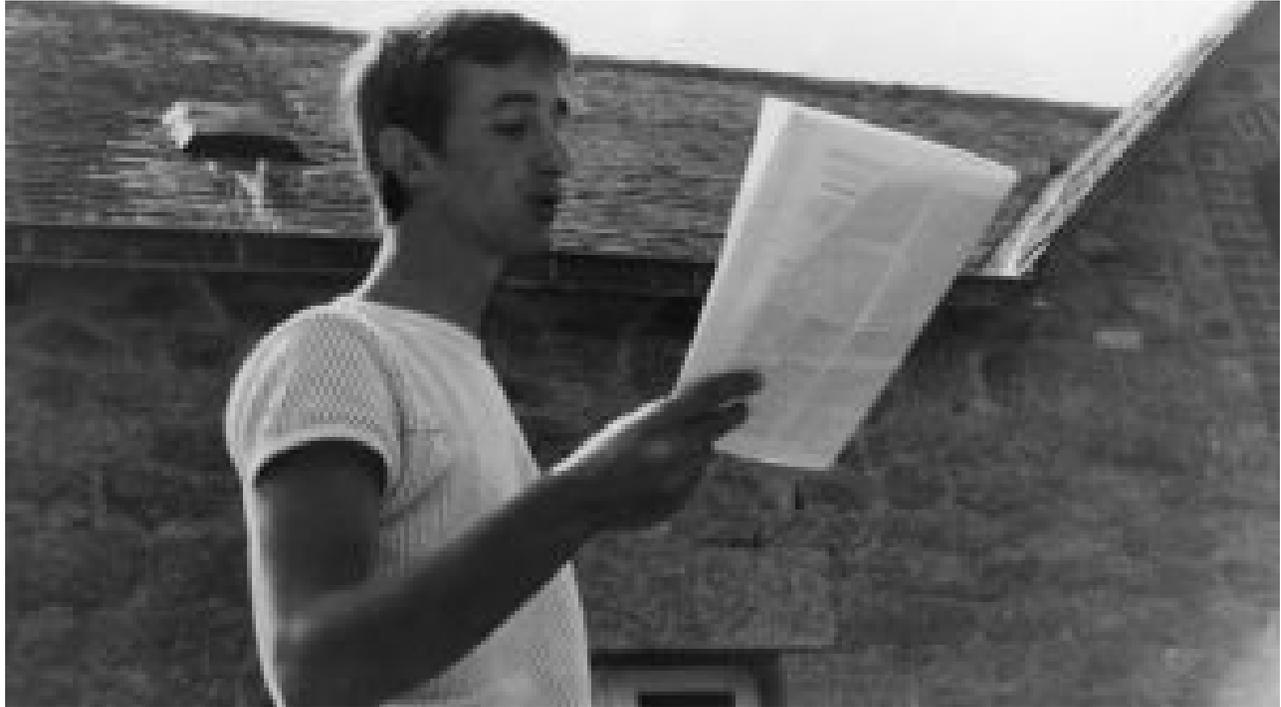


# 18Forty Profiles: From Mao to Moses; The Life of Benny Lévy

 [18forty.org/articles/from-mao-to-moses-the-life-of-benny-levy](https://18forty.org/articles/from-mao-to-moses-the-life-of-benny-levy)

By: Yehuda Fogel



*“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 Sorbonne, 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.](#)" Let's jump in – together.



# The Jewish History of Jean-Paul Sartre's Private Secretary

 forward.com/culture/189099/the-jewish-history-of-jean-paul-sartres-private-se

Benjamin Ivry

Ten years after his death, a French Jewish author hitherto celebrated chiefly for making philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre more sympathetic to Jews, is now earning attention for his own works. Benny Lévy, who died in 2003 at the age of 58, is being honored with the posthumous publication of his works, along with homages from students and colleagues, and an eloquent memoir, “À la vie” (“To Life”), written by his widow, Léo Lévy. Its title, echoing the traditional Hebrew toast *l’chaim*, is appropriate for a book which fullheartedly celebrates a man who during his lifetime frequently faced bitter controversy.

Best remembered for his stint from 1973 to 1980 as Sartre’s private secretary, Benny Lévy co-authored books of conversations with Sartre in which the elderly thinker expressed more sympathy with religious observance, particularly Judaism, than he ever had before. When Sartre was quoted as saying that the suffering of the Jews was the “most shattering of all sufferings,” some in his circle, including his longtime companion Simone de Beauvoir, reacted with furious denials and accusations of misrepresentation. Others close to Sartre, such as author- filmmaker Claude Lanzmann and philosopher André Gorz, made no such objections. To some, Benny Lévy remained an enigma, especially after he made aliyah in 1997 and thereafter focused on studying Talmud, mysticism and the works of Emmanuel Levinas, the French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish ancestry. He would eventually found Jerusalem’s L’Institut d’études lévinassiennes.

“To Life” describes Benny Lévy’s early years as the son of an Egyptian Jewish family on Soliman Pasha Street in Cairo. As a boy given to temper tantrums, Benny Lévy was further traumatized by local anti-Semitism, which grew after the Suez Crisis of 1956. The following year, Benny Lévy and his parents fled Egypt, first to Belgium and later to France. In an early brush with Sartre’s work, he performed in a production of the play “The Condemned of Altona,” in which he was cast against type in the role of a Nazi torturer. Intellectually ambitious, Benny Lévy continued his studies in Paris.

At the *École normale supérieure*, a renowned university in Paris, Benny Lévy made contacts with such noted French Jewish thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Raymond Aron. By then, Benny Lévy had already met the young woman, from a Polish Jewish family, who would become his wife.

The young couple was passionately interested in leftist politics, and Benny Lévy’s fellow revolutionaries insisted he adopt a more generic French-sounding name for public pronouncements and activities, given the country’s long-standing anti-Semitism. He obeyed, using the alias Pierre Victor.

After the Israeli victory in the Six Day War in 1967, Léo Lévy noted wistfully that “forthright Jews were happy and shared a common pride, but we [as radicals] had forgotten how to be forthright and the Jew within us had to take a back seat.” Ironically, Sartre, much criticized for his study “Anti-Semite and Jew,” published in 1946, which defines Jews essentially by those who hate them, would bring Benny Lévy to a more forthright acceptance and appreciation of his own heritage. As Benny Lévy told his friend, the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, in a book of conversations published in 2006: “Sartre made me rediscover a taste for my own [real] name and first launched me on a return to Scripture.” This began in 1970, after Benny Lévy’s fellow leftist Jewish student Alain Geismar, later a noted French politician, introduced Benny Lévy to Sartre.

A genuine friendship developed between Lévy and Sartre. As Sartre explained in a conversation with Benny Lévy published in the newspaper Libération in 1977: “What immediately pleased me was that you seemed more intelligent than most of the political people I’d met until then... and much freer. You agreed to discuss unpolitical subjects, the kind of conversations I enjoyed having with women. You were, still and all, a chap with female qualities.”

In exchange, as Léo Lévy puts it, Benny Lévy showed Sartre how “Jewish Messianism could give new power and momentum to revolutionary thought.” The two friends could still disagree, as they did in 1972 after the massacre of 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team by the Palestinian group Black September, which horrified Benny Lévy. Sartre, by contrast, felt that “terrorism is justified when no other means of struggle exists.” By the mid-1970s, Léo and Benny Lévy were living in a leftist commune where they had to confront the fact that Françoise, one of their co-tenants, was the daughter of Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, a notorious anti-Semite and Nazi collaborator during the wartime German occupation of France, when he served as commissioner of Jewish affairs under the Vichy regime. Sentenced to death after the war, Darquier fled to Franco’s Spain, where he was protected by that country’s fascist dictatorship. This bitter remembrance of modern history close to home may have further impelled Benny Lévy to begin studying Jewish mysticism and Talmud soon afterwards.

When Sartre proposed a trip to Israel in 1977, after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat became the first Arab leader to visit Israel, Benny Lévy eagerly accepted. On the trip, where they were accompanied by Sartre’s lover and his adopted daughter Arlette Elkaim-Sartre, Benny Lévy put on tefillin for the first time to pray at the Western Wall. Benny Lévy’s later years in Israel were often stressful, partly due to France’s official reluctance to support French-language Jewish cultural studies in Israel. Yet his was a productive and satisfying life. Benny Lévy demurred when journalists simplistically summarized his trajectory as “from Mao to Moses,” arguing that he started with Jewish tradition and after his years as a secular radical, rediscovered his identity; thus his path would be more accurately described as “from Moses

to Mao to Moses again.” Léo Lévy summed up their sometimes-tumultuous experience best: “We realized that when Jewish life isn’t lived as a misfortune or hardship but as a fulfillment, other people cannot always tolerate that.”

*Benjamin Ivry writes frequently about the arts for the Forward.*

# From Maoism to the Talmud

(With Sartre Along the Way)

*An Interview With Benny Levy*

Stuart L. Charmé

IN 1970, Jean-Paul Sartre, who throughout his life had been preoccupied with finding a balance between intellectual activity and political involvement, met Pierre Victor, a young radical Maoist and follower of the brand of Marxism-Leninism preached by the Communist philosopher Louis Althusser. Victor, one of the leaders of the *Gauche prolétarienne*, a Maoist group active in the upheavals in Paris in 1968, had come to Sartre to ask him to take over the editorship of the radical newspaper *La Cause du Peuple*, to insure that the government would no longer try to harass or suppress it. Sartre accepted, and in the years that followed, Victor became one of his closest friends, someone who represented for Sartre the ideal combination of rigorous intellectual thought and militant political action. Simone de Beauvoir, in her memoir *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, quotes Sartre as saying, "I should like Pierre Victor to accomplish the work he wants to do, a work that is both that of an intellectual and a militant. Of all the people I have known, he is the only one who gives me full satisfaction from that point of view." Indeed, Sartre saw Victor as a youthful continuator of his own work.

In the mid-70's, however, Pierre Victor underwent a radical intellectual conversion. Reverting to his original Jewish name, Benny Levy, he abandoned the extreme Left and devoted himself to an intensive study of the Talmud. As Levy deepened his knowledge of Jewish texts, he shared his new insights with Sartre, who expressed an interest in certain Jewish ideas, though his grasp of them was rather superficial. Shortly before his death in 1980, in an interview with Levy, Sartre mentioned his appreciation of the Jewish views of man and history. This interview caused something of a scandal in Sartre's old circle. In her

memoirs Simone de Beauvoir expresses her own horror at the interview, and her conviction that Levy had manipulated Sartre into saying things he did not believe. In his physically weakened state, says Beauvoir, Sartre simply gave in to the influence of Levy—and of Sartre's own adopted Algerian Jewish daughter, Arlette. But of course there are many who dispute Beauvoir's version of these matters, including both Benny Levy and Arlette El-Kaim Sartre themselves.

In December 1983 I met with Benny Levy at his house in the suburbs of Paris. I was very curious about the path that led him from a deep commitment to radical politics to a total absorption in the world of the rabbis, a journey which he had tried to share, ironically enough, with the major figure of atheistic existentialism of the 20th century. I arrived at Levy's house on the first night of Hanukkah. He greeted me at the door wearing a yarmulke and led me into a small room where he and his family had just lit oil lamps and were finishing off a traditional dish of potato pancakes. On the bookshelves behind him I saw the volumes of the Talmud. What follows are excerpts from our discussion.

**Interviewer:** Recently, we have been hearing about a Jewish renewal in France. Do you think the immigration of thousands of Sephardi Jews from North Africa is a major cause of this change, since they tend to be more observant, traditional, and Zionist than French Jews were previously?

**Levy:** It would be bad for me to give a sociological response to a question which has a more essential meaning for me. In my opinion, the only answer of interest involves looking at what happened to us, without any pretense of sociological analysis. By "us," I mean those people who participated actively in the generation of '68. I mean those of us who prepared for '68, who continued '68, and who ultimately reached the low point of '68. As a result of the events of 1968 we reached the bottom of leftist thinking and of the extreme Left in general. It is this phenomenon which has

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the greatest significance, regardless of what sociology may say.

I can also tell you that beyond the group of people whom I knew directly and who, like me, began a reorientation toward Jewish texts, the same phenomenon occurred in Strasbourg, an important city for French Judaism. People from the generation of the New Left, and from elsewhere, gathered around a yeshiva to retrieve the study of Talmud in their own way.

I do have a friend, Shmuel Trigano, who has written books about the Sephardi element and strongly insists on this as the main factor in the renewal of Judaism in France.\* And, sure, the most obvious sociological data point in that direction. It's clear that the arrival of a mass of Jews from North Africa who were attached to certain traditions like kashrut led to the multiplication of kosher butchers. In addition, you can see the changes in the power relations within Jewish institutions that resulted from the arrival of the North African Jews. It is no accident that the Chief Rabbi today is a Sephardi. It is also no accident that a certain mode of kashrut is common today, linked to the customs of North African Jews who are attached to kashrut for sentimental reasons rather than strictly as a matter of following Halakhah and *mitzvot*, the Law and the Commandments. You can describe a pile of traits like this, where you can see the weight of the Sephardim. There's no doubt that the sheer mass of the Sephardi Jews has contributed to the renewal of interest in Judaism.

Here in my own house, my wife is Ashkenazi, whereas I suppose I am Sephardi since I am from Egypt. But there is such a particularity about Egyptian Judaism itself (which was in its final hour when I was born) that one would have to register all kinds of nuances for it to become interesting. My wife has followed a different course and has suffered profoundly different afflictions, having had part of her family massacred. The decisive events have been different for the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim.

But these are all external considerations, and things should be seen from a more internal perspective. If you want to talk about the renewal of interest in Judaism, you have to talk about the renewal of interest in the text. There is a renewal of Judaism only when the letter begins to live again. To be a Jew is to lead an existence in relation to the Torah. That's the first thing to consider. All the rest is external, superficial, and secondary. Of course, you can talk about the fact that a part of the Jewish world has lost all contact with the Torah as a result of assimilation. But then you are no longer talking about the renewal of Judaism in an internal sense.

**Interviewer:** In *Adieux*, Simone de Beauvoir writes that like many radical leftists who had once condemned religion, you gradually became "spiritualistic and even religious." To what do

you attribute the renewal of your own interest in Judaism? Is the fact of being Jewish important to you primarily as a religious matter or as a matter of ethnic identity?

**Levy:** As for what Simone de Beauvoir says, it would have been better for her to have said nothing than such stupidities. When she wrote the lines you cite, I was only at the beginning of my interest in Jewish texts, and speaking about it to Sartre every day. She believed she could see in my behavior the things she wrote, but I was still quite far from deriving such emotions from my study. That took several more years. Thus, when she calls me "religious" or "spiritualistic," she is advancing me a great deal. In any case, the mention of the name of God is manifestly unbearable to her, so it's understandable that she drew her revolver in advance. But the interest which I developed in these texts had nothing to do with religion and even less to do with my roots or sense of ethnic identity. My interest in these texts was rigorously metaphysical.

**Interviewer:** OK, but it's no coincidence that it was Jewish texts that interested you.

**Levy:** In order for me to give you a valid answer to this, I must first tell you that I truly tried everything possible before turning to those texts. It was the period when I was working with Sartre every day on our dialogues [to be called *Pouvoir et Liberté*]. I tried everything within the realm of the Western philosophical tradition, which was the common foundation that Sartre and I had. Sartre and I spoke of all this together. I really tried absolutely everything. (I never concerned myself with Buddhism or other such traditions. They are certainly a high form of knowledge, but one that didn't interest me.)

Recently, I've been finishing a work about these dialogues with Sartre and I've been rereading this record of our path. What strikes me is the extent to which, while working with Sartre, I was still attached to the idea of a common access to the word. The Christian metaphysical schema was extremely strong, extremely tenacious. It's not that we were interested in Christian texts as such, but the texts of Western civilization were themselves steeped in this Christian schema. Take Sartre's own texts, for example, which have spectacularly Christological elements.

**Interviewer:** Then how is it that you decided to turn to Jewish texts and to learn Hebrew?

\* Shmuel Trigano is the author of a number of works concerning the situation of the Jew in the modern world, and especially in France. His books include *La Nouvelle Question Juive: L'Avenir d'un espoir* (1979) and *La République et les juifs après Copernic* (1982).

**Levy:** The name of one person is important, a person to whom I must confess my indebtedness, Emmanuel Levinas.\* Here is someone who had the very same philosophical training as Sartre, the same roots in phenomenology and humanism. He was someone who was very close to Sartre in his philosophical language, and yet profoundly different, because he had his roots in the Talmud. This was extraordinary to me. I had two great philosophical moments in my life: in my youth it was Sartre, and then Levinas, when I came away from the Left in 1973-75.

**Interviewer:** Was that the first time you came upon Levinas?

**Levy:** No, actually I am reminded by Pierre Goldman† that I had discovered Levinas earlier, and with ecstasy. I had completely forgotten. It was before I became totally involved in politics. Goldman and I were good friends in the Latin Quarter when I began my philosophical studies. It seems it was in a preparatory class for the Ecole Normale Supérieure, around that time, that I discovered some texts of Levinas on the Other. I don't know which ones. That probably left a considerable mark on me, very largely without my knowing it. He must have had a subterranean effect on me. I couldn't notice this influence at first because when you're involved in politics, there isn't so much time to talk about the Other. To talk about the masses, that's all right, that comes off better.

When I finally extricated myself from politics, when I got my head above water, when I got back to philosophy in its original purity, I resumed everything, systematically, methodically, with ecstasy and extreme happiness. I turned to the philosophy of Plato on the one hand, and my dialogues with Sartre on the other. After a long series of unfruitful attempts to articulate the questions raised by my political experience, including a rereading with Sartre of all his works—after all that, thanks to encountering the texts of Levinas, I began to suspect that here was something decisive, something which also related to my existential constitution as a Jew.

**Interviewer:** In addition to your interest in Levinas and Jewish texts for "metaphysical" reasons, I notice that you wear a yarmulke, light Hanukkah lamps, and so forth.

**Levy:** That's all very recent, and has developed increasingly along the way, mainly in the last year.

**Interviewer:** Do you consider yourself a *baal teshuvah*, a "returnee" to Judaism?

**Levy:** In the sense in which the term is often used, I would have to say no, because it is a very distressing phenomenon. I shudder at the thought

of the American *baalei teshuvah* in Israel. There are yeshivot of these *baalei teshuvah* that are dens of fanaticism and imbecility. I reject the label in this narrow sociological sense. But if you were to restore the rabbinic meaning, if you understand a *baal teshuvah* to be someone who has taken a path toward the significance of the people Israel in its original sense, then I would say yes, without any doubt.

**Interviewer:** For a long time it was said that the price of emancipation for French Jews was to keep their Jewishness at home or in the synagogue, while being French in public. Do you think that there is a new pride among French Jews, such that they now participate in the life of the nation as Jews?

**Levy:** That's a joke! Alas, it may be true. Look what happened a few years ago in the presidential elections. There was more or less of a debate among the Jewish institutions, in the "organized community," as it's called, and a group called *Renouveau Juif* ("Jewish Renewal") was formed as a kind of lobby to exert influence and pressure on the elections and on the Jewish vote. I doubt that it had much effect, but in any case it's a dead end. It is politically misguided, largely the result of a vain, external Zionism. This external Zionism is dying, moribund. You can't really say that Zionism at the present time is a political ideology that is very much alive or prestigious. Can I speak of pride in this context without laughing? It is pride in the sense that Sartre talks about pride in *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *Being and Nothingness*. That is to say, it has about it no Jewish life, no Jewish truth, no positive relation to existing Jewishly, but lots of bluster and defiant attitudes of the same sort that says, "Black is beautiful!" Now, they are going to say "Jewish is beautiful!" That's a load of crap. It's crap first of all because the French who are not Jewish are rightly going to become fed up with these braggarts.

**Interviewer:** A while ago there was a demonstration in Paris for Josef Begun and other Soviet Jews who have been imprisoned or denied exit

\* Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1905, the same year as Sartre. He came to France in 1923. Influenced by Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Edmund Husserl, his philosophy is notable for combining talmudic and phenomenological perspectives.

† Goldman, a disaffected radical and convicted thief, was the center of a strange affair during the early 70's. Falsely accused and convicted of a double murder, he wrote an autobiography which produced enough of a stir to gain him a new trial and exoneration. He was released, but was later murdered himself. In *Dim Memories of a Polish Jew Born in France* (1977), Goldman writes of Levy: "I had first met this rigorous Marxist-Leninist at a time when he would sob with ecstasy on reading Eluard, Emmanuel Levinas, or the young Marx. . . . He was Jewish, and I had always considered him a Talmudist lost in doctrinal commentaries on Maoist texts."

visas. I was impressed at the size of the demonstration.

**Levy:** This concern for Soviet Jews is a positive thing. I know people involved who are very nice, very active. They have a real sensitivity. Look, let's not misunderstand one another. It's certain that there is a positive phenomenon that can be called "pride." But if this bud is to have any possibility of blooming, it will only happen in relation to a great deal of study. The rest will join together around this kernel.

**Interviewer:** Do you think your point of view on current events—for example, on the issue of the placement of cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe—is rooted in Judaism? Or is politics completely separate from your study of Judaism?

**Levy:** It is not separated in the sense that the study of Judaism has involved a vast deconstruction of politics for me. I make use of Judaism precisely as a critique of politics. In this sense there is a link between them rather than a separation. But when I speak of a critique of politics, you must understand that it is a critique of the *pretension* of politics, the idea that politics is adequate to respond in terms of the destiny of man. It is this pretension, this arrogance of politics in all its visions, whether the highest forms of German idealism or the more ideological forms of today, that the Jewish texts help me to criticize.

**Interviewer:** Then it is a "Jewish" critique in which you are engaged. In Judaism there is a long tradition of criticizing the political realm. Is your critique within this tradition?

**Levy:** You must be careful about what you mean by "tradition." Are we looking at it from an internal point of view or from a sociological or historical point of view? What has triggered and crystallized my interest and rootedness in these texts is the great gesture of the Pharisees toward Rome and its concept of politics. When Jerusalem was in flames, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai asked the Roman general only for permission to rebuild an academy of study at Yavneh. It is in accord with this gesture that I express my critique of politics.

In the Bible one reads that on their way to the Promised Land it was necessary for the children of Israel to pass around the mountain of Seir. The mountain of Seir is in the mountains of Edom, which in rabbinic terminology stands for Rome. "Rome" is our way of speaking of the pretensions of politics in its Western forms, both pagan and Christian. The text thus teaches us why it is necessary to pass around the mountain of Seir, why Jewish life must not entrap itself in politics: that's the snare one must avoid, that is why one must go around the mountain. It is in

relation to this gesture of the Pharisees, this lesson of "passing around," that I situate myself.

As for the Euromissiles, it is first necessary that I address a different question, one which does not arise directly out of the threat of nuclear war. It is the question of the relation of Sinai to Western democracy. You must start with this question before worrying about the Euromissiles. In order for me to understand what it means that the nuclear balance favors the Soviets, and that I am in agreement with the position of François Mitterrand, it is first necessary for me to understand the extent to which Israel ("Israel" in the sense of Sinai, not the state of Israel) is bound up with European democracy, or more generally, Western democracy. Insofar as the answer to this question is positive, that is, insofar as Jews are metaphysically interested to the greatest degree in Western democracy, you could say that I take positions from a Jewish point of view. In any case, I'm not taking positions here. It would be very pretentious on my part to speak of the Euromissiles. You must not forget that the wish to beat down the pretensions of politics means also beating down the pretension of each person to have a political opinion about everything. It takes a fair amount of weighing things before one can express oneself with relative competence on strategic and military questions.

It so happens that I have had long experience with politics, and I was sensitive to this question, especially the question of relations with the Soviet Union, and I have stayed in contact with friends who are quite concerned with these things. Thus I have a certain sensitivity which makes me take such and such a political position more easily than does my Talmud teacher, who would not say what I say. So, it's from a Jewish point of view, if you like, but it is mediated in a strictly Western way, since I am in great part a man who was shaped by the West. It is not necessary to distrust this Western part, but neither should one totally trust it.

**Interviewer:** I wonder if it is possible to locate a specifically Jewish morality from which to respond to political questions.

**Levy:** For me, it is not a matter of finding a specifically Jewish morality; it's been found for us. The interest of these texts is precisely that they relieve us of the idea that we need to establish, make, or elaborate a system of morality.

**Interviewer:** Is this morality different from the general Western tradition of morality?

**Levy:** Is wearing *tephillin*, phylacteries, within the reach of Western man? I don't believe so. Is refraining from mixing wool and linen in one's clothes something available to Western man?

**Interviewer:** Are those really ethical questions?

**Levy:** Yes, they are. That's the essence of the problem. How do we define morality? Do we define it starting from the coordinates of Western spiritualism, that is, in terms of spiritual interiority, or in terms of what is at stake in the Torah?

**Interviewer:** All 613 commandments of the Torah are ethical laws, in your opinion?

**Levy:** What else?

**Interviewer:** Isn't there a difference between ritual and ethical laws? The ritual laws, such as the laws of sacrifice, don't really seem to deal with ethical questions.

**Levy:** Take the Hebrew word for sacrifice—*korban*. The root of *korban* is proximity, to draw closer. If the work of approach, of rapprochement between man and that dimension which I will quickly call the transcendent, is not ethical, I don't know what is. Ethics, as it is conventionally defined, is the reconstruction [*réparation*] of one's physical being in the world. In the best of cases, ethics tries to base itself on an internal trace of a moral imperative. Happily there is Kant, rather than no Kant. Happily there is a moral law, rather than no trace of an imperative. In this sense, a Jew is closer to Kant than to the Marquis de Sade, or to Nietzsche. But that's nothing at all. Several years after the categorical imperative was elaborated, a great man named Hegel said to Kant, what do you want to do with a categorical imperative? It's too formal for the affairs of the world, for politics. In politics, it is necessary to dirty your hands.

Western morality spends its time setting up an opposition between this formal attitude, what Hegel called the "beautiful soul," and the realistic attitude, the one that knows the way of the world. These two attitudes are at best the limits of a field, but they are not the ethical field itself. A realist is not a moral fellow, while one who is formally moral is not in the real world. The opposition of these two attitudes alludes to the real problem, namely, the ethical field itself, which has to do with the coming-into-being of the body (the ethical body, not the anatomical one). What are the 613 *mitzvot* if not a reconstruction of the body? It's no accident that the Jewish sages always said that the number of positive *mitzvot* corresponds to the number of organs in the body. Ethics, in the sense defined by the Torah, will occupy itself with correcting what is naturally, spontaneously immoral in the body. This occurs through the *tephillin*, the dietary laws, or the laws of sacrifice.

Before seeing things in detail, for example the *mitzvot*, it's first necessary to know what we're talking about. If you try to think about the *mitzvot* starting from the concept of Western morality, you're finished.

I have been speaking about the ethics that are

at stake in the receiving of the Torah at Sinai. There is a more universal morality in the Torah, the seven commandments of Noah in Genesis. But the ethical dignity of Israel, which takes upon its shoulders 613 and not seven commandments, is considered greater than that of the sons of Noah. In any case, it is necessary to say that there are levels of ethics or morality, at least from a Jewish point of view. You can contest this distinction in principle and assert that every man, be he Jew or Greek, has the same relation to the moral imperative. You find this in St. Paul. It's nothing new; there can indeed be a relation to morality which does not pass through the 613 *mitzvot*. But that still leaves you with a completely different path of access to morality. That's what often drives many modern Jews crazy, the idea that there is a particular duty for the Jews.

**Interviewer:** I'd like to turn to your friendship with Sartre. Sartre seemed to have many Jewish friends during his life. He remarked that there was something special in a relationship with a Jew, a sincerity, a sensitivity, and also a shared skepticism of conventional ideas which was rare in Christians, who are beholden to tradition and ceremony. Wasn't Sartre thinking here especially of secular Jewish intellectuals and not of religious Jews, who are also beholden to tradition and ceremony?

**Levy:** He didn't know any religious Jews at all.

**Interviewer:** In your conversations with Sartre near the end of his life, he expressed a new understanding of the reality of Jewishness apart from the history and effects of persecution and anti-Semitism. What do you make of this new understanding?

**Levy:** On that point, things are very simple. Sartre knew only assimilated Jews who had no intellectual relation to Judaism and its roots. Thus, he too lacked any relation to Jewish existence, strictly speaking. From this point of view he shared at least the same ignorance of Jewish reality as everyone else, and he also had his share of prejudice. It's clear in his books, in the way he speaks about the Pharisees, the Kabbalah, and so forth—just like any other French writer. When he wrote *Anti-Semite and Jew* and spoke of his love for the Jews, it was love for these persecuted people; but he felt nothing for other Jewish things. For him, a Pharisee was essentially a hypocrite, just as one reads in the Gospels. The word "Pharisee" occurs more than a dozen times in his work, always meaning hypocrite.

Now it happened that in the course of our years of dialogue, when I turned toward the texts of Judaism, every morning as I arrived I would tell Sartre about these texts and the beginning of my instruction in them, and then we would

discuss issues of leftism and the end of leftism. I told him these things for at least a year and a half before his death. He heard me speak of things that I had never spoken of before (because I hadn't been familiar with them), and that he had never heard of in his entire life: for example, talmudic texts and kabbalistic commentary that I had studied with my teacher at that point. I was flabbergasted how all that could be so absent from his horizon, even though he thought he knew about it.

Sartre found out how Jewish knowledge works by seeing its first effects on me. His first great impressions concerned the texts themselves, of which he had been unaware. He was in the process of learning that Jews could have their own manner of being and thinking, well in advance of their reactions to persecution. He had read the five volumes in the French edition of Salo Baron's *Social and Religious History of the Jews*. It was Simone de Beauvoir who read them to him, not I. He was very impressed by them, he

was fascinated. Add to that the fact that Arlette had begun to translate the Talmud six months before he died. Every night he asked her how many pages she had finished, and she must have read to him from what she translated.

When he said all this in an interview in *Nouvel Observateur* [March 1980], there was an amazing scandal. The Sartreans said that I had manipulated him.

**Interviewer:** So Sartre's knowledge of Judaism was weak to average?

**Levy:** It was zero. Zero, compared with someone like Maurice Blanchot, who read what was in French, including the work of the scholar André Neher and of Levinas. Sartre read neither Levinas, nor André Neher, nor even Buber, who was also available in French. He read nothing at all. He wrote *Anti-Semite and Jew* without reading a book. It just came out of his head. It's stupefying!