

The Matanel Forum for
Franch-jewish Philosophy

Final Report

January 2025



Summary of the Matanel Forum at Bar-Ilan University for French Jewish Philosophy



First and foremost, I would like to thank the steering committee of the Matanel Forum (Dr. Miriam Feldman-Kay, Prof. David Benon, Dr. Tzvia Penerk-Vigoda, Dr. Avner Dinur) for their dedicated work, deep thought, and collaboration. The Matanel Forum at Bar-Ilan University operated for five years as a dynamic research hub, promoting the study of French Jewish philosophy, particularly the works of thinkers from the Paris School, such as Manitou (Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi), Emmanuel Levinas, André Neher, and Amédée Lévy-Vaensi. The Forum's goal was to nurture a pioneering and in-depth research field that offered support to both graduate students and senior researchers.

Each year, the Forum organized an intensive research group that met between 10 and 14 times. These meetings included guest lectures by leading researchers from Israel and abroad as well as in-depth discussions on a variety of topics related to French Jewish philosophy. Additionally, the Forum held annual conferences dedicated to central themes related to the Forum's activities and special study evenings focusing on significant books or prominent thinkers who are no longer alive.

The Forum played a key role in the development of the field in Israel. Notable achievements include the expansion of the curriculum in the Department of Jewish Philosophy, the development of specific French-language courses for students from France as part of the School of Jewish Studies and the advancement of young researchers to leading academic positions. It is worth noting that four researchers who worked within the Forum were appointed to positions at leading academic institutions, including Ben-Gurion University.

Beyond its academic achievements, the Forum also served as a platform for discussing questions of Jewish-Humanistic identity and addressing the challenges facing Israeli society. The issues raised went beyond the boundaries of French Jewish philosophy and touched on current social issues in Israel, especially in light of events and tensions that intensified after October 7th.

Following its success, a proposal was submitted to the Matanel Foundation to expand the Forum's activities into a new program aimed at advancing discourse and research on the contribution of Jewish thought to the processes of repair and reconciliation in Israeli society. Our goal is to continue to serve as a driving force for positive change in Israel's social reality.

The Forum's fellowships were awarded annually to doctoral students and post-doctoral fellows based on the recommendations of a dedicated fellowship committee and in accordance with the progress of the students' research. Research summaries are attached to this report.

The fruits of the Matanel Forum attest to its great value, both academically and socially, and serve as proof of Jewish thought's ability to bridge worlds and make a profound and meaningful contribution to both academic and social discourse.

**Warm regards,
Prof. Hanoch Ben Pazi**



Hila Pladot

The subject of my research is:

"The Thought of Manitou as Jewish Philosophy after the Holocaust".

Rabbi Ashkenazi's philosophy is currently experiencing a revival in Israeli society. The uniqueness and originality of his general and post-Holocaust thought can be attributed to the synthesis between the Algerian Sephardic-Kabbalistic tradition, in which he was born and raised, and the Western French intellectual framework, of which he was a citizen. Scholars and writers who have delved into Manitou's philosophy have described it as "a system that sheds new and profound light on almost every subject it explores, adhering closely to the Torah's sources and the traditions he received from his teachers while uncovering new depths within them."

According to Manitou, an event like the Holocaust could reoccur in human history. He believed that the processes marking the end of exile and the dangers accompanying them were not yet complete, even after the establishment of the State of Israel.

The hypothesis of this research is that the key and well-known topics in his thought—such as monotheism, history, Hebrew identity, and the equation of fraternity—are primarily a response to the theological and teleological scandal posed by the Holocaust to him and his generation. Manitou's use of the term "theological scandal" regarding the Holocaust reflects a double trap: in the aftermath of catastrophes like the Holocaust, there is a risk of drifting into beliefs and identities (theological or ideological) that deviate from the Hebrew and human identity

(the identity of the "child of man"). This deviation inevitably undermines the merit (*le mérite d'être*) necessary for redemption in the dimension of *be'itah* (in its appointed time) rather than *achishena* (I will hasten it).

In broad and schematic terms, Jewish theological thought on the Holocaust can be classified into three main categories: the tradition of *tzidduk ha-din* (justification of divine judgment), which appears primarily in Haredi thought; the adoption of theodicy of free will in Neo-Orthodox thought; and critical humanism, which questions the continuation of the covenant between man and God. Zachary Braiterman identified an additional "new discourse" of anti-theodicy Holocaust thinkers, who charted a unique path and made a distinctive contribution to Holocaust thought.

One of the goals of this research is to bring Sephardic-traditional Holocaust philosophy into focus, not as a marginal discourse but as an integral part of this development. This will be achieved by positioning Manitou's post-Holocaust philosophy within Braiterman's "new discourse" through three criteria and in comparison to three theologians who, according to Braiterman, embody this discourse: Emil Ludwig Fackenheim, Richard Lowell Rubenstein, and Eliezer Berkovits.

My dissertation is currently in its final stages of editing, following evaluation and revisions based on the feedback from two reviewers.



Hodaya Samet Har Shefi

My research examines the concept of language in the thought of Shoshani and his students, which developed against a dual backdrop: the modern language crisis and the theological rupture of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust placed language against its most extreme limits, as attempts at description and conceptualization collapsed. This crisis occurred alongside the modern language crisis—the linguistic turn revealed the insight that language shapes the way we perceive and understand reality, and postmodern thought deepened this crisis by emphasizing the limitations of language.

Shoshani, who worked in France in the years following the Holocaust, taught his students about the essence of the Jewish tradition that views language as a space of encounter between man and God. In contrast to views that see language as a constraint or prison, he presented it to overcome human loneliness and as an answer to the existence of good in the world and its fulfillment. His students developed these ideas: Levinas saw language as the space in which the encounter with the Other and the infinite is possible, and as the place where ethics itself takes place. Wiesel engaged with the boundaries of language through 'silence,' weaving the Jewish myth

with the Holocaust. Rosenberg proposed reading the Holocaust as the revelation of the devil, which requires a new theological language that can contain the tension between the existence of radical evil and the possibility of good.

In an era that proclaims the death of the subject and the death of God, these thinkers find in the Jewish tradition a way to preserve human subjectivity precisely through the encounter with the divine. They demonstrate how religious language allows for a renewed confrontation with the question of meaning. In this way, their thought offers an original solution to the crises of the modern age by finding the transcendent within language itself.

Shiran Greenberg

"The Becoming of the Subject through Encounter – Eros and Poiesis as Threshold Concepts in Phenomenology"

Over the past year, my research proposal, "The Becoming of the Subject through Encounter – Eros and Poiesis as Threshold Concepts in Phenomenology", was accepted, and I immediately began the task of writing the first chapters. The research explores the vitality of Eros and Poiesis for Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of encounter and interprets these concepts through the theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Both have written and continue to write within the French-Jewish intellectual space.

To enhance my reading and open up new and deeper research directions, I traveled to the National Library in Paris and spent eight days there. During my stay in Paris, I met with several researchers of Levinas. Another visit to Paris was for a seminar by Professor Bracha L. Ettinger and Dr. Jamieson Webster, which helped me deepen the psychoanalytic aspects of my research.

The past year has been unbearably difficult in Israel and, of course, for each of us personally. Therefore, I must mention in this context that working on my research, along with the generous scholarship from the "Metanel" Foundation, greatly helped me to get through this year with meaning and interest that transcended the daily routine.



Rachel Verliebter



The Matanel scholarship I was granted for 2023-2024 academic year allowed me to elaborate an ethical reading of the Zoharic Doe of Dawn myth in the light of Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenology. I was approached by one of the editors of the Da'at Journal of Jewish Thought to write a broader article about the topic including this perspective.

I am currently in the course of completing the said article, which shall be submitted for publication in February 2025. In the acknowledgments section on the first page I will of course mention that the research for this publication was made possible thanks to the Matanel Foundation's generous support.

In June 2024 I gave a lecture at the Bar-Ilan Matanel Conference on the kabbalistic traces in André Neher's work *The exile of the Word, from the silence of the Bible to the silence of Auschwitz*, for which I was also asked to publish as an article in the same aforementioned journal. After its publication in Hebrew, I hope to publish it in English in

a highly ranked philosophy journal to enable André Neher's thought to reach a wider audience. In the acknowledgments section for both articles, I will mention the scholarship I received from the Matanel Foundation, which allowed me to delve into the depths of Neher's thought on divine speech and silence amidst catastrophe - a question that has become particularly relevant in the light of current events.

Nicolini Cosimo Cohen

I started attending the meetings of Matanel Forum during the 2019-2020 academic year; that is, a year after I began taking courses at Bar-Ilan and several months before my doctoral research proposal submission. For the three years that followed, I had the opportunity to benefit from Matanel.

I still remember with joy the first meeting I attended. Professors David Banon, Ephraim Mayer, and Hanoch Ben-Pazi spoke, and I experienced the feeling of participating in a lively moment of contemporary Jewish philosophy bridging French thought and Israeli culture. Even when we had to meet online during the Covid19 pandemic, the Matanel meetings were a precious opportunity to delve into some theoretical issues and textual passages and to learn the living legacy of the School of Paris.

The Forum was also an occasion to get to know the other members as well as the different guest speakers. More broadly, attending the Forum was a way to familiarize myself with a way of doing philosophy, certainly, but also with a way to perceive and live the Jewish identity, in its dynamic relationship between Israel and the diaspora, through the dialogue between its universal values and 'particular' features.

Over the two years following the approval of my research proposal, I drafted some chapters of the research and some of these passages were used as the basis of my talks in seminars and workshops I attended in Italy. In this context, I participated in a conference on Messianism and Utopia, organized by the

University of Trento, whose proceedings have been published. An excerpt from a chapter dedicated to the notion of Sollen in Kelsen and Levinas is part of a collective work published by Springer, and another excerpt will be published as a paper for the Canadian journal Symposium (published by the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy).

Particularly stimulating for me was the topic of the relationship between the particular and the universal, between Israel and the people, which, in different forms, recurred in the several of the Forum's meetings, such as the one dedicated to Benamozegh, which I subsequently reported on in a short article for the Italian magazine of Jewish culture Joimag. Previously, an interview I conducted with Professor Ben-Pazi on the occasion of the opening of the Chouchani archives was published in this same magazine.

Furthermore, thanks to the Forum and the grant, I was able to publish, with the Matanel logo, the French edition (Harmattan publishing house) of an essay dedicated to some of the theoretical and ethical implications of Jewish hermeneutics vis-à-vis the works of the Italian philosopher Carlo Sini.

Hadas Chaya Halevi



My study focuses on the philosophy of Rabbi Yehouda Leon Ashkenazi (Manitou). Manitou (1922–1996), an Algerian Jew, was raised in a traditional educational setting and excelled in his studies. He expanded his religious knowledge and delved deeply into the ideological schools of thought prevalent in modern Europe. After World War II, Manitou chose to remain in France and served as an educator for a community largely different from his own origins, often composed of individuals with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds.

When Manitou embarked on his educational mission, he diligently reflected on how to adapt himself to his students. How could he find a way and a language through which he could provide them with a meaningful learning experience? My research examines the innovative philosophical-anthropological language that Manitou developed to ensure his educational approach left a lasting impact. This effort became a significant pillar in shaping the "Hebrew identity"—a renewed Israeli identity that became necessary with the consolidation of the Zionist idea. Through his educational work, Manitou encouraged and even demanded that his students uncover and establish this identity within themselves.

My research seeks to explore the influences that shaped Manitou's idea of the "return to Hebrew identity." Additionally, I aim to trace his educational efforts, focusing on the content he chose to present to his students. I also investigate how his philosophy became a guiding force for young Jews in France, inspiring them to rediscover their Hebrew identity or, at the very least, influencing them deeply enough to immigrate en masse to the land of their Hebrew ancestors. This study is both groundbreaking and unique in its nature.

The scholarship I received from the Matanel Foundation during the years 5781–5782 (2020–2022) enabled me to focus on and expand my research. The research group in which I participated provided a supportive platform for inquiry and deep exploration. For this, I extend my profound gratitude.

Ayala Gidron



My research, entitled "Radical Good – Jewish Moral Philosophy in Response to the Great Crisis", focuses on the thought of Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, and Emmanuel Levinas. The study seeks to compare the moral approaches of these philosophers and their understanding of the concept of "good" in light of the personal and human crisis brought about by World War II and the Holocaust. The opportunity to examine the moral response from both Jewish-French and Jewish-German intellectual perspectives provides a broad and rich framework for exploring the idea of a "radical good" that is not particularistic but rather universal.

Over the past year, I primarily focused on writing and submitting my research proposal, which received final approval in July. This year, I dedicated time to a first reading of Simone Weil's writings as well as the responses of Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt to her philosophy. In April, I participated in an international conference

at the University of Virginia, USA, entitled "Zero Hour – Rethinking 1945 from Jewish Transnational Perspectives." In May, I chaired a session at Bar-Ilan University for a daylong seminar on "Judaism in Aging and Tremor" – The Thought of André Neher", where we explored Neher's political philosophy. Additionally, in July 2024, I participated in the 4th Doctoral Conference at Bar-Ilan University, where I presented my lecture "The Madness of Love: A Look at the Concept of Good in the Philosophical-Political Thought of Simone Weil." Throughout the year, I took part in all meetings of the Matanel Forum both via Zoom and in person.



Thank You
for your ongoing
partnership.