

JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AS EXISTENTIAL HERMENEUTICS  
A REVISITING OF THE RELATION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND JUDAISM  
IN EMANUEL LEVINAS

by Eli Schonfeld

The relation between philosophy and Judaism is one of the major themes in Emmanuel Levinas' thought. Levinas often uses the metaphor of translation to describe his project, his effort consisting of translating Jewish ideas, which philosophy lacks, to the language of philosophy. This paper proposes a reevaluation of this theme in light of posthumously published texts from the 1930s and 1940s, as well as texts from that period which Levinas did not include in his published corpus. These texts describe the experience of persecution and suffering as an experience lived by the Jew as a modality of his relation to transcendence, to the divine. In this paper I demonstrate how this experience lies at the basis of Levinas' philosophy, and how the Jewish experience of suffering – while impossible to translate into the universal language of philosophy – paradoxically nourishes Lévinas' phenomenological project: translating Jewish wisdom into the language of philosophy.