

# The Immense House of Postcards

## The Idea of Tradition following Lévinas and Derrida

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**ABSTRACT** The subject of tradition engaged both Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida in many of their writings, which explore both the philosophical and cultural significance of tradition and the particular significance of the latter in a specifically Jewish context. Lévinas devoted a few of his Talmudic essays to the subject, and Derrida addressed the issue from the perspective of different philosophical and religious traditions. This article uses the writings of these two thinkers to propose a new way of thinking about the idea of tradition. At the core of its inquiry lie the paradigm of the letter and the use of this metaphor as a means of describing the concept of tradition. Using the phenomenon of the letter as a vantage point for considering tradition raises important points of discussion, due to both the letter's nature as a text that is sent and the manifest and hidden elements it contains. The focus of this essay is the phenomenon of textual tradition, which encompasses different traditions of reading and interpreting texts and a grasp of the horizon of understanding opened up in relation to the text through its many different interpretations. The attention paid here to the actions of individuals serves to highlight the importance of the interpersonal realm and of ethical thought.

**KEYWORDS** Derrida, Jacques; Lévinas, Emmanuel; tradition; heritage; scripture

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From Plato to Freud there is some letter. It is the same world, the same epoch, and the history of philosophy, like literature, while rejecting the letter into its margins . . . was counting with it, essentially. Our entire library, our entire encyclopedia, our words, our figures, our pictures, our secrets, all an immense house of postcards.<sup>1</sup>

In this study, based on the thinking of Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida, I would like to propose a philosophical exploration of the phenomenon of “tradition” in both its philosophical and religious senses.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of “tradition” will be approached in this essay as a complex ongoing process composed of individual acts of acceptance, processing, and conveying. The resulting construction constitutes a processive partnership that gives meaning to the dead and the living and simultaneously

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 52, 63 (hereafter cited as *PC*). Also cited in Michal Ben-Naftali, *Chronicle of Separation: On Deconstruction's Disillusioned Love*, trans. Mirjam Hadar (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 32, doi: 10.5422/fordham/9780823265794.001.0001.

2. One of the most important and well organized philosophical analyses of the philosophical meaning of tradition can be found in the works of Nathan Rotenstreich. See, for example, “On the Concept of Tradition in Israel,” in *On Jewish Existence in the Present Age* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv and Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1972), 11–23; “The Seriousness Regarding Time,” *Studies on Jewish Time in the Present Age* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1978), 156–67; and *Tradition and Reality: The Impact of History on Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: Random House, 1972). For additional exploration of the philosophical meaning of tradition, see Avi Sagi, *A Challenge: Returning to Tradition* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003); Meir Buzaglo, “The New Masoretic and the Halakha: Phenomenology,” in *Progress and Tradition: Creativity, Leadership, and Acculturation Processes among the Jews of North Africa* [in Hebrew], ed. Moises Orfali and Ephraim Hazan (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2005), 187–204; Steve Coleman, “Is there Reason in Tradition?” in *Politics and Experience: Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of his Retirement*, ed. Preston King and Bhikhu C. Parekh (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 239–82; Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change and Modernity* (New York: Wiley, 1973); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989); Gordon Tucker, “A Philosopher’s View on the Problem of Scholarship and Belief,” in *The Seminary at 100: Reflections on the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Conservative Movement*, ed. Nina Beth Cardin and David Wolf Silverman (New York: Rabbinical Assembly and Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987), 251–60; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Paul Heelas, Scott Lash and Paul Morris, *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006); Yves Congar, “What is Tradition?,” introduction to *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (Collins, CO: Ignatius, 2004), also available online [http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features/congar\\_introtradition\\_dec04.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features/congar_introtradition_dec04.asp).

outlines its possible horizons—both those that allow life and those that cause death. The phenomenon of textual tradition that is the focus of this essay encompasses different traditions of reading and interpreting texts, as well as an understanding of the horizon that is opened up to the text through its many different interpretations. The attention paid here to the actions of individuals who receive and pass on the formative texts of a tradition highlights the interpersonal and intergenerational realm as the space in which tradition exists. On this basis, ethical thought may be said to anticipate our observations regarding this concept of tradition, placing the discussion of textual tradition under the purview of ethics itself.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of “tradition,” or, as translated into English with a somewhat different meaning, “heritage,” was of great interest to Derrida. He explored tradition and heritage in general, and Jewish tradition—in which he had a personal interest and which helped him formulate the basic ethical concepts of deconstruction—in particular. A quick glance at just the titles of some of his works, such as *Archive Fever*,<sup>4</sup> *Des tours de Babel*,<sup>5</sup> *Circumfession*,<sup>6</sup> and *For What Tomorrow*,<sup>7</sup> reflects the fact that the subject

3. The philosophical discussion of tradition possesses not only an epistemological importance, but also an ethical meaning. This issue represents a major stratum in the development of modern Jewish thought, as manifested, for example, in the works of Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Lévinas. See, for example, Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Ungar, 1972). Cohen finds religious meaning in man's attitude toward the other—his “fellow man”—and in love's centrality in the religious experience. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 85–99, 115–126 (hereafter cited as *BV*); Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 30–37, 142–146; Jacques Derrida, “Foi et savoir: les deux sources de la *religion* aux limites de la simple raison,” in *La religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 9–86, published in English as “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1–78; Hanoch Ben-Pazi, *Interpretation as an Ethical Act: The Hermeneutics of Emmanuel Lévinas* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012).

4. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), hereafter cited as *AF*; originally published as *Mal d'archive: Une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée, 1995).

5. Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–207, in a bilingual edition. Original French text is on pages 209–248.

6. Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*, in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3–315; originally published in French, under the same title (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

7. Jacques Derrida and Élisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow . . . : A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), hereafter cited as *FWT*.

of family, religious, and cultural traditions was one of their primary concerns. In these texts, he explores man's ethical point of departure: that which emerges from deficiency as opposed to perfection. In this manner, he describes the fundamental injury of "being a Jew," who carries with him the heritage of generations on his very person in the marking of circumcision.<sup>8</sup> He examines the metaphorical and concrete meaning of the archive, including the different aspects of memory that accompany the Jewish archive—the collection of Jewish literature. He inquires into the meaning of the historical Jewish narrative, which is also the extremely personal story of the encounter with anti-Semitism. Ultimately, he takes up the first and the last question—and perhaps the most important one; that which pertains to the choice of the individual regarding his own heritage and his personal choices in this respect.

My study assessment in this article revolves around the paradigm of the "letter," or, to be more precise, the paradigm of tradition-as-letter.<sup>9</sup> Using the phenomenon of the letter as a vantage point for considering tradition raises important points of discussion due to the letter's nature as a text that is sent and the manifest and hidden elements it contains. A letter, like a postcard, is always open, even when it is closed. "What I like about postcards," Derrida explains, "is that even in an envelope, they are made to circulate like an open but illegible letter."<sup>10</sup> The perspective proposed here of considering tradition using the analogy of the letter facilitates a move from the private to the public—that is, from thinking of a letter as a private communication between two individuals to thinking of it as a text that is open to being viewed by everyone, so that it constitutes a public appeal to a multiplicity of potential readers.

While seeking to clarify Lévinas' and Derrida's views of tradition, this article also goes further by proposing some additional thoughts concerning the subject—ones that nevertheless seek to build on their work. These

8. See Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida: On Judaism as a Wound and the Judaism of Jacques Derrida* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Academia, 1998). Translated as *The Jewish Derrida*, trans. by Peretz Kidron (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

9. The term "letter" (*igeret*) in biblical language is associated with the Second Temple Period. Its earlier synonym is "book." The biblical letters are letters that were sent by notable individuals in order to convey private messages or communicate public instructions. In the Bible, we find the letter of Purim (Esther 9, 26, and 29) and the open letter (Neh 2:8; 6:5). The term "book" (*sefer*), which is used in the Bible synonymously with the term "letter," can be found in David's letter (2 Sm 11:14) and Jezebel's letter, as well as in 2 Kings 5:5 and Esther 3:13. Some have argued that the word is of Persian derivation, but it may have already appeared in Akkadian.

10. PC, 12. Also cited in Ben-Naftali, *Chronicle of Separation*, 33.

thinkers' in-depth analyses of the complexity of the notion of tradition obligate philosophy to continue reflecting on its own tradition, as well as the meaning of other traditions, religions, and cultures. The dialectics of conservatism and revolutionism, continuity and disruption, and allegiance and betrayal, provide the ultimate foundation for the line of thinking discussed here.

Considering tradition as a letter also poses a number of new questions to ponder, as in the case of cultural traditions it is unclear who the sender is and who the recipient is, what—if anything—it has to say, and how it can and should be read. Was the letter ever actually written? Has it already been read? What is the position of those engaged in guarding it?

#### THE LETTER AS METAPHOR: A POSSIBLE TALE OF A LETTER

In order to enable us to better appreciate the meaning of the metaphor of tradition-as-letter, I would like to offer an imaginary tale, based on a biblical story. The scene I attempt to describe here is meant to appear as if it were taken out of a Kafkaesque play. In it, we meet a man making his way from one location to another, carrying a letter in the form of a rolled-up, sealed scroll. The scene has an air of the past—perhaps of medieval times in Europe, or the ancient East. Our hero sets out from his home one morning on horseback, and at the gates of the city he encounters a respected man, perhaps a government minister, who asks him to accept a letter from him and to deliver (*traduire*) it to another important person. As the scene's audience, we observe the man as he rides along carrying the scroll and for some reason refrains from reading it. He has no idea what it contains, although he might be able to imagine or conjecture. It may even be sealed with a wax insignia. We know not whether the traveler is troubled by the letter's contents or even if he knows how to read. Nonetheless, he views the opportunity as an important event in his life and guards the letter with vigilance. Should he run into difficulties, or meet with someone demanding that he turn over the letter, his intention is that he will do everything in his power to protect it, and he may even be willing to sacrifice his life in order to see it delivered (*transmettre*). His dedication stems from his belief or knowledge that it is a letter of substantial importance. For us, the audience, who meet the devoted man mid-journey, the mission of safeguarding the letter and delivering it to its intended recipient appears to have become the most important undertaking of his life. In this context, the observer is initially faced with the following innocent question: Why? Why is the delivery (*the transmission*) of this letter a matter

of such great significance in his life? He most likely does not even know what is written in it, but his life—his days and his nights, his journeys and the burden he carries with him—now depend on it. He will deliver the letter no matter what the cost. And now we, in the audience, ask ourselves: Does the letter hold some importance for his personal life? Does he, perhaps, regard its safe delivery as a crucial mission to be undertaken for the sake of his people, humanity, or the kingdom? We may think of this tale and this mission of delivery, perhaps, as the self-consciousness of exhibited by each and every traditional people: the mission to see their tradition successfully transported or transmitted (*transmettre*).

We now turn to a translation of this fictional account into everyday life, in that letters that carry a far-reaching and constitutive meaning also exist in the modern world. One example is Walter Benjamin's manuscript, for which he was willing to sacrifice his life without its ever being published.<sup>11</sup> We can also imagine alternative versions, such as a letter of recommendation containing an assessment of the conveyor's professional experience or a document communicating critical information about the conveyor's culture. In some senses, the letter may be allegorical in relation to the life of the conveyor. Indeed, certain letters can determine the life and destiny of the bearer.

Such a letter can be compared to a will, for example. When a person receives a signed will from his or her mother or father, or from another party, the manner in which he or she is expected to learn of its contents is governed by clear and sometimes ceremonial rules. In some cases, a person's entire life may depend on the contents of such a will, which may be of critical personal, economic, or behavioral import and may have a bearing on his or her family relations. Nonetheless, the individual keeps the document closed and in his possession until the moment when he is permitted to open it. The same dynamic can also be imagined in other contexts, as in the case of a person who undergoes a blood test, an x-ray, or a medical test of some other kind and either does not know how to read the results or receives them in a sealed envelope. In the modern version of this scenario, the letter takes the form of a CD, which bears immense

11. The story of Walter Benjamin's manuscript and suicide can be read about extensively in Jay Parini, *Benjamin's Crossing: A Novel* (New York: Holt, 1997); Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, *Dvarim Bego* [in Hebrew], ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982) 426–49; Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review Books, 2003); Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 51–89.

importance for the life and future of the patient and the manner in which he will conduct himself from that point on.

To further increase the drama and, to a certain extent, the familiarity of the situation described above, we draw attention to one possible element of the letter's contents: a condemnation to death. Such a letter, when its bearer is so insistent upon safeguarding and not reading it, appears to be enormously cruel in nature. After all, by opening and reading the letter, the bearer could change his destiny by destroying it or modifying its contents through omission or addition. Perhaps he would not work so hard to safeguard it and would actually prefer to leave it forgotten by the side of the road or, at the very least, allow it to get wet while crossing the river in order to prevent its contents from being understood with certainty. Were he to open the letter, he could choose to do any of these things. However, he either knows—or wants—not to know that the letter condemns him to death.

This situation is not one conjured up from my own imagination, and what follows is a verse from the biblical story that inspired it: "In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In the letter he wrote: Station Uriah in the thick of the battle and then withdraw from him so he will be cut down and killed" (2 Sm 11:14–15, NET). Moshe Shamir describes the thoughts that must have been going through Uriah the Hittite's mind in this situation:

I am almost certain that the key to this mystery is to be found in the king's letter. David must have sent Joab the harshest of reprimands. Whatever its contents, it is clear that the letter is of extraordinary importance; otherwise David would not have summoned an officer of my rank from the battlefield of Rabbah to Jerusalem, when any number of royal messengers make the same journey every day. And were the letter not of unusual importance, the king would not have deliberated over it for two days: nor would he have exhibited so many hesitations and such unaccountable changes of mood before entrusting it to my care.<sup>12</sup>

What at first glance appears to be merely an unsubstantiated account with no relevance to the subject of tradition actually enables us to broach certain important questions regarding tradition that emerge from the

12. Moshe Shamir, *The Hittite Must Die*, trans. Margaret Benaya (New York: East and West Library, 1978), 8.

symbolic aspects of the story of Uriah the Hittite.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the story's importance lies in its concise posing of some of the most central elements of the biblical discussion on the subject. Quite surprisingly, the story also hints at this in its language and its terminology: the letter and the writing it contains, its being conveyed, and the questions it raises regarding its manifest versus its concealed content.<sup>14</sup>

The story is a familiar one that has been explored extensively in biblical commentary, poems, artistic works, and literary and legal studies. It proceeds as follows: King David, who is conducting a war against the Ammonites, remains in Jerusalem and dispatches Joab, his minister of war, to supervise the campaign. While his army is in the midst of the war effort, David gets entangled in a love affair with a woman named Bathsheba, "who was very beautiful to look upon"—the wife of one of his military officers, Uriah the Hittite. From here on, the story grows increasingly complicated and evolves into a biblical account of corruption that has everything: forbidden romance, murder, bribery, mourning, rebellion, and revenge. The story as a whole had profound historical implications for the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel and immense impact on biblical thought. However, in the context of the present discussion, we focus our attention on the letter. In the story, David sends a letter to Joab to cause the death of Uriah, who is not cooperating with David's efforts to make it appear as if it was he who impregnated Bathsheba. But David's course of action proves excruciatingly unbearable, as he entrusts the letter containing Uriah's death sentence to Uriah himself.<sup>15</sup> It is to this cruel situation—in which Uriah bears his own death sentence—that I seek to compare tradition. What is of interest to philosophical inquiry

13. On the story of Uriah the Hittite, see Uriel Simon, "An Ironic Approach to a Bible Story: On the Interpretation of the Story of David and Bathsheba" [in Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 2 (1970): 598–607; Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, "The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process," *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1976): 275–322, doi:10.2307/1772762; Menuha Gilboa, "Tradition and Its Breaking in 'Uriah and Bathsheba,' for Adam Hachohen" [in Hebrew], *Criticism and Interpretation* 22 (1986): 5–14.

14. Shamir highlights the story's centrality through the gap he succeeds in creating between Uriah the man and the injustice done to him on the one hand, and the major consequences of the birth of Solomon, the Kingdom of Solomon, and the very history of the Jewish People on the other hand. This unbridgeable gap between the personal and general narratives already had reverberations in the biblical period, in its various interpretations.

15. For this reason, Adam Hochen compared the letter to an arrow, in the Midrashic sense of an arrow that has already been shot and that is destined to strike Uriah, the only one who does not understand its content. Adam Hachohen, "Uriah and Bathsheba," in *Poems of the Holy Language (A Selection)* [in Hebrew], ed. Menuha Gilboa and Yehuda Friedlander (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1987), 211–7.



is the distinction between the significance ascribed to the process of transmitting and conveying on the one hand, and the content passed down from generation to generation on the other hand. The metaphorical use of David's letter being carried by Uriah draws our attention to the most troubling aspect of the letter: the death it encompasses. Shamir offers the following account of Uriah's indecision: "so I will use words that any man will understand. I am writing this because I feel that something is about to happen in my life."<sup>16</sup>

The question facing Shamir's Uriah, and perhaps also the Uriah described in the book of Samuel, is what he should do with the letter with which he has been entrusted, which bears the message of the King. In a broad sense, life and death is depending on this letter, and not just the life of the man carrying it. The Derridean argument in this context would be that the element of death is incorporated within the very writing of the letter.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, the act of writing the letter itself immobilizes living language within dead letters, such that the very act of the hand using ink to do the writing can also be thought of as incorporating an element of death.<sup>18</sup>

#### TRADITION AND JEWISH TRADITION

The use of the term "letter" appears to be self-evident in the context of the monotheistic religions, which revolve around the "letter" of the Holy Scriptures: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran. However, what Derrida proposes in his observation of the manner in which

16. Shamir, *The Hittite Must Die*, 9.

17. See Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); originally published as "La pharmacie de Platon," in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 69–197.

18. The introduction of an element of death into writing is described in depth in the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*. Derrida addresses this issue in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy." [Editor's note: No place to this effect can be pointed to in this particular Platonic dialogue. Derrida's interpretation relies on his reading of the deeper meaning of Plato's idea that writing is a *pharmakon*, helpful only in reminding us of what was once said (275a5). As the Greek word *pharmakon* is inescapably ambiguous, pointing to something that can work both as medicine and as poison, and as the invention of this peculiar drug is attributed, by Plato's Socrates, to the god Theuth/Thot in an "Egyptian story," whom Derrida views as Amon-Ré's nocturnal representation (95–107 in original edition, cf. 85), Derrida proposes a subversive philosophical reading of Plato's concealed, possibly even unconsciously held, view that associates writing with death.] Lévinas discusses the element of death in his phenomenological interpretation of the concept of the scriptures and the accompanying contamination of hands in the writings of the Jewish sages, as we will see below.

letters are written and conveyed enables us to think more deeply and creatively about that primary attribute of letters which is also present in the conveying of the tradition of the Holy Scriptures: tradition is preserved as written tradition, written and read anew by each generation and thus in constant need of, and constantly subject to, new interpretations.

In the context of Judaism, it takes little effort to think of tradition as a written letter. After all, it too is described in terms of receiving, transmitting, and conveying. As such, tradition can be thought of as a process—that of its bearers' sending a letter from one person to another, or from one generation to another, without reading or revising it and without caring about the fact that they are the ones carrying the letter. However, the uniqueness of this letter lies in the fact that it actually does have a bearing on the affairs of the person carrying it and passing it on, as the individual who seeks to be a part of the transmission process must remain dedicated to the tradition itself. At the same time, however, he can only be truly devoted to tradition if he is willing to betray it, or at least willing to do more than just convey the letter. Rather, he must also accept that his role is not only to convey and deliver the letter, but also to actively relate to its content.<sup>19</sup> According to Nathan Rotenstreich, the question of activity versus passivity is of central importance to our understanding of the conveying of human culture overall, as "the relationship between the works of the present and the forms of the past are the essential forms of culture."<sup>20</sup> And, as he himself so effectively explains: in the past, the bearers of Jewish culture perceived themselves as passing on, from generation to generation, a letter—whether it be a royal decree or the word of God—that was revealed at some time in the past and that they were obligated to convey to the future. According to this understanding, which can be viewed as forming a parallel to the spatial construal of one's conveying something from place to place, tradition must be passed on from moment to moment, so that it may reach the last generation. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the per-

19. The Jewish concept of "*massorah*" (notations regarding the exact traditional text of the Bible) constitutes one of the fundamental dictates of the concept of tradition (*masoret*): careful preservation of the formulation of the text. We must pose questions about the different meanings of tradition—about both its being conveyed in written form, and its being orally conveyed, or about the forms of behavior involved with these. The story of the Aleppo Codex serves as a fitting metaphor for this point as, in the course of the Crown's transmission, we encounter a large number of traitors who steal, acquire, duplicate, read, and hide, and without whom the conveying of the Codex would have ceased. See Amnon Shamosh, *Haketer: The Story of the Aleppo Codex* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1987).

20. Rotenstreich, *On Jewish Existence in the Present Age*, 43.

ception of tradition changed, so that it took on “a meaning associating it with the very historical process that occurs within the spiritual-religious heritage of our people.”<sup>21</sup> That is to say, the internal content of tradition is not limited to the letter: it also encompasses the letter’s voyage and the stops it makes along the way.

Thinking about tradition using the analogy of the letter necessarily raises questions regarding the extent to which the conveyor of the letter is aware of its importance to, and presence within, his own life. Many people who are engaged with tradition assign significance to their commitment to tradition, or, we might say, to the preservation of the letter. Clearly, in the context of Jewish tradition, the analogy of the letter raises complex questions regarding the identities of the sender and the recipient—questions that require us to confront longstanding issues in theology, including the tradition of the sages with respect to the source of the letter and the perspectives of different generations as regards the notion of the “Torah from the heavens” or, alternatively, the “Torah from Mt. Sinai.”<sup>22</sup>

Thinking in the spirit of Lévinas and Derrida requires us to disregard the concrete interpretation of “from the heavens” and instead interpret it using the tools of either metaphysical discourse or that of ethics. Who the sender of the letter is, and who its recipient, are questions that necessitate the use of the terminology of metaphysical discourse, although a thorough understanding of this discourse rules out an existential explanation of the sender of the letter. The sender is not a specific one, and, in the context of religious tradition, He cannot be defined in His infinite divinity. When the possibility of speaking about God in positive terms is denied, and when the philosophico-phenomenological discourse precludes us in any event from speaking about the writer of the letter in the language of being, our attention is drawn to the letter itself and to the processes of its being conveyed, which, in turn, raises the question of its recipient, and of the recipient’s recipient. Thinking in terms of a letter enables both Lévinas and Derrida to devote abundant attention not to the questions of prior revelation or the giver of the Torah, but rather to the different dimensions of its being written, read, conveyed, and interpreted.

21. Ibid.

22. The two important schools of thought with regard to the position of the “Torah from heaven” and this ideological development in the history of Jewish culture are discussed at length and in depth in Abraham Joshua Heschel’s book *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, trans. and ed. Gordon Tucker (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006).

### THE SCRIPTURES AS A LETTER: LÉVINAS' INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Within the broad discussion proposed in this article, I seek to train an inquiring eye on Lévinas' systematic discussion of the question of tradition vis-à-vis the status of the Book of Esther in the Bible and the Halakha. The Talmudic literature discusses the status of this book through a consideration of both aspects, together and separately: that is to say, through a discussion of the Book of Esther's inclusion as one of the books of the Bible, and the religious determination regarding the establishment of the holiday of Purim, which transforms the reading of the Book of Esther into a ritual reading as opposed to a scholarly reading alone. These Talmudic discussions, and the example of the Book of Esther, enable Lévinas to consider the fundamental question of tradition, its establishment, and the changes that are made to it.

In his book *In the Time of the Nations*, Lévinas engages in a number of profound discussions regarding tradition in general and the Jewish tradition in particular.<sup>23</sup> In this context, he proposes an interpretation of a number of Talmudic issues and discusses the nature of the Bible as a letter, and the critical question of who its true recipients are: the People of Israel or the nations of the world. He also inquires into the rules of biblical editing and canonization and the possibility and obligation of translating the scriptures into the languages of the world. Moreover, he expresses a concern, among other things, that the ritualistic attitude toward the Torah could turn it into a form of idolatry.<sup>24</sup> Lévinas interprets Jewish tradition in terms of ethicality and responsibility. The letter, therefore, is addressed to humanity as a whole, and the purpose of the scriptures is revealed in their translation into the languages of the nations, which makes known the Jewish tradition's responsibility to open itself up to the nations of the world and to humanity.<sup>25</sup> From this perspective, the importance of the Bible lies not in its role as the Jewish People's "book of books," but as

23. Emmanuel Lévinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. by Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), hereafter cited as *ITN*; originally published as *A l'heure de nations* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1988).

24. On the issue of the Bible's editing in the context of the Book of Esther, see Lévinas, "For a Place in the Bible," in *ITN*, 11–32. On the translation of the scriptures, see Lévinas, "The Translation of the Scripture," in *ITN*, 33–54. On the view of the Torah as posing a risk for idolatry, see Lévinas, "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry," in *ITN*, 55–75].

25. See Annette Aronowicz's "Translator's Introduction" to Emmanuel Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1990), ix–xxxix; Annette Aronowicz, "Teaching Lévinas's Talmudic Commentaries: The Relation of the Jewish Tradition to the Non-Jewish World," in *Paradigms in Jewish*

a letter to the nations of the world. "What is Europe?" asks Lévinas. "It is the Bible and the Greeks."<sup>26</sup> The Bible's contribution to Europe is the responsibility that man bears toward the Other, to whom you can never say "you are not my business."<sup>27</sup> Viewed from this vantage point, the Bible is an open letter to the nations of the world, and the ethical meaning of being a recipient of the letter of the Bible lies in its outward orientation, toward the Other and toward others.

Lévinas' interpretation proceeds to a clarification of the concept of "scriptures" via a consideration of the Book of Esther's designation as a "letter." This term is applied to the Book of Esther within the book itself (in the context of the confirmation "of this . . . letter concerning Purim," Esther 9:29) and is preserved in the language of the sages and halakhic literature.<sup>28</sup> The sages may have preserved this reference as an element of Midrashic and Aggadah-based description, but what the halakhic literature gained from it was an understanding of the religious mode of reading the Book of Esther as an act of a person reading a letter. This image of a person reading a letter shapes the attitude toward the Book of Esther and offers greater insight into the Bible as a whole, as reflected in the Talmudic discussion considered by Lévinas: "Esther sent word to the doctors [the doctors of the law]: Set me [set my feast] for the future generations." Their response is negative: "You will stir up [in so doing] violent feelings against us among the nations."<sup>29</sup> Esther's desire to be included, or to have her book included in the Bible, is depicted as a letter conveyed between Esther and the rabbinical doctors. Perhaps these were the sages of Esther's time, and perhaps they were the sages of later generations. Perhaps this is the recurring appeal from generation to generation of the need, in every generation, to consider the place of Esther among the sacred books. The letter must be, as Lévinas explains, "words of peace

*Philosophy*, ed. Raphael Jospe (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 280–89.

26. See Lévinas' article "The Bible and the Greeks," in *ITN*, 133–5.

27. In this context, it is interesting to consider the surprising fact that the Bible is indeed the book that has been most widely translated into the world's languages, and that its recipients include many different peoples in the Western World and beyond.

28. The appropriate mode of reading the Book of Esther in the halakhic literature is that of a person reading a letter. See, for example, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Megillah 2, Hilkha 12: "It is customary among the Jews that the reader of the scroll reads it and simplifies it like a letter. And when he finishes, he closes it up again and makes a blessing."

29. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah, 7a, 62, quoted in Lévinas, "For a Place in the Bible," 11.

and truth" (Esther 9:30),<sup>30</sup> as this is the sages' condition for inclusion in the Bible and the attaining of sacredness.

Lévinas' decision to consider the meaning of the Bible through an analysis of a Talmudic passage pertaining to the Book of Esther's place in the Bible, then, is a choice that makes the discussion all the more difficult. Lévinas raises this point explicitly: after all, the Book of Esther appears to be not "words of peace and truth" but, rather, a book of anti-Semitism, war, and hatred that condemns to death those who convey it.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, even the explicit language of the letter itself makes reference to the notion of the annihilation of the Jewish People. In a certain sense, the letter is a death sentence imposed on its bearers, who would be aware of it if they were only willing to read it. In this way, the condition of remaining faithful to the letter constitutes its very betrayal. Preserving the text as it is written causes hatred, envy, and war.<sup>32</sup> The possibility of its becoming a sacred letter emerges only if we assign it an opposite interpretation—that of a story of peace and truth.

In the Talmudic discussion, Lévinas offers a creative possibility for understanding the notion of the "letter" and for relating to the scriptures using the metaphor of the letter. The Talmudic and Halakhic language is surprising in its creation of categories that are not feasible but that nevertheless exist from a philosophical perspective. Some letters, say the sages, are written but not recited, whereas others are recited but not to be written. The distinction found in the language of the sages between the writing and the reading of the letter, to which Lévinas draws our attention, is not immediately self-evident.<sup>33</sup>

30. Quoted in Lévinas, "For a Place in the Bible," 16.

31. For the sake of comparison, readers can consult A. B. Yehoshua's article on anti-Semitism and the meticulous analysis of anti-Semitism which he holds that the Book of Esther contains. See A. B. Yehoshua, "An Attempt to Identify the Root Cause of Anti-Semitism," *Azure* 32 (2008), accessed 20 November, 2016, <http://azure.org.il/article.php?id=18>.

32. In this context, we are reminded of the 1994 massacre perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein at the Machpelah Cave on the occasion of Purim, and the immediate connection between observance of the holiday on the one hand, and the inspiring nature of the Book of Esther and the mode of reading and celebrating the wiping out of Amalek during the public reading of the Scroll on the other hand. See Adi Ophir, "Jew-Gentile" [in Hebrew], *Prose* 81–82 (1986): 23–33.

33. Paul Ricoeur has dealt extensively with the meaning of these hermeneutical distinctions. See Paul Ricoeur, "Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?" in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 137–59 (published in English as "What Is a Text?" in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 105–124); Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the

Thinking about tradition as a letter creates new tensions and new possibilities that transcend our understanding of the letter in a private, individual sense. Every letter contains a gap between the processes of its writing and the processes of its reading, as well as between the speaking that precedes the text's writing and the text as actually written. But gaps also exist in more distinct dimensions, such as between the text during the act of writing and the same letters after they have been written, and between the actions involved in writing and the actions pertaining to reading. The existence and meaning of the text require us to relate to different dimensions of time, past and present. If all letters contain gaps and multiple dimensions of reference and interpretation, then considering tradition as an open letter opens up the discourse of tradition to new horizons.<sup>34</sup>

One of the gaps in the text highlighted by Lévinas is that which exists between its being written and its being read. He refrains from placing both acts in one framework or incorporating one into the other, which is a distinction that, according to Lévinas, also creates possibilities that are more difficult to discern on a practical level, such as that of reading without writing. It is commonly assumed that every text that is written will avail itself of being read again.<sup>35</sup> But how can we depict reading without the writing that precedes it? In this instance, the practical solution is also the intellectual and spiritual one. What is in question here is not a reading of something that has never been written, but rather a description of writing that, in itself, contains no element of deviation or inspiration. The deviation beyond the letters is actually found in the reading. The book's inspiration is manifested not in its form, its materials, or that which is written in it, but rather in that which is read in it.

Text: The Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 73–101. Also see Ze'ev Levy, "A Thousand and One Interpretations: Hermeneutics and the Creation of Open Art" [in Hebrew], *Studio* 25 (1991): 30–32; Hanoch Ben-Pazi, "On the Spoken in the Scriptures and the Written in the Spoken" [in Hebrew] *Dimui* 28 (1997): 36–48; Georges Poulet, "Lecture et interprétation du texte littéraire," in *Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?*, ed. Edmond Barbotin (Paris: Corti, 1975), 63–81; Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Studies in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1983).

34. On opening up the text to its horizons, see the following works by Hans-Georg Gadamer: "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem," trans. David Linge, in Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, 128–40; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

35. According to Ricœur, "The Model of the Text," 537.

## THE DOUBLE MEANING OF THE LETTER AND OUR CONVEYING OF IT

The common ground between Lévinas and Derrida with respect to the analogy of the letter is to be found in both thinkers' approach to the dual role of the letter's conveyor. Bearers of a letter are never simply bearers of a letter: they also bear responsibility for the life and the death of the letter. The danger of death and immobilization looms over the letter's writing and its being conveyed, whereas the possibility of life and inspiration are contingent upon the manner in which it is read and interpreted. The very writing of the letter contains an element of death and immobilization, of something that was and is no more. To use a variation on a Lévinasian term, writing can be said to encompass "that which never existed." That is to say, the written word from the past arrives as a past that never was present and that exists within the present as an element of the past.<sup>36</sup> The question is whether writing has the ability to move from the past to the present and to be read into our lives.

The major question posed by Lévinas is whether we open our eyes to read the letter. Are we capable of moving from written speech to the inspiration of what lies beyond written words? How do we make the hermeneutic transition from the speech that is immobilized in the written letter to that which can perhaps be awakened in the writing and be spoken?<sup>37</sup> Can we move from the dimension of the Said (*le dit*) to the dimension of the Saying (*le dire*)? Derrida, on the other hand, highlights writing and reading as acts possessing aspects that are necessarily self-contradictory in nature, in as much as the act of deconstruction asks not only about interpretation and the manner in which the letter should be read, but also about how we attend to the margins of what is written, how we relate to the small nuances and the things concealed within the contradictions of the letter itself.<sup>38</sup>

In their account of the act of interpreting and conveying, Lévinas and Derrida share the language of a betrayal—not to mention a murdering—of

36. Lévinas, "Beyond Memory," in *ITN*, 76–91. See also Ze'ev Levy's account in *Otherness and Responsibility: A Study of Emmanuel Lévinas's Philosophy* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 36–51.

37. Or, in the terminology of Lévinas, the transition from that which can be read to that which it is possible to read, as reflected in the naming of his book *Beyond the Verse*. See Lévinas' foreword to *BV*, x–xvii.

38. Derrida's terminology in this context is somewhat misleading for the reader, but refers to the margins of the letter. See Derrida's book *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 18–26, 118–40. This book is published in English as *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).



the written text and its being conveyed. Willingness to betray the content of the letter may actually constitute the deeper meaning of our staying loyal to it. At the same time, strict loyalty and adherence to the contents of the letter (or, we might say, “the letter of the letter”) may constitute a death sentence for the letter itself and that which is encrypted within it—and, in the case of our analogy, for religious, philosophical, and political tradition. This analysis subjects the notion of tradition to internal dialectics and a complex experience and existence. The very use of the term tradition encompasses a betrayal of the notion of truth itself.<sup>39</sup>

In a certain sense, this returns us to the medieval philosophical discussion—caught between revelation and the intellect—juxtaposing the divine and the human aspects of scripture. The interpretation of the scriptures assumes its form in the space between religious authority and the tools of logical interpretation. In medieval times this tension resulted in different solutions, some more elegant than others, but now it assumes a distinctly modern meaning. Readers of today approach the traditional texts using such tools of inquiry as are furnished by philology, literature, history, and reflection. But the tools of inquiry and science carry with them other sorts of political, social, and institutional baggage too, engendering a tension between sovereignty on the one hand and the order of religion on the other. Who can lay claim to authority over the textual tradition: religion and its institutions, or that tradition’s own historical development?

This also raises an interesting and complex legal issue regarding the legitimacy of traditional institutions and laws, and the possibility of change and revision within the Halakha and Jewish law.<sup>40</sup> This conceptual process presents us with a dialectic that is unique to tradition, the acceptance of which includes the right to betray it.<sup>41</sup> When it comes to giving a reliable historical account of the text, the true men of religion may be those

39. The etymology of the Hebrew word for “tradition” (*masoret*) also attests to the connection it facilitates between acts of conveying that are faithful and ones that amount to a betrayal or an act of informing on it. The Hebrew term also reflects a connection between tradition as faithful tradition and morality as engagement with the destiny of the conveyor, who informs on and threatens injury to the life of the Jewish community.

40. An interesting example of this issue is found in the writings of the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott, who ascribes value to tradition in itself, particularly with regard to institutions in general and political institutions in particular. See, for example, Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

41. For an extensive treatment of the meaning of this discussion, see Nathan Rotenstreich, *Tradition and Reality*.

who betray it in order to preserve its status, whereas inquiring scholars seeking to be loyal to it may actually be guilty of betraying the tradition ascribed to it.

*Betrayal as a Founding Condition of Tradition*

Derrida is also attentive to the selecting of a text as worthy of reading and interpretation: the traitor and heretic with respect to a text also begin with the fundamental premise that it is worthy of being read—and betrayed. The letter is imbued with new life by virtue of the reader who reads, attacks, or reinterprets it. In conversation with Élisabeth Roudinesco, Derrida insists that his appreciation for tradition is present in even his most aggressive texts, which appear to be an expression of complete opposition, as the very selection of the texts he chooses to address reflects a kind of acceptance and appreciation:

There is always a moment when, in all sincerity, I declare my admiration, my debt, my gratitude—as well as the necessity to be faithful to the heritage for the purpose of reinterpreting it and endlessly reaffirming it. . . . I never speak of what I do not admire. (*FWT*, 5)

However, the act of endorsement involved in the acceptance of tradition and the ethical response to that which is greater than us requires us to assume responsibility. Tradition dictates contradictory roles because it recognizes the finiteness of our existence. It is a recognition that brings man face to face with that which lies beyond him and simultaneously assigns him responsibility:

To choose, to prefer, to sacrifice, to exclude, to let go and leave behind. Precisely in order to respond to the call that preceded him. To answer it and to answer for it—in one's name as in the name of the other. The concept of responsibility has no sense at all outside of an experience of inheritance. Even before saying that one is responsible for a particular inheritance, it is necessary to know that responsibility in general ("answering for," "answering to," "answering in one's name") is first assigned to us, and that it is assigned to us through and through, as an inheritance. (*FWT*, 5)

*The Postcard and the Letter within the Book*

When we think of our philosophical tradition as a letter, the identity of the recipient generally remains unidentified. Derrida himself considers the complex question of the identity of the author, and of the reader for

whom the author writes. And what about multiple recipients of the author, and the single recipient to which philosophy addresses itself? Is the postcard, by virtue of being written, already open to everyone? Is it a sealed letter or an open one? Could it be that what makes the philosophical letter unique is its very capacity to at once both reveal and conceal? And for what dimension of time is it intended: the past or the future? The letter also encompasses a consciousness of time, as its author addresses it to someone else who will read it at a different time. "Who will prove that the sender is the same man, or woman? And the same male or female addressee?" asks Derrida. "Where would the principle of identification be? In the name?" (PC, 52).

As asserted at the outset of this article, all of written culture is the culture of a letter being passed from generation to generation, from culture to culture, and from person to person. Ostensibly, we are living within "an immense house of postcards" (PC, 53). On the one hand, culture builds the house. On the other hand, the house's composition from postcards maintains its openness. But the great openness of culture does not remain open, as we would like to believe or hope, but rather simultaneously closes it off within a "house" of postcards and correspondences. Philosophy is found in the attempt to send a letter and in the infinite exchange of letters. And, as pointed out by Michal Ben-Naftali, the library's voices continue to speak and to be sent to additional addressees.<sup>42</sup> Philosophy could, it seems, be described as a library accumulated from the ongoing philosophical discussions occurring between its many books and writings. The danger is that those preserving it all will be condemned to die.<sup>43</sup> The bearers of the mail—those safeguarding it—are the archivists, the professors, and the journalists, all of whom are hindering the openness of the letter and, in so doing, actually risking its death.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, the story is about a person: the story of Uriah must be read as the story of someone who died because he did not open the letter he was conveying.

This death of the letter is found precisely in the attempt to preserve its formulation and its own singular meaning in full. But this singular meaning need not be written, is of no significance to its addressees, and

42. See Ben-Naftali's essay on Derrida's *The Post Card* titled "Let's Show Our (Post) Cards," in Ben-Naftali, *Chronicle of Separation*, 30–51, doi:10.5422/fordham/9780823265794.003.0002.

43. Sometimes even by poison. See the literary account by Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983).

44. On the meaning of the archive for Derrida, see *AF*.

loses itself on its own. The letter carries a voice without presence from the past. To be more precise, it is the voice of a ghost,<sup>45</sup> which is present and threatens the bearers of the letter but sometimes also exposes the abysses of their own present. The ghosts that emerge from the depths of cultural memory or the abysses of memory burst forth from the letter. The unique character of the letter is the fact that it preserves the speech that lies beyond it and that cannot be present within it. The letter introduces to our present a voice from the past that was never a voice.

In this sense, the letter's power lies in its ability to circumvent the problem of time and to speak to the ghosts of the past. This is how Derrida describes it in *Archive Fever* (AF, 25–96). In an interpretative tradition of books upon books, Derrida refers to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi,<sup>46</sup> who refers to Freud, who refers to the Bible,<sup>47</sup> which refers to the story of Moses. This description can be extended forward in time to include subsequent works, such as Edward Said's book<sup>48</sup> dedicated to Derrida, whose book, in turn, is dedicated to Yerushalmi. In Hebrew, we may also point to the essay written by Gideon Ofrat, which was dedicated to this narrative and interpretative metamorphosis.<sup>49</sup>

When Derrida takes up the discussion of the meaning of memory addressed by Yerushalmi, he describes a process similar to that outlined above. Freud's discussion attempts to reveal the hidden story of the Bible regarding the fate of Moses. Yerushalmi accepts Freud's position, and this acceptance constitutes the basis of his criticism. What is revealed here is the fact that the content of the letter contains the element of death existing deep at the heart of tradition, and that Yerushalmi is willing to accept it as being located at the very core of biblical and Midrashic tradition. The archives through which Yerushalmi searches—those of psychoanalytic and cultural memory—simultaneously preserve and conceal this fact. Yerushalmi accepts Freud when he speaks to him like a ghost, whose betrayal is its very acceptance.<sup>50</sup> Yerushalmi, who is aware of his manner of writing and interpretation, chooses to end his book on Freud

45. The notion of ghosts was of interest to Derrida in a number of his works, in which he can be found engaging with the ghosts of Marx and the ghosts of Freud.

46. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

47. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Knopf, 1939).

48. Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003).

49. See Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, 37–47.

50. This is a philosophically strong argument, but one based on the first act of choice in the book the critic chose to critique. See FWT, 3–8; AF, 33–45.

with a letter addressed to Freud or, to be more precise, to Freud's ghost. Derrida continues this tradition by also writing a letter, this time addressed to Yerushalmi himself. It is a letter bearing a letter: a letter about the wonders of Yerushalmi's letter, written to Freud's ghost, who hovers in the world of Yerushalmi and that of Derrida.<sup>51</sup> In this way, Derrida attempts not only to discuss the issue of tradition, but also to take part in the crystallization of Jewish tradition, which plays a role in shaping Western culture. Thinking about the way in which memory takes on form leads him from the archive to cultural creation.<sup>52</sup>

In a similar and perhaps somewhat bolder manner, Lévinas offers a Talmudic parable regarding the meaning of the "treasury," or the archive conceived as a kind of treasury. Lévinas' discussion has to do with the modes of interpretation of the scriptures, as well as the Talmudic criteria which, he notes, belong not to interpretative doctrine but rather to ethical discourse. The Talmudic parable depicts the treasury of God (as the Talmud says: The Holy One, blessed be he), from which all texts requiring interpretation emerge: "The Holy One, blessed be He, has in His treasury

51. In the words of Derrida: "this fiction has another originality, which sets the fictionality of the Monologue as if *en abyme*: the apostrophe is addressed to a dead person, to the historian's object become spectral subject, the virtual addressee or interlocutor of a sort of open letter" (AF, 39–40). And at the same time, as highlighted by Yerushalmi, it also pays considerable attention to a different letter: a dedication inscribed in the Bible by Sigmund Shelomoh's father, Jakob son of R. Shelomoh Freud: "Behold, it is the book of books, from which sages have excavated and lawmakers learned knowledge and judgment. A vision of the almighty did you see; you heard and strove to do, and you soared on the wings of the Spirit. Since then the book has been stored like the fragments of the tablets in an ark with me." Quoted in Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*, 71.

52. Here, I draw the reader's attention, if only parenthetically, to the fact that the image of the letter can also be found in the work of Jacques Lacan. In a seminar devoted to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Lacan maintains: "The Letter always arrives at its destination." Its content is not important, and, in truth, is also not known. We, the readers, may think, conjecture, or even invent its content, but we do not know what its content is. The letter in Edgar Allan Poe's story is a signifier without a signified, extremely detached from context. This is, on the one hand, a repetition of things that have already been said, and, on the other hand, a promise for a new story analysis that is not actualized. Lacan's seminar on "The Purloined Letter" is perhaps one of Lacan's most well-known seminars. See, for example, Mordechai Geldman, "A Dark Sight: Comments on E.A. Poe's Story 'The Purloined Letter'" [in Hebrew], *Sihot: Israel Journal of Psychotherapy* 7 (1993): 124–34; Jacques Lacan, "Le Séminaire sur 'La Lettre volée,'" in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 10–61, published in English as "The Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' from *Écrits*," trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies* 48 (1973): 39–72; John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds., *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Servanne Woodward, "Lacan and Derrida on 'The Purloined Letter,'" *Comparative Literature Studies* 26, no. 1 (1989): 39–49.

nought except a store of the fear of heaven.”<sup>53</sup> The treasury of the Holy One, blessed be he, then, is dependent on mankind, and the letter written by the Holy One, blessed be he, is written by mankind, whose ethical behavior creates it within the archive of God:

the language that is capable of containing more than it contains would be the natural element of inspiration, despite or before its reduction to the instrument of the transmission of thoughts and information (if it can ever be entirely reduced to this). One may wonder whether man, an animal endowed with speech, is not, above all, an animal capable of inspiration, a prophetic animal. One may wonder whether the book, as a book, before becoming a document, is not the modality by which what is said lays itself open to exegesis, calls for it; and where meaning, immobilized in the characters, already tears the texture in which it is held. In propositions which are not yet—or which are already no longer—verses, and which are often verse or simply literature, another voice rings out among us, a second sonorous voice that drowns out or tears the first one.<sup>54</sup>

#### FAITHFUL AND HERETIC: DERRIDA FACES TRADITION

The final part of this article explores Derrida's attitude toward tradition, which encompasses both acceptance and rejection—faithfulness and heresy. Every reference of heresy, explains, Derrida, contains an element of acceptance. After all, one neither engages with nor speaks of that which one does not approve of, as the very act of speaking about a text makes that text present. This points to the necessity of undertaking a sincere declaration of the importance of the text or tradition one is interpreting. The deep meaning of tradition is the meaning of the recipient of the letter, but also of the person who reads it and gives it meaning. It includes the choice, the reinterpretation, and the hosting of the text in the present. In actuality, the recognition of our finitude limits the possibilities of reading, interpretation, and internalization, and therefore obligates us to make different choices and establish different preferences regarding the way in which we read and accept tradition. Or, as explained by Derrida during a conference in Rabat, to be faithful to heritage one must betray it:

53. Emmanuel Lévinas, “On Religious Language and the Fear of God,” in *BV*, 89.

54. Lévinas, “On the Jewish Reading of the Scriptures,” in *BV*, 111.

Faithful and unfaithful, how right you are! I often see myself pass very quickly before the mirror of life, like the silhouette of a madman (at once comic and tragic) who is dying to be unfaithful in a spirit of fidelity. . . .

It is true, whether it's a question of life or work or thought, that I have always recognized myself in the figure of the heir—and more and more so, in a way that is more and more deliberate, and often happy. By insistently confronting this concept or this figure of the legatee, I came to think that, far from the secure comfort that we rather too quickly associate with the word, the heir must always respond to a sort of double injunction, a contradictory assignation: it is necessary first of all to know and to know how to *reaffirm* what comes “before us,” which we therefore receive even before: choosing, and to behave in this respect as a free subject. (FWT, 3)

Derrida invokes the fascinating notion of “choosing” one's own heritage, a claim underlain by the complex assertion that accepting tradition involves an element of choice, or, to be more precise, that traditionalism's call lies in the conditional acceptance of tradition.<sup>55</sup> The truly traditional man—in the sense that he does not question tradition at all—is the one who defines himself not as traditional but rather as a performer of the truth. In the religious context, this means the acceptance of his faith and his proper behavior as the product of revelation as opposed to the product of tradition. The very assertion that this is a traditional position is an assertion that at once both accepts and rejects the authority of tradition. In response to this question, Derrida explains:

So you see very well why I am sensitive to what you say about the absence of the refraining from all killing or putting to death. I have always forbidden myself—as far as possible, of course, and however “radical” or inflexible an act of deconstruction ought to be—to injure or to put to death. It is always by reaffirming the heritage that one can avoid this putting to death. Even as the moment—and this is the other side of the double injunction—when this very heritage, in order to save its life (within its finite time), demands reinterpretation, critique, displacement, that is, an active intervention, so

55. Moshe Idel has written about the meaning of this phrase and the relationship between deconstruction and Jewish tradition. See Moshe Idel, “Jacques Derrida et les sources kabbalistiques,” in *Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida*, ed. Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 133–56. Published in English as “Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalistic Sources,” in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, ed. Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly, trans. Bettina Bergo and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 111–30.

that a transformation worthy of the name might take place: so that something might happen, an event, *some* history (*de l'histoire*), an unforeseeable future-to-come. . . .

My desire resembles that of a lover of the tradition who would like to free himself from conservatism. Imagine someone who is mad for the past, mad for an absolute past, a past that would no longer be a past present, a past whose measure or immeasure would be that of bottomless memory—but a madman who dreads fixation on the past, nostalgia, the cult of remembrance. A contradictory and uncomfortable double injunction, therefore, bears on this heir who is certainly not what we call an “heir.” But nothing is possible, nothing is of any interest, nothing seems desirable to me without this injunction. It demands two gestures at once: both to leave life in life and to make it live again, to save life and to “let live” in the most poetic sense of this phrase, which has unfortunately been turned into a cliché. (*FWT*, 4)

Here, Derrida ascribes a profound meaning to the concept of “responsibility”—something which justifies our taking another look at the model proposed here. The responsibility assigned to the conveyor of the letter—and, within the process of conveying, its reading and interpretation—is apparently the meaning of “culture,” and the ethical meaning assigned to man as a participant in creating and conveying his culture. This responsibility, says Derrida, cannot be created beyond the context of a specific heritage and culture and cannot be found within the elements of a particular heritage, but rather in its standing before universality. The responsibility assigned to me, explains Derrida, is always located within the borders of a given heritage, but faces everything, including the past we interpret and the future that will be influenced by our approach to the past.

This description, which may contain something heart-rending with regard to Derrida’s personal life, also reflects the great compulsion of the traditional position and the great fear of its own capacity to cause death. Tradition demands that it be enabled to live, and this vitality can only be actualized through the paradoxical nature of destruction that building constitutes. Without the betrayal and the simultaneously corrective and destructive act vis-à-vis tradition, there is no acceptance of tradition (or, as a result, of its deep meaning) as truly yours, and the outcome is living the past as if it were the present. Derrida, however, suggests that we respect the past as past with all its unique aspects and endow the present with the life of the present.

As Derrida maintains, respecting heritage means reinventing the name we were given, signing the name we were given by virtue of our heritage



as if it were a one-time signature—even if we are only the heir of the name, and even if the one-time heritage is subsequently revealed to be a letter to distant times.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have proposed a reconsideration of the concept of tradition using the metaphor of the letter and the images of writing, conveying, and reading which it evokes. As we saw, this metaphor, which is rooted in the philosophical discussions of Lévinas and Derrida, can engender certain more complex philosophical thoughts regarding religious and philosophical traditions. The writings of Lévinas and Derrida contain challenging and fascinating analyses of the meaning of tradition in general and religious tradition in particular—ones that call for further discussion and reflection regarding our overall conception of this phenomenon. Through a number of types of discussion of notions of tradition—cultural, social and conservatively-oriented ones, as well as a religious discussion about the conveying of the Holy Scriptures—this article has proposed a complex philosophical picture of the phenomenon; it is one that gives greater precedence to the processes involved in its being conveyed between different individuals and from one generation to the next than to the actual contents conveyed.

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