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From Dialogue to Revelation: Alterity and the Concept of Fraternity (Fraternité) in Léon Askenazi's Biblical Hermeneutics

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Abstract: In *Love: Accusative and Dative*, Paul Mendes-Flohr explores ancient and modern Jewish engagements with the commandment to love the Re'a (neighbor) in Leviticus 19:18. Drawing on Rosenzweig's phenomenology of divine-human love, Mendes-Flohr seeks to delineate the possibility of a humanist ethics of compassion that is not dependent, as in Rosenzweig, on hearing the divine voice. Taking Mendes-Flohr as point of departure, this paper explores the concept of fraternity (fraternité) as it figures in the thought of Yehuda Léon Askenazi (1922–1996), a North African kabbalist thinker and an important spiritual leader of Francophone Jewry in the twentieth century. Looking at two interrelated moments in Askenazi's long career as a biblical exegete, I quarry Askenazi's notion of fraternity for an account of alterity. Based on his discussions of the Cain and Abel story, as well as other biblical episodes, I argue that, for Askenazi, the challenge of fraternity, as figuring repeatedly in the Genesis narrative, is the preferred model to think of second-person relationships. Furthermore, I suggest, in contrast to Rosenzweig's top-down account of revelation and human love, Askenazi's approach represents a bottom-up model of love of one's neighbor, which, when achieved, brings about divine revelation.



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1. Introduction

In *Love, Accusative and Dative* Paul Mendes-Flohr (2007) investigates Jewish sources on the question of love of the biblical *Re'a*, rendered as friend or as neighbor. In his study, Mendes-Flohr focuses on the locus classicus of this issue, the command to love the *Re'a*/neighbor as it appears in Leviticus 19:18, and the interrelated command to love the *Ger*, commonly rendered as stranger, in Leviticus 19:34. Drawing on a famous rabbinic discussion of this commandment as a central Jewish principle (ibid., p. 5), Mendes-Flohr offers another formulation for this dictum: "We should love our *Re'a* as our fellow human, who was created in the image of God like ourselves, and who is also fallible, as we are" (ibid., p. 10). Searching further for the existential source and structure of this demand, Mendes-Flohr turns to Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (Rosenzweig 1971) for the latter's discussion of divine love and its human addressee. According to Mendes-Flohr, Rosenzweig's account of love in the *Star* proceeds as follows:

Beloved by God, one is lifted out of the whirl of self-absorbed anxiety and empowered to love others—to reach out to others in compassionate cognizance of their needs. The trajectory of love begins with God's command to love Him—that is, love in the accusative, experienced by the individual, the meta-ethical self, as an existentially confirming love—culminating in the command to love the neighbor, love in the dative, that is, to assume responsibility for one's neighbor. (Mendes-Flohr 2007, p. 21)

This schema of commanding love of the neighbor thus begins with God's love to humans, which, as a second stage, awakens the command that humans love each other. Yet,

as Mendes-Flohr notes, Rosenzweig's account of the command to love one's neighbor, in so far as it retains a transcendent God of revelation as its normative origin, cannot assist modern attempts to establish this principle from within a "secular, humanistic creed," for which "morality is grounded in the autonomous will" (ibid., p. 17). For Mendes-Flohr, what may be retained from Rosenzweig's phenomenology of neighborly love is its attention to feelings of shame and judgement. These feelings need not only accompany a response to divine call, but also, Mendes-Flohr argues, may arise out of "sheer human compassion," prompted by deliberate encountering of one's fellow humans and witnessing their suffering (ibid., p. 22).

Mendes-Flohr's reservations regarding Rosenzweig's account of neighborly love, I suggest, may be described as a broader critique of a top-down model of dialogue. In so far as Rosenzweig's account takes the divine as located at the top of an imagined pyramid, and humans at the bottom, once the head of the pyramid is gone (in a modern secular world), it is hard to sustain a normative account of love of one's neighbor in the base of the pyramid. Arguably, this critique may also be directed at Martin Buber's dialogical approach, as presented in his *I and Thou* (Buber and Kaufmann 1970), to the degree that Buber too places the divine as central to the praxis of dialogical life. From this perspective, Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical project may be described as a horizontal solution to the problem raised by Mendes-Flohr in Rosenzweig's wake. That is to say, in so far as Levinas's account of the other consists of a secularization of the previously theological role played, for Rosenzweig, by the divine other, and its transformation into a human other, Levinas substitutes Rosenzweig's top-down approach with a horizontal account of human intersubjectivity.¹

In this paper, I consider a bottom-up account of human love of the Re'a/neighbor, as developed by Yehouda Léon Askenazi (1922–1996), a modern Jewish thinker and North African kabbalist who was active in France in the first decades following the Second World War.² Askenazi was born in Oran, Algeria, to a family of rabbis, who traced their lineage to a disciple of the great kabbalist Isaac Luria of Safed.³ Askenazi arrived in Paris shortly after the war, having served as a military chaplain in de Gaulle's Free France Army during the campaign to liberate France. In Paris, Askenazi completed his academic training in philosophy and ethnology at the Sorbonne, and he also enrolled in a new institution for young leadership established by the French-Jewish Scouts (*Les Eclaireurs israélites de France*, henceforth EIF), called the Gilbert Bloch School (*École Gilbert-Bloch*), located in the Parisian suburb of Orsay (Benguigui 2009). Following his arrival at the Metropol, Askenazi became deeply involved in the postwar renewal of French Judaism, holding leadership positions in the Gilbert Bloch school, the Jewish student union, and the EIF. Askenazi's mastery of Talmudic and kabbalistic sources, familiarity with contemporary French philosophy, personal charisma, and oratorical skills led him to become a member of the group of thinkers called the Paris School of Jewish Thought (*École de Pensée Juive de Paris*), which included figures such as Levinas, Eliane Amado Lévy-Valensi, and André Neher (Trigano and Tiar 1997; Banon 2017). Askenazi's influence on the Francophone world also continued after his immigration to Israel in the late 1960s. In recent years, following translations to Hebrew of audio recordings of Askenazi's lectures on various topics in Jewish thought, his ideas are reaching new audiences.

In the following pages, I will consider Askenazi's notion of fraternity (*fraternité*) through an analysis of two of his many exegetical reflections on biblical texts, one authored in 1996 and another delivered as a lecture in 1972. Bringing these two hermeneutical moments together, I will show that, for Askenazi, (a) cases of biblical fraternity provide a normative model for human second-person interactions, at the individual as well as at the intergroup level; and (b) moreover, an additional outcome of a fraternal relationship is nothing less than revelation. In this way, in my reading, Askenazi offers an outline for a bottom-up dialogical model where, in the opposite direction from Rosenzweig, it is love between humans that is the condition for revelation.

2. Fraternity and Revelation

As part of a series of weekly commentaries on the Pentateuch, authored from the late 1980s to the mid-90s, [Askenazi \(2007\)](#) treats Exodus 33:11, a verse which describes the new manner of God's revelation to Moses after the episode of the Golden Calf (Exodus 31:18–32:35). According to the biblical text, in the aftermath of what may be described as a crisis of trust between God and the Children of Israel, Moses put up a tent outside the encampment, to which he went when seeking to converse with God. In the biblical description, every time that Moses left the encampment towards this new tent, all the people "Rose, and stood at the entrances to their tents," then followed Moses with their eyes until he entered the tent of meeting with God (Exodus 33:8). As soon as Moses disappeared into the tent, the Bible continues, a divine pillar of cloud descended to earth just outside the tent, to speak with Moses. The people, upon seeing the clouded divine presence, "bowed down, each person at the entrance to their tent" (*ibid.*, 33:10). The biblical description of this dramatic ritual, seemingly occurring each time that Moses went to converse with God, concludes with the following verse: "And God spoke to Moses face to face, the same way that a person speaks with their Re'a." (*ibid.*, 33:11). In 1996, in one of the last commentaries that he authored in his lifetime, Askenazi added his contribution to generations of exegetical engagements with this evocative verse:

Regarding this verse, Rashi [a prominent Jewish medieval commentator] brings the rendering in the Aramaic translation of the Pentateuch [of the word "and God spoke"] as "mitmalel" [a reflexive form], which leads to the following reading: God was speaking to himself, for Moses, face to face, just as a person speaks with their friend. A person speaks with their friend as they speak to themselves, namely, in absolute sincerity. It is therefore more an indication of the veracity of God's speech to Moses, and less of an "intimacy" which may pose the problem of an anthropomorphic reading. We would like to point out another particular aspect of the verse that is of a grammatical order. The word *dibber*, that is usually translated in the past tense as "and God spoke . . ." may also be read in the present or future tense. Furthermore, if one notices that the Hebrew word that is usually translated as "the same way" (*Kaasher*), also signifies "when", then our verse becomes: "And God speaks to Moses . . . when a person speaks with their friend". In other words, although revelation is subjected to strict conditions of prophetic authenticity, it is nevertheless available every time that the morality of fraternity is guaranteed.⁴ ([Askenazi 2007](#), pp. 218–19)

In focusing on the meaning of *Re'a*, friend, in Exodus 33:11, Askenazi implicitly and explicitly ties together his conditions for correct inter-subjective human dialogue and for revelation. Suggesting, with Rashi, that revelation may not consist of a direct dialogue between God and humans, Askenazi nevertheless insists on sincerity, arguably a moral virtue, as the condition for the epistemological veracity of revelation. For Askenazi, it is the same sincerity with which one should, and Askenazi assumes that one does, address one's closest relations, as that with which Moses heard God. Then, in the last part of his commentary, Askenazi argues further that not only Moses is privy to revelation, but that revelation may occur in the present and in the future, presumably to every human, every time that the "morality of fraternity" is exercised. To obtain a sense for the cultural and historical background for Askenazi's assertion, I now turn to a brief discussion of the latter term.

3. Fraternity/Fraternité

Derived from the Latin word for brother, *frater*, the English term fraternity is most often used to denote "a group of people sharing a common profession or interest," with student fraternities arguably the most familiar example in the North American context ([Soanes and Stevenson 2003](#), p. 689). In French, on the other hand, *fraternité* expands the kinship connotations to apply to an even broader body politic. According to the

Grand Robert dictionary, fraternité denotes “A bond existing between all persons [since they are] considered as members of humanity as a family; a deep feeling of this bond” (Robert and Rey 1986, p. 700). This signification is further reflected in the fact that fraternity serves in the triumvirate of concepts that form the motto of the French republic: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity (Liberté, égalité, fraternité).

Consequently, when using the term fraternité, Askenazi appeals to a central concept in French thought. This is a concept that is arguably as fundamental to modern France, and, certainly from a French perspective, to democracy everywhere, as its fellow cherished concepts of equality and freedom. Yet, unlike liberty and equality, which are mentioned in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, fraternity is not mentioned explicitly in this foundational document of the French republic, and its role is similarly more ambiguous. Indeed, without delving too much into political theory, a similar question to the one that was raised earlier comes up in this context as well: How, if this is even possible, can a state or a society guarantee fraternity for all?

When considering the experience of Jews in France in the years during and after the Second World War, this problem was not only theoretical, but painfully visceral. During more than a century of Jewish emancipation preceding the war, French citizens of the Jewish faith were confident in the promises of the state to conserve the rights of every citizen to liberty and equality. However, this promise was broken in 1940, when the Vichy government published the infamous “*Statut de Juifs*” (Jewish status law), which effectively stripped Jews of their citizenship and thereby openly reneged on France’s commitment to liberty and equality for all (Marrus and Paxton 1995; Weisberg 1996; Zalc and Porter 2020). Put differently, despite some notable exceptions, during the war years fraternity was certainly not expressed towards Jews in France. This cultural and historical background is important when looking at the centrality of fraternity for Askenazi. Askenazi assigns a high value to the exercise of morality of fraternity in his commentary quoted above, as well as in his explorations of biblical fraternity that I shall presently discuss. In both cases, I suggest, Askenazi’s engagement with fraternity represents a persistent attempt to offer a response to the question of why fraternity disappeared in France and around the world, and how can it be regained.

4. Variations on Fraternity I: Cain and Abel

In 1972, the conference of French-Jewish intellectuals (*Colloque d’intellectuels juifs de langue française*) was devoted to an exploration of a chosen theme: Ish (Man), Isha (Woman), or, the Other par excellence (Halpérin and Levitte 1973). This annual colloquium, which was inaugurated in 1957, drew to Paris every fall speakers of diverse political and confessional orientations, and an ever-growing audience eager for discussion on the meaning and relevance of Judaism (Simon-Nahum 2005). Among the organizers were key Jewish intellectuals and community leaders, including Levinas and André Neher. Like the preceding meetings, the first day of the colloquium in 1972 opened with a Talmudic lecture by Levinas, titled “And God Created Woman,” where Levinas offered a reading of rabbinic interpretations of this biblical event informed by his theory of alterity (Levinas 1990). Askenazi, who had been a constant presence at the colloquiums since 1959, travelled to Paris from Israel, where he had moved only a few years before, to give a lecture titled “The Couple: Creator of History” (Askenazi 1973).

Askenazi’s long lecture integrated multiple themes, most of which cannot be treated in the current exposition. Among them, Askenazi offered his definition of the meaning of world history according to Judaism, reinterpreted a Talmudic-then-kabbalistic cosmogonic myth on the diminishment of the moon as concerned with the metaphysics of history, and reflected briefly on Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. For our purposes, Askenazi’s overarching argument in that lecture included two related claims: (a) that the history of humanity should be viewed as the history of a constant attempt to arrive at an ultimate human moral state of global peace, and (b) that the biblical narrative in Genesis reflects this aspect of history, primarily through recurrent stories of couples, or better, dyads, of brothers.

At an early stage in the lecture, Askenazi told his audience that for biblical Hebrews, and presumably also their Jewish inheritors, first:

[I]f history has meaning, it is of a certain orientation, towards the engendering of a human identity that the prophets of Israel called “the son of man” . . . [an identity] wherein the problems, conflicts, and contradictions of our world would be resolved . . . a messianic identity for which the watchword, Shalom [peace] . . . is the fundamental problem that the couple has to resolve. Second, and this is perhaps a paradox: The first couple with which the history of the Bible concerns itself in order to discuss, expose, and suggest the ultimate goal of history that is sought by messianic aspiration, is not so much the couple man–woman—the first male and the first female—but rather the couple of the first brothers. History begins with Cain and Abel. The overarching consistency of the combination of biblical narrative–historical narratives proper but also dispositions of the Law–aim to provide a user’s guide to a conception of history that leads to this messianic aspiration. That is, [the aspiration] to reach the ability to make possible the fraternity between human persons. (Askenazi 1973, pp. 267–68)

Askenazi’s notion of identity, that he equally applies to individuals and groups, demands a separate study. At present, it can be described as a sociological notion of group identity in an ethical key, which, for Askenazi, includes common moral standards practiced by all members of the group. A “human identity” that can achieve a state of peace would be referring to a developed moral capacity to live with each other in peace, characteristic of all members of a certain human group. Askenazi’s related claim, introduced in his second comment just quoted, is that, biblically speaking, it is through attention to fraternity that this utopian aim may be conceptualized and ultimately also achieved.

In the rest of his talk, however, Askenazi does not present an account of the brother–brother relationship, the one that he holds to be the defining element of the messianic “human identity.” Nor does he enumerate the normative conditions for the achievement of world peace. Rather, he offers several exegetical readings of episodes in Genesis that are related, for Askenazi, to the issue of fraternity. Among these exegetical moments, Askenazi treats the “fraternal” relationships between Cain and Abel, Abraham and Sarah, Abraham and Loth, Isaac and Rebecca, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers, in effect covering most of the Genesis narrative. In this paper, our discussion will be limited to Askenazi’s explication of the Cain and Abel story, and that of Abraham and Sarah.

In his 1972 lecture, Askenazi began his discussion of the former case in the following way:

Regarding Cain and Abel, it is written in the first verse of [Genesis] Chapter Four: “And man knew Eve his wife, she conceived, and birthed Cain.” Cain’s name is a name of being, this is the name of the first son of man, his proper name. Just as Adam signifies [in Hebrew] man, Cain signifies a certain manner of being human. One commentator explicates the end of the verse (“I have acquired”), as saying that Cain had acquired his name with God. The engendered being, the object of history . . . is already here. And he knows himself as an acquired being. However, in verse number two: “She furthermore birthed his brother Abel.” And thus appeared the first couple of twins, of a brother to a brother. Why was a solution to the problem of history not reached then? Why was the equation of fraternity, the one that the patriarchs of Israel will re-take upon themselves, not resolved? We have here [for the first time], the term “brother,” that will remain as a guideline for the historical telling of the engendering of the identity of Israel. This is as if history’s aim is indeed to reach the creation of the brother, of a being capable of being the “brother of”, or “sister of”. (ibid., pp. 273–74)

Immersed in a French existentialist discourse concerned with questions of being (Baring 2015; Kleinberg 2005), Askenazi retrieves from the two opening verses of the Cain and Abel episode a pluralistic argument.⁵ Loosely building on the popularized formulation

of Sartre's existentialism that existence precedes essence, namely, that human life begins with the sheer fact of being, Askenazi suggests that humans should direct their efforts of self-formation toward the ethical achievement of "being-brother" or "being-sister." Just as important is the hermeneutical claim that Askenazi makes, to the effect that the Hebrew term for fraternity and its cognates are the key words that drive the historical narrative in Genesis. Attention to "Leitworts" in the biblical text, to use Buber's terminology (Buber 1994), is not new to Jewish traditional exegesis. However, Askenazi is distinct in setting a single term as the leading term for a unit as large as the book of Genesis.⁶ In the lecture, having claimed that the problem of fraternity characterizes human history, and that the Cain and Abel story is the first biblical exemplar, Askenazi continues in his exegetical reading of the biblical verses. He claims that these Ur-brothers are not equal: one of them, Cain, is the first born, and can make a claim to ownership of the world; the other child, Cain's brother Abel, having been born second, is already in a dependent status, as an additional child. In other words, Cain and Abel begin their biblical life in an asymmetrical relationship. Consequently, Askenazi states, their respective "brotherly" responsibilities also differ:

The identity of these two persons, Cain and Abel, is not the same at all . . . there are two different problems in the intersubjectivity of these two persons. The problem for Cain, his virtue, is to prove that he can guarantee that, in his world, the other, the brother, who is in addition, would be able to be at home too. Yet Abel's problem, his virtue, is completely different: it is a virtue of an educator. He [already] possesses this identity, this virtue of being-brother. He has it naturally because he was born as an addition. For Abel, the son is Cain, and he is in addition. While for Cain, this is the opposite, he is being, and the other is an addition. There would be here two radically different anthropologies, two moralities, two theologies. We know that in what follows [Genesis 4:3–4] Cain will bring the "surplus" of his harvest to God, and this is why he will be disqualified, because he brings his surplus to the one who he believes is superfluous. For Cain, God is superfluous. "It is me the being, and then there is God, but this is as surplus . . ." Whereas for Abel, who knew himself as being in addition, who assumed the position of the other within the couple, for him the Other [autrui] is the essential, and he gives the firstborns of his herds, he gives the essential to He who is the essential. There are here therefore two visions of being, two visions of the world that are radically different by nature. Abel does not make an effort to be a brother, this is his being. His effort is to educate Cain, to make Cain capable of being a "brother of". . . . That history failed. Abel was eliminated because Cain could not tolerate a being in addition. In his name, the world is Cain's; in his world, the other is an addition. As long as the other does not interfere this is not such an issue; but once the other poses a moral problem he becomes an interference and is eliminated. When God accused Cain, He said: "The voice of the bloods (in Hebrew the word is in the plural) of your brother cries" [Genesis 4:10]. The Midrash explains: "The voice of the descendants of Abel that Cain had eliminated." There is a crime, and this is a serious issue. But what is even more serious is that one had eliminated history, [by eliminating all future descendants] one eliminated the possibility . . . to develop the relationship between an other to an other so that they could live like brothers. (ibid, pp. 273–75)

At the simple exegetical level, Askenazi explicates the Cain and Abel episode as a story relating to a clash between two opposite personalities. The psychological makeup of Cain and Abel, for Askenazi, seems to be determined by their temporal relations within the family, namely, the order of their birth. It is also captured in their biblical names, Cain meaning the one who already acquired the world, and the ultimate brother, Abel. Finally, Cain and Abel's personalities are markedly expressed in their respective engagements with the divine other. Put differently, through close reading of the biblical text, Askenazi conducts a phenomenological analysis of Cain and Abel, presenting them as typological

manifestations of two forms of human existence. The one is self-centered, and the other is other-centered. Yet, Askenazi does not demand of both types to become other-centered. Rather, he assigns varying ethical demands to his respectively varied human types. In Levinasian terms, the Cainian type needs to learn responsibility for the other, while the Abelian type must teach this responsibility to his brother-other, lest he be eliminated.

The utilization of Levinas's terminology and conceptions of alterity in the analysis of Askenazi here is justified not only by the fact that Askenazi was well aware of Levinas's philosophy, but also, in particular, because the very setting of Askenazi's talk was a conference clearly inspired by Levinas's concerns with alterity. Askenazi's reading of the Cain and Abel story therefore may be presented as advancing a modified version of Levinas's account of alterity. This modified account goes as follows: In a meeting with the other, here a brother, one should be aware of one's moral positionality. One might realize they are in a position of prominence, perhaps of dominance of power, and then one's task, for Askenazi, will dovetail with Levinas's call to acknowledge one's responsibility towards the other. Cain, both for Levinas and for Askenazi, should reach the ability of hearing the "you shall not kill" in meeting with his brother-other. If one finds oneself in a position closer to that of Abel, however, the ethical demand is different. Askenazi's Abel has no need for cultivating his own responsibility towards his dangerous brother, since he is already endowed with this ethical capability. Instead, Abel's task is to teach Cain this responsibility, and perhaps, in the meantime, not to expose himself to a Cainian type of danger. Askenazi's version of alterity, to the degree it can be gathered from this short biblical explication, is of a reciprocity built on an inverse asymmetry of power and ethics. Each side of this relationship should contribute its specific abilities to make the relations of alterity possible.

Notably, for Askenazi, in the Abel and Cain example, the effort to reach "fraternity" failed. However, Askenazi indicates, in the rest of Genesis, the same attempt is carried out time and again by the three patriarchs with their own respective kin relations, until, finally, success comes in the appeasement between Joseph and his brothers. To obtain a better sense for how Askenazi, in 1972, continues to read Genesis as the biblical book of fraternity, I will consider his treatment of a fraternal conversation between the biblical patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah.

5. Variations on Fraternity II: Abraham and Sarah

Having discussed the Cain–Abel episode, Askenazi points to a near "obsession among the patriarchs," meaning Abraham and Isaac, "to say of one's wife that she is one's sister" (*ibid.*, p. 275). The first such case discussed by Askenazi occurred during Abraham and Sarah's first sojourn to Egypt. Before arriving in Egypt, Abraham told Sarah "I know you are a beautiful woman. Therefore, when the Egyptians see you, they will say: this is his wife; and they will kill me and keep you alive. Please say that you are my sister, so that . . . my soul may live because of you" (Genesis 12:11–13). In his lecture, Askenazi questions the reason for Abraham's dubitable practice as given in the plain level of the biblical text, as Abraham's worry that Sarah will be taken by force to become Pharaoh's wife due to her beauty. "Abraham's age then was hundred years and Sarah was ninety! Could this old couple have been scared that the Egyptians would seize the ninety-year-old Sarah because of her beauty?" (Askenazi 1973, p. 275). The beauty involved, Askenazi then suggests, concerns the broader question of fraternity. To make his argument Askenazi first introduces a distinction between two types of love that Jewish tradition finds in the Bible: love between couples, and love between siblings.⁷ Intimate expression of the former type of love, Askenazi explains, is permitted in private and forbidden in public. As for the latter, public expression of love between siblings (such as embracing) is allowed in public, while private inner-sibling intimacy (i.e., incest) is forbidden. Yet, Askenazi affirms, for the world to reach its ultimate stage of redemption, both forms of love should be practiced, that is, appropriate love between couples (in private) as well as correct love between siblings (in public). Having established this classification, Askenazi returns to Abraham and Sarah:

At the level of the first man, there was already an evolution: there is no more male and female like the stage of animals . . . where there is no history but [only] simple reproduction; we are entering into the relationship Ish and Isha, husband and wife . . . But it [this process] came to a halt, [there was] progress [only] up to the relationship husband-wife, whereas the relationship brother-sister could not be reached. This is the question that is posed when the patriarchs of Israel relaunch the history of human identity, when they restart it from the point that Adam reached. Once their identity was constituted, when they reached a certain level of maturity, there began their travels to bear witness, and they went to the frontiers. And Abraham told Sarah: "We are arriving at the frontier, where the civilization of the sun [Egypt] begins. You should say that you are my sister". At first Sarah did not understand, but Abraham explained it to her: "The human person is at stake. In order that the person live, it is not enough that we will be husband and wife, we need to already be brother and sister". (ibid., pp. 275–76)

Having explicated the Cain–Abel story as a case of a failed fraternal relationship, Askenazi now represents Abraham and Sarah as a successful model of such a relationship. Unlike the Cain and Abel story, Askenazi does not enter into a discussion of the content of the fraternal relationship between Abraham and Sarah. Rather, he recasts them as making a point, biblically speaking, about the utmost global importance of fraternity. Notably, in the original verse, Abraham spoke with Sarah in the singular, asking for his own soul to be saved as a consequence of her declaration of her biological kinship to him.⁸ In Askenazi's reading, in contrast, Abraham and Sarah become figures whose conversation is carried out at a universal level, aiming for fraternity that will save the "human person" (ibid.).⁹ For Askenazi, in other words, Abraham and Sarah, as the morally advanced human couple of their time, took upon themselves the more challenging task of fraternal relationships, of externalizing their love, so that they serve as broad example for how to treat one's other. For our purposes, Askenazi, true to his search for the cognates of fraternity in Genesis, extracts from this episode a further indication that what the early historical narrative in the Bible is about is precisely the problem of alterity as fraternity.

Indeed, in this paragraph Askenazi expands the range of his reading of Genesis for fraternity by going back to include the first human couple, Adam and Eve, in his grand narrative. Earlier in his lecture Askenazi insisted that the brothers Cain and Abel, and not their parents, Adam and Eve, mark the true beginning of (biblical) human history. Now, however, Adam and Eve signify a first stage of correct, albeit limited, relations of alterity. Taking Askenazi's exegetical focus on Cain and Abel into account, his brief discussion of Adam and Eve might imply that Abel's murder also consists of a parental failure. For Askenazi, then, despite their own loving relationships, Adam and Eve did not manage to cultivate similar mutual respect between their children. Subsequently, now passing over Noah and his children, the next important biblical couple in Askenazi's retelling of the Genesis story faces the same challenge. Abraham and Sarah aim to make their love an exemplar for their broader society and transmit their advanced moral state, their "maturity" as Askenazi calls it, to their own children. In the latter task, for Askenazi, Abraham and Sarah did not immediately succeed: "Isaac and Ishmael did not love each other. But this is not the end. Yet another failure: The two brothers, Jacob and Esau hated each other. But beginning from Jacob, one can see the solution emerging" (ibid., p. 277).

The term "solution," used here by Askenazi, corresponds with his mathematical metaphor for a relationship of alterity as an "equation of fraternity," invoked earlier in the talk in the explication of the Cain and Abel episode (ibid., p. 273). This metaphor presents alterity cum fraternity as a type of an "equation" between two brothers (say, Cain and Abel). Each side of this equation is significantly different (Cain dominant, Abel dependent), and some operation of transformation must be undertaken in order that the equation be "solved;" i.e., the relationship will become represented by an equal sign, and will reflect mutual respect (Cain will learn responsibility and fraternity, Abel will teach, and together they will achieve peace). In terms of Askenazi's retelling of Genesis, the "solution" then

means the achievement of love rather than hate between siblings. For Askenazi, such an event, the significant exception to the biblical rule of failing to establish true fraternity, occurred with Joseph and his brothers, that is, the children of the third patriarch, Jacob (also named Israel). Despite the brothers' intention to kill Joseph and their act of selling him into slavery, and despite the harsh treatment of his brothers by Joseph when he was the de-facto ruler of Egypt, Askenazi views the last chapters of Genesis (especially Genesis 44:18–45:15; 50:15–21), as a record of their ultimate successful reconciliation.

In Askenazi's view, this achievement of peace between Joseph and the other children of the patriarch Jacob marks a "messianic" moment (ibid., p. 278). This is a moment when brothers in a human family managed to develop mutual loving relationships. This achievement may perhaps not be such a feat for ordinary individuals. However, with Askenazi's retelling of Genesis in the background, this is certainly a distinct achievement for the biblical figures. Moreover, since Askenazi also views his biblical protagonists as human archetypes, for him, the difficulties of reaching fraternity and the possibility of reaching it as conveyed in Genesis carries contemporary implications for Judaism. As he bluntly put it near the end of the lecture:

The sole objective of this history [in Genesis] is to arrive at the construction of fraternity. When this happens [with Joseph and his brothers] the history of the children of Israel can begin, and be attested to, not only like the patriarchs at the level of individuals, but equally at the level of a collective identity of a society, of a nation. However, the history of Israel did not yet reach its completeness. It is a history of an enterprise: To produce the being-brother, to construct fraternity, this is the only solution to the problem of the couple . . . One can repeat this in millions of ways; this is the only thing that is said in the teaching of the patriarchs, of the prophets, of the rabbis, in the entirety of the Jewish tradition . . . (ibid., p. 278)

6. Biblical Fraternity as a Model

The exploration of some of Askenazi's biblical interpretations in 1972 undertaken so far raises multiple issues. While most cannot be addressed here, a few of them must nevertheless be indicated. First, in 1972, and elsewhere in his biblical hermeneutics, Askenazi presents the Genesis stories as simultaneously universal and particular myths. They are universal since they pertain to a global human project to reach an ideal moral state. Yet these stories are also particular in so far as Askenazi's readings delineate what may be called the emergence of Judaism out of humanity, as a particular group with a vocation to be humanity's moral avant-garde. Such an approach, which is neither new nor unique to Askenazi, relates to a set of ethical, political, historical, and theological problems that far exceed the confines of this paper.¹⁰ A second issue pertains to Askenazi's rhetoric. To what degree should Askenazi's assertions, such as the above quoted claim that all of Jewish tradition is singularly concerned with fraternity, be taken at face value, perhaps as a restatement of the same rabbinic discussion referred to by Mendes-Flohr (2007, p. 5)? And, to what a degree should these assertions be perceived as means to underline one's message in a performative oral setting?¹¹ A third point has to do with Askenazi's hermeneutical method. As an exegete, Askenazi introduces a textual guiding anchor, namely, cognates of fraternity, around which he constructs his close reading of selected biblical verses. At the same time, Askenazi's readings depart from the plain level of the text, and the question of whether what he lost in consistency of reading he might have gained by imputing a deeper meaning to the biblical narrative should be pursued. Certainly, in such an undertaking, Askenazi's kabbalistic background, as well as his explicit drawing on the rabbinic tradition of Midrash, should be taken into account.¹²

The most pertinent question for the current discussion, however, is whether Askenazi has offered an account of a second-person, or dialogical, relationship. And, if he did, can his account speak to the developed and far more familiar accounts by figures such as Buber, Rosenzweig, or Levinas? On this point, it must be noted that Askenazi is not a philosopher, and his biblical exegesis is lacking precise definitions of alterity as such. In this, Askenazi's

hermeneutics, albeit more theoretical than legal, fits the description offered by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz for Talmudic thinking:

In the Talmud, as in most areas of original Jewish thought, there is deliberate evasion of abstract thinking based on abstract concepts. Even matter that could easily be discussed through abstraction are analyzed, sometimes clumsily, by other methods, based mostly on unique logical systems aided by models. The Talmud employs models in place of abstract concepts... The model is utilized in accordance with a series of clearly defined steps, approved by tradition . . . Thus there is a high degree of mechanical thought, and no attempt is made to clarify practical or logical problems per se; they [the models] are seen rather as complete entities, and their conclusions are of practical or logical significance, though it is not always possible to understand the convoluted methods of the operation itself. (Steinsaltz and Galai 1976, p. 228)

Following Steinsaltz, Askenazi's mode of treating the question of human love, ethically and broadly conceived, should be understood as an attempt to clarify fraternity through its investigation as a biblical model with multiple variations. For Askenazi, these biblical variations, which pertain to the spiritual forefathers of the Abrahamic religions and especially of Judaism, also carry an ontological dimension. That is, they are not only narrative examples, but also reflections of a persistent and universal human psychological makeup. Seen in this light, while Askenazi cannot be said to have developed a full account of human intersubjectivity, his biblical exegesis, it seems to me, does offer the outlines of such an account. Askenazi's treatment of fraternity in Genesis makes fraternity the primary case for thinking on alterity, and his interest in fraternity implies the claim that any treatment of human intersubjectivity should not begin from relations to one's absolute other, but with one's closest neighbor, which is very often a sibling. As the biblical examples that Askenazi explicates suggest, it might often happen that our greatest ethical challenges take place not vis-à-vis an unknown stranger, but in the face of our closest relations. To recall the expansive meaning of fraternité to which Askenazi constantly appeals, it might be that, for Askenazi, no discussion of intersubjectivity can begin without the underlying view of all of humanity as an extended family.

7. Conclusions

In the previous section, I suggested that Askenazi's conception and deployment of fraternity contribute to broader thinking about second-person perspectives by offering a concrete set of narrative models of such relationships as occurring between siblings. Arguably, support for Askenazi's claim, as presented in this paper, may be solicited from Buber's postwar talk, "Hope for this Hour," delivered in 1952 (Buber 1957). Addressing the emerging geopolitical divides between East and West, Buber, who in his writings rarely discusses one's relationship to one's siblings, declared that:

We can comprehend the origin of this cruel and grotesque condition if we realize how the three principles of the French revolution have broken asunder. The abstractions freedom and equality were held together there through the more concrete fraternity, for only if men feel themselves to be brothers can they partake of a genuine freedom from one another and a genuine equality with one another. But fraternity had been deprived of its original meaning, the relationship between children of God, and consequently of any real content . . . (ibid., p. 221)

Like Askenazi, Buber casts fraternity as the key to achieving global peace in a divided world.¹³ Indeed, according to Buber's dissenting ideological view, it is rather the principle of fraternity, and not of freedom or equality, that is the most "concrete" principle of the French revolution. Recalling the meaning of fraternity in the postwar French-Jewish context discussed earlier, Askenazi's own view on fraternity now becomes clearer. Askenazi's biblical expositions implicitly claim that lack of fraternity is a cause behind the twentieth-century horrors of warfare, violence, and persecutions that targeted Jews as well as other

groups and individuals. As a Jewish thinker, Askenazi also advances the claim that the teachings of the Jewish tradition offer the key to establish human fraternity.

This essay began with Mendes-Flohr's inquiry whether one can command love of fellow human beings, and with Askenazi's commentary in 1996 which tied everyday revelation to the achievement of a morality of fraternity. In conclusion, I offer the possibility that, with Askenazi's help, one can fortify Mendes-Flohr's plea for the cultivation of human compassion. This will be by a call to reflect on and strive to imitate positive models of exercising compassion in a fraternal context, broadly conceived, that are found in religious as well as secular traditions. And, for those who, like Rosenzweig or like Askenazi, are searching for the voice of a transcendent God, Askenazi's biblical commentaries as treated in this article offer an additional benefit to the praxis of loving one's Re'a. This added benefit is revelation, arrived at in a bottom-up way. For Askenazi, it seems, only when humans act with love and sincerity toward each other might a divine loving command to love one's neighbor then appears.

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Notes

- ¹ Here I follow the thesis offered in (Moyn 2005). See (Morgan 2018) for a broad philosophical treatment of this same issue. While Morgan highlights the role that God does play in Levinas's ethics, he maintains the utmost priority of the human second-person encounter for Levinas.
- ² See the biographical notes in (Askenazi and Goldmann 1999, pp. 501–3), and brief autobiography in (Koginski 1998, pp. 23–33). Little has been written on Askenazi in English; for now, see the encyclopedia entry by Charvit (Charvit 2022).
- ³ For one among many introductions to Isaac Luria, see (Fine 2003).
- ⁴ Italicization in the original. Unless otherwise noted, throughout this article, translations from the French or Hebrew are my translation.
- ⁵ For two notable and widely differing French works engaged with the issue of being that were in circulation in the postwar era, see (Marcel 1935; Sartre 1943).
- ⁶ Buber himself usually identified a set of Leitworts rather than a singular one, and his units of analysis usually include several biblical chapters at most (Buber 1994).
- ⁷ Throughout this lecture, Askenazi assumed a normative heterosexuality in line with accepted Orthodox Jewish practice of his time. A gendered critique of Askenazi's views demands a separate study.
- ⁸ Indeed, later in Genesis, when Abraham and Sarah again present as siblings, Abraham explains that Sarah is his half-sister, from his father (Genesis 20:12).
- ⁹ As this term suggest, Askenazi here appeals to the ideas of the personalist movement, which in France was primarily associated with the writings of Emanuel Mounier. See examples in (Mounier 1954).
- ¹⁰ In the history of Jewish thought, the thinker most strongly associated with an approach similar to that indicated by Askenazi is the medieval Jewish poet and thinker Judah Halevi in his Kuzari (and the reception of this work in (Shear 2008)). Askenazi's specific concerns with Judaism's universal and particular element should be also read in his French-Jewish context. See (Hammerschlag 2018) for a selection of text, including one by Askenazi, dealing with this issue.
- ¹¹ For one discussion of Askenazi, his hermeneutics, and his rhetoric, see (Handelman 2010).
- ¹² Out of many aspects of Askenazi's kabbalistic sources, one element that should be noted is his indebtedness to the Lurianic reading of the biblical narrative in Genesis and Exodus as the story of a series of transmigrations of the souls of Cain and Abel. According to this hermeneutical theory, presented most dominantly in Shaa'r Hagilgulim (Vital 2006), after many generations, the interactions between Moses (carrying on elements of Abel's soul) and key figures he encounters during his lifetime, including his father-in-law Jethro (with elements of the soul of Cain), represent the eventual reconciliation between the two primordial biblical brothers.
- ¹³ In this cold war world, according to Buber's suggestions in the talk, the West, led by the United States, championed the principle of Freedom, while the East, led by USSR, promoted the principle of Equality, thereby creating further impoverishment of the three revolutionary principles.

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