

**Zeitschrift:** Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums  
**Herausgeber:** Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog  
**Band:** 72 (2016)

**Artikel:** Phenomenology of pregnancy, maternity and parenthood in the writings of R. Joseph Soloveitchik and Emmanuel Lévinas : philosophical readings of Jewish sources  
**Autor:** Ben Pazi, Hanoch  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-961499>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 19.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Phenomenology of Pregnancy, Maternity and Parenthood in the Writings of R. Joseph Soloveitchik and Emmanuel Lévinas: Philosophical Readings of Jewish Sources

By Hanoch Ben Pazi\*

## *Abstract*

*This article aims to explore the philosophical meaning of pregnancy and maternity in the writings of R. Soloveitchik and Emmanuel Lévinas. They both make a phenomenological enquiry into these phenomena, by looking on the biological aspect and the emotional aspects. R. Soloveitchik suggests a spiritual interpretation concerning the meaning of pregnancy, which is both biological and spiritual. He attempts to differentiate between the natural parenthood and the spiritual parenthood. Lévinas gives us the philosophical observation through the phenomenological research of pregnancy, motherhood and parenthood. For him, this inquiry may be revealed as an ethical occurrence that demand responsibility. Perhaps this is one of the unique dimensions of modern Jewish philosophy, looking towards the religious texts with modern philosophical method and modern philosophy theories. Reading carefully the biblical story of Genesis on the notion of birth and maternity, raises textual questions and cultural questions. For Lévinas and R. Soloveitchik these questions can open the door to new philosophical inquiry.*

The phenomenological school has sought to produce philosophical thought focused on life itself and on the concrete manner in which people experience their everyday reality. In this way, phenomenology has advanced new philosophical approaches facilitating religious and ethical discourse on subjects that previously were not discussed in such a manner. This article offers a phenomenological inquiry into the ethical and educational significance of pregnancy and maternity in terms drawn from Jewish Talmudic discourse. This article talks about two Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century – Rabbi Joseph Dov Ber Soloveitchik (1903–1993), representative of Jewish existentialist thought, and Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995), representative of ethical thought based on phenomenology – and the ways in which they discuss the biological and ethical aspects of the phenomenon of pregnancy.<sup>1</sup>

---

\* Dr. Hanoch Ben Pazi, Dept. of Philosophy, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, and Kibbutzim College of Education, Tel Aviv, Israel.

1 For understandable reasons, we must distinguish between Lévinas' use of phenomenological philosophical inquiry as a student of Husserl and Heidegger, and the way in which Rabbi Soloveitchik, who started as an adherent of the neo-Kantian school and, but turned to the existentialist thought, uses phenomenological analysis. As we will see below, the philosophical inquiry of both thinkers focus on concrete phenomena of life. Nevertheless, and this too will be emphasized

Despite the differences in the location of these two thinkers and the social contexts, in which they lived and worked, we nonetheless can identify a number of interesting similarities in their biographies.<sup>2</sup> The lives of both men spanned almost the entire twentieth century, from its first decade through the middle of its last, and both immigrated from Eastern Europe to the West, R. Soloveitchik from Poland to Germany and then to the United States, Lévinas from Lithuania to France. Both also sustained a long-time involvement in education, R. Soloveitchik at the Maimonides School in Boston and Lévinas at the Alliance Teachers Training School in Paris. R. Soloveitchik and Lévinas also made academic careers, the former at Yeshiva University and the latter at the University of Paris – Nanterre Campus (Paris X) and the Sorbonne Campus (Paris I, IV). And in a certain sense, both were also characterized by the formative status of their philosophical writing.

More important to our discussion, however, are the common aspects of their thinking: their commitment to ethics and Judaism, their attempt to understand the importance of Judaism in their age through contemporary philosophical and cultural eyes, and their philosophical interpretation of Talmudic writings and Talmudic wisdom.<sup>3</sup> Most interesting and curious

---

below, otherwise than Lévinas', Soloveitchik's approach to phenomenological discourse is neither precise nor stringent. This appears to stem primarily from Soloveitchik's religious existential motivation, which enabled him to use different philosophical tools in order to develop his religious philosophy.

2 There are few important books and researches on Emmanuel Lévinas's biography, e.g., MARIE ANNE LESCOURRET, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, Paris: Flammarion, 1994 (2005); SALOMON MALKA, *Emmanuel Lévinas: la vie et la trace*, Paris: Jean Claude Lettès, 2002 [English version: *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, translated by Michael Kigel and Sonja M. Embree, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006; German version: *Emmanuel Levinas. Eine Biographie*, aus dem Französischen von Frank Miething, München: C. H. Beck, 2004]; ADRIAN THEODOOR PEPPERZAK, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas*, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997. – On R. Soloveitchik's life see, e.g., David Hartman, *Love and Terror in the God Encounter: The Theological Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Pub., 2001; AHARON ZIEGLER, *Halakhic Positions of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Northvale, N.J. / Jerusalem: J. Aronson, 1998; MICHAEL A. BIERMAN (ed.), *Memories of a Giant: Reflections on Rabbi Dr Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Jerusalem: Urim, 2013; AARON RAKEFFET-ROTHKOFF, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Pub. House, 1999.

3 See, e.g., EPHRAIM MEIR, *Lévinas's Jewish Thought: Between Jerusalem and Athens*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2008; DANIELLE COHEN-LÉVINAS and SHMUEL TRIGANO (eds.), *Emmanuel Lévinas: philosophie et judaïsme*, Paris: In Press, 2002;

about their writing is the role of Talmudic, and perhaps Jewish Halakhic thought as a relevant interlocutor in the philosophical discourse of the period. The interpretive philosophical tools, which they apply to Talmudic and Halakhic sources imbued them with, or helped them to derive from them, ethical philosophical thought.<sup>4</sup> In the context of this article, which deals with the phenomenon of pregnancy and maternity, both R. Soloveitchik and Lévinas can be regarded as carrying out a phenomenological investigation of a distinctly feminine phenomenon and attempting to understand the significance of this investigation and its implications beyond the realm of gender. For this reason, the consideration of the phenomenon of pregnancy in the writings of these two philosophers is surprising in light of the masculine image of religious writing and opens a new horizon for the gendered reading of Jewish sources.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note that both Soloveitchik and Lévinas engage in a variety of modes of writing: meditative, interpretative, Talmudic, Biblical,

---

CLAIRE ELISE KATZ, *Lévinas, Judaism and the Feminine*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003

- 4 See HANOCH BEN-PAZI, "Philosophers read the Talmud: The Reinterpretive Exegesis of Lévinas, R. Joseph Baer Soloveitchik and R. Abraham Isaac Kook – a Comparative Analysis", in: *Judaica* 67 (2011), pp. 3-40.
- 5 On the topic of feminism and gender in Lévinas' writings, see TINA CHANTER (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Lévinas*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001; ROY MORNAY, "Lévinas: Alterity, the Feminine and Women – A Meditation", in: *Studies in Religion* 22 (1994), pp. 463-485; STELLA VILLARMEA, "The Provocation of Lévinas for Feminism", in: *European Journal of Women's Studies* 6 (1999), pp. 291-304; JÉRÔME BENARROCH, "Re-lecture talmudique: à propos de la lecture talmudique d'Emmanuel Lévinas: 'Et Dieu créa la femme'", in: *Cahiers d'Études Lévinassiennes* 6 (2007), pp. 163-185; CLAIRE ELISE KATZ, "From Eros to Maternity: Love, Death, and 'the Feminine' in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas," in: HAVA TIROSH-SAMUELSON (ed.), *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 153-175 ; SUSANNAH HESCHEL, "Emmanuel Lévinas in Feministischer Perspektive," in: *Kirche und Israel* 15 (2000), pp. 41-46; HANOCH BEN-PAZI, "Rebuilding the feminine in Lévinas' Talmudic readings," in: *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 12/3 (2003), pp. 1-32. – On the question of feminism in R. Soloveitchik's thought, see SHIRA WOLOSKY WEISS, "The Lonely Woman of Faith," in: *Judaism* 52 (2003), pp. 3-18; MAYER TWERSKY, "A Glimpse of the Rav," in: *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 30 (1996), pp. 79-114; SIMCHA KRAUSS, "The Rav: On Zionism, Universalism and Feminism," in: *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 34 (2000), pp. 24-39; CHANA KEHAT, "Partnership and Equality: Between Rav Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik," in: *Massekhet* 4 (2006), pp. 35-48 (Hebrew).

philosophical, and homiletical. At times, it may appear to readers that they must distinguish carefully between the different modes of writing, and many scholars espouse an approach that does just that. However, the logic underlying the scholarly approach employed in this article strives to forge a primarily interpretative philosophical connection between the modes of writing. Thus, writing that can be understood as anecdotal – such as a comment appearing in an interpretative text on the Bible or a paragraph discussed in a Halakhic or Talmudic text – may actually play a role in a systematic position regarding a specific subject – in our case, the subject of pregnancy and maternity.

Contemporary readers may be surprised by the little or no direct mention of the phenomenon of pregnancy in philosophical literature up to the mid-twentieth century. The phenomenological school, which devoted in-depth inquiries into everyday phenomena and issues (such as those of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre) ascribed little significance to this central everyday human event.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, even Simone de Beauvoir, whose work *The Second Sex* deals with the centrality of pregnancy in the definition of the female subject as female, identifies it not as an ethical phenomenon but rather in a biological context, and as a weakening factor among the elements of the subject's identity.<sup>7</sup>

---

6 See MARYLOU SENA, "The Tragic Voice of the Feminine and its Significance for Phenomenology," in: PHILIP BLOSSER (ed.), *Japanese and Western Phenomenology*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993, pp. 181-192; LINDA FISHER, "Feminist Phenomenological Voices," in: *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (2010), pp. 83-95. – An interesting effort to develop such a phenomenological discussion can nonetheless be found in a number of feminist works, such as SHANNON VALLOR, "The Pregnancy of the Real: A Phenomenological Defense of Experimental Realism," in: *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 52 (2009), pp. 1-25, which was written in response to a different discussion but contains fascinating phenomenological elements following Husserl. See also LOUISE LEVESQUE-LOPMAN, "Listen, and You Will Hear: Reflections on Interviewing from a Feminist Phenomenological Perspective," in: LINDA FISHER (ed.), *Feminist Phenomenology*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000, pp. 103-132; JANET DONOHOE, "The Vocation of Motherhood: Husserl and Feminist Ethics," in: *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (2010), pp. 127-140. An interesting attempt to propose initial lines of thinking on pregnancy from a Heideggerian perspective can be found in LANEI M. ROSENMEYER's article "Dasein Gets Pregnant," in: *Philosophy Today* 42 (1998), pp. 76-84.

7 SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *Le deuxième sexe*, Paris: Gallimard, 1949. On de Beauvoir's philosophy and this notion, see MARGARET A. SIMONS (ed.), *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University

The mode of discussion began to change with the publication and influence of Sara Ruddick's works on maternity<sup>8</sup> and Carol Gilligan's works on ethical aspects of the distinction between masculine and feminine. This distinction between different voices of ethical judgement reflected a breakthrough in thinking on gender, and, despite the significant criticism that has been written on books and studies on this subject, there is no question regarding the major impact of their efforts.<sup>9</sup> Sara Ruddick pays considerable attention not only to the phenomenon itself but to what she refers to as "maternal thinking," oriented toward the Other and others, and offers an in-depth examination of the connection between the private sphere and the public sphere. Maternal thinking deals with issues of power and powerlessness, and facilitates the introduction to the public sphere of a position of protected life and a pacifistic dimension.<sup>10</sup>

---

Press, 2006; KATE KIRKPATRICK, "Past Her Prime? Simone de Beauvoir on Motherhood and Old Age," in: *Sophia: International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Metaphysical Theology and Ethics* 53 (2014), pp. 275-287; JANET FARRELL SMITH, "Possessive Power," in: *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 1 (1986), pp. 103-120. See also ULRIKA BJÖRK's critical article, "Paradoxes of Femininity in the Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir," in: *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (2010), pp. 39-60; YOLANDA A. PATTERSON, *Simon de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Motherhood*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989; BARBARA DUDEN, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

- 8 Ruddick posits that the practicalities of maternity lead the mother to relinquish part of her power for the benefit of her children. See SARA RUDDICK, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989; TONI BOWERS, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; NANCY J. CHODOROW, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978; JOYCE TREBLICOT (ed.), *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983.
- 9 See CAROL GILLIGAN, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982, and CAROL GILLIGAN, *Mapping the Moral Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989. See also CAROL LEGET, CHRIS GASTMANS, and MARIAN VERKERK (eds.), *Care, Compassion and Recognition: An Ethical Discussion*, Leuven: Peeters Publishers 2011.
- 10 A recently published collection of articles dedicated to Sara Ruddick contains important discussions on pregnancy from a feminist philosophical perspective. See SHEILA LINTOTT and MAUREEN SANDER-STAUDT (eds.), *Philosophical Inquiries into Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering: Maternal Subjects*, New York / London: Routledge, 2012.

Late twentieth-century feminist writing's attention to and deep understanding of the subject may stem also from the influence of psychoanalytical theoretical writing.<sup>11</sup> One example that highlights this absence can be found in Isabelle Mercier's article "The Origins of Consciousness." "What is this relationship that a mother has to her foetus?" asks Mercier:

A pregnant woman can feel a range of emotions directed towards this foetus that is growing inside of her. They can range from apprehension, love, anticipation, nervousness and even indifference (denial) and hatred. However, emotions do not describe the ontological significance of being pregnant. In what follows I will speculate by trying to piece together a possible Sartrean perspective of pregnancy. As I have mentioned before, I can only speculate because Sartre offers little or no discussion of the subject. However, I am confident that *Being and Nothingness* allows us to extend Sartre's ontology.<sup>12</sup>

On this basis, the very discussion of pregnancy, maternity, and parenthood by R. Soloveitchik and Lévinas warrants philosophical consideration. Both approach the issue from the perspective of ethics and the question of biological and non-biological parental responsibility, and both are somewhat committed to the portrayal of pregnancy presented by Martin Buber in *I and Thou*, and in the context of dialogical thinking.<sup>13</sup> Both also attempt to reinterpret the significance of pregnancy in the Bible and the Mishnaic and Talmudic commentary and regard the biological dimension as only one aspect of the phenomenon.

---

11 See SHEILA LINTOTT (ed.), *Motherhood – Philosophy for Everyone: The Birth of Wisdom*, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010; ADRIENNE RICH, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York: Norton, 1976; IRIS MARION YOUNG, *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; SHULAMITH FIRESTONE, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case For Feminist Revolution*, New York: Morrow, 1970; BARBARA ROTHMAN, *The Tentative Pregnancy: How Amniocentesis Changes the Experience of Motherhood*, New York: Norton, 1993; EVA FEDER KITTAY and ELLEN FEDER (eds.), *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

12 ISABELLE MERCIER, "The Origins of Consciousness: a Look into the Foetus and the Pregnant Body in 'Being and Nothingness'," in: *Gnosis: Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2001), ISSN 1927-5277 Gnosis online: URL <https://ojs.concordia.ca/index.php/gnosis/article/view/144>.

13 Although Buber does not discuss pregnancy as a philosophical concept, *I and Thou* contains a dialogical account of pregnancy and advances it as a model of the relationship between the I and the Other. See: MARTIN BUBER, "I and Thou," in: WILL HERBERGER (ed.), *The Writings of Martin Buber*, New York: New American Library, 1956, pp. 50-54.

R. Soloveitchik proposes an interpretation that is both biological and spiritual in nature and attempts to differentiate between natural parenthood and spiritual parenthood.<sup>14</sup> In Lévinas' phenomenological analyses of pregnancy, motherhood, and parenthood, pregnancy emerges first and foremost as an ethical phenomenon, revealing a deep ethical substructure of the other and otherness.<sup>15</sup> The very attempt to read religious sources from a perspective of philosophical thought is not unique to the modern Jewish philosophy, and we can find it in other traditions do this as well. Nonetheless, we note the intellectual openness that characterizes them and the manner in which they discuss these subjects.<sup>16</sup>

From a methodological perspective, the reading of R. Soloveitchik proposed in this article is based on the phenomenology of Lévinas. Whereas Lévinas regards the biological phenomenon as the basis of the ethical imperative, R. Soloveitchik feels that a religious interpretation is needed to give ethical meaning to the same biological phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> Can ethical

---

14 Although no methodological research has thus far been undertaken on phenomenology in Soloveitchik's thinking, a few specific phenomenological studies have been published. Examples include: GERALD JACOB BLIDSTEIN, "On the Halakhic Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: The Norms and Nature of Mourning," in: *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 30/4 (1996), pp. 115-130; GERALD JACOB BLIDSTEIN, "Death in the Writings of R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik," in: *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 44/1 (2010), pp. 7-18; LAWRENCE J. KAPLAN, "Joseph Soloveitchik and Halakhic Man," in: MICHAEL L. MORGAN and PETER ELI GORDON (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 209-233; DOV SCHWARTZ, "Uvikashtem Misham: Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik's Response to the Phenomenology of Religion," in: BENJAMIN ISH SHALOM (ed.), *Paths of Peace: Studies in Jewish Philosophy, Dedicated to Shalom Rosenberg*, Jerusalem: Beit Morasha, 2007, pp. 447-458 (Hebrew); RIVKA HOROWITZ, "Rav Soloveitchik's Attitude toward the Religious Experience and to Mysticism," in: HAVIVA PEDAYA and EPHRAIM MEIR (eds.), *The Many Faces of Judaism: Literature and Philosophy*, Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2002, pp. 205-235 (Hebrew).

15 A large number of scholars have explored these aspects of Lévinas' thinking. See, e.g., KATZ, "From Eros to Maternity" (note 5).

16 Here, I would like to draw readers' attention to Blidstein's article on the unique manner, within the rabbinical landscape of which he is part, in which Rabbi Soloveitchik addresses issues related to romantic relationships, sexuality, and paternity, see: GERALD J. (YA'AKOV) BLIDSTEIN, "The Covenant of Marriage," in: GERALD J. (YA'AKOV) BLIDSTEIN, *Society and Self: On the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2012.

17 On the existential observations in Soloveitchik's writings, see OLIVER LEAMAN, "Jewish Existentialism: Rosenzweig, Buber, and Soloveitchik," in: DANIEL

meaning be assigned to biological and natural life? How can we understand animal events as spiritual and as the subject of ethical deliberation? Woman as a pregnant human being is engaged in natural behaviour. At the same time, she also can be thought of as a partner of the Divine Creator; but does this constitute a spiritual aspect of creation?

*In the Beginning: Masculine Writing on Pregnancy and Childbirth*

The masculine attributes of Biblical and Talmudic writing are well known and frequently subjected to harsh criticism and, in some cases, downright condemnation. This may be the most formidable challenge with which both R. Soloveitchik and Lévinas are required to contend in their approach to the subjects of pregnancy and childbirth. I wish to consider this aspect of the Jewish homiletical writing on the Book of Genesis as seen through R. Soloveitchik's rabbinical eyes. One of the most vexing aspects of the male Biblical mode of writing in the Book of Genesis pertains to its chronological lists (תולדות), or its human genealogy. The historical genealogies presented in the Book of Genesis are almost all male, relating almost exclusively to the birth of sons and the sons of sons and characteristically failing to mention the names of mothers. The result is a continuous list of males who fathered sons.<sup>18</sup>

The Hebrew word תולדות means “chronology,” “chronicle,” or “history,” but in the biblical narrative, genealogical lists were intended to represent the history of humanity. The Hebrew noun תולדות is derived from the root י-ל-ד, which means “to give birth”, or in its causative form הוליד “to beget”. Thus, e.g., “And Noah begot [ויולד] three sons: Shem, Ham, and Jafet” (Gen. 6:10), and “Terah begot [הוליד] Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran begot Lot” (Gen. 11:27). In this way, according to the book of

---

H. FRANK and OLIVER LEAMAN (eds.), *History of Jewish Philosophy* (Routledge History of World Philosophies, vol. II), London / New York: Routledge; 2003, pp. 799-819; MICHAEL S. BERGER, “*Uvikashtem mi-sham*: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Response to Martin Buber's Religious Existentialism,” in: *Modern Judaism* 18 (1998), pp. 93-118; MARK ANGEL, “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Judaism and Modernity,” in: *Conversations* 21 (2015), pp. 102-115; GERALD J. BLIDSTEIN, “Death in the Writings of R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik,” in: *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 44 (2010), pp. 7-18.

18 See, e.g., the genealogical lists in Genesis 5:1-32 and Genesis 11:10-32, which can be contrasted to lists that do pay attention to the gendered aspects of births, such as those that convey the line of Cain (Gen. 4:17-22) and the line of Nahor and Milka (Gen. 22:20-24).

Genesis the act of begetting to give birth to new generations is a male act, by which grandfathers produce fathers, fathers produce sons, and sons produce grandsons, etc. Indeed, when the verb “to give birth” is used in a female form, it occurs always in the context of a single act or personal event. Women give birth to an individual, but the genealogical lists are masculine.

R. Soloveitchik inquires the use of this Hebrew root in the context of the birth of Isaac in the opening verse of the portion תולדות – “This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham; Abraham begot [הוליד] Isaac” (Gen. 25:19) – which employs the causative form of י-ל-ד that is clearly associated with the word for giving birth. What is the meaning of this verse, R. Soloveitchik asks? Is it a response to a gossip, as the Midrash suggests – a clear response to those who wondered aloud whether Abraham was indeed the new-born’s father?<sup>19</sup> R. Soloveitchik’s response, however, shifts the focus from biological and historical observation to a religious and spiritual perspective.

Let us consider the first biblical account of birth and check whether this account can be read as an articulation of the religious perspective of the phenomenon. The Book of Genesis describes the creation of human beings as the creation of man, as R. Soloveitchik interprets it.<sup>20</sup> The first man was born not through birth in the natural sense but through spiritual birth, through divine word and deed. The biblical account of natural pregnancy and birth is preceded by another, perhaps alternative story, containing religious observations on the creation of human beings.<sup>21</sup> In the book of Genesis, the first case of pregnancy and birth discussed is not that of Eve but the coming into existence of Adam, the first man, who is depicted as a complete human being,

---

19 See Rashi on Genesis 19 and 25 and the way R. Soloveitchik interprets it in his “Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed,” in: JOSEPH DOV SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. by DAVID SCHATZ and JOEL B. WOLOWELSKY, Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 2000, pp. 105-125, esp. pp. 105-106.

20 See JOSEPH DOV SOLOVEITCHIK, “Adam and Eve”, in: SOLOVEITCHIK *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 3-30, esp. pp. 3-18. R. Soloveitchik differentiates between Man-natura and Man-persona, between the description of human being as part of nature, and human being as personality.

21 For feminist critiques of the masculine and patriarchal construct of these chapters of creation in Genesis, see KATE MILLET, *Sexual Politics*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969, pp. 70-75; MIEKE BAL, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Interpretations of Biblical Love Stories*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 118-127. Also see KARI ELISABETH BORRESEN (ed.), *Image of God and Gender Models: in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991.

including an element of serving as the basis for a new person. In the biblical text, the event is described as follows: a man (thus far, the only man in existence) goes to sleep, and “the LORD God casts a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot” (Gen. 2:21), and so on. When we try to imagine the scene, what comes to the mind strikingly resembles a Caesarean section. Perhaps, that way, the book of Genesis is attempting to convey the message that before the first woman became pregnant and gave birth, the act of giving birth was associated with man and understood as an expression of man’s ability and masculine power; feminine pregnancy is regarded as some kind of punishment. Indeed, according to Gen. 3:16 God is telling Eve: “I will greatly multiply thy pain. In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children [...]” Can we suggest that the Biblical description of pregnancy gave preference to the religious meaning of pregnancy over its biological significance? This study will explore this Biblical question from a phenomenological perspective.

The intuitive feeling that the religious text is masculine in character is well founded with regard to the Biblical literature in general and the Book of Genesis in particular.<sup>22</sup> Lévinas’ and R. Soloveitchik’s efforts in themselves encompass an essay to contend with the nature of masculine biblical writing and the possibility of thinking differently about pregnancy and parenthood within the religious philosophical context. In a certain sense, both thinkers are called upon, each to a lesser or greater extent, to address the initial stories of the book of Genesis and the gender distinctions they reflect.

### *Lévinas’ Phenomenological Inquiry: The Uniqueness of Pregnancy and its Ethical Implications*

The understanding of the importance and uniqueness of the phenomenon of pregnancy which I wish to advance here is based on Lévinas’ phenomenological discourse, which offers an analysis of pregnancy and a number of other related phenomena that are worthy of investigation, such as Eros,

---

22 On this controversy regarding biblical language, see: DONALD A. CARSON, *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998; MARK L. STRAUSS, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy*, Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1998; VERN S. POYTHRESS and WAYNE A. GRUDEM, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words*, Nashville, MA: Broadman & Holman, 2000. See also ATHALYA BRENNER-IDAN (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.

parenthood and childhood, and dwelling. For Lévinas, all of these phenomena are subjects of inquiry due to the questions they raise concerning the relationship between the subject and the Other.<sup>23</sup>

Lévinas is known in the philosophical field for his development of ethical thought regarding the Other and the alterity of the Other. Lévinas' phenomenological study devotes substantial attention to man's encounter with the Other and to the manner in which the subject views the face of the Other gazing upon him. Lévinas' major work *Totality and Infinity* is devoted to the strict phenomenological study of the manner in which the subject encounters the Other and the face of the Other, which gazes upon him and commands him: "thou shalt not kill."<sup>24</sup> The point of departure of Lévinas' inquiry is the ethical imperative with which the subject is charged to refrain from harming the alterity of the Other, and therefore also to respect his place and his uniqueness. However, Lévinas also assigns positive importance to the ethical imperative: the responsibility with which the subject is charged. In a particularly demanding manner, Lévinas presents the encounter with the Other as an interaction that charges the subject with responsibility for the Other's existence and needs. In this sense, Lévinas' approach to the examination of and inquiry into the phenomenon of pregnancy is unique in its complete transformation of the question of interiority and exteriority. During pregnancy, can the Other be considered internal to the subject? If so, can pregnancy best be thought of as the ultimate expression of hospitality? And what will be the significance of this hospitality? This phenomenon, which appears to be natural and to go without saying on the surface, is actually extremely challenging from an ethical perspective. Equally as important, however, is Lévinas' effort to learn from this biological phenomenon about the all-encompassing and complete nature of parental responsibility and the completeness of the subject's responsibility toward the Other within him.

---

23 A large number of scholars have explored these aspects of Lévinas's writing. See, e.g., KATZ, "From Eros to Maternity" (note 5); JENNIFER ROSATO, "Woman as Vulnerable Self: The Trope of Maternity in Lévinas's 'Otherwise Than Being,'" in: *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 27 (2012), pp. 348-365. For important work comparable to the research proposed here but with regard to Derrida, see NANCY J. HOLLAND's *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997, and her short paper "With Arms Wide Open: Of Hospitality and the Most Intimate Stranger," in: *Philosophy Today* 45 (2001), pp. 133-137.

24 See EMMANUEL LÉVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, pp. 152-174, 256-273:

To understand the uniqueness of pregnancy as an ethical phenomenon, we must first consider its uniqueness among the different possible expressions of a person's humanity. In the course of pregnancy, the relationship between the subject and the Other – between the mother and the foetus – is based not on separation and a sense of foreignness but on identification and responsibility. During pregnancy, the Other is at once part of the mother and separate from her.

To emphasize the unique significance of pregnancy, we can consider the manner in which Maimonides chooses to describe the phenomenon, as a situation that flies in the face of common sense. Maimonides refers to pregnancy when trying to illustrate the impossible undertaking of understanding creation. In this context, he suggests imagining an orphan who grew up on a deserted island and who, in one way or another, discovers the fact of pregnancy – the existence of one person inside another person: “Now the orphaned child must of necessity put the question: Does every individual amongst us – when little, contained within a belly, but alive and moving and growing – eat, drink, breathe through the mouth and nose, and produce excrements?”<sup>25</sup>

From a philosophical perspective, pregnancy is not simply a biological state but also an ethical situation. We may, of course, consider the ethical questions with which many women are faced during pregnancy.<sup>26</sup> However, pregnancy can also be viewed as a phenomenological situation that is, in itself, an ethical situation by nature. It is a state in which one person holds within herself the Other, which is at once both part of her and entirely separate from her. Bodies typically respond to penetrating foreign object by rejecting them, but not in the case of pregnancy; during pregnancy, the body protects and sustains the stranger within.<sup>27</sup>

---

25 MOSES MAIMONIDES, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, II,17, pp. 295-296.

26 On the issue of responsibility and the distinction between desired pregnancy and undesired pregnancy, see, e.g., CAROLINE LUNDQUIST, “Being Torn: Toward a Phenomenology of Unwanted Pregnancy,” in: *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 23/3 (2008), pp. 136-155; MARIA SALETE BESSA JORGE, GETÚLIO VASCONCELOS FIÚZA, and MARIA VERACI OLIVEIRA QUEIROZ, “Existential Phenomenology as a Possibility to Understand Pregnancy Experiences in Teenagers,” in: *Revista Latino-Americana de Enfermagem* 14 (2006), pp. 907-914. This fascinating article tries to apply the implications of the phenomenological discussion in an applied context to the issue of nursing in complex cases of adolescent pregnancies. In this study, adolescent girls were asked what it means for them to be pregnant and to contend with the natural and unnatural aspects of this human situation.

27 See FREDRIKA SCARTH, HILDE LINDEMANN, and SARA RUDDICK (eds.), *The*

The subject typically relates to the Other using his or her senses and by means of the manner in which his or her body encounters the body of the Other and the messages it conveys. In his phenomenological inquiry (the “Fifth Meditation”), Husserl considers the possibility of identifying a living body beyond oneself as another person. Consciousness of one's own body can be established by integrating the various senses. But the body of the other exists always as an object, whereas phenomenological inquiry, as a rule, considers the thoughts of the Other not as an object but as a subject: “It is clear from the very beginning,” writes Husserl, “that only a similarity connecting, within my primordial sphere, that body over there with my body can serve as the motivational basis for the ‘*analogizing*’ apprehension of that body as another animate organism.”<sup>28</sup>

For Lévinas, to think about pregnancy is to change the meaning of the subject, its relation to the Other, and the way of exploring the Other.<sup>29</sup> The phenomenon of pregnancy is a different mode of “one and the other,” based neither on analogizing nor meeting “face-to-face,” but rather on responsibility. According to Lévinas, Husserl does not consider the woman as a subject and therefore does not regard the phenomenon of pregnancy as subject to phenomenological inquiry. These ideas are developed in three of Lévinas’ major philosophical works.<sup>30</sup>

Lévinas’ inquiry into the phenomenon of pregnancy attends not only to biological structure but also to the more challenging aspects of pregnancy.<sup>31</sup> For Lévinas, pregnancy is a state in which one human being is pursued by another one for whom the first is responsible. During pregnancy, the woman

---

*Other Within: Ethics, Politics, and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

28 EDMOND HUSSERL, *Cartesian Meditations*, translated by D. Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, p. 111.

29 See Catherine Chalié’s critique of Lévinas’s attitude to the feminine in: CATHERINE CHALIER, *Figures du féminin: lecture d’Emmanuel Lévinas* (coll. « Questions », no. 198), Paris: éd. La Nuit surveillée, 1982 [Paris: éd. Des Femmes-Antoinette Fouque, 2007], pp. 46-51, especially the study of the use of language relating to the feminine.

30 See EMMANUEL LÉVINAS, *Time and the Other*, translated by Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987, pp. 84-94; LÉVINAS, *Totality and Infinity* (note 24), pp. 152-174, 274-280; EMMANUEL LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981, pp. 99-129.

31 On the ethical significance of the biological phenomenon, see LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being* (note 30), pp. 114-117.

finds herself burdened with a new mode of responsibility: responsibility that is corporeal and complete and encompasses suffering, pain, and the element of the unknown. That pained sigh – the inner suffering that expresses absolute responsibility toward something that is other than oneself – is a distinctly ethical characteristic that moves beyond itself, from pregnancy into the concept of maternity. As a source of the image of “being responsible for one by whom you are being pursued,” Lévinas draws on the Talmudic discussion regarding one person’s pursuit of another with malicious intent. Indeed, situations may arise in which the foetus proves harmful to the health or survival of the mother.<sup>32</sup>

Lévinas does not limit himself to an account of this uniqueness of the phenomenon and addresses what he regards as a still sensitive nerve of the subjectivity of the subject (The Passivity of Passivity). According to Lévinas’ description, pregnancy also encompasses a subversive aspect that undermines the stable foundations of the subject.<sup>33</sup> An observation of parenthood, or, more precisely, the profound experience of pregnancy and childbirth, reflects an element of injury to the certainty of the subject, stemming from the knowledge of the subject’s having been “born,” that is to say, having been preceded by an Other. As a result, the once possible description of the “I” as certain, in encountering his environment and others and seeking to understand and investigate their existence and his relationship with them, is now completely undermined by the I’s discovery that he was preceded by an Other and that his subjectivity was preceded by the subjectivity of the Other. Can we say that the meaning of “subjectivity” changes as a result of this phenomenology? Apparently, we can, as described by Lévinas in a manner that goes beyond memory and beyond the certainty of the I, as a reminder to the immemorial memory of the Self.<sup>34</sup>

---

32 This Halakhic question is discussed in the rabbinical literature. See, e.g., bSanh 73a-b (on mSanh VIII,7); mOhol VII,4-6.

33 The subject's transformation is discussed a number of times throughout the book.

34 On the importance of the “immemorial,” see JOHN H. RIKER, “Self-Psychology and the Problem of the Other,” in: *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology* 7 (2012), pp. 165-179; SUZANNE BARNARD, “The Corporeal and the Sublime in Feminine Depression: Kristeva's *Semiotic* and *Das Ding*,” in: *Gender and Psychoanalysis* 4 (1999), pp. 367-386; BETTY BERNARDO FUKS, “Vocation of Exile: Psychoanalysis and Judaism,” in: *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 8 (1999), pp. 7-12; JEFFREY ANDREW BARASH, “Memory and the Immemorial in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas,” in: *Sofia Philosophical Review* 3 (2009), pp. 5-16 ;

Here, Lévinas appears to be referring to the I's difficulty assuming itself as a certainty and as a basis for consciousness, and to the role of pregnancy as a reminder to the individual of his or her having been born. After all, he who is born cannot constitute a source of certainty or of primacy. A born being cannot be a basis for full consciousness or one who establishes a world. "Maternity," explains Lévinas, "in the complete being 'for the other' which characterizes it [...] is the ultimate sense of this vulnerability."<sup>35</sup>

Maternity and Parenthood, then, emerge as surprising and fascinating phenomena comprising all the necessary dimensions of being for an Other. Pregnancy attains significance by making possible a meaning other than the subject; indeed, it receives its identity not by virtue of being for itself but by virtue of being for an Other.

Here, we refrain from delving into the manner in which Lévinas develops these ideas and the evolution that takes place in his inquiries, from *Time and the Other*, in which he first discusses the unique role of parenthood in understanding the concept of the subject and ethics vis-à-vis the Other and others; to *Totality and Infinity*, in which the discussion of parenthood reflects development of the concept of the feminine; to the meaning of "dwelling" and concepts of "hospitality" and responsibility toward the Other;<sup>36</sup> through the stage in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, to which we pay considerable attention here, in which Lévinas takes yet another courageous intellectual and ethical step forward not only in understanding the phenomenon itself but in undermining the revealed subject. The phenomenology of pregnancy has ethical implications—which transcend the biological phenomenon—for the concepts of maternity and parenthood and for a deeper understanding of the notion of responsibility toward the Other, even at the price of doing injury to the subjectivity of the I, to the point of the I's guaranteeing and taking the place of the Other.<sup>37</sup>

---

35 LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being* (note 30), p. 108.

36 See IRINA ARISTARKHOVA, "Hospitality and the Maternal," in: *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 27 (2012), pp. 163-181; ABI DOUKHAN, "From Exile to Hospitality: A Key to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas," in: *Philosophy Today* 54 (2010), pp. 235-246; RAYMOND D. BOISVERT, "Ethics Is Hospitality," in: *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 78 (2004), pp. 289-300.

37 Lévinas addresses the concept of hospitality on a number of levels. The first instance, which opens the door to this notion, is found in his *Totality and Infinity* (note 24), pp. 154-162.

## R. Soloveitchik on Pregnancy and Motherhood

It is important to emphasize that although both thinkers use terms taken from phenomenological discourse, they imbue these terms with different meanings: Rabbi Soloveitchik, whose Berlinian philosophical education is rooted in neo-Kantian thought and who was well versed in the early twentieth century study of religion, as opposed to Lévinas, whose approach is deeply rooted in the phenomenological school, which he uses to consider the sources of religion.

R. Soloveitchik's doctrine is typically classified first and foremost as existential religious doctrine. Although his observation of human phenomena is directly related to European existential discourse, he examines this discourse within a Jewish religious context and makes use of religious discourse to understand it against the background of existential thought. R. Soloveitchik's awareness of the early twentieth century inquiry into religion enables him to engage in religious phenomenological examination of subjects, ideas, and laws from the Jewish world.<sup>38</sup> His thinking and knowledge regarding the world of philosophy affords R. Soloveitchik a creative and particularly challenging reading of Jewish halakhic and philosophical discourse, in his examination of fundamental concepts such as faith, Jewish law (*halakha*), prayer, and community. R. Soloveitchik's gaze, then, is focused on the subject bearing the faith and the law, as reflected in a number of his works that contain the word "man" in their title, such as *The Lonely Man of Faith* and *Halakhic Man*, and a number of essays of which this is their primary focus, such as וביקשתם משם (*u-viqqaštem mi-šam*) ("And From There You Shall Seek").<sup>39</sup> In this context, we can understand how R. Soloveitchik also engages in a discussion of intra-couple relations and parenthood. Nonetheless, his approach to reading and examining these subjects is unique and bold, and enables us to extract from his writings his views on the subject of pregnancy.<sup>40</sup>

---

38 ZVI KOLITZ, *Confrontation: The Existential Thought of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik*, Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1992; DOV SCHWARTZ, *From Phenomenology to Existentialism: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, vol. II, translated by Batya Stein (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, vol. 19), Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2012.

39 JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK, "וביקשתם משם", in: JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK, איש אִישׁ והלכה - גלוי ונסתר, Jerusalem 1979 [English version: *Halakhic Man*, translated by Lawrence Kaplan, Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1983].

40 The fact that almost all of Soloveitchik's philosophical writings are rewritten and edited versions of lessons and oral lectures has resulted in major arguments

It sometimes seems as if the majority of Soloveitchik's analysis actually pertains to the subject of paternity, meaning the spiritual parenthood to which he draws attention. Still, the point of departure of Soloveitchik's existential observation lies in what he refers to as "natural parenthood" – or what this article refers to as pregnancy and maternity.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, who seeks to give spiritual meaning to parenthood using the concept of "redeemed parenthood," does so by imparting existential and religious significance to the concept of natural parenthood. What makes parenthood meaningful from an ethical perspective is the way in which human consciousness understands and gives meaning to biological parenthood, which, for the most part, is "maternity."

---

between scholars regarding how his writings should be understood, the relationship between different texts, and how to relate to different phases of his development. We can follow the different arguments regarding Soloveitchik's development and the subjects concerning him in the writings of many scholars, some of whom were his students and others who can be viewed as writing from the outside. A significant direction of inquiry relates to the philosophical sources on which Soloveitchik draws and the philosophical traditions on which he relies. I suggest to read Dov Schwartz's introduction to his *From Phenomenology to Existentialism* (note 38), pp. 4-14, which contains a critical assessment of the lack of philosophical precision with which Soloveitchik employs 'phenomenological' and 'existential' concepts. In this article, I refer to the essays collected in his book *Family Redeemed* (note 19) and refrain from discussing the question of developmental context. On the Importance of this dispute and the dispute about R. Soloveitchik's philosophical traditions see: SIMCHA KRAUSS, "Kol Dodi Dofek: Fifty Years Later," in: *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 39/3 (2006), pp. 38-46; LAWRENCE KAPLAN, "The Multi-Faceted Legacy of the Rav: A Critical Analysis of R. Herschel Schachter's Nefesh HaRav," in: *BDD – Bekhol Derakhekha Daebu: Journal of Torah and Scholarship* 7 (1998), pp. 51-86; DANIEL RYNHOLD, "The Philosophical Foundations of Soloveitchik's Critique of Interfaith Dialogue," in: *Harvard Theological Review* 96 (2003), pp. 101-119; ALMUTH .SH. BRUCKSTEIN, "Halakhic Epistemology in New-Kantian Garb: J. B. Soloveitchik's Philosophical Writings Revisited," in: *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 5 (1998), pp. 346-368; BERGER, "'Uvikashtem mi-sham' (note 17), pp. 93-118; SHLOMO H. PICK, "The Rav: Biography and Bibliography A Review Essay," in: *BDD – Bekhol Derakhekha Daebu: Journal of Torah and Scholarship* 6 (1998), pp. 27-44; SHUBERT SPERO, "Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik and the Philosophy of Halakha," in: *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 30 (1996), pp. 41-64; JONATHAN SACKS, "Review: Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik's Early Epistemology: A Review of the Halakhic Mind," in: *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 23 (1988), pp. 75-87; AVIEZER RAVITSKY, "Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik on Human Knowledge Between Maimonidean and Neo-Kantian Philosophy," in: *Modern Judaism* 6 (1986), pp. 157-188.

As noted at the outset of our discussion, Lévinas's consideration of the subject of pregnancy provides us with a deeper understanding of R. Soloveitchik's writings on the subject. Discussion of R. Soloveitchik's texts must clearly be undertaken with methodological caution, as his philosophical approach is not one of strict phenomenological inquiry but rather existential or experiential description. The questions that interest R. Soloveitchik are drawn from the realm of religious inquiry and Jewish existential thought. Although he attempts to imbue a biological phenomenon with philosophical ethical meaning, the manner in which he approaches the questions deals more with Jewish holy and literary sources and Jewish tradition and the manner in which tradition gives meaning to becoming parents. Still, there is meaningful proximity between R. Soloveitchik's philosophical motivation and that of Lévinas' philosophy in assigning ethical meaning to such a natural situation.

As already noted, R. Soloveitchik's very discussion of intra-couple relations, sexuality, and pregnancy was surprising for Jewish religious discourse in the eyes of many.<sup>41</sup> Though his words and his sentiments bear a local interpretative character, he nonetheless makes use of homiletical sermons and interpretation to offer a modern, contemporary account of questions of intra-couple relations and parenthood from a perspective that takes into consideration psychoanalytical psychological thought and liberal egalitarian thought. We now turn to a presentation of R. Soloveitchik's discussion based on the homiletical interpretations he assigns to the weekly portions of the book of Genesis.<sup>42</sup>

---

41 BLIDSTEIN, "The Covenant of Marriage" (note 16); DOV SCHWARTZ, "Intra-Couple Relations (*Zugint*) in the Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik," in: *Da'at* 57-59 (2006), pp. 333-353 (Hebrew); HANNAH KEHAT, "Intra-Couple Relations (*Zugint*) and Equality: Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik," in: *Massekhet* 4 (2005), pp. 35-48 (Hebrew).

42 On these philosophical lectures and lessons, see, e.g., JONATHAN COHEN, "Strauss, Soloveitchik, and the Genesis Narrative: Conceptions of the Ideal Jew as Derived from Philosophical and Theological Readings of the Bible," in: *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 5 (1995), pp. 99-143; RAPHAEL YARCHI, "Mid-rashic, Literary, and Philosophical Aspects of the Creation of Man and its Interpretive and Educational Implications," in: *Derekh Efrata* 7 (1993/94), pp. 67-88 (Hebrew); YUVAL CHERLOW, "The Role and Meaning of the Chapters of Creation in the Doctrine of Rabbi Soloveitchik," in: *Petuchei Chotem* 2 (2005/06), pp. 215-251 (Hebrew); GEORGE P. FLETCHER, "Adam and our Selves," in: JONATHAN W. MALINO (ed.), *Judaism and Modernity: The Religious Philosophy of David Hartman*, Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004, pp. 158-170; DAN VOGEL, "The Legacy of Two Adams," in: *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 33 (2005), pp. 3-12.

R. Soloveitchik traces the names given to man and woman, to Adam and Eve. The first woman, he points out, is called חַוָּה *Hava* (Eve), a name derived from the Hebrew root חַיָּה meaning “life”, because she was the mother of all life, or perhaps the mother of all human life. In the Bible, motherhood is the primal aspect of the feminine.<sup>43</sup> Man, in contrast, is referred to as אָדָם *Adam*, a name attesting to a deep relationship with the “earth”, “ground” or “land” (in Hebrew, אֲדָמָה) from which man was taken,<sup>44</sup> and neither fatherhood nor parenthood emerges as a particularly salient aspect of masculinity in the corpus of Biblical texts. This terminological differentiation is crucial for our understanding of the meaning of parenthood in Soloveitchik's thinking. For him, there is a difference between the natural aspects of the masculine and the feminine, and we can make use of this differentiation to inquire into the meaning of parenthood.<sup>45</sup>

R. Soloveitchik teaches us that pregnancy has religious meaning in the Jewish tradition. The first woman is named Eve because she is the mother of all. Adam, on the other hand, is the first man but is not described as a father. The first father is Abraham, as reflected in his name as originally written in Hebrew: אַבְרָם *Avram*, which means “exalted father.” According to the biblical narrative, אַבְרָם became אַבְרָהָם *Avraham*, or Abraham, at the age of ninety when God added the Hebrew letter ה (h) to his name. But what is the meaning of this extra letter?<sup>46</sup> R. Soloveitchik suggests that the difference between man and father is the difference between “man-*natura*” and “man-*persona*”. Man-*natura* is the man who is part of nature, and may even include sinners. The archetype of this man is Adam, the first man. Abraham, in contrast, is the model of man-*persona*, who overcomes his own nature, directs himself toward spirituality and redemption, and is compelled to change along with the change in his purpose. Adam hears the divine voice and chooses to remain part of nature, ignoring God's commandment and becoming a sinner. Abraham also begins as part of nature but strives to

---

43 See SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 105-106; on the dialogical meaning of the relationship ‘female and male’ see JOSEPH DOV SOLOVEITCHIK, “The redemption of sexual life,” in: SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 73-104.

44 On the mythological meanings of this etymology, see RAPHAEL PATAI, אָדָם וְאֲדָמָה, Jerusalem: The Hebrew Press Association, 1941–1942.

45 SOLOVEITCHIK, “Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed,” in: SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 105-125.

46 See SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 117-119.

hear the divine voice in search of a commandment. Adam leaves paradise, whereas Abraham attempts to rebuild it.

For R. Soloveitchik, parenthood in natural society is a biological phenomenon associated with the woman as mother and the phenomenon of maternity. Addressing the question “who suffers from parenthood?” R. Soloveitchik asserts that it is the mother who suffers, and that it is typically she who assumes responsibility. The father may ignore or even deny his parenthood, and may therefore evade his responsibility.<sup>47</sup> Maternity as a corporeal experience is encountered first in pregnancy. Man cannot recognize his parental responsibility without ethical observation.<sup>48</sup> Motherhood can be thought of as a situation in which the woman subjects upon herself within herself, and in which the emotional status is derived from the corporeal status. To be a father, in contrast, is not a corporeal status but rather a logical understanding with ethical obligations.

For R. Soloveitchik, the ethical meaning of parenthood transcends biological parenthood. Ethical parenthood is derived from a human consciousness of being before infinity or standing before God, and one must move beyond the biological dimension in order to understand the ethics of the phenomenon. In this way, ethical parenthood is first fatherhood and only then can be considered motherhood:

New commitments were accepted; man began to live not only for himself, but for others as well. He became concerned with the destiny of others, and discovered in himself responsiveness not only to biological pressure but to the call of conscience, through which God addresses Himself to him.<sup>49</sup>

According to R. Soloveitchik, “redeemed fatherhood” is achieved not by ethical syllogism but by purification from orgiastic, hedonistic experience toward conscience and heteronomy. This means that the concept of parenthood is redeemed only by standing before divinity. From a logical perspective, then, fatherhood is parenthood derived from the role of being a teacher, which we might refer to as “teacherhood” (to coin a new word). Man becomes a father not out of biological fact but rather by virtue of the act of trying to educate his child. In his own name and the name of the law, the father stands before his child bearing all the tradition that transcends him. The obligation of fatherhood is the consequence of the father’s representation of the community

---

47 SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 110-111.

48 See the way R. Soloveitchik described the duality of fatherhood: SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 121-122.

49 SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), p. 107.

of the covenant. Maternity is a natural obligation stemming from biological circumstance; fatherhood is a duty stemming from personal will.

From Soloveitchik's perspective, this understanding also changes the meaning of motherhood from a biological state to a willingly accepted duty. Sarah emerges as the archetype of this new kind of mother after learning from Abraham the ethical meaning of parenthood: being part of the community. As a mother-teacher, she is more of a spiritual mother than a biological mother, which is an interpretation with far reaching application. After all, whereas the role of the biological mother is limited to the family and the tribal circle, the spiritual and teacher-mother bears universal responsibility and is part of a cosmological community. For this reason, just eleven verses after describing Abraham as "the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:5), we also learn that Sarah "shall give rise to nations" and that "rulers of peoples shall issue from her."

This changing meaning of parenthood is constructed on what for R. Soloveitchik are basic concepts: fate and destiny. Eve is an instinctive mother who exercises responsibility for her child but is nonetheless not a leader. It is Sarah who is the model of ethical motherhood based on her vision and understanding that community is based more on the covenant than on familial relations. By changing her name, the mother changes her own meaning and becomes ethically active.

### *The Pain and Suffering of Pregnancy*

A fascinating point in the discussion of both R. Soloveitchik and Lévinas concerns the difficult, painful, and at times downright agonizing phenomenon of pregnancy.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, consideration of the difficult aspects of pregnancy and parenthood causes us to rethink the ethical aspects and implications of the discussion. In this context, the difference between the two thinkers is extremely pronounced. Whereas Lévinas understands pain based on concepts of complete responsibility, R. Soloveitchik understands it in terms of "sacrifice."<sup>51</sup>

R. Soloveitchik, it is interesting to note, prefers to explain the redeemed act through corporeal description and employs the term "sacrifice" to

---

50 See Rashi on Genesis 3:16: "your sorrow: This refers to the pain of child rearing; and your pregnancy: This refers to the pain of pregnancy; in pain you shall bear children: This refers to the pain of childbirth."

51 See the way that R. Soloveitchik described the "Sacrificial Action": SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 110-111.

denote that which provides the mother with a way of overcoming biological difficulty. This is the sanctity of the body, he posits, achieved by the readiness to sacrifice. After all, even the most natural experience of motherhood involves sacrifice and suffering, as the woman loses her right to freedom and the ability to manage her life as she desires.<sup>52</sup>

The Bible emphasizes this point with its extensive description of the natural desire for a child that goes unsatisfied by nature. The pain and sorrow of women who are not blessed with children is a recurring theme in biblical texts. The desire for offspring is a yearning for actualization, but also involves sacrifice and suffering. As God explains to Eve in Genesis: “I will make most severe your pangs in childbearing. In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). Entry into the community of the covenant imbues this suffering with meaning and endows it with purpose, transforming it from an absurd experience into a sacrifice for the benefit of the eternal idea of the community of the covenant.<sup>53</sup>

R. Soloveitchik therefore distinguishes between the desire for a child stemming from primitive instinct and the desire for a child stemming from the need to serve and participate in a society with a messianic destiny. The first, instinctive mother derives pleasure from caressing and coddling her child, while the second, spiritual-educational mother teaches and educates her child. This desire for motherhood returns the mother to the divine covenant through a mystical *imitatio Dei* – the desire to benefit another – and the mother is expected to hand over her child to be dedicated to God’s service.

For Lévinas, however, this phenomenology is only part of the meaning of pregnancy, which also involves the transformation of the subjectivity of the subject. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Lévinas develops an image and concepts of pregnancy as something that defies all frameworks of consciousness, just as we are considering maternity as a physical, bodily experience. The notion of maternity does away with the possibility of discussing relations only in an external fashion, as in the case of pregnancy, the meaning of the concept is embodied. Here, sensitivity begins not with awareness of the other but within the body itself. It involves being pursued by a stranger in a very real way but also the paradox of desiring this pursuit and even being responsible for it. It is this sigh—which includes pregnancy—

---

52 SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), p. 106.

53 See SOLOVEITCHIK, *Family Redeemed* (note 19), pp. 117-123, and his use of the term of “Covenantal Community”.

that is the result of being pursued by the one who is to be born or has already been born.

From Lévinas' perspective, maternity is not limited to the phenomenon of pregnancy alone but is rather subject to expansion into thinking about relations with an Other that are not preceded by the consciousness of the subject: "In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution itself in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even the responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor."<sup>54</sup>

The significance of this difference is rooted in the fact that the person-to-person encounter in pregnancy occurs without pretext or defence and with no setting of boundaries between the two beings. Pregnancy demands a reconsideration of the entire significance of sensitivity toward the other in that it lacks the element of disingenuousness that may accompany other encounters. The subject's leap of consciousness in pregnancy includes the pain and suffering of being actively pursued.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to this description of a mother's readiness to suffer and bear pain for an Other, Lévinas articulates the principle of Messianism as a readiness to endure agony. This notion appears in Lévinas' writings in the context of an explanation of one of the names assigned to the Messiah in the Talmud – a name which, unlike the other names, does not paint a positive picture but instead stresses conflict and a willingness to endure suffering for another: "And the Rabbis said: 'The מצורע *mesora* [one afflicted by leprosy, a disfiguring skin disease] of the House of Rabbi [Judah the Prince]' is his name, as it is stated: 'Indeed it was our diseases that he bore and our pangs that he endured, whereas we considered him plagued, smitten by God and afflicted' (Isa. 53:4)."<sup>56</sup>

The expression "the מצורע of the House of Rabbi" as a name for the Messiah removes messianic status from the realm of a particular individual and defines it as a distinctive human capability, ascribing messianic attributes to teaching and to teachers—not those who comfort and encourage but those who are about a willingness to suffer. Returning to our discussion of maternity, we see how close this notion is to the conception of pregnancy as being pursued and suffering for the benefit of the very one who is pursuing you. Readiness to suffer for others is a central characteristic of both Messianism and teaching.

---

54 LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being* (note 30), p. 75.

55 LÉVINAS, *Otherwise than Being* (note 30), p. 121.

56 bSanh 90b.

It now becomes clear that the description of the teacher as messiah, which initially sounds so gratifying, actually sounds amenable only as long as we refrain from inquiring into its constituent elements. Once explored at a deeper level, however, it emerges as a tough and perhaps even intolerable expectation of the teacher, as it necessarily means extricating the student from alienation and anonymity in the classroom, in the community, and in the world at large. Personal recognition of the student is accomplished through gestures of peace, sympathy, and generosity and is not an intellectual event involving the learning of specific “content.” There is no material to be imparted, no necessary knowledge or even “truth.” It is something that transcends truth, something entirely personal: a “personal name.” As if these expectations are not enough, Lévinas expects the teacher to be prepared to “endure,” to suffer on behalf of the student, not only because of what he suffers from the world around him but because of what he does to the teacher because he is his teacher.

For Lévinas, exploring the ethical significance of pregnancy helps teach us the true meaning of responsibility. Indeed, pregnancy has the potential to invert the meaning of ethical commandments, from the imperative derived from the outside—from the face of the other—to the imperative derived from within – from the unborn foetus. The externally derived ethical imperative is based on the negative commandment “לא תרצח” *lo tirṣaḥ* – “Thou shall not kill,” whereas the internally derived ethical meaning is based on the positive imperative for complete responsibility.

Both Lévinas and R. Soloveitchik view teaching and education as an internalization of parental responsibility. R. Soloveitchik makes frequent use of this description, as reflected, for example, in his discussion of the above-mentioned passage from Genesis (25:19) from which we learn that “Abraham begot [הוליד] Isaac.” “Ibn Ezra and also Targum Onqelos give a different interpretation,” explains Soloveitchik in one of his sermons. “They say that ‘Holid’ is not begot but educated. The first one is biological, the second is teacher. Apparently, Abraham neglected the education of Ishmael. All that was given to Abraham was conditional that a father is not only biological but that he is a teacher.” In order to broaden the meaning of parenthood, Lévinas cites the Talmudic assertion that “Whoever teaches someone else's son Torah is considered as if he fathered him.” With this manoeuvre, in a manner strikingly similar to R. Soloveitchik, Lévinas provides a basis for the change in the understanding of parenthood from a biological category to an ethical one.

By relating to the educator-teacher as a biological parent, Lévinas reconstructs the concept of parenthood with an emphasis on its ethical

meaning: responsibility. On the one hand, Lévinas explores the ethics in ‘face-to-face’ relations as dictated by ethical imperatives received by the subject from the outside. On the other hand, he understands the phenomenon of pregnancy and maternity as an ethical imperative emanating from within.<sup>57</sup> The ethical significance of education is an internalization of the feminine aspects reflected in pregnancy and maternity. This principal idea has a number of ethical implications that ascribe parental duties to an educational context. When Lévinas portrays the teacher not as one who imparts dry knowledge but one who enables the future, he endows the teacher with feminine aspects. In this way, Lévinas also characterizes the very values he ascribes to the teacher as messianic as the messianic aspects of the feminine: recognition, peace, and the possibility of escaping anonymity.<sup>58</sup>

Elsewhere, Lévinas directs the reader’s attention to the connection between thought about God and pregnancy – that is, between God and the womb.<sup>59</sup> In rabbinical Hebrew, God is sometimes referred to as רַחֲמָנָה *Rahmana*, “the Merciful One,” derived from the Aramaic word for “love,” the root letters of which (ר-ח-מ *r-h-m*) are the same as those of רֶחֶם *rehem*, the Hebrew word for “womb.” This divine epithet, then, can be understood as deriving from an understanding of God as womb. According to Lévinas: “*Rahamim* [רחמים] is the relation of the other, whose gestation takes place within it. *Rahamim* is maternity itself.”<sup>60</sup>

The idea of divinity as womb enables us to understand God’s infinite nature as openness to different possibilities and to a future created by human agency. The womb, as the ability to accommodate and open up to the Other, is a distinctly feminine phenomenon. According to Lévinas: “God as merciful is God defined by maternity. A feminine element is stirred in

---

57 The transcendental inward direction is discussed in HANOCH BEN PAZI, *Call to Responsibility*, PhD dissertation, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan 2002, pp. 283-291 (Hebrew).

58 Attention should be paid to the manner in which Lévinas discusses the issue of pain and suffering, which steers completely clear of any discourse of theodization and is instead formulated in terms of ethics (see his essay “Useless Suffering”). In the present discussion, attention is paid to the subject of pain not only in the context of justified or unjustified suffering but using the ethical categories of responsibility and parenthood.

59 EMMANUEL LÉVINAS, “Damages Due to Fire,” in: EMMANUEL LÉVINAS, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by Annette Aronowicz, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990 (21994), pp. 178-197.

60 LÉVINAS, “Damages Due to Fire” (note 59), p. 183.

the depth of this mercy. This maternal element in divine paternity is very remarkable.”<sup>61</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Both Lévinas and R. Soloveitchik display an interest in the phenomenology of pregnancy and its ethical significance. The difference in their thinking is their methodology. For R. Soloveitchik, pregnancy is a biological phenomenon, and the ethical meaning of parenthood stems from the transition into religious and spiritual life before the divine. In this way, fatherhood is not a biological fact but rather the redemption of natural events and understanding the responsibility of redeemed parenthood hinges on an understanding of fatherhood in the context of the destiny of the community. Man becomes a father when he understands his role as the child’s teacher. Lévinas’ phenomenology, on the other hand, focuses on the biological fact of pregnancy itself as an embodied trope of general ethical responsibility.

From Soloveitchik’s perspective, somewhat surprisingly, women can grasp the spiritual meaning of motherhood by observing and inquiring into fatherhood. Indeed, his conclusion regarding the phenomenology of pregnancy is that ethics lie beyond nature due to humans’ standing before divinity. For Lévinas, the phenomenology of pregnancy holds broader, more fundamental implications for general interpersonal relations and can be understood as embodying the meaning of complete responsibility toward the other, which continues into maternity and parenthood (with the deep meaning of education being based on the significance of parenthood).

This differentiation is not merely a difference of structure but a question of precedence. Whereas for Lévinas ethics facilitates the advance of consciousness and infinity precedes humanity, ethics for R. Soloveitchik is the realization of human consciousness, which is to say that humanity precedes infinity. The meaning of infinity here is also different, as for Lévinas the phenomenology of pregnancy is also a reminder of the unmemorable, the advance of the Other, and otherness. In this way, the corporeal situation is a representation of the infinity of the Other and of alterity.

---

61 LÉVINAS, “Damages Due to Fire” (note 59), p. 183.