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## 2008 Yom Kippur morning: “AIMing for Responsibility: or, Levinas sings, ‘I Owe You, You Owe Me, We’re a Happy Family’”

### 1.

Camp Unistar: Star Island, northern MN, July 16th. It's family camp, with kids' program from 10 till Noon. The adult learning-- about ecology, no less -- is optional; instead I turn to my odd summer beach book: "Nine Talmudic Readings" by Emmanuel Levinas, a leading French (and Jewish) 20th century philosopher, who believed that we come into life so indebted that we can't possibly repay it, but we must try.

I start drafting this very sermon, focusing on one's responsibility to "the Other," a theme that runs through Levinas' thought. Soon I look up; it's 12:03! I run, realizing that I've inconvenienced 'the other' – the counselors! -- while thinking and writing about avoiding just that!

Turns out that my brother-in-law, Dave, picked up my daughter and has been watching her. I briefly explain the irony, flagging this as an amusing anecdote to open my sermon. I asked him, "So -- did I inconvenience you?" He said "oh, no." I asked again, clearing my throat, "did I inconvenience you?!" He paused, got it, and said "sure, you did, enough for the story to work!"

Responsibility to the Other. It's a central religious and philosophical tenet, from the golden rule on down. And it's all over our Machzor, at the core of our Yom Kippur experience. How have we done by "the Other" this year, and how will we do better next year?

### 2.

Emmanuel Levinas. The briefest of bios: born in Lithuania in 1906, touched by the Musar or "popular ethics" movement, started philosophy at Strasbourg in '24, naturalized French in '30, drafted in '40, spent most of the war in Nazi barracks for Jewish POWs, while his wife and daughter survived by hiding; the rest of their families weren't so lucky. Post-war, studied Talmud, ran a Jewish school, rose in philosophy, wrote two magnum opii, influenced Sartre & Derrida & John Paul the Second, retired from the Sorbonne in '79, published 'til '91, died in 1995.

His serious philosophy put ethics (right *action*) above ontology (right *understanding* of why we're here). He also wrote on Talmud, phenomenology, and much more. For that which I can understand, I'm on a Levinas kick; come back on Shabbat and for adult ed, to hear more. Today, just three short quotes:

(1) A set day with all the ceremonial solemnity of Yom Kippur is needed for the 'damaged' moral conscience to...reconquer its integrity ... Ritual is not at all external to conscience; it conditions it... The sense of justice dwelling in the Jewish conscience -- that wonder of wonders -- is perhaps in part due to the fact that for centuries Jews fasted on Yom Kippur, observed the Sabbath and the food prohibitions...and understood the love of one's neighbor as a duty of piety...<sup>1</sup>

(2) ... Israel would teach that the greatest intimacy...consists in being at every moment responsible for the other, the hostage of others. . Even if you are free, you are not the absolute beginning. You come after many things and many people. You are not just free; you are also bound to others beyond your freedom.... Your liberty is also fraternity.”<sup>2</sup>

And (3) ...One more time let us recall the word of the Lithuanian rabbi Israel Salanter: the material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs ... everything begins with the right of the other person, and with my infinite obligation toward them...”<sup>3</sup>

### 3.

Unique to Yom Kippur ‘morning’ is the Avodah service. We recall what the High Priest did, this day, when the Temple still stood. Amid ritual lovingly recounted in the Machzor, the priest made three separate confessions – distinct only in the circle of responsibility he drew each time.

First: “O Lord, forgive I pray... [that] which I have committed, transgressed, and sinned before you – I and my house.” Second: “forgive I pray...[what I have] sinned before you – I and my house and the children of Aaron, your holy people” (the priesthood). Third: “forgive I pray...the sins which your people, the House of Israel, have committed.” All of us.

From this we learn: responsibility to the Other grows outward. First we focus on ourselves and our family; that’s natural, sacred even. But we then need a larger circle, to encompass our extended group – the entire priesthood for the kohen gadol; for us, perhaps fellow Adat Shalomers, neighbors, coworkers, coreligionists -- those we consider friends and those we might not – all are included in our circle of concern.

And finally, we let it encompass all in our ken – back then, all of Israel; today, all who share this fragile planet. Our Machzor<sup>4</sup> faithfully translates these three confessionals, then adds this: “O Holy One, please grant atonement for the sins, the wrongdoing and the transgressions that the House of Israel have done before you, they, and all who dwell on earth’.”

So -- who exactly is “the Other”? It’s one we know, and feel directly accountable to. It’s one we’re somehow connected with, but don’t personally know. And, it’s a nameless faceless someone ‘out there’.

Some Jews still don’t buy it, even in our globalized world, and end accountability with “all Israel.” The rabbis did turn *ger*, ‘stranger,’ into *ger tzedek*, righteous convert, a former stranger only. Yet there’s no denying the framers’ intent: “*V’ahavtem et ha’ger*, you shall love the stranger, *ki gerim hayitem*, for you were strangers yourselves *b’eretz Mitzrayim*, in Egypt.”<sup>5</sup> The Other could be anyone -- and we come into the world indebted to them.

### 4.

Example: cars and driving.

Back at Adat Shalom, on Shabbat, scores of vehicles can’t park in our lot. You meant to bike to shul, thought you’d carpool with your friend – but instead you burned half a \$4-gallon of gas, moving a ton of steel and glass and plastic to get your late-awakening self to shul, alone. Leaving the next folks to turn around, drive a half-mile to Eggert or Country Club Lane, and walk the narrow way in the rain, or wait for the shuttle.

Consider last week’s email from a member of Adat Shalom who lives nearby: “...a gentle but strong reminder to drive S-L-O-W-L-Y through the neighborhood...If you don’t feel as if you are driving slow, you are probably driving too fast. And -- no names here -- I have seen more than one congregant go through the intersection on Lilly Stone Drive without stopping at the 4-way STOP sign. Scary. I have a 4th-grade son who rides his bike around the neighborhood... So, PLEASE pay attention -- everywhere, of course (but I don’t so much

recognize Adat Shalom people driving on the Beltway...) -- because it only takes...one failure to stop... '

Now back to brother-in-law Dave, who went to Cornell, whose town is setting for Dick Louire's poem, "What It's Like Living In Ithaca New York" (abridged):

here's what it's like: let's say.../...you recently noticed the brakes were beginning to fade / you start down Buffalo Street hill ...[at] the blinking yellow light at Stewart Avenue those brakes are not good / and it gets worse ...the Terrace Hill Apartments flash by you like the past / you feel terror in your wrists, your stomach / and you know those brakes are gone and you won't be able to stop at the red light on Aurora / where there are several people leisurely crossing your path: maybe on their way from the Unitarian Church to Hal's Delicatessen or they just left their own apartment to go buy flowers... / there they are and you can't stop / so this is what it's like: as if your brakes failed and you couldn't avoid running right through that crowd knocking them all apart -- ... well the chances are that on any given day at least one of those people would be somebody you had quarreled with last year and hadn't spoken to since / or a friend you had visited only last week / or even the person you were once married to yourself / who would see / just before impact / that it was you / that's what it's like living in Ithaca"

We're responsible to the Other, to get those brakes checked. To stop at the red sign. To carpool whenever possible. Recognizing our impact on Others *within* our lives, our circle -- it's a necessary spiritual practice, always, and a necessary first step... *only* a first step...

## 5.

Instead of Ithaca or Bethesda, say twenty years hence you're in Bangladesh, sixth-most populous nation in the world, low-lying country most affected by increased flooding and extreme weather. By then atmospheric CO2 is nearing 450 parts per million (up from 385 in 2008, when we were warned of the need for intense turnabout, but oops, didn't take it seriously enough); the death toll is at record levels. You're in Hassan and Amara's tiny house, comparing lifestyles, cubic footage of homes, use of air conditioning, miles driven and flown. What do you say to them about getting up a little late, wanting to make things a little more convenient, burning that extra half-gallon of gas? You won't be allowed to say, "we didn't know."

There will come a reckoning, for all our 'missings of the mark' -- you *will* eventually face an "Other" whose family and community *you* have harmed. It's reality. Yom Kippur is that uncomfortable day when we think *ahead* to that reckoning, plan ahead *for* it -- and change the future.

Now, reverse that future: carpool. Fewer folks had to park offsite -- but on your way, you see one making the trek; your carpool offers its last seat; and drops them quickly at their hybrid, steering safely clear of the many Adat Shalomers on bikes heading home. Say we make good personal and political choices in 5769 and thereafter, create a new Apollo program for energy efficiency, care enough -- and find in 20 years we've brought CO2 levels down, well on our way to the needed "at least 80% reduction by 2050" -- and have saved Bangladesh.... Not bad...

## 6.

But let's start closer to home. Some months ago, while I taught Torah School, Rabbi Sid's d'var torah focused on Agriprocessors, that 'kosher' slaughter house in Iowa, targeted for labor reforms by government *and* a group of non-Orthodox rabbis. To the question, 'do non-Orthodox Jews have a right to protest or boycott,' the resounding answer was "yes" (don't know

if he asked about vegetarians protesting!). As individuals, we may or may not buy kosher meat. But as Jews, we're concerned about abuses in a visibly Jewish-owned and -run facility. And as humans, we're concerned about abuses anywhere. I believe Rabbi Sid mentioned my upcoming class, "Sources of Justice," exploring traditional texts that inform this very situation<sup>6</sup> – led into by Levinas.

Levinas, commenting on a Mishnah about workers' rights, admits he barely understands the then-current expression, 'opening up the soul in its love of God,' but still: "I ask myself, isn't there a certain connection between [reasonable] working hours and the love of God, with or without the opening up of the soul? I am even inclined to believe that there are not many other ways to love God than to establish these working hours correctly, no way that is more urgent..."<sup>7</sup>

A new friend recently shifted careers from the labor movement to Jewish youth; she's arranged for immigrant teen workers from Agriprocessors to talk with Jewish teens in her program. (She's now in touch with our own youth committee, rest assured!). I see no better way to make loving the stranger, responsibility to the Other, more real: meeting face to face peers, oppressed by a system in which our teens may be unwittingly complicit, and planning together how the situation can change.

In what systems are we unwittingly complicit, closer to home? Are there ways we can sit face-to-face with those most directly impacted by injustices in our own backyard, and talk together about how the situation can change?

Yes, there are.

## 7.

Across the country -- encouraged by our very own Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, which has made this a top priority, as has the Reform movement and the Jewish Funds for Justice -- shuls like ours are beginning to join with larger networks of congregations and citizen groups, to work together for real social change.

Here in Montgomery County, where four-fifths of our members live and all worship, the vehicle is Action in Montgomery, or AIM -- which just hired its first rabbi/organizer, my friend and colleague Rabbi Erica Asch. She's encouraging area shuls to get involved. One Conservative shul in Gaithersburg beat us to it long ago; three in northern Virginia are now helping start AIM's equivalent there. And others in our County are considering it alongside us.

Within our movement, we're laggards. Over a minyan of leading Reconstructionist shuls are involved in (and many more exploring) their local CBCO, Congregation-Based Community Organizing, efforts -- including those whose leadership we often cite, like Dorshei Tzedek in Newton Mass, West End and the SAJ in New York, and the sister shul we visited last spring, in Montclair New Jersey<sup>8</sup> -- see their quote, and helpful resources,<sup>9</sup> on the songsheet-handout.

Why such a groundswell? -- 1) It refocuses us on why we're here. 2) the interfaith component forces us to better understand our own faith. 3) its organizing model is, first-and-foremost, internal community-building. 4) its leadership development potential is unparalleled. 5) Solidarity, and Responsibility to the Other.

Many board members and staff hope that we *will* engage with AIM -- will take this message of interdependence, responsibility, love of the Other, to the next communal level. We come into the world more indebted than we can possibly repay -- but we must try. We can begin by standing with others across the County, most of whom face challenges yet greater than ours, and working together on tikkun olam, writ large. Levinas reminds us that doing so is not only a mitzvah, it's how we get in touch with the deepest part of ourselves.

## 8.

Today, Yom Kippur: time to consider our mis-steps, so that we stop them, and do better next time. Let's commit now to structures which will HELP us do better.

Commit to learning more Torah -- for "*Talmud Torah kneged kulam*," the study of Torah is equal to all the mitzvot (because it -- especially Levinas! -- leads us there).

Commit to carpooling, or biking to shul, more than you did last year (-- how's that for a twist on the "come to shul more often" sermon, still too common elsewhere?!).

Commit to the candidates you think will best realize these values, your values, in the public sphere, one month hence.

Commit to approaching, with an open mind, Adat Shalom's involvement in AIM.

And above all: commit to making a spiritual practice of reflecting on your impact on the "Other" -- both near and far -- so we all can show up *next* Yom Kippur with that much less to atone for.

G'mar Chatimah tovah.

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<sup>1</sup> Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (ed. & trans. Annette Aronowicz, 1990), page 17, slightly adapted.

<sup>2</sup> Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, page 85, slightly adapted.

<sup>3</sup> Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, pages 99-100, slightly adapted.

<sup>4</sup> Kol Haneshama L'Yamim Noraim, p. 983 and elsewhere.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 10:19

<sup>6</sup> The Conservative Movement's impressive *Heksher Tzedek al pi Din*, ed. by Rabbi Avraham Reisner.

<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, page 103, slightly adapted.

<sup>8</sup> "CBCO has created a framework for transforming the language of justice into the language of covenant. All areas of our synagogue life are now more rooted in our relationships with each other. It's a much more Jewish way..." - Rabbi Elliott Tepperman, Bnai Keshet (a sister JRF shul), Montclair NJ

<sup>9</sup> [www.jrf.org/cbco](http://www.jrf.org/cbco); [www.jewishjustice.org/jfsj.php?page=2.5](http://www.jewishjustice.org/jfsj.php?page=2.5)