Shavuos

“The giving of the Torah was a far-reaching spiritual event—one that touched the essence of the Jewish soul for all times. Our sages have compared it to a wedding between G‑d and the Jewish people. *Shavuot* also means “oaths,” for on this day G‑d swore eternal devotion to us, and we in turn pledged everlasting loyalty to Him.

In ancient times, two wheat loaves would be offered in the Holy Temple on Shavuot. It was also at this time that people would begin to bring *bikkurim*, their first and choicest fruits, to thank G‑d for Israel’s bounty.”

https://www.chabad.org/library/article\_cdo/aid/609663/jewish/What-Is-Shavuot-Shavuos.htm

I’ve been reading the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas recently, and his writings strike me as filled with wonder. However, his wonder differs profoundly from that of the Chabad lines above that focus on Shavuos as the holiday that presents the central event of Judaism the giving of the torah, as a wedding.

While I like the idea of idolizing books, this seems quite distant from a humanistic faith, a Judaism that might lead us to caring for the poor who glean at the edges of the fields after the harvest. Unless we choose to read that metaphor from below, where we would not be the landowners but the gleaners. In Leviticus we read, "And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God" (Lev. xix. 9, 10).

Gleaning is like begging, like taking charity; there is one who gives and one who receives. The giver enjoys the pleasure of having enough extra to give away without himself suffering from the consequences; the receiver might have been one of those women who received the benefits of Harvey Weinstein’s beneficence, but who ultimately suffered the consequences of regretting the way she was expected to express her gratitude.

In short, gleaning, charity, giving, taking, all put a best face on a bad situation where we might imagine that generosity wouldn’t be necessary if the poor had their own fields to harvest, and the rich didn’t have so much that their garbage throwaways were necessary for the poor to survive. Who would glean if they didn’t have to do so?

The most famous painting about gleaning is that of Millet.[Image of PAINTing]

Two of the gleaners who appear in the foreground in Millet’s painting are bent over, picking at the stubble. The third is half bent, has a black face and hand, and betrays her poverty, like the other two women, by her plain dress and truly meager pickings. We barely catch glimpses of their faces, and without any expression to read can’t engage them closely as people. We can say only that we understand them as the poor, and can understand the hints Millet provides by the way he portrays their impoverishing takings which stand in stark contrast to the huge stacks of wheat that appear in the background. There on the horizon appear the owners of the land, the well to do, standing upright before their enormous stacks of wealth, their white city, their town—who knows, their country even. The owners; the workers. Rich, poor.

We were slaves in Egypt, with no country. We wandered in the desert for forty years; we complained to Moses about having to leave, about the hardships of the exodus. We lived the exodus, the nights of fear and dark knives, and all the rest of a long history, but somehow at one point acquired a set of laws informing us of an entire regulatory order that we were obliged to follow. And at the heart of that order lay the central event that bound us, the recipients of the gift, to the one who bestowed the order, the mitzvot, upon us. “The giving of the Torah was a far-reaching spiritual event—one that touched the essence of the Jewish soul for all times. Our sages have compared it to a wedding between G‑d and the Jewish people. *Shavuot* also means “oaths,” for on this day G‑d swore eternal devotion to us, and we in turn pledged everlasting loyalty to Him.”

That event and the mitzvot always position us, in the Torah, as the owners, not the gleaners. We are forbidden, as men, from taking a woman who is not suitable for us, not related properly Not a foreign woman or a prostitute, etc. We are enjoined to be generous, but also, as though continually at risk of disobeying, continually tempted to fall away. We are told we will be punished if we violate the contract, the covenant. We are repeatedly presented with the prophecy that most of us will become sinner and abrogate the covenant, be punished, and die, while only the few good, the remnant, or the children will survive. If we are the brides of god, we are also the unfaithful ones who break the covenant. The haftorahs for this week and for ex 19 spell this out. I will turn to the haftorahs soon for an answer to the question of giving, under what conditions is the exchange, the giving and receiving, awesome, and conversely, when is it deadening.

It all began at the beginning. What is the beginning? Maybe bereshit provides an answer that shuts down further questions with the definitive version of creation: here is where we came from. Further answers follow: these were our forebears, our adam and eve. These were our people and where they came from. Here were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and here the covenant. All these answers presuppose that god was there at the beginning, and god created the world and human beings. Genesis is filled with stories that begin anew, like Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, or Noah, that expose an order that can’t be sustained, that lead to a fall, a flood, a killing. Disorder, punishment, and then a new day. The tower of babel falls; the scattered people begin their lives again. Able gone, Cain wanders often to find his new life. To be orderly we needed another story to which we could feel a link: the Abraham story, the other beginning that came after the disorderliness following creation, and from Abraham the people who are numberless, us. With Abraham, the covenant, the family of patriarchs, the beginnings each time that led to the same night under the stars, the wrestling with the angel, and then the covenant anew or renewed or reaffirmed. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, patriarchs, meaning, order, the promise of a covenant, the giving of lands, the fields giving milk and honey, and enough left over for the gleaners.

This version of the beginning comes to a conclusion in Egypt when Joseph finally dies, his pharaoh-master dies, the people’s sojourn appears settled. A new story has to begin, this time with a new baby and his miraculous rescue, his discovery of who he is and of a miracle voice in a burning bush. Moses takes me to where I want to go: to the last beginning, separate from all those that preceded it, and that turns on the Chabad version of Shavuos where the covenant created by the handing down of the tablets on Sinai determined the settled account of god’s relation with the jews from then on.

In fact, the contours of this last story were defined by the rules set forth on the tablets, laws to be obeyed, with the understanding that the majority of the Israelites would always fall away from obedience, would be punished or die, after which the remnant, the children, would be the ones to return to faithfulness and reap the rewards.

This is the point where I want to try to locate a different kind of beginning that doesn’t end with laws, violation, and punishment. Chapter after chapter from exodus on takes us back to this pattern: I saved you, you are my people, I take you as mine and give you this gift of the laws, for you to obey. You will fail, just like Pharaoh who repeatedly agreed to the demands of Moses and then reneged. Pharaoh, his people, his animals, and the first born Egyptian children were all punished until they capitulated. And even then, they reneged, were punished in the Red Sea, and died. The Israelite people suffered in the wilderness, were given spring water, manna, miraculous encounters with god, and ultimately the torah. But the story that begins with that narrative always ends with something like the golden calf being created, scouts to the new land being disbelieved, revolt against Moses, the laws being violated, and the people being punished.

It isn’t that the pain of the punishment is too great, although in anecdote after anecdote, as with that of the half Israelite half Egyptian man who curses god and is stoned to death, the pattern becomes grinding, or worse when Aaron’s sons are killed for performing the rites incorrectly, or when the levites are called to slaughter all those who rebelled against god, against moses, against the rules and order. It’s that this version of our story is grounded in the logics and metaphors of a war god for whom obedience is the key issue in this version of the story. Obedience requires punishment if the story is to be completed. It requires a beginning grounded in an absolute power working within an alien finite universe, one which god visits but does not reside in. Most of all, that figure of absolute power works on a people who are subordinate to that power and whose fate is seen in relation to that power. Chabad calls this version a wedding, but it is clear that the groom has the power to punish his bride. This is the metaphor extended by Hosea when he describes how the people fell away from their fidelity to the groom-God, and the punishing she was to experience as a result. This was the Haftorah for Bamidbar, this past week’s parshah.

HOSEA chapter 2

4Strive with your mother, strive, for she is not My wife, and I am not her Husband, and let her remove her harlotries from her face and her adulteries from between her breasts.

5Lest I strip her naked and leave her as [on] the day she was born; and I make her like a desert, and I set her like an arid land, and cause her to die of thirst.

6And I will not pity her children for they are children of harlotries.

7For their mother played the harlot; she who conceived them behaved shamefully, for she said, "I will go after my lovers, those who give my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drinks. "

8Therefore, behold I will close off your way with thorns, and I make a fence against her, and she shall not find her paths.

9And she shall pursue her lovers and not overtake them, and she shall seek them and not find them; and she shall say, "I will go and return to my first Husband, for it was better for me then than now.

10But she did not know that I gave her the corn, the wine, and the oil, and I gave her much silver and gold, but they made it for Baal.

11Therefore, I will return and take My corn in its time and My wine in its appointed season, and I will separate My wool and My flax, to cover her nakedness.

12And now, I will bare her disgrace before the eyes of her lovers, and no man shall save her from My hand.

…

18And it shall come to pass on that day, says the Lord, you shall call [Me] Ishi, and you shall no longer call Me Baali.

19And I will remove the names of the baalim from her mouth, and they shall no longer be mentioned by their name.

20And I will make a covenant for them on that day with the beasts of the field and with the fowl of the sky and the creeping things of the earth; and the bow, the sword, and war I will break off the earth, and I will let them lie down safely.

21And I will betroth you to Me forever, and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and with justice and with loving-kindness and with mercy.

22And I will betroth you to Me with faith, and you shall know the Lord.

Curses and blessings; the law of the covenant, the covenant of the patriarchs, the ethic of obedience. It is difficult to find in this pattern, this logic, the moments of transcendence when one’s breath is taken away by the beauty and engagement of the image, or the story. We don’t want to engage the Torah as an historical artifact, but something closer to the wedding that resonates for us with a more joyful music. We need to begin again, elsewhere.

Levinas begins elsewhere. In the beginning there was one person who encountered another. Not a god who creates, not the handing down of a torah of commandments from on high, and not the punishment of those who failed to obey, but of an encounter between two people who were always already there.

With this beginning, Levinas wants to account for an awesome experience and moment apart from the spaces where war gods are to be found. Two people meet without any rules to define the contours of the encounter, without one commanding the other, without master and slave. What follows leads Levinas to his transcendental moment—a moment in which feelings, come into play, and in which questions of mortality, finite being, and infinitude, arise. For Levinas, it is in the feelings evoked when we meet others, when one meets those who are different from themselves, that reaching beyond ourselves becomes possible.

Beginning with finite being, then, means a coming to being not through god or by oneself, but in the encounter with others, the encounter that returns us to ourselves through the Other. What is the nature of the encounter? We might imagine it as one in which we discover ourselves through the opening to the relationship between two equal beings, instead of master-slave, where the possibility for a transcendental exchange of love, or a real relationship with the other becomes possible. Not the other as an object, but another subject that enables me to perceive my own status as a subject, as someone, not a thing, in relation to another. This would be the opening for Buber’s I-Thou relationship.

Levinas begins somewhat differently. We encounter the other, at the outset, as a person with a face, which we engage by looking at. I see you. Your face, and then, your eyes which I see looking at me. I don’t know anything about you, but it is immediately apparent that you can perceive in me someone who might take hold of you. I can do that by learning who you are; by seizing hold of you; but taking advantage of you, of the vulnerability that I perceive what Levinas calls the nakedness of your face. You are then open to me; not in the sense of being vulnerable to the loss of my love, as an infant craves the approval of its parent, but of the stranger who now has some kind of access to you where you might be vulnerable. Nobody is offering any gifts at this point; nobody is actually threatening anybody either, or making a move that determines what the relationship will turn out to be. No master, no slave. But an encounter marked by a vulnerability. The gaze of the other person is returned to me so that I recognize my own responsibility to that vulnerability. If I let that vulnerable person down, I am responsible; if I enslave him, beat her, bend them to my will, I will have imposed an order of force on our relationship. In the order I impose, I decide to ignore the call of the vulnerable, naked face, end the exchange by shutting down its initial open gaze. I will have given the command, defined it as a mitzvah, and turned willingly to a punishment for violating its conditions. God as master, not as groom.

If I stop first, if I look, see, and see myself being seen, recognize the vulnerability, and then open myself to that experience, a wonder occurs, for which Levinas utilizes the language of religion. What follows might be a relationship of intimate love between two, who shut out the rest of the world, or of a third interlocutor, excluded from that exclusive couple, who felt left out, hurt, and in need of justice. Society imposes its order, we learn the rule not to kill the other, to leave the corners of the fields for the gleaners, to give without the gun, to take without the gun, to learn how to be together, all conditions for the social order. But the beginning, the sense of something with more to it than simply existing, but having a being and feeling its miraculous experience, reaches out for more than mere living and getting along, getting by.

The language Levinas uses to evoke the moment of meeting the other, the effect it has, the emotional charge and sense of responsibility, leaps out at us, and I want to give you a taste of his text to acquaint you with it. He begins with the meeting, in which we recognize that another is meeting, is seeing and recognizing us: “Man is the only being I cannot meet without expressing this meeting itself to him…In every attitude toward the human being there is a greeting—even if it is the refusal of a greeting.” “[M]y understanding of a being as such is already the expression I offer him or her of that understanding” (7). Expression, meaning how our feelings are made available to others, is key for Levinas—we not only see and attempt to understand another in this meeting, we are expressing some social feeling of interaction, and we can’t do that without interpellating, that is, calling out, reaching out, speaking to and not just speaking words. The calling out is an evocation, which is what I call the Hinani moment: god calls, Abraham, Abraham, and expects an acknowledgment of the call. The acknowledgment, the I am here, is Hinani, which comes back to mark the encounter each time. I call, there is an answer, a covenant can now be initiated. I don’t call you as an object, but as a real person, with a name, as someone who’s returning words, whose gaze back at me, perhaps is the underlying basis for the Chabad term wedding in God’s call to the Israelites. Levinas says, “This bond with the other which is not reducible to the representation of the other, but to his invocation, and in which the invocation is not preceded by an understanding, I call *religion*.” The call and response we can call the introduction of a dialogue; Levinas calls it prayer. “The essence of discourse is prayer.” It distinguishes itself from simply identifying the other—hey, you are an Arcadian—or commanding the other, “Hey you, do this.” “What distinguishes thought directed toward a thing from a bong with a person is that in the latter case a vocative is uttered: what is named is at the same time what is called.” When God says, remain true to the covenant and I will walk among you and will be your God and you will be my people” (Lev XXVI, 12), this is God’s way of saying, here is my face: “I will have respect unto you” (9), I will look upon you with favor. If you do not listen, God says, “I will set my face against you” (17).

For Levinas the meeting with the other comes first, before anything else, before creation or obedience or explanations about the world or who we are. I call, you answer. Hinani. It is a moment in which our finitude ceases to hold us into the closed space of self, and enables the encounter with the other to open our understanding to the nature of being as reaching beyond. It is not an intellectual moment of comprehension and grasping the nature of the other, or of ourselves, but of reaching beyond our finitude, and he holds that it is only by an encounter with the face of the other that this can occur. He states the word “religion” entails the sensibility of a moment not marked by understanding, and thus not by an exercise of power. Finally, as if in a psalm by David, he states the relation between people “in human faces joins the Infinite” (8). “’Religion’ remains the relationship to a being as a being.” Unconcerned with God here, he focuses our attention entirely on that meeting, the being whom we perceive and which is perceived in us, that becomes accessible to us, perceptible to us, and available to us, at that moment. Being, not God, is what is hidden in the burning bush, and as if in exhileration at the fountain of Jewish ethic, he says, “That being is man, and it is as a neighbor that man is accessible: as a face.”(9-10). I see him, I see her, she sees me, face to face, and in recognition of the nakedness of that face, of its vulnerability before my gaze, before the possibility that this stranger we are meeting might represent a danger to me, I see and accept my responsibility not to harm her, not to demand any more. This is the responsibility to the face. The face signifies “the infinite resistance of a being to our power,…affirmed precisely in opposition to the will to murder that it defines, because, being completely naked—and the nakedness of the face is not a figure of speech—it means by itself.” (10)

Later Levinas comes back to the God of the gleaners, “the stranger, the widow, the orphan,” the figure Christians love to evoke, and asks about that figure’s poverty, humility, and return to earth after a crucifixion. He returns the Christian understanding to his Jewish reading of the infinite, without needing a transcendental being or spiritual being, to evoke the trace of an infinite encountered, amazingly, in “the countenance of my fellowman” (57). This infinite trace comes in the nakedness of the face. “The face is precisely that through which the exceptional event of the *facing [en-face]* is produced.”n (57). The relationship that occurs at the moment of the face-to-face is “the most naked nakedness, the ‘defenseless’ and ‘without resources’ itself, the destitution and poverty of absence that constitutes the proximity of God—the trace” (57). The evoking of God is his way of inserting the presence of the infinite in our finite being, our existence in this material world, and that presence occurs only in the meeting that inaugurates a relationship, or as he now says, a covenant: “this covenant between the poverty of the face and the Infinite is inscribed in the force with which my fellowman is imposed for my responsibility before all engagement on my part—the covenant between God and the pauper is inscribed within our brotherhood” (58). This relationship is no longer one about which one can now say, I understand. It is a closeness, a relationship of “proximity, preserving the excessiveness of the uncontainable” (58), a relationship that goes too far, comes too close, when Moses is hidden in the cleft, and the face is hidden from his gaze. It burns Moses, sets him on fire so that others cannot look into his face on his return down the mountain, requiring him to wear a veil. “The Infinite cannot incarnate itself,” says Levinas, a Jew, after all, and not a Christian. But God does call his people, does call Adam in the garden, does call Abraham, Abraham, and after him Isaac, and Jacob, and later Joseph in his dreams, and later Moses and then all his people, in a form that cannot be seen or heard in its infinitude. God does this, says Levinas, through the trace left on the face of the other. The Infinite “solicits through a face” (58). Call that person who is now inserted between you and the infinite a “thou.” Levinas cites Jeremiah speaking of God as present in the cause of the needy: “He judged the cause of the poor and needy… Was not this to know me, saith the Lord” (58). This moment is a beginning. “Everything 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).

Shavuos celebrates the giving of the torah. How we can read this moment in light of Levinas’s philosophy, the reinscribing of Jewish ethics at the beginning when the first man met the first woman, when the first real meeting occurred, depends on a recognition that the call to respond to the other was the real beginning. It comes over and over, and at the end of all the magic that surrounds Mt. Sinai, all the traces in the act of giving and receiving, we put the Jewish face on the encounter. Isaiah’s haftorah conclusion to the parshah Yitro when Moses receives the tablets from God, presents our version of this meeting. Isaiah says, in his vision of God on high:

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| 5And I said, "Woe is me for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and amidst a people of unclean lips I dwell, for the King, the Lord of Hosts have my eyes seen. |
| 6And one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal; with tongs he had taken it from upon the altar. |
| 7And he caused it to touch my mouth, and he said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity shall be removed, and your sin shall be atoned for." |
| 8And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here I am; send me." |
| 9And He said, "Go and say to this people,…” (Isaiah Chapter 6) |