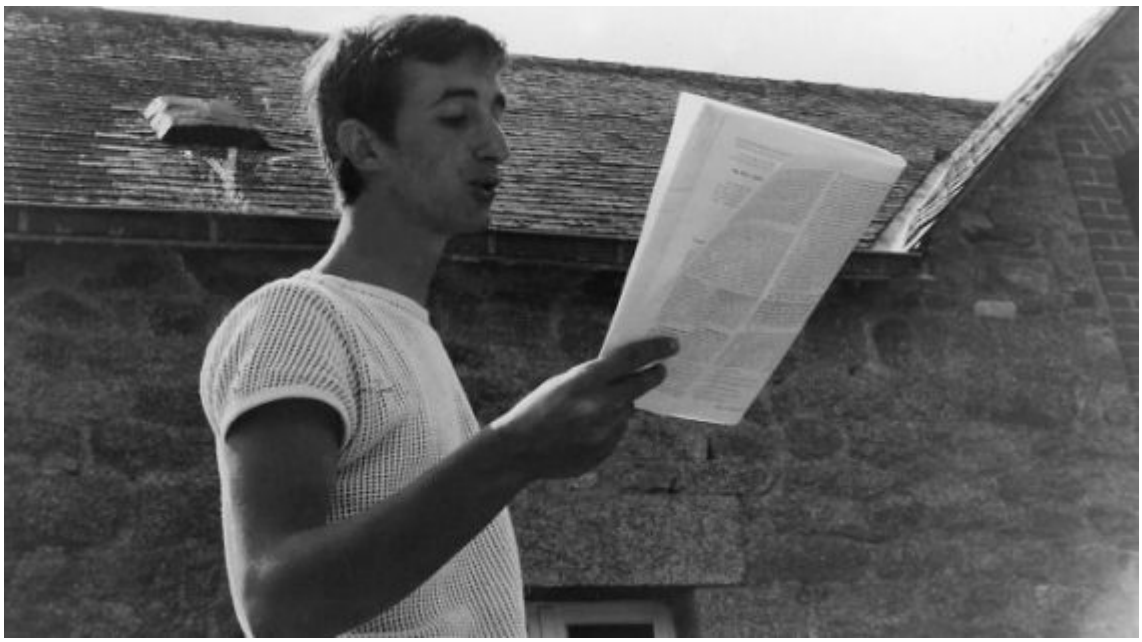
From Mao to Moses: The Life of Benny Lévy



“To be Jewish. To be, in an absolutely singular manner… a thought of the Return. The Return to the Sinai… The thought of the Return (la pensée du Retour) requires a critique of the atheology of the modern Jew. Theology of the silence of God after Auschwitz, critique of theodicy, finally return to the notion of absolute Evil, these are the points through which one must pass in a critical manner…”

– Benny Lévy, *To Be a Jew*

Who was Benny Lévy? If you haven’t yet heard of this intriguing figure, then you are in for a trip. It would not be an overstatement to say that Lévy (1945–2003) might be one of the most intriguing, and underrated, religious Jews of the 20th century.

In the articles below, you will hopefully get a more textured and fleshy understanding for who Lévy was, but here’s the clickbait.

Born in Egypt to Jewish parents, Lévy ultimately became a close student and controversial scribe of Jean-Paul Sartre—the French philosopher and writer—for 6 years at the end of Sartre’s life. Lévy was a Maoist, an editor of the Maoist newspaper *The Cause of the People*, and was frequently arrested by the French police in the 1960s and 1970s for his political activities.

In 1978, Lévy first encountered the work of the great French-Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, and he started studying Judaism seriously. He read Jewish materials to Sartre, who was blind at the time, the results of which are still resounding today, as Sartre's comments on messianism at the end of his life has led to vociferous battles over what Sartre truly believed. Lévy immigrated to Israel in 1997, where he co-founded, with his fellow French-Jewish philosophers Bernard-Henri Lévy and Alain Finkielkraut, an institute for the study of Levinas in Jerusalem. Lévy embraced Orthodox Judaism and studied with Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, a profound thinker and rabbi in Israel. Lévy died in 2003.

As we think about the roads from religion to rationality, rationality to religion, and all the intersecting cross streets and avenues, Lévy is on our mind. How does a Maoist intellectual with a PhD from the Sarbonne, and a close student of Sartre (*for the uninitiated, a quick Google search of Sartre should be informative for why this is intriguing!*), end up studying Torah in Jerusalem, and all the while being directly interested and engaged in the deepest questions of life and thought?

To better appreciate and understand who Benny Lévy was, we have a few of our favorite reads on this fascinating individual. We start with an easy read, "The Jewish History of Jean-Paul Sartre's Private Secretary," originally published at *The Forward*. We then have Lévy in his own words, from a 1984 interview with *Commentary Magazine*, titled "From Maoism to the Talmud (With Sartre Along the Way): An Interview with Benny Levy." We end our PDF there out of mercy, but if you are still tuned in at that point and looking for more, we recommend checking out Annabel Herzog's "Benny Levy versus Emmanuel Levinas on 'Being Jewish,'" Eager readers can also check out Bernard Henri-Levi's comments about Lévy in his interview with *Tablet Magazine*, which you can find under the title "Q&A: BHL." Remember to download the PDF to check out the full reader. And as always, let's jump in – together.