BOOK REVIEW

Michael Chighel's *Kabale: Hebräischer Humanismus im Lichte von Heideggers Denken*

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Michael Chighel, *Kabale: Hebräischer Humanismus im Lichte von Heideggers Denken*. Translated by Peter Trawny. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2020. 294 pages.

Anyone familiar with the small but intriguing and hopefully growing scholarly field dealing with Heidegger and Jewish thought is bound to come across the analogy between Heidegger and Balaam, the non-Jewish Moabite prophet who wished to curse but ended up blessing biblical Israel. While Heidegger's oracle-like rhetoric has something to do with it, putting these two figures together is surprising, provocative, and somewhat peculiar. For some, the link between the two is intended to signal toward the unusual, paradoxical "insider-outsider" character of the German philosopher, whose well-known tainted relationship with Jews comes together with some surprising affinities with various ideas within Jewish tradition. This is not the case for Chighel. The reader of this rich and thought-provoking book will encounter the Balaam-Heidegger analogy on its very first pages, but here, the analogy is not meant to suggest some kind of hidden similarity or correspondence between Heidegger and Judaism, but the opposite. The analogy is based on Chighel's sense that like the ancient prophet, Heidegger too is an enemy of Judaism, but whose attack on the Jews can likewise end up being an unintended

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blessing; the calamity of Heidegger can illuminate important light on the true nature and vocation of Israel. A serious Jewish engagement with Heidegger therefore should not simply involve a defence against his accusations, but should be taken as an opportunity to articulate Judaism's own teachings in a more precise and direct way – and in so doing to illustrate their radical difference from his philosophical world.

It should be already clear that this book differs greatly from most of the publications on the topic of Heidegger and the Jews. While it touches on his ties to the Nazi party and the question of his antisemitism, its main focus lies elsewhere, namely, in enacting a critical confrontation with Heidegger's philosophy from the (or a) point of view of Judaism. Chighel states explicitly that the negative, anti-Jewish statements found in Heidegger's writings are much less important – and less interesting – than the anti-Jewish stance that his overarching philosophical project represents. Indeed, the endless debate over his antisemitism serves as a distraction from the more pressing question that is at stake. Exhibiting the originality of thinking exhibited in the book, Chighel mimics Heidegger's claim that the essence of technology is not technological to state that the essence of antisemitism is not antisemitic but rather a question concerning revealing and truth. Reaching the bottom of the essence of Heidegger's antisemitism would thus require a different kind of analysis than commonly employed.

For Chighel, Heidegger's philosophy is corrupted to the core, beyond repair – not so much because it harbours problematic statements about Jews, but because it constructs an entire conceptual and religious world that is in diametrical opposition to that of Judaism. Over against what can be termed, rather inappropriately, a "harmonizing approach" – developed in a remarkable albeit different way in the works of Elliot Wolfson, Marlène Zarader, Michael Fagenblat, Elad Lapidot, Allan Scult, and others – according to which similarities, parallels, or areas of interaction between Heidegger and Jewish traditions are highlighted, Chighel posits a clear and unambiguous oppositional relation between Heidegger and Judaism.[1] The anti-Judaism animating Heidegger's philosophy is what Chighel calls anti-Adamism. Heidegger's philosophy is developed in the

name of a *Deutsche Menschentümlichkeit* (German humanity), which actively counterposes the "Hebrew Humanism" of Judaism. There is, indeed, a fundamental difference between Judaism and Heidegger, which can be boiled down to whether *das Seiende* (beings) or *das Sein* (Being) is prioritized and considered superior. This difference, in Chighel's framework, encompasses the difference between presence and transcendence, verticality and horizontality, the ontological and the ontic, solipsistic immanence and openness to an Other. Heidegger's philosophy is far worse than antisemitism – it is pagan, anti-humanistic, anti-creation, anti-God, anti-Sinai, anti-Adam.

The central intervention of the book is to demonstrate the opposition staked out above. It does so by setting out a confrontational analysis, a *Kampf*, of key organizing concepts in Heidegger's philosophy and opposing them to parallel Jewish concepts, a juxtaposition that co-illuminates each side in its radical distinction vis-à-vis the other. Such a *Gegensetzung* (opposition) is posited between the following concepts: "Welt" and "Od," "Boden" and "Eretz," "Erde" and "Adama," "Ethos" and "Tzelem," "Poiesis" and "Avoda," "Alētheia" and "Emet" (other oppositions pop up in passing throughout the book, like the opposition between Heidegger's *Bund* and the Jewish *B'rit*, as well as between *Angst* and love, *Sein* and creation, among others). It is difficult to do justice to the sophisticated way in which these parallel notions are probed to reveal their unreconciliatory character, or to the remarkable array of sources drawn upon in the process of doing so. In the context of this short review, it is sufficient to say that unlike a lot of what is published on the topic of Heidegger and the Jews, there is little that is banal about the analyses in this book. Indeed, few are as fluent in the breadth and width of Jewish tradition and as familiar with the long arc of Heidegger's writing and the European philosophical tradition as Chighel, and few could accomplish such an informed and exciting confrontation. For this achievement alone, this book should be commended.

In addition to Peter Trawny's notion of Heidegger's "being historical-thinking," developed in his *Heidegger and the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy* (2016) – Trawny is the translator of this book from English

into German – the mark of Emmanuel Levinas is clearly felt in this work. In the assertion that Judaism is not a particularistic identity but a universal teaching about humanity, in the assumption that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable hostility between Heideggerian philosophy and Judaism, in defining Heidegger as a pagan bound to *Bodenständigkeit* (rootedness) and Judaism as an uprooted existence of sorts, and in approaching Heidegger through the prism of the (im)possibility of encountering an (ethical, religious) Other – a Levinasian line runs through its pages. The Hasidic background of the author is clearly palpable, as well. In fact, this work is in general continuity with some major twentieth century Jewish engagements with Heidegger in that it, too, perceives Heidegger as in some way representing the most pristine manifestation of some fundamental flaw within Western philosophy, and in seeing Judaism, or a philosophical rendition thereof, as the much-needed remedy and alternative to it.

Heidegger occupies an interestingly dual position in Chighel's scheme. Both put up on a pedestal as representing the height and heart of European philosophy and said to be flawed to the very core, Heidegger is attributed with the grandeur and disgrace of being the archenemy of Judaism. As Chighel states explicitly, insofar as Heidegger and Judaism are opposing and non-reconcilable frameworks, it stands to reason that a Jewish reading of Heidegger is necessary for anyone seeking to arrive at a conclusion as to the truth of his views. According to the same logic, a Heideggerian reading of Judaism must be necessary as well. Can one fully grasp what Judaism and "Hebrew Humanism" are about without considering their contrast with Heidegger? It is also important to note that arch-rivalry implies a unique relation of intimacy and dependence in opposition. According to this logic, Heidegger's philosophy belongs "closer" to Judaism precisely *because* it is its diametrically opposite and great enemy. Other philosophical systems do not hold the same intimate relationship of utter negation. Chighel is aware of the dialectic implicit in this dynamic, which makes his analysis more interesting than a facile "good guys" versus "bad guys" story (though at times it comes close to succumbing to this paradigm).

I wish to raise one point about how the oppositional positioning between Judaism and Heidegger is set up. It seems to me that the basic structure grounding the book's arguments, that is, the relatively neat Heidegger/Judaism distinction – paralleling, from Chighel's perspective, a clear "us"/"them" distinction, with its implicit or not-so-implicit evaluative overtones – can only be defended if it is assumed from the outset. In this work, both Heidegger and Judaism are presented in a de-contextualized and ossified manner, like two a-historical Platonic ideas that are the mirror image of the other. The unity of the position attributed to Heidegger is obvious. But what is the basis for the unity of the latter position, attributed to "Judaism"? After all, "Judaism" in this work is represented by a long list of Jewish thinkers and texts that may be separated from each other by centuries and also at times in open disagreement with each other. The claim here is not the trivial point that Jewish thinkers and texts do not speak in a single voice about every topic. It is, rather, a methodological claim. Chighel's approach is a-historical. When the same thinkers and texts are approached from a historical-contextual perspective, it is difficult to deny that some of them actually operated under similar or closely related philosophical assumptions, shared a conceptual nexus and horizon as, and were even nourished directly from, Heidegger. Take Martin Buber or Levinas, for example. Surely these thinkers strongly disagreed with Heidegger on basic matters and even mounted against him fiery, devastating critiques. But presenting them as positioned in diametrical opposition to Heidegger obscures the fact that there are also important moments of continuity, commonality, and interface between them. This is not a "harmonizing" point but, again, a methodological one: the drama of contrasts, radical distinctions, and diametrical oppositions is made possible by the a-historical methodology, but somewhat mellowed down when a historical-contextual perspective is taken. Now, it is certainly true that readers of this book, as a constructive work of Jewish philosophy or theology that perceives itself as speaking in the name of Jewish tradition and making normative claims about it, must adjust their expectations to its methodology and aims. This is not a book *about* Jewish engagements with Heidegger but a book that *is itself*

a Jewish engagement with Heidegger. But it is important to see that here the methodology determines the argument. In the context of the present book, this means that the argument regarding the oppositional distinction between Heidegger and Judaism only holds if we presuppose it, together with Chighel, from the outset.

In my own work I have argued that "no other philosopher has had more impact on twentieth century Jewish European thought than Martin Heidegger."[2] It is yet to be determined whether Heidegger's philosophy will remain a fruitful interlocutor for twenty-first century constructive Jewish thought to think with and against. But the erudition, sophistication, and originality exhibited in this book give the impression that it is off to a very promising start.

NOTES

1 On these readings, see Daniel M. Herskowitz, "Heidegger and Judaism: Variations on a Theme," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 32 (2024): 8–34.

2 Daniel M. Herskowitz, *Heidegger and his Jewish Reception* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), xii.