

THE *TESHUVAH* OF JACQUES DERRIDA: JUDAISM *HORS-TEXTE*

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Introduction

Teshuvah is the process of returning to Judaism. More specifically, it refers to turning toward God, confessing, seeking forgiveness, and returning to the fold of one's people. In his later writing, Derrida expanded the semantic range of much of his previous lexicon to include religion and, more specifically, Judaism. If Derrida's texts are read in a curvilinear rather than linear fashion, *teshuvah* Derrida-style can be uncovered by examining synchronic structures made up of hyponymies that 'hyperlink' to one another. These 'sparks of judeity' augment his earlier writings and succeed in allowing him to find an *hors-texte* (a space outside of writing). A growing sense of his own authentic and unique Jewish existence supplements his previous deconstruction of more universal philosophemes and casts light on his future focus on social justice. As in the famous Talmudic expression "*Ein mukdam umeuher batorah*" ("There is no before and after in Torah"),¹ neither is there one in

¹ See Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 95.

Derrida. Within the paradox of Derrida's own ambivalence about exemplarity, his non-observant but nevertheless Judaic sensibility picks its way. To this effect, one can do a reading of Derrida that begins with his deconstruction of Husserl and moves toward 'confession,' soul searching, and social justice.

A great deal of current literature on exemplarity, chosenness, and being Jewish despite halachic remissness has examined what it means, in these contexts, to be "Jewish." By sticking strictly to Derrida's texts, however, one can make the more restrictive claim that his turn toward social justice is commensurate with his increasing 'Judaic' preoccupation. Within his own universe of infinitely differing meanings, Derrida avows and disavows; he turns and returns, engaging in continual soul searching and internal and external *mahloket*,² a state of mind that is Jewish in spirit if not in traditional practices and allegiances. In the end, his redemption has to do with his turn toward social justice. As Simon Critchley has claimed in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, it is quite clear that Derrida's increasing loyalty to Levinas's ethics facilitated this turn. Critchley suggests that deconstruction as an ethic can best be understood through Derrida's turn toward Levinas, and Derrida's interest in Levinas is undoubtedly an important station along the way to his conclusion that "deconstruction is justice." There is a wider well of meanings, however, from which Derrida draws. His discovery of his Jewish roots in texts such as "Circumfession," his exploration of the Akedah in *The Gift of Death*, his encomium to his father's tallith, and his soul searching in "Abraham, the Other" all accrue meanings to his Judaism that go beyond Levinas. Derrida's concern with forgiveness, friendship, and hospitality, his sensibility concerning Jewish particularity and universal justice, nationhood and violence catapult past doctrinal dogma, whether religious or philosophical.

² Ouaknin draws attention to the *mahloket* (debating) that goes on continually in the Talmud. The *mahloket* Hillel *ve-Shamai* is the most famous example between the schools of thought of Hillel and Shammai.

The Turning Away from Western Philosophy: Deconstruction

"O house of Yisra'el, thus says the Lord, learn not the way of nations...Stupid and senseless are they, the teaching of their vain idols is but...wood!" (Jeremiah 10.2, 8)

Derrida, like the Abraham of a well-known midrash (*Midrash Bereshit* 38:13), began smashing the idols in the house of the Greek fathers by deconstructing Husserl, the least obvious of Western 'metaphysicians.' In his 1973 *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida deconstructed "the voice that keeps silent," the so-called "phenomenal epoché" (a bracketing off of any relation to anything but what appears to a conscious subject). When, in Derrida's later piece entitled *The Gift of Death*, the reader encounters the radically other type of silence of Kierkegaard's Abraham at Moriah, he or she can turn back to *Speech and Phenomena* and find that the two primal moments pose a telling contrast with one another. Husserl's alleged 'inner life' is already temporal, not a timeless moment at all but a movement of auto-affection in the action of deferring. The Husserlian silent primal scene, allegedly an intuition, no more guarantees the discourse of philosophy than did Plato's forms. There is no possibility of self-presence for a Husserlian subject. Husserl's intentional act is not private intention, but public insofar as it necessarily takes place as an apprehension of ideas and, thus, is universalizing. Immediacy is lost at the moment of inception. The alleged primordial moment of subjectivity, the auto-affection of voice, is in fact only a 'trace' because the temporal nature of thought/speech cannot be arrested at any moment of an actual 'signified.' So-called private mental life already presupposes and is constituted by a relation to the world.

In later writings, Derrida will suggest that the politico-ethical is similarly public and not uniquely self-originated, and he will found his own moral consciousness on a more immediate and personal 'election.' As Derrida claims in this early work, the 'I' for Husserl is as it is only as distinct from its 'object'. A true 'self' and true inner life, as opposed to the Husserlian 'subject' that the 'I' names, must somehow be apart from objectification. In "Circumfession" and other later writings, Derrida finds

a living, confessing 'self' and takes hold of a genuine inner life. Turning to the genre of confession allows him to assume an autobiographical 'I,' an interior 'I' that originates in a very personal space and contrasts with the Husserlian subject. It is one which can 'elect' to be Jewish, without exemplarity and with only an archive of personal memory and history. It is anticipated by the silent self which Abraham represents in the moment of silent avowal to God during the Akedah and which Derrida discusses in *The Gift of Death* as a moment of pure interiority. In "Abraham, the Other," Derrida is reluctant to divulge his secret Judaism. Through the connection with the deconstruction of Husserl, this reluctance can also be related here to Derrida's hesitance to contaminate it with the impurity of speech and its universalizing concepts. When his Judaism is at stake, he will not subject it to the structural impurity that speaking always entails. First, however, it is necessary to provide a codicil to *Speech and Phenomena*. Derrida raises the specter of the 'German Jewish psyche' as an outcome of the entire Western tradition and, in particular, the Kantianism that resulted in 'nationhood.'

The German Jewish Psyche

"O Sages, be careful with your words! You may incur the penalty of exile and be banished to a place of evil waters...and the disciples who follow after you will drink and die..." (Perkei Avoth I:11)

1973's *Speech and Phenomena* anticipates the 1989-1991 essay "Interpretations at War," in which Derrida deconstructs an even greater 'scoundrel' than Husserl: the enlightenment-engendered "powerful fable of the German-Jewish psyche" ("Interpretations," 152).³ This essay exposes "an unfortunate amalgam" that ultimately includes Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosensweig, Gershom Scholem, Buber, Kant, the Reformation, Kepler, the Enlightenment, Plato, Philo, the patriarch Luther, Nicolas of Cusa, and Fichte for good measure (Ibid., 173). The

³ Derrida's study here, also termed "Kant, the Jew and the German," was prompted by Hermann Cohen's 1915 essay "Deutschtum und Judentum." See Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 25.

particularly pernicious Judeo-Protestant axis of evil, which Derrida identifies, constitutes the veil of ontotheology that has resulted in “nation as a spiritual principle” with all its insidious implications. Derrida starts with “Kant, the Jew, and the German.” It is in the very subjectivity of the Kantian subject, of man as a free and autonomous subject of morality and justice (*droit*), that the Jew and the German are associated. It can be found, according to Derrida, in the strategy employed by the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, through which “a new line of alliance between the soul and the spirit has just been named...[T]he universality of the moral subject came to be rooted in an event: the history of the German spirit and the German soul” (Ibid., 168). Germany, then, through a confabulation which includes the similarly moral Jew, is the true homeland of every Jew in the world. Germany becomes, in Cohen’s words, “the motherland of the soul.”⁴

To the German Jewish (Greek) psyche, Derrida also adds Fichte’s “great discovery” that the self is social, but also that the social self, in its origin and essence, is a national self. The ego is a national ego. Derrida slips in a reference to Heidegger’s rectorate’s speech and Cohen’s “self-positing of the German spirit” (Ibid., 177), thus ensnaring it in the same web as Cohen’s “Die Universität muss die wahrhafte Volksschule werden” (“The university must become the people’s thing, a truly popular school”).⁵ The result of these fusions is Jewish German messianism: social justice is social democracy is national unity is popularism, all in supposed attunement with Judaism.

Nationhood, then, is a construct resulting from a historical fusion of Jew and Greek.⁶ Derrida identifies the moment of fusion, of co-substantiality, with the Jewish idiom “which presumably received from the Greek a new force and a new imprint (*Aufprägung*).” There is an even

⁴ “Deutschum und Judentum,” cited in Derrida, “Interpretations at War,” 177.

⁵ “Deutschum und Judentum,” cited in Ibid., 148.

⁶ The fact that “Interpretations at War” (1998) is given in Jerusalem should be duly noted here.

more originary Greekjew than Hermann Cohen. Philo Judaeus is “Plato’s Jewish heir” who brought about “the cosmopolitical moment” whose “holy spirit (*heligegeist*) paved the way for Christianity and made logos the mediator between God and man” (Ibid., 148). Derrida invokes Cohen’s use of “*Fuehrer*” (before Hitler, of course), which Cohen applies to Philo. This is typical of Derrida ‘play’ with epithetical assignment. Guilt by association makes Philo the Fuehrer, the first Greekjew to become a Jewgreek and whom Cohen’s Kantianism emulates. Hermann Cohen “assumes the middle term of the syllogism, the Christian logos which will serve as the mediator between Judaism and Germany, between the Jewish spirit and the German Spirit” (Ibid.). This becomes a dangerous fusion, ultimately one of the German spirit and the leader (*Fuehrer*) who turns messianism, in its purely German incarnation, against the very Greekjew that is anticipated by this fusion. Derrida gives this paper in 1987 and *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* in the same year. *Of Spirit* begins, “I shall speak of ghost (*revenant*), of flame, and of ashes. And of what, for Heidegger, *avoiding* means.” The Holocaust imagery here, added to the fusion of nationhood and being and nationhood and spirit, can be associated with Heidegger and has precedent as the Kantian German Jewish psyche. The Kantian subject and its dangerous propensity to universality, spirit, and nationhood now become a powerful augment to the pseudo-subject deconstructed in *Speech and Phenomena*.

Silence and the Secret (in the Name of Kierkegaard): The Turn to Interiority

“A fence to wisdom silence” (Pirkei Avoth III:17).

“There is no *hors-texte*” (“Il n’y a pas des hors-texte”) (*Of Grammatology*, 163). This is fundamental Derrida, at least in the way that he is usually understood viz. his claim that writing is primal. Can Derrida now succeed in finding a way outside of writing? In the 1964 essay on Levinas entitled “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida asks, “[W]ill a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek could not do except by...feigning to speak Greek in order to get near the king (viz. the parricide of the Greek father)?” (89). By the nineties, his own ongoing “parricide”

of the patrimony of Western metaphysics had done its lethal work (Plato to Husserl/Heidegger and, in between, the 'German Jewish psyche'). The demise through deconstruction of the possibility of an *hors-texte* (in the form of a transcendental signified, for example) does not mean that for Derrida there is nothing *but* text. The fact that writing is auto-reflexive and can make no ontological commitments *hors-texte* does not equate to the notion there is nothing else. Derrida is not permanently doomed to exile in the self-contained sphericity of infinite signification and auto-reflexivity. While Husserl's epoché can be deconstructed as disappearing within an unstoppable temporality, Derrida exposes a 'sacred' primal scene that poses a possibility for timeless and authentic interiority. In *The Gift of Death*, he finds that there *is* a secret passage out, an abyss of unknowing and unseeing, an *hors-texte* that is not that of an elusive transcendental signified. It is found through a fault line in the very site of secular/significatory speech. *The Gift of Death* channels Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, who writes an account of the silence of Abraham at Mount Moriah. Derrida trembles along with the Kierkegaardian Abraham, and, in so doing, he identifies an 'other' space. An abyss opens, and the non- speech giving of death is the key to finding the truly real—the black hole, the dark matter in the universe, the place where one can stand silent as God's other: the real self of a believer. Wordless avowal to the present but absent God becomes an exemplary, epiphanic, timeless now. It does not, as do all philosophical concepts, immediately imply a chain of signification. It is not intrinsically and irrevocably tied to its own opposite, nor is it a place of religion, that unsalvageable term.⁷

Kierkegaard's evocation of the primal scene of Abraham's test and subsequent abject devotion is the counterfoil to the ethics of the polis; it is a model for 'singularity' as opposed to the universality that is inevitable

⁷ In "Faith and Knowledge" (1996/1998), Derrida eschews the possibility that the thing itself—religion—could actually be deciphered due to the fact that "religion" itself is a term born in the lexicon of Latin/Romance languages. See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, (New York: Routledge Press, 2002).

in writing and speech. The scene of sacrifice, unlike speech, has no possibility of substitution. Abraham remains silent in infinite responsibility (not ethics)—“a responsibility to silence and secrecy,” and a “responsibility before God.” (*Gift*, 60-61)

Language is never secret and is always tied to a public and non-secret “accounting for one’s words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them” (Ibid.) By its nature, it violates the singularity with which Abraham trembles before God. Silence—the secret—is the absolute duty toward God and the singularity of faith, while for Kant and Hegel, there “are no final secrets for philosophy, ethics or politics.” The Akedah implies a sort of “gift or sacrifice that functions beyond both debt and duty, beyond duty as a form of debt” (Ibid., 63). Here is the counterfoil to *Speech and Phenomena*: “As soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity.” (Ibid., 60) Once I speak, I am no longer alone and unique. In the Abraham scenario, Abraham presents himself before the unique, jealous, secret God, the one to whom he says, “Here I am.” Faith’s interiority is “incommensurable with exteriority.”⁸

The visible, Plato’s *hors cave*, is enlightenment; the Christian metaphysics of the West implies the Kantian/Cartesian/Husserlian subjectivity that loses the self in the universality of subject, object, etc.⁹ Nothing is transparent in a dark place. For Plato, truth is *a-lethiea*, exposed to light; *theoria* only exists within visual metaphors and goes hand in hand with the Christian logos. It can be displayed and is accountable to the world, and it is there for all to see. *The Gift of Death* has as a subtext that the immediacy of the silence of the abyss and the reality of death, that which only the Lord gives, are the preludes to true self-discovery: the “Here I am” rather than the Cartesian/Kantian subject. An encounter with

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” *Fear and Trembling, Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.), 69.

⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 13-15.

death allows for a place bereft of logos and philosophy, a place of judgment and calling, as in the Akedah:

[T]he soul “only distinguishes itself, separates itself, and assembles within itself in the experience of this *melehē tou thanatou*. It is nothing other than this concern for dying as a relation to self and an assembling of self. It only returns to itself, in both senses of assembling itself and waking itself, becoming conscious, in the sense of consciousness of self in general, through this concern for death. And Patrocha is quite right to speak here of mystery or secrecy in the constitution of a psyche or of an individual and responsible self. For it is thus that the soul separates itself in recalling itself to itself, and so becomes individualized, interiorized, becomes its very invisibility. (*Gift*, 14-15)

Abraham, whom Kierkegaard presents in the pseudo-authorship of Johannes de Silentio, keeps silent. It is Christianity and Philo that team up to bring in the logos and uncover the secret repressed within Paul's conversion to the logos. Here is blind faith without reason, an axiom that cannot be deconstructed because that would once more reinstate the 'logos': “And Faith, in the moment proper to it is blind” (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 30). The Christian Kierkegaardian/Paulian reference to the infinite fear and trembling before the absent presence of the absolute other is primal. We find out that in the absent, hidden, silent, separate secret is the God who must be obeyed without question. In the name of Paul—“the great Jewish convert,” as Derrida is quick to add—there is the “still Jewish experience of a secret, hidden, separate, absent, or mysterious God, the one who decides, without revealing his reasons, to demand of Abraham that most cruel impossible and unthinkable gesture to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice.” All of that goes on in secret, for “God keeps silent about his reason” (*Ibid.*, 58). In “Abraham, the Other,” Derrida attests to a silence and a secret that keeps him from his Judaism but also keeps it safe within himself: the “here in me” (315). The passages in *The Gift of Death* provide supplementary associations with the gaze “that sees me without my seeing it looking at me. It knows my very secret even when I myself do not see it” (*Gift*, 91). It corresponds to a ‘soul’ or secret self that trembles in silence, that is present to God.

Is Derrida himself called by this secret God? Is Derrida's own 'Judeity' to be found in these dis-coverings? In the revelatory moment of the Akedah, the reader of Derrida may think he has heard Derrida's own voice on this matter, but in fact it is Kierkegaard that is the narrative voice. Derrida, like Plato, uses multiple 'mouthpieces' (much as does the Talmud where one reads on almost every page the opinion of one sage in the name of another). The elusive Derrida can perhaps be more easily identified in a different Abraham. In his 2003 essay "Abraham, the Other," Derrida finds another Abraham in Kafka's voice (one of Kafka's four Abrahams). This last Abraham is the Abraham of the back row in school, the worst student from the dirty back bench as Kafka describes him ("Abraham," 286).¹⁰ He is the one who fears the laughter of the other students, should he have mistaken the calling of his name as meant for another: "How can anyone be certain of the authenticity of a summons from God?" (Ibid., 285-6). Derrida hides in the shadows, walks on the edge of an abyss, disavows in order to avow, stands in the place of uncertainty. Can one pledge allegiance to an unseen and unknown Other? He has kept a "stubborn silence" about having been entrusted, a kind of secret election over which he must keep a guard.

In the Name of Levinas: Justice and the Other

"The sword comes upon the world on account of the delay of justice and the perversion of justice." (Perkei Avoth V:10-11)

Derrida immersed much of his coinage in the mikvah of Levinasian ideation. Turning and re-turning, Derrida visits and revisits Levinas from his earlier 1964 essay "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" to his poignant *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* of 1997. While in the former essay he situates himself in "the difference

¹⁰ In the Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 29b, Moses travels to the future to attend a class of Rabbi Akiva, who is interpreting Torah in such innovative ways (*hiddush*) that Moses does not recognize it and sits in the back row behind the other more advanced Torah students. Derrida may not have been privy to these passages, but the analogy is striking when it comes to Derrida *qua* self-proclaimed "last of the Jews" as equivalent to far reaching and creative interpretations.

between the Jew and the Greek" ("Violence," 153), in *Adieu* he steps out of that matrix and finds an "uprightness (*droiture*)" that is "stronger than death" (*Adieu*, 2).¹¹ It will accrue to terms such as hospitality, compassion, etc. in his later corpus. In the name of Levinas and the latter's commentary on Tractate Sabbath, Derrida discovers the key to an ethics beyond ethics, the "urgency of a destination leading to the Other and not an eternal return to self...the relation to the other, that is to say, justice" (*Ibid.*, 2ff). This is not the post-Cartesian subject, the Kantian subject who deliberates in moral judgments. An "ethics beyond ontology," one greater than death that lives for unlimited responsibility and righteousness, provides a counterfoil not only to moral discourse but also to Greek 'being' (*Ibid.*, 4). As Simon Critchley has explained, deconstruction as an ethical demand occurs in putting into question the ego and the alterity that cannot be reduced to 'Same.'¹²

Moral urgency and human finitude are not separate matters. The prosthesis of Levinasian "ethics beyond ethics," when added to the Akedah passages, opens up a discourse of self and other that is in opposition to the subject/object opposition of Western philosophy. In addition, Levinasian alterity is a counterfoil to what can now be seen to be a most dangerous and misappropriated alliance for the Jewish intellectual: a Kantian ethic. The extreme alterity of the self in relation to the 'other' as the others' other etc. is not as a Kantian 'subject.' It is not a speaker but an actor, not secular but holy, not public and epistemic but private and singular. This is a default position after the deconstruction of Greek/German philosophy and a station along the way to Derrida's later turn to social justice. Levinas brings moral urgency onto the playing field, and this accrues an increasingly compelling intensity for Derrida. At the same time, he seems to suggest that Levinas himself falls into the old trap of making 'universal' what should be a private avowal. Derrida alludes to

¹¹ Derrida is here citing Levinas's "Four Talmudic Readings" in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 48.

¹² See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, (Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), 4-5.

Levinas's "curvature of space for the benefit of the same" ("Violence," 152) and finds Levinas steeped in Greek logos.¹³ As time goes on, however, and after the 1964 essay "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida freely adopts Levinas to jump-start his own ethical 'otherness,' outside of philosophical/public discourse. Real justice "must not wait" and "always remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation, since it must not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical knowledge... [It must precede] juridico- or ethico- or politico-cognitive deliberation" ("Force of Law," 26).¹⁴ The righteous act, the *mitzvah*, is performed in the immediacy of its call without hesitation or thought. Justice is enacted, agented and carried out with an urgency that is outside of linear time and is thereby not subject to differing, as is Husserl's deceptive immediacy. We recall that Maimonides had to counter a similar adversary when he prioritized the law given by the prophets as superior to the philosophers' law.¹⁵ The gnomic proclamation "deconstruction is justice" can be understood in this light. Messianism without religion, an infinite justice "due to the other before any contract" (Ibid., 25), gives revelatory truth a priority over reason (logocentrism).

In the Name of Eli: The Pivot in "Circumfession"

"Do not go judging alone (by yourself), for no one may judge alone except One (God)." (Perkei Avoth IV:10)

In his 1993 essay "Circumfession," Derrida makes a retrospective turn engineered by a new genre: autobiography. Walter Benjamin lamented the loss of the genre of narrative storytelling as a modality of communicating. Storytelling entails the ability to exchange experience with the moral

¹³ This is not the place to review the extensive literature on Derrida and Levinas. See Susan Handelman's chapter "Greek/Jew, Jew/Greek" in Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, (London: Routledge Press, 1995); or John Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ See Emilie Kutash, "Review Essay on Acts of Religion," *Transcendental Philosophy*, (2002).

¹⁵ See Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), II:37-39.

usefulness that goes along with it.¹⁶ "Circumfession," written in 1989-1990, is a marginal gloss on Geoffrey Bennington's exposition of his philosophical writing.¹⁷ Derrida, in this narrative form, searches for personal origins enacted through a self-constituting, soul-searching confrontation with his mother's death. Derrida uses Augustine's co-extensive *Confessions* as the exemplary redemptive narrative for a singular turning toward God that is also somehow entangled with his mother. Derrida's own confession is not presented in the name of anyone but himself. In the face of the death of his mother, the confession is private. It is not the anonymous philosophical positioning of *The Gift of Death*. Now his Jewish existence (as opposed to Jewish texts)—the matrilineal origin of his Judaism, his Jewish name, his circumcision, his anti-Semitic experience growing up—all can be told. Narrative can reinstate the live temporality that is lost in didactic discourse; now he is able to work through autobiographical memories to constitute a singular selfhood in face of the singular death of his own mother and his memories.¹⁸

The suffering, avowing, and disavowing self that steps out of the pages of "Circumfession" contrasts sharply with the Kantian moral subject described in *The Gift of Death*. This self is not alone and has a more difficult freedom. For this self, God watches: "It is dissymmetrical: this gaze that sees me without my seeing it looking at me. It knows my very secret even when I myself don't see it" (*Gift*, 91). Derrida speaks to God "an absolved, absolutely private language" ("Circumfession," 155-56) as opposed to his feigning to speak Greek in his work on deconstruction. In

¹⁶ See Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on Nickolas Laskov," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken, 1968), 85-87.

¹⁷ "Derridabase," Geoffrey Bennington's exposition of Derrida's philosophy, serves as the principle text upon which Derrida comments. Derrida's comments comprise "Circumfession." See Derrida and Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ One is reminded of Berachot (55a), that book of the Talmud on dream interpretation which, unlike Freud, claims that to dream of sleeping with one's mother means that one will attain wisdom. For further discussion see my "Polysemy and Its Vicissitudes: Oneirocritical Interpretation in Sura and Vienna," *The Dreaming*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (2014), 39.

"Abraham, the Other," he attested to a silent and secret core that stubbornly clings to self even without knowing what that is. In "Circumfession," he trembles in the face of his mother's impending death, as Abraham trembled before the *tout autre* (God) whose command and whose giving of death were cause to fear. He remembers fearing that his absent mother will not return, as he recalls the experience of parting from his mother in nursery school. He knows he must separate. When it comes to death, for example, he must relinquish the lifelong fear of death that he and his mother shared and possess it as his own. This narrative self (as opposed to a Husserlian 'I') does not bypass real time (past, present, future) in favor of an illusory idealized presence. This 'I,' the narrative 'I,' can contemplate its own death, the absence of self that is the future counterpart to his mother's death.

Derrida here makes a retrograde motion in his many turnings around the center of an ever-expanding universe of periphrastic allusion. His Jewish mother (the only orthodox recognition of being Jewish), the inscription upon him of his circumcision, and the anti-Semitism that was visited upon him from the outside are events that 'write' his Judaism on him during a time when he was not a Kantian 'subject' that makes judgments and can choose. Here he finds, in this autobiography, his Jewish name Eli and an identity that is, at the same time, an origin (from a Jewish mother. Or as Harold Bloom puts it, "Jewish mothers have given birth to Jewish daughters and sons for perhaps one hundred and fifty generations, a facticity so overwhelming as to dwarf every conceptualization as to what Jewish identity might mean, *unless* it is to mean precisely what the Talmud wanted it to mean."¹⁹ In retrospection, he finds that he was chosen, given his Judaism as he was given the name Eli. Eli, Elijah, the empty seat of the always-coming never-arriving Elijah—that is his namesake. It is the name of his uncle who in turn is named for the brother of his grandfather Abraham. These gifts—circumcision and the naming—predate the signature with which he signs

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, "Pragmatics of Jewish 'Culture,'" *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, eds. Josh Rajchman and Cornell West, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 113.

off on his written corpus. They are now literally written *hors-texte* in the margins of his self, as is the running commentary that circumlocates around the Bennington text. These biographical events chose him; he did not choose them. In the primal scene of Jewish chosenness in Scripture, the Jews said "We will do" and avowed their election. Derrida here invokes, in the name of Eli and in the face of the death of his mother, an *unchosen* chosenness. He was chosen by his people, and by those people who chose him for anti-Semitic attack. He did not, in this election in which he had no say, agree to this. These are exteriorities as is, in an entirely other sense, God. Derrida bears the imprint of Judaism *hors-texte*, with or without its exemplarizing historical archive about which he confesses to being unlearned.

A further personal supernumerary can be added to the psycho-biographical mode that he now adopts. In 1992's *Monolingualism and the Other*, Derrida confesses that he is entrapped, via his spoken tongue, in a borrowed culture that ultimately ejected him from his place of birth. This exile into the world at large prepares him for his later pronouncements on hospitality, a term of greater value than the worn-out coinage of terms like 'tolerance' or 'intercultural understanding.' He attests to a defining moment when he claims, "[F]or I could never call French, this language I'm speaking with you, 'my mother tongue'" (*Monolingualism*, 341). French, the language of the nations, makes him wonder "whether that unknown language (Hebrew) is not my language of choice. I like to hear it principally outside of any 'communication,' in poetic solemnity of song or prayer" (*Ibid.*, 41). Psychohistory is a reductive discipline at best. A wider context can be called upon here, aside from his experience of the troubled assimilation of Algerian Jews, an alleged key frame for Derrida's alienation. He claims repeatedly, here and elsewhere, of an experience of exteriority, which he "hesitates to call Judaic."²⁰ This "transcendental homelessness" is a further gloss on the permanent exile occasioned by communicative and therefore ethical/political/Platonic/metaphysical

²⁰ See Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Weber, *Points...Interviews 1974-1994*, (Stanford University Press, 1995), 206.

deferral. Language keeps the spiritual seeker entrapped in universals that have no particularity of reference. On the other hand, the tallith and the Hebrew prayer song/language are opaque and immediate, outside of time, as are the circumstances of his personal election as a Jew.

The Encomium to His Father's Tallith

"Be very, very humble in spirit, for the anticipation of man is the worm."
(Perkei Avoth IV:4)

1996's "A Silkworm of One's Own" advances Derrida's personal memoir. It is a gloss on the subject of silk (veil), worm (death), and trust. The tallith (a transitional object *qua* substitute for what it represents) is comfort against the abyss and better than the veil (philosophy/logos/artistry). The tallith and the sacred language Hebrew (even when heard as prayer and not understood), and prayer itself are tangible and, thereby, are somehow more real than all and any logos.²¹ The tallith is a "reference cloth" which is "neither a veil nor a canvas [*une toile*], but a shawl. A prayer shawl" ("Silkworm," 326). Far away from any story of the eye (read: vision, Plato's sun, revelation after Christian rending of the veil, a-lethia, the tradition from Plato to Heidegger), the tallith recalls one to the law; his father took it across the Mediterranean at the "time of the exodus." "One can never get rid of a tallith," he says, which is not exactly the case with the veil that is a vehicle of the separation of the holy from the most holy in the description of the sanctuary in Exodus. The tallith, like sacred language, is opaque and irreducible. The silk tallith (the faith that covers one) and the worm (both death and creation) recall the basic fact that the Jew will be married and buried with his tallith. It is his father's.²² Derrida confesses to caressing it every day while eschewing the

²¹ In a roundtable which I attended in Toronto (AAR 2002), Derrida was asked if he prayed. He answered, "I am praying now." For many more citations of Derrida's attestations to constant praying, see also Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 291ff.

²² This discussion brings to mind Daniel Pearl's last words before his beheading: "I am a Jew and my father was a Jew." This declarative is opaque and real and impenetrable in a way that discursive language is not.

“important theoretical knowledge about the truth of fetishism” (Ibid., 327).

The veil, on the other hand, has an association for Derrida with the Western culture he now eschews and the inaccessible and secret nature of the Jewish God. A veil from the rest of the sanctuary separates the Holy of Holies; the Torah is encased by the *pare chet* (the veil), but the tallith is known by the immediacy of touch. It is father, law, calling, death, and life. In these musings, we find still another important midrash on Scripture: the burning to ashes of Aaron’s two sons who entered the Holy of Holies. The Jew does not go past the veil but uses symbolic substitutions (ritual, tallith, Hebrew, prayer), makes no images, does not look too far before or after as it says in the Talmud, does *mitzvahs*, looks upon the other with an *ayin tova* (a compassionate or good eye), and does not partake in Greek poison (philosophy). God cannot be known; Judaism is practice, not ontotheology.

The veil/prayer shawl contrast, then, supplements the oppositions between public and private, universal and singular, and subject and self. “The secret of the shawl envelopes one single body” (Ibid., 327), and “[o]ne says ‘my shawl’ only by obeying Yahweh’s order. And by beginning to wonder: who am I, I who have already said ‘here I am’? What is the self?” (Ibid., 337). The shawl, yet another substitution for the silent singularity of self, defies any kind of universalizing and is present to oneself only in autobiography.

Fear and Trembling

“Do you not fear me?... Will you not tremble in my presence?” (Jeremiah 5:22)

“Fear and trembling,” the Kierkegaardian signature phrase, appears repeatedly in Derrida’s texts. First of all, it appears in *The Gift of Death* at the scene of the Akedah. It appears in other places as well as a fear of secularization. In his 2001 essay “The Eyes of Language,” Derrida specifically discusses, in the name of Gershom Scholem, whether Hebrew as a sacred language can be subjected to the dissemination of public

discourse. Derrida refers to Scholem's "fear and trembling" when sacred Hebrew is converted to usage in the street, on the bus, at the corner store, etc.: "The infinite value attached to a sacred thing becomes a commercial value...an iconoclasm and idolatry at the same time" (*Gift*, 212). In a similar vein, Derrida trembles before the sacrifice one would have to make (into non-exclusivity or secularity) in order to ensure global justice. It might entail forgiveness of what cannot be forgiven (the Holocaust, 9/11, forgiveness to those acting in the name of those doomed by globalization, etc.). Tolerance of others is not an adequate and ethical way to treat others, while hospitality is. Peace will not be ethnocentric, but secular and intercultural.²³ Translation (speaking each other's languages) supplies a deceptive commensuration, as if it were possible to have a metalanguage to resolve differences.²⁴ This possibility must give way to non-verbal ways to reconcile nations: hospitality, friendship, etc.

Naming God

"Whoever profanes the Name of Heaven in secret, will pay for it in public. It is all one and the same whether someone acts unintentionally or willfully in profaning the (holy) name." (Perkei Avoth IV:5)

Derrida trembles before the idea of naming God as well. To 'name,' or to form propositions about God, is fearful and could result in an impiety analogous to that which can ensue when public discourse attempts disclosure of private avowal. Moshe Halbertal describes idolatry as false belief, the belief in a "wrong" god in place of the "right" God. Halbertal explains the mistake of idolatry with the following example: "[T]he history of the Israelite belief...is partly history of changes and transformations in the description of God. If God's identity depends on the descriptions, then who can guarantee that the biblical Moses and

²³ See, for example, Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).

²⁴ In the 1980 essay "Des tours de Babel" in his *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Derrida elaborates upon the divine law that resulted in the Tower of Babel of Genesis. Walter Benjamin, whose work on intertranslatability is well known, inaugurates a theme that can generalize to include the intercultural.

Moses Maimonides and Moses Mendelssohn all worshiped the same God?"²⁵ Descriptions, then, at the heart of the possibility of referring, cannot identify the God of Israel. Derrida sees negative theology (saying what God is not), as somehow protective of divinity. Apophatic theology is like an arrow that strikes "everything save what it aims for, save what it strikes, even, indeed save what it wounds" (*On the Name*, 62). This is what makes Derrida's ethical 'turn,' in relation to the unknown and unnamed God, a sacred quest. We recall his quoting Levinas' remark, "To tell the truth, what interests me isn't ethics, or not just ethics, but the sacred, the sanctity of the secret" (*Adieu*, 15). In both 1992's *The Gift of Death* and 1993's *On the Name*, Derrida grapples with the mysterious act of proper naming, well aware of the trepidation attached to the age-old prohibition about pronouncing the name of God. God's name is singular and secret, impossible to enmesh in the syntax of speech or language except by negative attributions. The tetragrammaton of the Torah and the colloquial "HaShem," which religious Jews use to refer to the God, uphold that conviction.

Derrida's fear and trembling appear again in his reading of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*, which states, "Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people" (9). Derrida responds, "I would have liked to spend hours, in truth an eternity, meditating and trembling before this sentence" (*Archive Fever*, 76). As Dana Hollander points out, exemplarity is "the assertion of a particular identity in the name of a universal value or principle." She goes on to say that it is abused by "certain groups that assert it, including Jews."²⁶ John Caputo, discussing Derrida's *Archive Fever*, describes it as "a feverish desire to make one's own archive," to be "a law for everyone and

²⁵ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 158.

²⁶ Hollander, "Is Deconstruction a Jewish Science?," 135.

used to exercise absolute control over the archive of another.”²⁷ Hollander further tells us, “A core figure that emerges in Derrida’s exploration of exemplarity is that of chosenness—the biblical idea of a people elected by God for a particular purpose.”²⁸ For Derrida, then, one of the bases for his “fear and trembling” is the impossible dialectic between exemplarity and the universal obligation and responsibility that transcends particularity. The outcome (with its sacrifice) will be a vote in favor of global justice and against Jewish exclusivity.

The *Teshuvah* of Jacques Derrida

“Do not despise any man, and do not reject anything; for there is no man who has not his hour, and there is no thing that has not its place.” (Perkei Avoth IV:3)

The autobiographical Eli, who was elected to be Jewish while not electing and who talks to God without knowing God, can be seen as an alter ego and the site from which Derrida can relinquish habitation in a secret and silent place that he has identified as Jewish. Throughout the 80’s, 90’s, and well into the 21st century until the time of his death, Derrida increasingly turns to social justice, launching a ‘second sailing.’ Now he can testify to the importance of public pronouncement, in the name of justice and in the arena of geopolitics.²⁹ Tolerance is patronizing and must give way to friendship and hospitality: the Levinasian message of real justice must be directed at the ‘other’ rather than ruling over the ‘other.’ In dialogue with Borradori after the event of 9/11, he claims that the true philosophers are those who “in the future, reflect in a responsible fashion

²⁷ See Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 265. Caputo describes this as a “feverish desire to make one’s own archive authoritative, normative, nomological, confusing one’s own archive with an archethat is taken to be the law for everybody.”

²⁸ See Dana Hollander, *Exemplarity and Chosenness: Rosenzweig and Derrida on the Nation of Philosophy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2.

²⁹ Derrida’s “Geopsychoanalysis and ‘the Rest of the World,’” which treated human rights violations in Latin America, “Racism’s Last Word” on apartheid in South Africa, “Taking a Stand for Algiers,” and Derrida’s comments on 9/11 in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* are examples.

on these questions [concerning geopolitics] and demand accountability from those in charge of public discourse, those responsible for the language and intentions of international law.”³⁰ Deconstruction has all along been in the service of justice.

Derrida’s succession of Abrahams follows the trajectory of his second sailing. Abraham, who is a singular soul in his silent and abject piety in the Kierkegaardian account (discussed *The Gift of Death*), does not trade it for the ethical/juridical/public justice, but is silent. The last of Kafka’s four Abrahams disavows the calling of God that demanded sacrifice in that secret and silent place (“Abraham”), adding disavowal to avowal. Derrida now invokes an Abraham whose triple patrimony is of the Abrahamic religions. Abraham the Jew returns from Moriah in historical real time as Abraham, the father of nations. Now hospitality, compassion, and forgiveness trump solipsism. Abraham’s patrimony presides over all, and moral righteousness is an imperative for all. Moral exemplarity, as opposed to chosenness, is not exclusively given only to Jews at Sinai even from a traditional perspective. The ‘*sheve mtizvot b’nei Noah*’ discussed in Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 54b-55a are known as the Noahide laws. These laws for moral righteousness were alleged to be given by God at Sinai and are binding for all humankind. Derrida, in the 2003 interview after 9/11, decries the warring hegemonies that, ironically, arise from Abrahamic “common soil” (*Philosophy*, 117) and speculates about the possibility of a global “democracy to come” and its implications for true hospitality and forgiveness (*Ibid.*, 195).

The hope of international peace, of an “ethics beyond ethics,” is prefigured by the essay “Hospitality” and expanded in the 2003 interview. This is a further gloss on untranslatability after Babel and is yet another way to metonymize the notion of intercultural relationship. The Levinasian symmetrical reciprocity of ‘other’/other interplay, the respect for the otherness of the other, is displaced onto the meta-ethics of hospitality and the politics of friendship. The call that evoked the “Here I

³⁰ See Giovanna Borradori, editor and interviewer of *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 106.

am" at Moriah now calls for a justice outside of the impenetrable veil of exhausted Judeo/Protestant/Platonic ethico/juridico-deliberation. Compassion and mutual respect; this is the only possibility for intercultural reciprocity in the face of the hopelessness of intercultural 'translatability.' After two millennia of Graeco-Roman Christian religions, or scientifico- or technico-capitalism, basic "Eastern values" (hospitality, forgiveness, friendship) must prevail.³¹ Forgiveness in particular is aimed toward the future to come (*àvenir*) and is the basis for Derrida's utopian longing for world peace in his post-9/11 interview. This circles back to his earlier "Faith and Knowledge," wherein he claims that "this justice which I distinguish from right, alone allows the hope, beyond all messianisms" (56). Following Louis Massignon, the great Orientalist and the founder of a sect of Christianity that become hosted in the Muslim world, hospitality is more direct than mutual understanding.³² The triple Abrahamic patrimony, plus the idea of substitution discussed by both Levinas and Massignon, evokes for Derrida the triple requirement of compassion, sacrifice, and expiation. This triad supersedes the generic/singular opposition (read: genealogy, etc.), and it brings with it a justice that transcends genealogy and brings the possibility of redemption after the irreconcilable differences introduced at Babel. It is, however, a redemption of all humankind, and the 'last' of the Jews in the spirit of true respect for all human beings must yield up the ethnocentrism which had seemed so inseparable from the notion of 'the chosen people.'

In the 2003 interview, Derrida mentions the state of Israel, which "has not cut the umbilical cord with religio[n]" (*Philosophy*, 118) as playing a

³¹ Forgiveness in particular, Derrida, suggests, "is...inscribed in the becoming-responsibility of freedom—that is to say, in the very movement of temporalization" Time renews and is always moving forward. This is what Bergson and Heidegger missed in their theories of time ("Hospitality," 394).

³² Derrida deconstructs and reconstructs all notions of hospitality: the visit, the visitation (wanted or unwanted), Arabic hospitality, extending oneself and withholding, forgiveness and the unforgivable (the Jew after Auschwitz), the other, humanity, hospitality which elides into hostage and substitution, the hospitality refused to Islam in non-Islamic lands, and the original triple hospitality of the universal paternity of Abraham (himself hosted in strange lands such as Palestine was to him at the outset), etc.

role in worldwide configuration of conflict. Messianism in the new vision of worldwide democracy to come catapults righteousness out of regionalism and onto the soil of global justice. The irony of this positioning on the part of a Jew is best exemplified by remarks from a 1998 interview quoted by Ofrat in *The Jewish Derrida* regarding Derrida's visit to Auschwitz: "It is terrible, Auschwitz, it is monstrous," yet he adds, "But even during the extermination-experience it was but one place among many" (14).³³ This problematic is repeated, as Hollander notes, in an exchange with Daniel Libeskind on Libeskind's proposal for the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Derrida expresses uneasiness about the "risky enterprise of assembling a culture as exemplary."³⁴

Conclusion

"The god of the whole earth he shall be called." (Isaiah 54:5)

Derrida, neither learned nor practiced as a Jew, walks a circuitous road, one upon which he might find himself in the company of other twenty-first-century Jewish scholars. Overexposed to Western literature and underexposed to the oral and written traditions and practices of his own people, Derrida has picked his way out of the debris of Western culture. At the end of his life, he has exhausted what he calls his 'Peloponnesian' weavings. Having removed all of the idols of Western philosophical discourse in the last of his writings and lectures, bereft of conceptual balm, his Judaism has gathered momentum and, in proportion to, it he trembles. He knows, as the sons of Aaron did not, that to enter the sanctuary—the silent and secret place, the one beyond the 'veil'—is to be consumed by fire and ashes. Although halachically remiss, he nevertheless experiences the agony of a Jew who knows that, as it says in the *Pirkei Avoth*, "the living are destined to be judged" (IV.28).

³³ He did, however, ally with other French intellectuals for President Mitterrand's recognition of France's guilt concerning Vichy crimes. For an interview given in January, 1998 to Michal Ben-Naftali, see Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, 151-152.

³⁴ See Hollander, *Exemplarity*, 234-5.

"Different drafts of a final text or a chain of drafts," Susan Friedman points out, "can be interpreted as a working through...as a kind of remembering."³⁵ A panoptic view of Derrida's entire oeuvre shows that later twists and turns prove to be 'term-in-al' amendments to previous gnomic coinage. After the 'anamnesis' and retrograde motion through autobiographical musings, a more public Derrida resumes an elliptical path around an ethical center. He comes out of a private "Here I am," gives death to his own worn out deconstruction, and opts for the righteous and redemptive. He lays claim to the fire within that burns for all of humankind. The oscillation between nationhood as a Jewish identity and universal justice as a Jewish principle can keep the reader of Derrida forever uncertain about exactly where Derrida stands as a Jew. Derrida's endless equivocation on where he stands on core Jewish beliefs and practices certainly poses a legitimate question of how Jewish Derrida is or is not.³⁶ What does it mean to be the people who have allegedly been chosen to be, in De Solo Poole's phrase, "the standard bearers for justice"?³⁷ Or, as Hollander states the question, "[H]ow is the elevation of a particular people reconcilable with a universal God?" Perhaps keeping this problematic alive can make any Jew, as did Derrida, appear to be an 'outsider' to halachically practicing or more nationalistic Jews. Jewish 'election,' on the one hand, and other discourses such as Fichte's that make

³⁵ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author," *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, eds. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 165-166.

³⁶ See Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 9ff. Ofrat asks, "Is Judaism an essence from which Derrida was exiled?" Richard Cohen asks in his review of Ofrat's book, since Derrida's so-called Judaism is not based on "belief, profession, practice, learning culture or self-identification...in what sense...are we inclined to think that his thought must be or is in any way Jewish?" ("Review of *The Jewish Derrida*," *Shofar*, Vol. 21, No. 2, (Winter, 2003).). Dana Hollander asks if deconstruction is a Jewish science ("Is Deconstruction a Jewish Science? Reflections on 'Jewish Philosophy' in Light of Jacques Derrida's *Judéïtés*," *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 50, No.1 (Spring 2006). As Hammerschlag points out, Derrida himself questions the poles Jewishness and Judaism in Yerushalmi's usage in his own *Archive Fever*, 74 (See Sarah Hammerschlag, "Another, Other Abraham: Derrida's Figuring of Levinas's Judaism," *Shofar*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2008), 84.

³⁷ David de Sola Poole, *Why I am a Jew?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

a similar claim for other nationalities on the other, frame a problem that requires soul searching.³⁸ The agonizing and Talmudic '*mahloket*' that Derrida's engages in with interlocutors, his internal debates and doubts, his never-ending and never dogmatic self-dialectic, has Talmudic precedent in method if it is not commensurate with other features of the oral tradition. A dialectic open to questioning is the result of the necessary trade-offs between particularity, exemplarity and universal justice:

The more radically you break with a certain dogmatism of the place or of the bond (communal national, religious, of the state), the more you will be faithful to the hyperbolic, excessive demand to the hubris perhaps of a universal and disproportionate responsibility toward the singularity of every other...I speak to myself, then, I address to myself an apostrophe that seems to come to me from the site of a responsibility without limits that is to say, hyper-ethical, hyper-political, hyper-philosophical, a responsibility...that burns at the most irredentist core of what calls itself "Jew." ("Abraham," 15)

³⁸ See Hammerschlag, "Another, Other Abraham: Derrida's Figuring of Levinas's Judaism," 86 and Derrida's "The Onto-theology of National Humanism," in *Derrida: Basic Writings*, ed. B. Stocker, (London: Routledge Press, 2007).

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