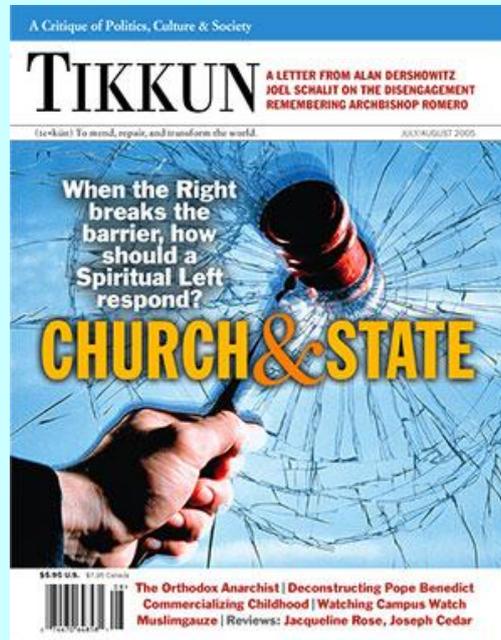


*The Jew and the Other,*  
by Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias.  
Cornell University Press, 2004.

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An “improbable modern midrash” is what Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias call their slim yet elegant little volume. Moving through the Pentateuch and stopping to explicate select verses, the French scholars offer a kaleidoscopic view of that most vexing of creatures – the other. The approach is wide-ranging, the voice sweeping. Historical and theological evidence is found everywhere: from Christians and Muslims to Spaniards and Germans, and from Abraham’s pagan ancestors and Moses’s unmistakable foreignness to God’s radical alterity.

But this is no mere laundry list. A deeper philosophical and political argument sustains the book. Many pages, to be sure, are spent on the expected topic – the way Jews have figured as an other in various times and places. The Middle Ages make an appearance as do the horrors of the twentieth century.

Benbassa and Attias are at their most passionate and persuasive, however, when they turn the tables and examine how Jews themselves have regarded the other. Their guide in these meditations is the late French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who developed an ethics of the other in critical response to his teacher Martin Heidegger and his focus on the ontology of being.

Over the last years, the work of Levinas has been recognized as a major contribution to modern Jewish thought. Benbassa and Attias make it their guide to the enduring tension in Judaism between universalism and particularism. If God created all of humanity, they pose with Levinas, why did he name the Jews as his chosen people and anoint them with special obligations.

The answer lies in Judaism's special relationship to non-Jews, from the biblical nations to present-day Palestinians. Jews need these others in order to fulfill their universalizing mission. This mission centers on an "interhuman" injunction, what Levinas calls the "non-indifference of one to another." Benbassa and Attias explicate that "one must pass from the human or the universal to Judaism, and then, with Judaism as one's point of departure, make one's way back toward the other, in a to-and-froing that transcends tolerance and is neither a law nor a social convention, but the very basis of the human."

The political message in this philosophical stance is clear. At the end of the volume, Benbassa and Attias call once more for Jews' "sensitivity to the suffering of others," adding with a nod to the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, that a "mutilated Israel and a Palestine bled white are simultaneously destroying their common future."

*Matti Bunzl*