Israel’s Messianic Nationalism after 1967 and the Question of French Jewry’s Loyalty: Levinas, Buber, and Ben-Gurion

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Growing out of his experience as a Jewish-Lithuanian immigrant who had assimilated into French culture in the 1920s, and a French prisoner-of-war in Germany during World War II, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906 – 1995) provides a unique perspective on modern nationalism. His writings concerning Jewish exclusion and participation in the “modern state,” written between his major works *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974)*,* are especially relevant. These various publications addressed Jewish and non-Jewish audiences in France in the late 1960s, a time of national and social tensions, culminating in the French weapons embargo on Israel in 1967 and the protests of May 1968.

The Israeli victory in the Six Day War of June 1967, followed by Israel's seizure of the “sacred sites” in the occupied territories, sparked Jewish-nationalist feelings among French Jews, which many critics saw as a deviation from French nationality. Levinas, in turn, saw this criticism as a return of old exclusionist sentiments in French society, which were locked in a struggle against the inclusiveness that he imagined as “defining France.” This inclusiveness, he argued, was founded on the **individual’s messianic possibility** of the **utopian****pursuit** of an “ethical life” in the modern state. In contrast, and mirroring his writings on France and Germany from the 1930s, Levinas dubiously imagined Jewish nationality in Israel as a **non-utopian** **messianic project**.

Levinas**’** approach, which religiously rejected “land” in favor of “utopia” (which, etymologically, means “non-place”), can be profitably compared with that of other contemporary thinkers. On the one hand, Israeli Prime-Minister David Ben-Gurion (1886 – 1973) reimagined Jewish nationalism in 1957 as a **collectivist mobilization within a non-utopian messianic framework**. On the other hand, philosopher Martin Buber (1878 – 1965), at the time a member of the Yichud political movement, which advocated for a Jewish-Palestinian bi-national state, conceived of **Israeli kibbutz collectivism as a utopian fulfillment** of Zionism, socialism, and religious ideals, in his 1947 book *Paths in Utopia*.