

THE FACE OF RELATIONSHIP: THE FORMATION OF JEWISH WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS IDENTITY BETWEEN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND ISRAEL

TVÁŘ VZTAHU: FORMOVÁNÍ NÁBOŽENSKÉ IDENTITY ŽIDOVSKÝCH ŽEN MEZI ČESKEM A IZRAELEM

Hana Bednaříková (Czech Republic)

Abstract

This paper presents a thematically focused segment of a broader dissertation project that explores how Jewish women living in the Czech Republic and Israel reflect on their identity, responsibility, and relationship to the Other in the context of memory, upbringing, and wartime experience after October 7, 2023. The theoretical framework is grounded in Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the Face as an ethical appeal and a site of interpersonal encounter. The study does not offer empirical findings but serves as a conceptual and methodological grounding for research based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Keywords: religious identity; Jewish women; the Face of the Other; upbringing in crisis; war and spirituality

Abstrakt

Příspěvek představuje tematicky vymezenou část širšího disertačního výzkumu, který zkoumá, jak židovské ženy žijící v České republice a Izraeli reflektují svou identitu, víru, odpovědnost a vztah k druhému v kontextu paměti, výchovy a válečné zkušenosti po 7. říjnu 2023. Teoretickým východiskem je pojetí Tváře Emmanuela Lévinase jako etického apelu a místa mezilidského setkání. Studie nepředkládá empirické závěry, ale slouží jako konceptuální a metodologické ukotvení výzkumu, jenž se opírá o interpretativní fenomenologickou analýzu (IPA).

Klíčová slova: náboženská identita; židovské ženy; tvář druhého; výchova v krizi; válka a spiritualita

Introduction

In moments of uncertainty and rapid transformation of the world around us, fundamental existential questions emerge: Who are we? What shapes us? How do we stand in relation to the Other? These questions gain urgency when war enters a person's life, together with the experience of threat, uprootedness, or loss. In such emotionally charged circumstances, religious identity may not only serve as a point of reassurance but also provide a resource for resilience and spiritual orientation (Shevchuk, Shevchuk, & Zaitsev, 2023). Here, identity becomes a process in which individuals strive to preserve wholeness under conditions of existential rupture. As Binder (2022) notes, "choices and actions grounded in the awareness of these life contexts and in an understanding of the existential vulnerability contained within them can be regarded as the core of authentic personal identity" (p. 2237). Thus, the relation to existential vulnerability plays a crucial role in the way individuals shape their identity in a constantly shifting world. In this respect, the text also touches the sociopathological discourse, as it reflects the impact of crisis and traumatization on the subject, family, and community, while at the same time tracing how spiritual structures can provide resources for overcoming such rupture.

This text turns to the stories of Jewish women living in the Czech Republic and Israel and anticipates how they perceive their faith, identity, and place in the world under the current circumstances. The effort of the research is to approach the experience of the Other in its concrete, personal form. For this purpose, I employ a philosophical–ethical framework rooted in Lévinas' concept of the Face, which I understand as a call to responsibility and as a space where alterity manifests itself in a way that cannot be bypassed. Through this relation, profound existential questions may be uncovered.

Within this perspective, I pay particular attention to how women who speak about their religious practice reflect the influences of environment, upbringing, family tradition, and cultural expectations. Although this text captures only one thematic strand of a broader research project, it formulates several guiding questions that structure the forthcoming empirical inquiry:

- How did family upbringing and socialization shape the religious identity of these Jewish women? What specific values, habits, and attitudes were transmitted in childhood, and how did they imprint themselves on their faith and spiritual orientation in adulthood?
- In what ways do the experiences of faith and religious practice differ between women in the Czech Republic and Israel?
- What roles do intergenerational memory and family storytelling play in the

formation of religious identity? How do narratives of survival, loss, migration, continuity of faith, or trauma shape moral and spiritual orientations?

- What role does the concept of the Face of the Other play in these women's life stories? How do experiences of interpersonal encounter become a call to responsibility—toward others, toward oneself, and the Transcendent?
- How have the wartime events of October 7, 2023, been inscribed into the spiritual life and educational strategies of these women? Have their faith, their need for ritual, their levels of trust or anxiety changed? How have these events influenced the way they raise children (if they are mothers), share values, or seek meaning?

The aim is to listen to how the women themselves understand, interpret, and articulate their experience of religious practice in the context of everyday life, social variables, and the ethical relation to the Other.

The Face

The Face comes as an appeal, as the idea of infinity (Lévinas, 2020, p. 170), which disrupts the self-evidence of my world and simultaneously raises the question of what, within me, is shaped by the very presence of the Other. The Face of the Other is not merely an image, but a call; it bears within itself their presence, their alterity, which approaches me as an appeal to responsibility. Through this Face, not only does the Other reveal themselves, but also how the I is capable of seeing, hearing, understanding, and being affected. Education, then, is not merely a social process of transmitting values, but also takes place in the sphere of intersubjective encounter, where ethical experience and pedagogical act intersect. The Face of the Other speaks even without words, and its eloquence is the beginning of moral consciousness—something that cannot be fully grasped conceptually, but can be experienced as disruption, summons, and responsibility. And how does this experience affect my self, transforming it, addressing it, and at the same time placing it under responsibility? Isn't the tragedy of a modern man the result of being a creature that has forgotten to ask: *Who is man?* (Heschel, 2017, p. 14). How does his authentic existence manifest itself in the inner space (Heschel, 2017, p. 15) through the Face?

A way in which a human being experiences oneself about the Other contains both ontological and ethical dimensions. The relation to the Other is not merely a framework for interaction; it is a constitutive element of personal identity. Martin Buber expresses this interconnectedness in the following words: "I become truly myself only through my relation to the Thou; becoming myself, I say Thou" (Buber, 2016, p. 14). He thus indicates that subjectivity is realized only through relational determination—through the address of the Thou. The alterity of the

Other shapes and transforms the way individuals exist in the world, and thereby the way they understand reality around them. Encounter with the Other thus becomes an ethical event, which not only discloses the interpersonal dimension of existence but also demands the acceptance of responsibility. This responsibility is neither optional nor conditioned by reciprocity; it is part of the very essence of human coexistence.

Limit Experience and Ethical Disruption after October 7 as Social Determinants

These conceptual foundations reveal themselves as profoundly relevant considering the events that followed the attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 (Saposnik, 2024). In the atmosphere of a limit experience, an experience of evil, powerlessness, threat, and loss, the ethical relation to the Other discloses itself with renewed urgency. It does not remain an abstract idea but transforms into a concrete experience in which the subject is existentially confronted with the vulnerability of the Other, and thereby with one's ethical situatedness.

This experience, however, is not confined to women living in Israel. Women in the Czech Republic who identify with Judaism also live through these events as an intrusion into their own spiritual and ethical space. Even though they are not directly physically endangered, they perceive the pain of the community as their own; they share anxieties, uncertainties, and the need to rethink the boundaries between their identity, solidarity, and the public sphere. Thus, the limit situation proves to be *translocal*, affecting not only the body but also identity, memory, and spiritual belonging, as shown in research on existential resilience in the everydayness of war (Shevchuk, Shevchuk, & Zaitsev, 2023).

In this context, one cannot avoid the question: What does the face of the Other mean where human dignity is systematically denied? The Face—in the Levinasian sense—is not merely a visual phenomenon but an expression that speaks even in silence; a summons that addresses even when it articulates no message. Where the face is no longer recognized as face, where it is instrumentalized, humiliated, exposed as an object, what takes place is not only physical violence but a rupture in the very ethical structure of the human world (for example, the event of the release of Israeli hostages after 491 days of captivity).

Women's Experience in the Context of War

Facing a confrontation with war, there is a need arising within the human being, a need to understand not only through logical explanation but also through attentive listening to one's own lived experience and relationships with others. The Face of the Other—as Lévinas writes—resists being reduced to an object or content (Lévinas, 2020, p. 168). I proceed

from the assumption that women living in cultural and geographical proximity to war, who share the Jewish tradition, undergo a profound inner transformation, not only in how they understand themselves, but also in the way they form relationships, seek meaning, and bear responsibility for transmitting values to the next generation. The experience of war likely affects their attitudes toward upbringing, not only on the practical level of care, but also in what and how they wish to convey to their children about the world, about faith, and humanity.

Questions resonating with the themes of my planned research are also articulated by Shiri Levinas and Nitza Berkovitch (2020) in their study of women's narratives from Ofakim, a peripheral Israeli town struck by conflict. The women in their research oscillate between an acute awareness of threat and the effort to preserve everyday life. Motherhood emerges as a key motif, an active, ethically grounded force that transcends traditional gender frameworks. Their narratives, albeit indirectly, disclose Levinas' "Face" as an appealing presence that cannot be bypassed. The experiences of these women are not universal; rather, they arise from concrete conditions of marginalization and uncertainty, and it is precisely in this situatedness that they acquire ethical urgency.

Methodological Note

The research is based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on subjective experience and the meaning individuals ascribe to that experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 6). It does not aim to identify general patterns or construct typologies. Rather, it is oriented toward a detailed understanding of how women themselves interpret their experiences in relation to the world, to others, and their own inner life. All research activities are conducted by the ethical principles of qualitative research and have been approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Hradec Králové.

Within the preliminary phase of the research, I have already created personal portraits of five women living in Israel. These portraits will serve as contextual grounding for the subsequent research process. The main research phase is yet to begin. It will involve in-depth semi-structured interviews in Czech, which will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research sample consists of two groups of women aged 20 to 40. The first group comprises Czech women who identify with Judaism and live in Israel, while the second group consists of women living in the Czech Republic.

These interviews will be complemented by an ongoing reflexive diary. The diary is not only a means of capturing details of the research situation but also a space for recording my reactions and questions. I will consciously attend to what is easily overlooked: pauses,

repetitions, hesitations, shifts in tone. Reflexivity here forms part of the responsibility for how the research unfolds (Gulová & Šíp, 2013, p. 107).

The similarity between the narratives of women from Ofakim and the anticipated structure of the narratives in my research shows that this work will not be merely a matter of data collection. The research situation opens itself as a relation, a shared space in which language, experience, and vulnerability meet. It is not about speaking *for* the Other but about being *with* the Other, in openness to her word. In this sense, research itself transforms. The methodological framework becomes a space of encounter, where ethics precedes the very articulation of data. Responsibility begins before the first question is asked.

This proximity, however, carries both methodological and ethical risks, above all, the risk of projecting my meanings. Reflexive practice, articulating one's positions, expectations, and emotional reactions, becomes a tool for making present what enters the interpretative field.

The purpose of this approach lies not only in enhancing the validity of the research but also in its anthropological reach. The human being becomes intelligible not through strength but through vulnerability. In times of crisis, vulnerability emerges with the greatest urgency, as the vulnerability of the body, of relationship, of memory, and of the entire ethical world. As Gutman and Landau (2024) show, the collective trauma of the Jewish community after October 7 has generated new questions concerning the ethical and communal grounding of resilience, including how faith and religious identity become tools of orientation in a lost moral horizon. In this context, philosophy is not a luxury but an attempt at orientation. How can one think a human being when the world itself is collapsing?

Conclusion

This paper has thematized the significance of the Face as an ethical appeal that situates upbringing and religious socialization within a relational framework. It suggests that the formation of religious identity cannot be understood in isolation from social determinants: family environment, cultural memory, and the experience of threat. A phenomenological analysis of the subjective accounts of Jewish women in the Czech Republic and Israel thus opens a space for exploring identity as an intersubjective process in which education in a state of crisis plays a crucial role. Here, the concept of the Face is not only a philosophical metaphor but also a tool for capturing interpersonal responsibility and pedagogical ethics born in the presence of the Other.

In this perspective, subjectivity may be understood not as a stable entity but as a response, and as a relational event realized in the situation of being addressed. The events of October 7, 2023, represent in this context an ethical disruption that transforms the way women experience

faith, responsibility, and their relation to themselves and others. Thus, the research emerges as a task of a dual nature—both methodological and ethical—where the two cannot be separated. It may also be seen as a modest attempt to respond to the question of what it means to preserve one's face in a time when everything is being called into question *face to face*.

References

- Binder, P. E. (2022). Facing the uncertainties of being a person: On the role of existential vulnerability in personal identity. *Philosophical Psychology*, 37(8), 2220–2243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2022.2129002>
- Buber, M. (2016). *Já a ty* (P. Babka & J. Navrátil, Trans.). Portál.
- Gulová, L., & Šíp, R. (Eds.). (2013). *Výzkumné metody v pedagogické praxi*. Grada.
- Gutman, L. M., & Landau, S. D. (2024). Collective trauma and resilience for the Jewish people in the aftermath of 7th October. In R. Freedman & D. Hirsh (Eds.), *Responses to 7 October: Law and society* (pp. 59–67). Routledge.
- Heschel, A. J. (2017). *Kdo je člověk?* (M. Lyčka, Trans.). OIKOYMENH.
- Levinas, E. (2020). *Totalita a nekonečno: Esej o exterioritě* (2nd ed., M. Petříček & J. Sokol, Trans.). OIKOYMENH.
- Levinas, S., & Berkovitch, N. (2020). Women in a conflict zone: Narratives of three generations of women living in the southern periphery of Israel. In A. Mana & A. Srouf (Eds.), *Israeli and Palestinian collective narratives in conflict: A tribute to Shifra Sagy and her work* (pp. 189–211). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Saposnik, A. (2024). Introduction: October 7th and Israel studies. *Israel Studies*, 29(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.2979/is.00001>
- Shevchuk, D., Shevchuk, K., & Zaitsev, M. (2023). Existential resilience of human being in the wartime everyday life. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 22(65), 28–42. <https://www.thenewsjsri.sacri.ro/index.php/njsri/article/view/360/86>
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. SAGE Publications.

Mgr. BcA. Hana Bednaříková
Department of Cultural and Religious Studies
Faculty of Education
University of Hradec Králové
Czech Republic
hana.bednarikova@uhk.cz
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8616-8119>



This proceedings is licensed under a Creative Commons license 4.0 CC-BY-SA 4.0 – Attribution
– Share Alike <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.