel for forty years. In order to be a judge in Israel, he must have known the Oral Law. At least that is how it must have been in the eyes of the sages of the Talmud. In the eyes of the sages, he must have been involved, anachronistically, in the future discussions of *Tanaim*, *Amoraim*, and *Gaonim*. In any event, in spirit and in truth, Samson must have been a *talmid-haham*. Beneath the youth who dares, beneath the youth of good will, is the youth of the one who studies the Torah and who judges.

Why youth? Because the text expresses itself thus: "All your children will be the disciples of the Eternal One." Children of Israel, children of the Eternal One. Youth is equivalent to the condition of a child, no matter what the age of the child! Youth is the state of receptivity to all that is permanent and quite the opposite of the "Oedipus complex." The children of Israel, students of the Torah, are youth *par excellence*. They are the ones who, in receiving the Torah, renew it.

The quotation of the verse from Isaiah 54:13, "All your children will be the disciples of the Eternal One; great will be the peace of your children," is followed in the tractates *Berakoth* and *Yebamot*, in which it is also evoked, by the following remark: "One must read, not 'banaik,' your children, but 'bonaik,' your builders." Great is the peace of your builders. To receive while building. To bring peace into the world by renewing it constructively, that is the youth of the nazirate, that is youth.

Older than Any Life and Younger than Any Youth

But a further step can be taken to rediscover this essence of a youth younger than any youth, in the peculiar arrangement of the text which juxtaposes the attachment to the Law of justice, in turn connected to the nazirate, to the idea of the nazirate referring to Samson and Samuel. Samson and Samuel had been "consecrated" before growing in their mother's

wombs. These two nazirites did not begin their nazirate by their own decision, but on God's command and through the vow of a mother. It does not matter! They began their nazirate before birth. From which stems an idea which I personally find extraordinary and which I had an opportunity to present to the colloquium regarding another text: the attachment to the Good precedes the choosing of this Good.[5] How, indeed, to choose the Good? The Good is good precisely because it chooses you and grips you before you have had the time to raise your eyes to it. *Formally*, it thus challenges your freedom; but if no one is good through free choice, no one is a *slave* to the Good. Precisely because the other who commands us thus is the Good, he redeems, by his goodness, the violence done to the "freedom" before freedom. We thus arrive at the idea of a consecration—of a nazirate—older than the age at which we choose. The absolute nazirite is older than his life. Extraordinary old age! But also the absolute nazirite bears, throughout all his life, the mark of an unimaginable youth, of a youth before youth, of a youth which precedes all aging. The children of Israel are quite an anachronism! The nazirate is not the youth of beginnings; it is preteroriginal youth, before the entry into historical time. "The children of this tribe are counted for the census before they are of age, from their very presence in their mother's womb," the passage of *Midrash Tanhuma* concerning Numbers 3:15 tells us; this also appears in *Bereshit Rabba* 94:1. The passage is about the tribe of Levi, in which are born the priests and those consecrated to the Holy One. It is about their absolute youth, before the time of the world.

But that, ladies and gentlemen, is not just the youth of levites and nazirites. It is the youth of Israel.

NOTES

1. *Jeunesse et révolution dans la conscience juive. Données et débats* (Paris, P.U.F., 1972), pp. 230–242.
2. See note 3 in Levinas's Introduction to "Four Talmudic Readings." (Trans.)
3. See note 1 in "As Old as the World?" (Trans.)
4. See *Difficile liberté*, 2d ed., p. 107.
5. See "The Temptation of Temptation." (Trans.)