Emor may 18, 2019

[the kohen] is holy to his God.

8You shall sanctify him, for he offers up the food offering of your God; he shall be holy to you, for I, the Lord Who sanctifies you, am holy.

For the past few weeks, as a group of us read Levinas, I have been searching within our parshahot for passages that might relate to Levinas. I will cite a few of the Levinas lines that I found inspiring; they are much like what I used about a month ago for the last parshah, and basically focuses on the notion that that what underlies our humanity, our being, has the special distinction of being different from that of objects or any other creatures. The difference emerges in what Levinas calls the face-to-face, what I call the Hinani moment. Other philosophers call it interpellation (Althusser), meaning being addressed, being called upon. In the Chumash, God calls Abraham, who responds, hinani. I am here, I hear you, I recognize both the call and the need to respond. We respond to those who call on us to respond to them, not like animals and with obedience, not like my new device Alexa who kindly turns on radio stations or gets quiet at my command; not like things; not like our pets whose recognition seems more a matter of need. Cats and dogs can be close to us; they are not our children or spouses. When we talked about Levinas last week, I remembered what it felt like when my grandchildren grew to the point where they were more than little cute things needing to be fed or changed or held or bounced or put to sleep, but ones who saw us, saw Liz, recognized her, and smiled. We have a 10 month old now, who turns her head when called, smiles when her name is called. We say, Ayla, and someone is there, and when she acknowledges our call, we feel the magic of connecting, of being connected, not just of serving needs.

So when the kohanim offer the food offering to god, and we are told they shall be holy to you, for I the lord who sanctify you am holy, my thoughts immediately turn to Aaron’s two sons who were killed, burnt up, for having made the offering in an incorrect fashion.

It would trouble me enormously if I had to read the rabbinical rationalizations for this murder, forcing me to question the adherence to such a religion. For Levinas the world we inhabit is accessible to us through our senses, and corresponds to the emotional states we experience through our interactions with other people and the world around us. If we belong to a society, one in which we understand the need for those outside of our close personal lives to adhere to social codes and laws, then we can say we participate in a totality. But it doesn’t require a personal relationship for that. The personal moment that arises when we look at the face of another, and both seek recognition and experience recognition, putting us in touch with something different, you might say more than society, and Levinas calls it the infinite. He calls that appeal to speak to the other, or respond to the other, prayer, religion, the infinite, and he finds it in the features of the face. I see you. Not I love you, but I recognize you. And not that I recognize you as my plumber, or as the ballplayer, etc., but as Ayla, our Ayla, our little Ayla. The one who just began to crawl, and whose three year old sister might just want to hug her, or whack her—we are never quite sure which, yet.

If I were to read our parshah with that face-to-face in mind, where might I find it?

Leviticus offers the ultimate test. On the one hand, if I were to belong to a jewish community that respects the regime of laws detailed in Leviticus, I’d have to believe that observance is a value in itself, and that requires believing there is a god, that that god wrote the laws, that the transmission of the laws was divinely guided, that my life should be regulated by 613 mitzvot. Why should we observe kosher laws or the ten commandments or anything when we respect none of these claims, and yet feel ourselves to be jewish. Perhaps there are two sides to being Jewish: the insiders and outsiders: those who learned Hebrew in Hebrew school, whose parents knew Yiddish and what glatt-kosher meant, and especially what treif meant; and those who not only didn’t know, but didn’t care, and were proud of identifying with Einstein rather than the orthodox. In neither case, obedience or rebellion, was there a face-to-face to guide us.

Ultimately Leviticus came to force a face-to-face between these two sides, the total rules group and the infinite undisciplined group. I want to propose looking at this question, how to be jewish and read these passages, holding Levinas as a possible way.

I have to do this expeditiously, so I won’t drag out the question: what does it mean to have a defect, and therefore not qualify for making the offering to god—not to be holy. Without being Christian about it, can’t I prefer to be in the defective camp? Here is the definition for one of a myriad ways to be defective: Any “man among your offspring throughout their generations who has a defect, shall not come near to offer up his God's food.

18For any man who has a defect should not approach: A blind man or a lame one, or one with a sunken nose or with mismatching limbs;

19or a man who has a broken leg or a broken arm;

20or one with long eyebrows, or a cataract, or a commingling in his eye; dry lesions or weeping sores, or one with crushed testicles”

I’ve always admired as ideal types the bohemians and beatnicks of my generation. I broke my arm twice. I have long eyebrows, which Liz always wants me to cut, which I refuse to do. I never knew why before now. I had cataract surgery, so in correcting the defect, I became permanently artificial, and as a result can now see clearly in the distance and wear sunglasses. Defects mean I identify with people who are highly imperfect, who grew up loving curse words, and looking at dirty magazines. But there was one problem about defectiveness: would others permit you to approach them. This listing makes it clear: “21Any man among Aaron the kohen's offspring who has a defect shall not draw near to offer up the Lord's fire offerings. There is a defect in him; he shall not draw near to offer up his God's food.”

Drawing near seems important if you are seeking the face-to-face. What does the nearness imply? That one can be so unimportant as to deceptively assume the face of defection: what Levinas finds that Christians seek in their savior, or better Isaiah seeks in “’dwell[ing]’ with the contrite and the humble” (57), or what we otherwise call “the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.” Not the owner of the field, with whom Leviticus identifies, but the gleaners for whom the owners leave the corners. The outcast, what French call the marginal. Levinas plays at Christians on their notion of this person as having come into the space of our world, and left, leaving a trace. The trace appears in the features of a face glimpsed by those who have not yet had their cataract surgery: “The trace is not just one more word: it is the proximity of God in the countenance of my fellowman” (57). Though we can imitate this facing, we can only approach it defectively, crushed testicles and all. Levinas calls this vulnerability our nakedness, the very state we are barred from approaching in all those who are deemed to be too close to us.( No man shall come near to any of his close relatives, to uncover [their] nakedness. I am the Lord…. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.) Levinas says, “The nakedness of the face” can be extirpated from our encounters in this world . . .” (57), not from another plane of reality or holiness. “The face is precisely that through which the exceptional event of the *facing* (en-face) is produced, which the façade of the building and of things can only imitate.” He evokes the presence of God, and calls it “the most naked nakedness, the ‘defenseless’” which is “‘without resources itself,’ the destitution and poverty of absence that constitutes the proximity of God—the trace” (57). And he provides the basis for the face to face, the ground for the encounter, stating “it comes enigmatically from the Infinite and its immemorial past, and …this covenant between the poverty of the face and the Infinite is inscribed” on the responsibility I bear toward you before I know you as a person or know your needs. This is the originary basis for the encounter with the Infinite, so that, as he says, “The relation with the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a proximity” (58). A face-to-face with others.

You can tell where I am going. Aaron and his sons bring into that proximate space of the tent of the Meeting the twelve loaves of offering, and there eat the bread: “, and they shall eat it in a holy place, for it is holy of holies for him, among the fire offerings of the Lord, an eternal statute.”

Then the listing of rules is interrupted; the purity and holy discourse of statues and obedience, stops. A pause, a small hint of something different to come: the word “Now.” What else could there be? We have had no real people yet, only a list of defectiveness and exclusions, punishments.
10Now, the son of an Israelite woman and he was the son of an Egyptian man went out among the children of Israel, and they quarreled in the camp this son of the Israelite woman, and an Israelite man.

11And the son of the Israelite woman pronounced the [Divine] Name and cursed. So they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan.

Already this mixed race man must have been different, difficult, uncontrollable. Let’s not romanticize. If he becomes unholy, it is to become the infinite scapegoat who is charged with bearing the weight of all in the community, to bear their touch, through which closeness their sin might pass onto him. The pronouncement of Leviticus: “14Take the blasphemer outside the camp, and all who heard [his blasphemy] shall lean their hands on his head. And the entire community shall stone him.”

Levinas says we are free, except for our responsibility for other: “I am free to assume my responsibility, put a good face on a bad situation, except at the approach of my fellowman.” I want to read the responsibility he sees inscribed in that situation, that approach and proximity, against this act of punishment made in obedience to the covenant of Levitucus. Levinas writes of responsibility to the other: “[E]verything happens as if I were at the beginning; except at the approach of my fellowman. I am recalled to a responsibility never contracted, inscribed in the face of the Other” (58). When those who heard the blasphemer put their hands on his head and leaned on him, and then stoned him to death, did any of them see his face? And if so, what responsibility for him did they feel? Did they glimpse in his face a trace of the Infinite?