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THE VOICE OF GOD AND THE FACE OF THE OTHER

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The Akedah begins with a command from God to Abraham. God demands that Abraham willingly sacrifice his [Abraham's] child to God in order to prove his faith.[1] The test, as Abraham understands it, is to take Isaac, his beloved son, the son through whom God has promised the fulfillment of the covenant, up to Mt. Moriah where he is to be offered as a sacrifice. It is in the absurdity of the situation that Abraham's faith is tested, for God has promised that Canaan will be delivered through Isaac, but now God is asking that Isaac be sacrificed. Abraham, because of God's initial promise, must believe Isaac will be returned to him, though this seems impossible. It is in light of this absurdity that Abraham proceeds with Isaac up the mountain.[2]

[1] To say that it is troubling is probably an understatement. Judah Goldin, translator of Shalom Spiegel's *The Last Trial*, Spiegel's elegant commentary on both the Akedah and the poetry arising from the story of the Akedah, refers to the Akedah, in his preface to the book, as the most terrifying narrative in all of scripture. See *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, translated by Judah Goldin (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), p. vii.

[2] Genesis Rabbah 56:8. Abraham has problems fitting together three things: (1) God's promise to fulfill the covenant through Isaac, (2) God's command to offer Isaac as sacrifice,

If we take seriously Kierkegaard's reading of the story in *Fear and Trembling*,[3] then we must imagine that it took all of Abraham's strength to get him to the point of raising his lethal knife. Kierkegaard gives us an excellent psychological portrayal of Abraham. In particular, Kierkegaard reminds us of the time it took to for Abraham to make the decision: that he had to lie to Sarah, travel up the mountain, cut the wood, and then bind Isaac. To read *Fear and Trembling* is, to be sure, not to take lightly what Abraham is asked and commits himself to do. In light of the captivating power of this psychological profile, we are led to ask: what must have happened that Abraham so easily puts down the knife without so much as a question to the angel? If nothing else, inertia alone might have

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and (3) God telling Abraham not to continue with the sacrifice. God responds by saying that he will not change any part of what he has commanded. Rabbi Aha gives us this speculative dialogue between Abraham and God where Abraham wonders about God's indulgence in prevarications. God, according to the rabbi says, "O Abraham, my covenant will I not profane [Ps. 89:35], and I will establish my covenant with Isaac [Gen. 17:21]. When I bade thee, 'Take now thy son,' etc. [Gen. 22:2], I will not alter that which is gone out of my lips. Did I tell thee, 'Slaughter him?' No! But, 'take him up.' Thou hast taken him up. Now take him down." The Hebrew verb beginning Gen. 22:2 is *veha'alehu*, which can be translated as "offer him up as a sacrifice" or, as R. Aha is doing here, as "raise him up." R. Aha is thus suggesting that Abraham misunderstood, or misheard God's command. However, rather than say God would not ask this kind of action of us, though Levinas assumes that God must be compassionate, Levinas focuses on *our* actions, on what *we* are supposed to do. Franz Rosenzweig makes a similar point when he claims that if humanity is to be truly free, God must also be truly free, and part of that freedom is the freedom to deceive us. In addition, God must make God's own actions difficult, if not impossible, to understand lest we be too willing to follow along God's will blindly. If this course of action were possible, then the fearful and the timid, those most likely to follow God's will out of fear of the repercussions, would be the most pious. In order to be free, we must be free to defy God's will. We fear and tremble before a God who can ask us to commit a murder precisely because we are to choose not to do so. We fear and tremble before a God who is also free and who will n ot do our ethical work for us. It is, as Levinas would say, a "difficult freedom." See Levinas's work, *Difficult Freedom*, translated by Seàn Hand, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp.24-26; *Difficile Liberté* (Paris: Albin Michael, 1976). Hereafter cited as DF/DL followed by the respective page numbers.

[3] Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. Alistair Hannay, (London: Penguin, 1985).

prompted him to execute God's original command.[4] Thus, we might ask if Kierkegaard has glossed over the real concern: the father of Israel has just been asked by God to kill his own son, for no reason other than to pass a mysterious test.[5]

In light of this portrayal, this essay examines what it means that Abraham "heard" the second voice, and that Abraham put down the knife. Something is missing from Kierkegaard's reading of the story, a story he began but did not finish. Just as Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling teaches us not to read the Akedah too quickly, I think we should apply that same vigilance to Kierkegaard himself. We should read the story of the Akedah slowly and carefully, but we should also read it to its end! We can read Kierkegaard back upon himself and discover another message in the text, a message Levinas himself acknowledges, and one that should be emphasized.[6]

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[4] In fact, a midrash (Genesis Rabbah 56:7) has a similar concern but for a different reason. With typical meticulous attention to detail, an unnamed rabbi wonders why the angel tells Abraham "not to lay a *hand* (emphasis mine) on the lad." Their response is that when Abraham raised the knife, the angels wept and their tears melted the knife. So Abraham responds to this by saying, "okay, I will strangle him then." Though the rabbis are trying to explain the change in "weapon" they also underscore Abraham's determination, which must have been present.

[5] In other words, the story takes place as such, with the circumstances, as such. But what if the absurdity were not present? What if there was nothing in God's relationship to Abraham that made it absurd that he would ask for Isaac's life, but only horrifying? One cannot help but wonder what Kierkegaard's reading of the story would be if the covenant had not been promised through Isaac. Is the teleological suspension of the ethical only an issue because of the promise of Canaan? What would we think of a God who had no reason to return the son to the father? What would we think of the father who was willing to sacrifice his son under that circumstance? Would faith still be a possibility? If so, what would it be like?

[6] So, in spite of Kierkegaard's brilliant reading of this story, in spite of the effective way he teaches us to re-read the story, and maybe even teaches us to read it for the first time, to read it slowly, to fill in the gaps, or, at least wonder about them, ponder them, and be troubled by what might be inserted, in spite of all these things, de Silentio misses something. It is this lack on which Levinas focuses, and which I want to stress. How can we retain an admiration for Abraham, but have a different motivation for doing so? It is here that I insert my own answer into the question.

This paper re-visits the Akedah, using as its point of departure Marc Bregman's commentary on the visual in the text: what does Abraham see and how does vision mediate what he hears? The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between the voice of God and the face of Isaac in order to see the role each plays in the test to which Abraham has been put. My claim is that the test Abraham had to pass was an ethical test, not a test of obedience to God. The test Abraham passed was to see the face of Isaac and abort the sacrifice. Moreover, I argue that Abraham had to have seen the face of Isaac *before* the angel commanded him to stop. Finally, this paper discusses the significance of Sarah's absence in both Kierkegaard's reading and the Torah's version of this story and speculates about what she might have seen.

Thou Shalt Not Murder: Levinas and the Primacy of the Ethical

If we are to understand Levinas's concerns with regard to Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham, we must also understand Levinas's project, the shift from the primacy of ontology to the primacy of ethics—ethics as first philosophy. We first find this move to the primacy of the ethical in *Time and the Other*,[7] where Levinas outlines his plan for *Totality and Infinity*. Here we see clearly that subjectivity, rather than giving rise to the ethical, is the result of the ethical. Levinas's critique of Heidegger in *Time and the Other* forms the foundation of a philosophical framework that gives priority to the intersubjective relationship rather than giving priority to the existent's solitary relation to its own death. For Levinas, the dimension of time, which emerges only out of the erotic relation–a relation that is the wellspring of paternity, gives the subject "victory over death." Levinas's goal in this collection of lectures is to demonstrate that time is "not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but that it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other" (TO 39/TA 17). His project then

[7] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, translated by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987). Published first in French as *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1979. Though not indicated by this citation, *Time and the Other* was Levinas's lecture course in 1946-47.

can be seen in contrast to Heidegger's analysis in *Being and Time*. According to Levinas, Heidegger views solitude in the midst of a prior relationship with the other. This view, while anthropologically accurate, is nonetheless disturbing in that this relationship with the other lacks practical import in the "drama of being" (TO 40/TA 18). The concern Levinas has in this first section is the "time" before existents, the time before the solitude of existing, the time before our subjectivity took hold: the hypostasis. However, what motivates the hypostasis cannot be an existent by itself. It cannot be the existent that pulls itself into existence as an existent. The motivation must be heteronomous rather than autonomous. Levinas wants to claim that subjectivity arises in the ethical relation, that is, in the claim the other makes on me. So if the movement out of the hypostasis is the movement toward subjectivity, then the flight from the hypostasis cannot be made by the existent alone. It must be done in relation to another. The existent cannot become a subject prior to the encounter with another.

Levinas's goal in *Totality and Infinity* is to characterize the "same" in its relationship to the Other, an Other which cannot be reduced to the same, cannot be subsumed under the same, and which continually eludes any attempt to grasp it. The "face to face" relationship is, as Levinas develops it in *Totality and Infinity*, the paradigm of the ethical relationship. It characterizes the claim of the other who disrupts the spontaneity of my enjoyment and "brings me back" to the seriousness that the ethical relationship requires of me.

In Levinas's view, the face is the face of another human being, as opposed to some other kind of alterity, whose presence disrupts my existence as a human being enjoying, or taking pleasure in, my existence.[8] The relation between the same and the Other is asymmetrical; the face-to-face relation is not a reversible relation. Though I can talk about the

[8] Levinas is contrasting his view to the one put forth in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, where Dasein's concerns appear as concerns for only Dasein's own projects, not for the other. Additionally, Dasein does not seem to partake in projects for any immediate pleasure, for the sake of enjoying. One eats for-the-sake-of..., rather than eating to enjoy.

relation the Other has to me, to do so is already to abstract from the face-to-face relation.[9]

The absolutely other, the other par excellence, is characterized by Levinas's use of the Biblical expression for those to whom we are most ethically bound: the stranger, the widow and the orphan (Ex. 22:20–23).[10] The ethical obligation one has to the stranger arises precisely from the fact that the stranger is the person who has no ties, specifically family ties, to me. The stranger, like the widow and the orphan who complete the biblical passage, has no claim on me except that he/she is human. The ethical other is the one to whom I am wholly obliged; and my freedom consists in whether or not I act on that obligation, not in having the obligation itself. But the relation to the face of the other is ambiguous. The command, "you shall not commit murder" that is the infinity of face of the other (TI 199/173) is compelling precisely because "the Other is the sole being I can wish to kill" (TI 198/173).[11]

Levinas's Reading of Kierkegaard

In his essay "A propos Kierkegaard Vivant," Levinas writes, "that Abraham obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is

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[9] In "A Religion for Adults," (DF 22/DL 39) Levinas tells us that "reciprocity is a structure founded on an original inequality. For equality to make its entry into the world, beings must be able to demand more of themselves than of the Other, feel responsibilities on which the fate of humanity hangs, and in this sense pose themselves problems outside humanity."

[10] The term 'stranger' is translated from the Hebrew word *ger*, which can also be translated as convert, or as someone who merely resides somewhere. Thus, the English translation does not capture the ambiguity of the Hebrew word. One midrash commentary tells us that the stranger in the Torah is a non-Jew. This is to say that from the Jew's vantage point, the stranger is the individual who does not share race, ethnicity, or kinship with him/her.

[11] The ambiguity of the face of the other, that it both compels me not to kill it, and yet also renders me with murderous desire, alters in *Otherwise than Being* where the face persecutes me, where the language of hostage and persecutor is inverted. See Robert Bernasconi, "'Only the Persecuted...': Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed," *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion,* ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 77-86.

essential."[12] If we are to understand why Levinas writes this, we must remember what happened before Abraham's trek to Mt. Moriah. We must remember that Abraham had to convince himself it was God, he had to lie to Sarah and to his servants, and he had to walk with Isaac up the mountain. We need to keep in mind all that it took for Abraham to convince himself that it is right to kill Isaac and what he needed to do to carry out the task. In other words, we need to keep in mind the psychological state in which we find Abraham. Therefore, Levinas's focus on Abraham's attunement to the second voice should not be minimized. Like Silentio, Kierkegaard's pseudonym in *Fear and Trembling*, Levinas does not want us to gloss over the fact that the sacrifice did not happen. This distance from obedience, this receptivity to the other that Abraham displayed, is at least as extraordinary as his initial faith.[13]

For Levinas, Kierkegaard's violence emerges precisely when he "transcends ethics"[14] and ascends to the religious. Though the religious in Kierkegaard's account reclaims the particular, it cannot be seen as Levinas's account of the ethical. Although the ethical that is suspended for Kierkegaard is the ethical understood as the universal, in Levinas's view the religious still appears to suspend the ethical, the ethical even as Levinas understands it. For Levinas, a suspension of the ethical that allows for the sacrifice/murder of another, cannot be tolerated. Therefore, Levinas's criticism of Kierkegaard focuses on Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical, the ethical defined in terms of the "universal."

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[12] Levinas, *Proper Names*, translated by Michael Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996) p. 77.

[13] And could we not say that this distance to obedience, this sensitivity to hear a second voice–if there was one, is precisely what the Nazis lacked? Such a view can be seen in some of the speeches Himmler gave to the SS, speeches of encouragement so that they would continue with their duty in spite of their own horror at the Nazi activities. That the Nazis were able to squelch whatever response to the other they had in order to carry out Hitler's plan is the cause for Himmler's praise. Himmler, himself, saw his actions as a conflict between will and obligation. See William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York, 1960), pp. 937-938.

[14] Levinas, ibid.

The religious is the sphere in which one reclaims the particular. At the level of the religious, the particular is reclaimed but in a higher form than the particular at the level of the aesthetic. In Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical, the singularity of the self and the other is lost in a rule that is valid for everyone. Levinas's criticism rests on his claim that "the ethical is not where [Kierkegaard] sees it [emphasis added]."[15] As in much of the history of philosophy, the ethical is characterized in terms of the universal, as that which applies to everyone. A conception of the ethical that accounts for the singularity of the I, and that poses the I as a unique individual, that is, that implies an infinite requirement of a responsibility toward others, is still missing from Kierkegaard's religious stage.[16]

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[15] Ibid., p. 76.

[16] See Merold Westphal's article, "Levinas's Teleological Suspension of the Religious" [*Ethics as First Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 151-160] for another perspective on the relationship between Levinas and Kierkegaard. In Westphal's view, Levinas makes a parallel move to the one made by Kierkegaard. Where Kierkegaard suspends the ethical, Levinas suspends the religious, if we think of what is suspended as that which is derivative of something higher than it. But the problem with Westphal's view is that he fails to take into account the places where Levinas tells us that religion is equated with ethics. See, for example, "On Jewish Philosophy" in *In the Time of the Nations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), *op. cit.*, pp. 167-183. In failing to take this point into account, Westphal then makes the mistake of assuming that we would need to put Levinas and Kierkegaard together in order to have a more complete picture of the ethical, that is in order to have both the ethical and the religious combined. But I think that Levinas already assumes this point. To hear the call of the other is to respond to the trace of God, the infinite, in the other. These things, the ethical and the religious, are not mutually exclusive, and though Levinas is greatly indebted to Kierkegaard, I do not think he needs Kierkegaard here to save the religious from its suspension by the ethical. However we might say, as I am arguing in the text of this paper, that Levinas's view comes from assuming implicitly what Kierkegaard is spelling out for us—that Abraham did raise his knife, and in light of how horrifying that is, the fact that he put it down needs to be explained. For a similar reading of this view, see Jill Robbins' essay, "Tracing Responsibility in Levinas's Ethical Thought," in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 173-183. Robbins suggests that "if God can be understood as 'not contaminated by being,' as Levinas puts it, that is, in accordance with what can be called a 'Judaic' *non*-ontotheological theology, then perhaps the non-manifestation of the revelation of God can be understood otherwise, as a differential constitution of (textual) traces, as the other-trace. Then perhaps we can begin to think God, in Levinas's work, as the *name*–unpronounceable if you like–for the difficult way in which we are responsible *to* traces" (182).

But—and this is crucial—the religious stage for Kierkegaard is outside language. This means that one is "out of communication." One cannot explain what one is doing. No one would understand what it means for Abraham to hear to this voice. And this is precisely the kind of relationship Levinas fears when he quotes Yossel ben Yossel with regard to loving the Torah more than God.[17] For Levinas, to love the Torah more than God is precisely to love ethics more than God; it is to be willing to respond ethically to the other rather than to be willing to kill because one "heard" this commanded by the voice of God. To love the Torah more than God is precisely what prevents, or what should prevent, an act like the sacrifice of Isaac.

Though Levinas is critical of Kierkegaard's reading of this story, it is actually Kierkegaard's psychological portrait of Abraham that gives strength to Levinas's own claims. On Levinas's view the dramatic moment of the story occurs when Abraham heeds the Angel of the Lord, who tells him "do not lay a hand on the lad." However, what makes so extraordinary the hearing of the second voice, or rather, what makes so extraordinary Abraham's willingness not to carry out the sacrifice of Isaac, is the psychology that brought him to the possibility of killing him in the first place. This psychology is what Kierkegaard understands so well and it is this psychological portrait that gives strength to Levinas's claim.

Certainly one can take issue with Levinas's readings of Kierkegaard.[18] It is not clear, say some defenders of Kierkegaard, that Levinas has read Kierkegaard correctly. In fact, some claim that Levinas did not see how close Kierkegaard's view actually is to his own. Yet, it does seem clear that one place where Levinas and Kierkegaard diverge is on how the relationship between the Other, God, and 'I' is arranged. For Kierkegaard, God is the mediator between the 'I' and the Other. For Levinas, it is crucial that God be removed as a middle term. Instead, the Other is the middle term between the 'I' and God. And it is in the Other that one sees the trace of God and is called to responsibility. For Kierkegaard, as for Christianity,

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[17] Emmanuel Levinas, "To Love the Torah More than God," in *Difficult Freedom*, 142–46.

[18] See Merold Westphal's work on Levinas and Kierkegaard. See note 16.

one is able to be in relationship to another because one and the other stand in relationship to God. Everything we can say about human relations begins with the Supreme Being.[19] For Levinas, we have the inverse. We begin with human relations and then move to God.

While there may be places where Levinas misunderstands Kierkegaard, it seems safe to say that a fundamental disagreement between Levinas and Kierkegaard is over what God can command. Can God command something unethical? For Kierkegaard this is not the case. If God in fact commanded Abraham to kill his own son, then the command was not a murder, but a sacrifice. Hence, it was not an unethical command. Levinas disagrees and in fact is incredulous at the idea that God is above the ethical order (PN 74). This disagreement reflects the problem with the Divine Command Theory, a problem similar to the quandary formulated in Plato's *Euthyphro*. The Divine Command Theory links ethics with God's word. An example of this theory would be a "literal" reading of the Ten Commandments: one ought follow them *because* they are the word of God. Socrates asks in *Plato's Euthyphro*, "Is the pious being loved by the Gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the Gods. A similar question could be posed to the ethical, and this question would carry with it the same implications. If something is ethical merely because God said so, then does not ethicality merely fall to the whim of God? Levinas would have to reject the Divine Command Theory as the basis for determining right from wrong, or he would not be able to hold Cain responsible for the murder of Abel, clearly something he wants to be able to do.[20] Cain was never told killing, much less murder is wrong. At the very least we do not find this moral lesson in the story. Would not the Divine Command Theory necessitate moral instruction from God, or at least, the giving of the moral rules? So, for Levinas, knowing "right" from "wrong" or knowing what is ethical cannot be the result of waiting for God to tell us what is right and what is wrong. For Levinas "[e]thics is not

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[19] See Westphal. See note 16.

[20] See, for example, "A Religion for Adults," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 16–19.

the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision" (DF 17/DL 33). In other words, acting ethically is not the result of the moral rules given from God. To act ethically is not the result of acting in response to a command from God. Rather, to act ethically is already to be in contact with God.

In *The Gift of Death,*[21] Jacques Derrida undermines our traditional conception of sacrifice by finding an aporia of responsibility in the writings of the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka. On the one hand, we wish to subject responsibility, or rather responsible decision making, to knowledge: how can one know what one is doing and, therefore, be held responsible unless one has adequate knowledge, conscience, etc.? Certainly this is a question we can pose to Abraham. On the other hand, such knowledge would "define the condition of impossibility of this same responsibility–if decision making is relegated to a knowledge that it is content to follow or to develop, then it is no more a responsible decision, it is the technical deployment of a theorem." [22] Though this aporia characterizes, in Derrida's view, the "relation between the Platonic and Christian paradigms throughout the history of morality and politics,"[23] Derrida's interest is in how Patočka reveals what is unthought within the Christian paradigm. Patočka's view of responsibility is strikingly similar to Levinas's. For Patočka, there is no binding responsibility that does not come *from someone*, "from a person such as an absolute being *who transfixes me, takes possession of me, holds me in its hand and in its gaze*" (my emphasis).[24] Patočka's point should alert us to the fact that the relationship between Abraham and Isaac was a relationship already in motion.

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[21] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). *Donner la mort* (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1999). Hereafter cited with the English and the French page numbers.

[22] Ibid., 24/43.

[23] Ibid., 24/43.

[24] Ibid., 32/54.

According to Genesis Rabbah 56:8, Isaac is thought to be around 30 years old, mature enough to go willingly with Abraham. And according to Bregman's reading of the visual imagery in this story, Isaac is thought to see what Abraham sees. That is, Isaac does not see merely a desert; he sees the spirituality of Mt. Moriah. This is not to say that Abraham would not have a responsibility to Isaac, were Isaac only an infant. Rather, one must be able to imagine how Isaac's age changes what we imagine in our mind's eye when we read this story. It is horrifying to imagine a father intending to kill his own son. But it is more horrifying still to imagine the son *knew* what was to transpire.[25] And yet one way to understand the story of Abraham and Isaac is to see it as a shift from the voice of God, *viz.*, from what Abraham hears God command, to the face of Isaac, *viz.* to what Abraham sees.

This tension between what Abraham hears, *viz.* God, and what Abraham sees, *viz.* Isaac, can be understood as the aporia Derrida outlined above. That is, this tension reveals the competing obligations Abraham experiences, namely his perceived duty to what is above (divine) and his duty to what is here on earth (Isaac). Bregman draws our attention to this tension in the artwork he utilizes in his essay. In one painting Abraham's gaze is directed upward, toward the angels who have called to him to stop the sacrifice. But also in this painting, a ram is depicted as tugging at Abraham's garment, drawing his attention downward. One might argue that the intention is not to draw Abraham's attention away from God (and hence away from the command to stop the sacrifice) but rather to draw Abraham's attention toward Isaac.

This image of the ram tugging at Abraham's sleeve is found in a number of the paintings Bregman discusses. He suggests that one

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[25] I do not mean to suggest that one is more or less horrifying than the other. Rather, that our image of one changes when we are aware that the proposed victim knew what was going to happen. This point came up most recently in the case of Andrea Yates and the five children she murdered. Though it was tragic that all five were murdered, and one as young as six months old, many people focused on the oldest boy who knew enough of what was happening to try to run away. One can only imagine how the emotional suffering added to the physical suffering.

interpretation of this representation is the idea that the ram is "express[ing] its willingness to be sacrificed in place of Isaac." Bregman's claim about the paintings is supported by the passage in *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* in which Rabbi Zechariah says, "that ram, which was created at twilight [just before the beginning of the first Sabbath at the time of the creation], was running, and came to be sacrificed in place of Isaac." The Rabbi continues, explaining that Satan thwarted the ram's attempt to stand in for Isaac by misdirecting it and so the ram was caught in the thorns. The ram eventually caught Abraham's attention and it was offered up as a burnt offering in place of Isaac.

The moment in the story when Abraham puts the knife down marks the turning point from a focus on Abraham to a focus on Isaac. The story is no longer about Abraham as a man of faith or about Abraham's perceived duty to God. Rather, this moment in the story could be read as the need for our attention to be focused on the victims, those who suffer the violence, not the administrators of that violence, even if, or maybe especially if, that violence is administered in the name of God.[26] And yet by focusing on this last point, it is still possible to see Abraham as a man of faith, though not in the sense that Kierkegaard, Silentio, or Christianity wants to ascribe to him.

The faith Abraham has must be a condition for him to see the ethical, not necessarily a faith merely to obey the command of God. Thus, as Bregman suggests, Abraham must be a man of faith in order to see what needs to be seen. He needs to be able to see Mt. Moriah as a holy site, as a place where this kind of sacrifice is out of order. Abraham needs to be able

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[26] We can draw on Levinas's imagery of the *Shoah*—the too tight skin, references to persecution, to being a hostage, to feeding the hungry—that appears in *Otherwise than Being*, a text which explores in detail the tension between the ethical and the political, to support the claim that Kierkegaard's reading of this story is precisely the problem Levinas has with the history of philosophy and the moral theory that springs from it. Levinas's worry about the history of philosophy fuels his belief that the focus of Western philosophy, its emphasis on rationality and the need to universalize, led to the sacrifice of the individual in the name of a greater good. We can see this enacted most clearly in the way national policy often sustains its own form of theodicy: the suffering of individuals is justified in the name of a greater good for everyone else concerned.

to see Isaac's face, and he needs to be able to see his responsibility to God precisely as a responsibility to Isaac. As Bregman points out, these "seeings" are not things the others see. The servants, for example, do not "see" what Abraham sees. Thus, Abraham is a man of faith, but not the man of faith Kierkegaard and Christianity want.

Levinas insists that responsibility presupposes response. Responsibility must not lose sight of 'response.' It is precisely this response that we see in Abraham at the point when Abraham aborts the planned sacrifice. An angel of the Lord says, "Abraham, Abraham."[27] Abraham replies to the angel, "here I am [*hineni*]." The Angel then says, "do not lay a hand on the lad." It is significant that while it was God who initiated this sequence of events, it is an Angel who brought them to an end. It is often remarked that Abraham should have wondered if it really was God who issued the initial command. We might also ask if Abraham should have wondered if this presence really was an Angel of the Lord—an Agent of the Lord, if you will? Should Abraham not have wondered if aborting the sacrifice really was what God intended? I do not mean to suggest that "seeing is believing"; nor do I mean to suggest that we should always doubt what we hear. But we should be able to ask after what it means to hear a particular voice and what it means to hear the voice of God. Even if this is a voice Abraham has heard before, what does it mean that he now hears the voice of an angel, an agent of God? Thus, we should also be able to ask after the relationship between "seeing" and "hearing."

The response of *hineni* implies a sensitivity, a total awareness, an openness to respond. In a sense, Abraham's words imply that the response

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[27] According to Genesis Rabbah 56:7, the repetition indicates that first the Lord speaks to Abraham, and second he speaks to all future generations. All generations to come will have men like Abraham and men like Jacob, Moses, and Samuel. Each represents philanthropy, service of God, Study of Torah, and civil justice, respectively.

actually precedes the utterance of the phrase.[28] To utter "here I am" is already to be ready to respond.[29] We should remember what Abraham endured to get to the point of raising the knife in order to respond to a command given to him by God. Then is it not extraordinary that Abraham is *ready* to "hear" the second command, the command not to continue, a command given to him, not by God, but by an alleged messenger of God? This point in itself is significant for Silentio, since this means that Abraham no longer stands as an Absolute in a relation to the Absolute. The relationship between Abraham and God is now mediated by Isaac and the immediate relationship has shifted to that between Abraham and Isaac, a relationship Levinas terms the "face-to-face."[30] Could we not say that Abraham's receptivity to the second voice implies that Abraham had already turned toward the ethical, has already *seen* the ethical? Could we not read this moment, as Levinas also suggests, as the *essential* moment in the story? Genesis Rabbah 56:7 questions the Biblical phrase "do not lay a hand on the lad" and suggests that Abraham had already put down the knife. The Angel's voice, on this interpretation, is less a command from above than a response to a response that is already in motion.[31] And though this is the essential moment for Levinas, something had to take place in order for Abraham to be receptive to this voice: he had seen the face of Isaac. That is, he had seen the holiness of the land.

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[28] See Rashi: "It is the response of the pious. I am ready, an expression of humility and readiness." *Ariel Chumash*, (Jerusalem: United Israel Institutes, 1997), 138.

[29] This view is borne out by Levinas himself when he cites Isaiah's claim that "before they call, I will answer." Isaiah, 65:24 as cited in OTB 150/AE 235

[30] We might be able to interpret this story as Abraham having already turned back to the ethical, or maybe having turned toward it for the first time, if the ethical is to mean something different here than it does for Kierkegaard. In any case, it would not mean, for Levinas, a turning back to the universal. In other words, the Levinasian conception of the ethical would mean a fourth category for Kierkegaard. But might we not say that Abraham saw, at the moment he raised the knife, the face of Isaac, that is, saw it in a way that demanded response, that commanded him, a command greater than God's command, to respond to a face that signified the particularity of the Other, rather than the universal of a nation?

[31] We might even be able to use the term *teshuvah*, a turning back toward, to describe Abraham's actions.

Thus, as Bregman suggests, Abraham does see what needs to be seen. He sees Mt. Moriah as holy, and as the picture of the ram tugging at Abraham's hem suggests, he has turned his attention from God to Isaac, from the command of God to the command of the other. As Bregman also notes, in *Yalkut Shimoni* "Abraham is bent over looking down at Isaac, who is lying on his back looking up into heaven. In the next 'shot', we see the face of Isaac through the eyes of Abraham. What he sees in his son's face is so horrific that it causes him to weep to a surrealistic extent and to let out an inhuman cry." Though the end of this midrash has the angel staying Abraham's hand, my claim is that Abraham was changed when he looked into Isaac's face—*before* the angel stayed his hand. The staying of the hand was the continuation, or affirmation, of an action that was already set into motion. Abraham had already begun to abort the sacrifice. That is, he has turned from sheer obedience to God to the ethical.

For Levinas, the point at which Abraham hears the second voice marks the moment at which Abraham has heard the voice that has led him to the ethical. This moment is not only the essential moment; it is "the highest moment in the drama".[32] Is it not the case that, as Levinas says, we rise to the level of the religious precisely when we are ethical?[33] The ethical for Levinas takes precedence, even over the apparent commands of God. If religion is to provide genuine freedom, God must be understood to be free and able to deceive, or to command a murder that we are free to choose not to commit.[34] Levinas realizes this kind of relationship with God is difficult. On the one hand, God's true desires are hidden. And on the other hand, we must be free to show that we are strong by being able to disobey God's commands.

It cannot be the case that Abraham waited for or merely responded to another command from God, even if the command was from an Angel. If it is, then we are left with the Divine Command Theory and all its

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[32] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 77.

[33] Ibid.

[34] See Rosenzweig on this point.

problems. The result would be to understand Judaism as a religion that has its members wait for the word of God and for orders to tell us what to do and how to act. As Levinas reminds us, Judaism is a *difficile liberté:* precisely because it both commands us to be and allows us to be adults. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard gives us a different reading from the collection of *midrashim* in the Judaic tradition; Kierkegaard, if you will, gives us his own version of a *midrash* on Abraham's struggle. In particular, Kierkegaard gives us the extraordinary psychological portrait of Abraham that is absent from Midrash. But Kierkegaard stops precisely where the drama begins, namely, when Abraham sees in the face of his son the true meaning of the religious, puts down the knife, and hears the angel. This, I claim, was the test Abraham had to pass and did pass.

Sarah's Voice

What then is the relationship between seeing and believing? How are we to determine if what we see is true? Might it not be the case that the visual is not always merely "seeing" the evidence as presented? If we do acknowledge that seeing is believing, we need to account for a broader conception of what it might meant to see. Sarah's "seeing" of Isaac is an example of this problem.

Where is Sarah in this story? This question arises when one reads the Akedah and when one reads Kierkegaard's interpretation of that story. Abraham had to take Isaac up the mountain without telling Sarah where he was going and what he was doing. By not telling her where he was going, by letting her think he was doing something other than taking his child to be offered as a sacrifice, Abraham, in essence, lied to Sarah. How do we account for Abraham's silence and his lie by omission to Sarah, his wife and the mother of Isaac? Was this test a test that Sarah would not have needed? Might we then say that the lesson of the ethical is one that Abraham needs to pass, but one to which Sarah would have already known the answer? The answers to these questions are also found in Levinas's work. For Levinas characteristics of the feminine define the ethical in such a way that maternity becomes the paradigm for the ethical relation.

In *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, one cannot help but notice, or be moved by, Levinas's continual references to and images of skin. If one thinks of skin as that which protects, that which, ultimately, mediates between a self and another, Levinas's images subvert this understanding. Skin now serves as the image of the ethical, of that which exceeds the skin. Responsibility for the other penetrates the skin. Moreover, it is the subject who is held hostage, who is denuded, who is so vulnerable that he or she is exposed beyond his or skin. Substitution, responsibility par excellence, can be viewed as a "getting into" the skin of another. The images of skin blend with Levinas's references to maternity in this text and elsewhere. The skin seems quite apparently to be the skin of the pregnant woman.

In his Talmudic reading "Damages Due to Fire" Levinas inserts into the discussion at hand a discussion of mercy. Levinas asks, what is the meaning of the word Merciful (*Rachmana*)? And he answers,

> It means the Torah itself or the Eternal One who is defined by Mercy. But this translation is altogether inadequate. *Rachamim* (Mercy), which the Aramaic term *Rachmana* evokes, goes back to the word *Rekhem*, which means uterus. *Rachamim* is the relation of the uterus to the *other*, whose gestation takes place within it. *Rachamim* is maternity itself. God as merciful is God defined by maternity. A feminine element is stirred in the depth of this mercy. This maternal element in divine paternity is very remarkable, as is in Judaism the notion of a "virility" to which limits must be set and whose partial renouncement may be symbolized by circumcision, the exaltation of a certain *weakness* which would be devoid of cowardice. Perhaps maternity is sensitivity itself, of which so much ill is said among the Nietzscheans.[35]

For Levinas maternity is not merely a metaphor derived from the image of the proximity between mother and child. Mercy, the ethical response to the other, derives from the Hebraic root for mercy *viz.*, uterus. So we can see the tie that binds the themes from *Otherwise than Being*, particularly the theme of the gestation of the other in the same, and the

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[35] Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 183; Levinas, *Du sacré au saint* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 158.

Hebrew word for mercy, whose root is derived from the word for uterus. But why the image of maternity?[36] A possible answer might be found in Isaiah, a text Levinas frequently references.

Throughout Isaiah we continually see the image of the womb, of the experience of birth, of the most intimate bond between mother and child. And yet, in Isaiah 49:15 Isaiah asks, "Can a woman forget her baby, forget to have compassion [*merachem*] on the child of her womb?" Just after that question, Isaiah, himself answers, "Though she might forget, I never could forget you." Although Isaiah's answer indicates that there is a bond stronger than the mother-child bond, namely the bond between God and God's people, Isaiah's question has force precisely because of the image of the mother-child relation. It is presented as the strongest bond between two humans, a bond only surpassed by a relationship with God. And yet, the relationship between God and Israel is modeled on the mother-child relation. It is against this background that Levinas develops his notion of maternity as the ethical relation par excellence, for even if a woman could conceivably abandon her child, and even though such activity happens, it nonetheless jars our ethical sensibility. For Levinas, the ethical relation is described in terms of proximity, in terms of an absence of space between the two such that the vulnerability of one to the other is plainly clear.

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[36] I am aware of the concerns surrounding Levinas's use of the 'feminine' and in his early work and his use of maternity that appears in *Otherwise than Being*, among other places. My appropriation of Levinas's discussion is not meant to support, uncritically, this idealized view of maternity as the ethical paradigm. I take Levinas's debt to phenomenology seriously. Thus, it is not clear to me that Levinas is offering maternity as a normative position. Rather, I think Levinas is giving us a phenomenological description of maternity as the ethical relation *par excellence*, and this is the point that I find both interesting and useful. The image of maternity is offered as the excess of the "feminine." Since the feminine was seen as the interruption of the virility, maternity exemplifies that interruption to an extreme: where virility is viewed in the context of war, the *conatus essendi*, the survival of one in the face of the other, maternity is viewed as the possibility of the ethical, of the sacrifice of one for the other (not the requirement, but the possibility), as the affirmation of life. For a variety of discussions on Levinas's treatment of the feminine see Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2001); Stella Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* (London: Athlone, 2000); Claire Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, under contract).

Turning the cheek to the smiter, as Levinas tells us when he cites the *Torah*, is not turning the other cheek after having already been injured. Rather it is turning the cheek for the first time, and thus, Levinas intends something far more profound. To have one's cheek turned toward the smiter is to indicate one's openness to the other. It indicates the always already being vulnerable, being exposed to the other. Thus, in order to illustrate such an ethical relation, Levinas turns to the maternal figure. In Levinas's view, the maternal exemplifies that which is held hostage, that which gives itself over to the other completely. The maternal exemplifies that which quite literally, in the state of pregnancy, for example, gives the bread out of one's mouth. Maternity exemplifies substitution.

Catherine Chalier, a French reader of Levinas's work, argues a similar point in "Ethics and the Feminine."[37] She claims that maternity is the very pattern of substitution insofar as substitution fulfills responsibility and we understand responsibility in a particular way, as that which is not chosen, etc. According to Chalier, it is the maternal body that exemplifies substitution since "Levinas describes the maternal body as 'a pre-original not resting on oneself' (OB75/AE 95), as a body of goodness that is devoted to the Other before being devoted to itself. In this unselfish and maternal body, subjectivity loses the substantiality and identity that would already be acquired. As a subjectivity without substitute, the maternal body has to answer for the Other and is irreplaceable in this task. The maternal body suffers for the Other, it is 'the body as passivity and renunciation, a pure undergoing.' The maternal body is completely affected by the gestation of the other in the same and as such it it is the very contrary of the *conatus*. It is 'signification for the other and not for itself.' In spite of me, for the other.... The maternal body is ruled by the Good beyond being; it has not

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[37] Catherine Chalier, "Ethics and the Feminine," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) pp. 119-129. Chalier offers us the Biblical Rebecca, a woman whose excessive fulfillment of the feminine moves them from beyond the ethical to the very example of the ethical itself, as an example. Levinas himself cites this very story as an example of the ethical at the beginning of his essay, "The Bible and the Greeks" (*In the Time of the Nations*, translated by Michael Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) pp. 133-135.

chosen the Good but the Good has elected it... Thus it seems that maternity is the ultimate meaning of the feminine, the very metaphor of subjectivity, and of course, not only a metaphor. The maternal body knows in its flesh and blood what subjectivity means."[38] (126-7).

Could we not ask if Sarah would have made a different decision from the one Abraham made? Might Sarah, if she had been the one asked by God, have refused? The ethical for Levinas takes precedence, even over God. So, if the ethical in *Otherwise than Being* is cast in the figure of maternity, what do we make of the implied statement Levinas makes about women, about the feminine? Certainly we could ask, in reference to our discussion of The Akedah, where was Sarah? Why does Kierkegaard not pay much attention to Sarah's absence? How might we read the story if it had been Sarah in place of Abraham, and she did or did not obey God's command?[39] Either scenario raises questions for us. At Genesis 21:12 God says to Abraham, "Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says."[40]

The above quote is a reference to Sarah's request that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael from their home. Sarah appears a strong and certainly willful character. Bregman reminds us in his gloss on the passage in *Midrash Tanchuma* in which Sarah, upon falsely hearing that Isaac had been sacrificed, dies of grief. In this passage, Satan comes to Sarah disguised as Isaac. Sarah, upon seeing him, immediately says, "What did your father do to you?" Embedded in this question is Sarah's knowledge, not just that something bad had happened to Isaac, but that it happened at the hands of his father. Sarah knows and she knows solely by looking

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[38] Chalier, *op.cit.*,126-7.

[39] Derrida also asks after the question of sexual difference in relationship to death. He notes that the traditional discourses on death, and in fact, the discourses to which he refers in his book, do not give room to take into account; "as if it would be tempting to imagine, sexual difference does not count in the face of death. Sexual difference would be a being-*up-until*-death" (*The Gift of Death*, 45). One might also ask this question with regard to the gift of death, a question that implicates sexual difference in the ethical itself.

[40] Though this statement is made in reference to Sarah's wish that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out into the woods, one might surmise that Abraham is implored to listen to Sarah in these difficult situations.

at her son. One might claim that it is because she is Isaac's mother that she knows.

Might we say, as Levinas says, that maternity is vulnerability? Sarah's strength is her vulnerability. That is, her strength comes precisely from her maternity. The fierceness with which she would protect her child is what causes her to die of grief at the mere thought that Isaac had died. What she thought she might hear — remember she died before the end of the story — is too great for her to bear hearing. Thus, Sarah is vulnerable in a way that Abraham cannot be. Sarah's mortality betrays her vulnerability. Her strength and her vulnerability are complements to each other, each a function of the other, and both issuing from motherhood.[41]

Rosenzweig offers us another interesting perspective on the relationship men and women have to the ethical:

> It is significant that at a boy's birth the father prays that it may be vouchsafed [for] him to bring up his son to the Torah, to the bridal canopy, and to good works. To learn the Torah and to keep the commandments is the omnipresent basis of Jewish life. Marriage brings with it the full realization of this life, for only then do the "good works" become possible. Only the man needs to be aware that the Torah is the basis of life. When a daughter is born, the father simply prays that he may lead her to the bridal canopy and to good works. For a woman has this basis of Jewish life for her own without having to learn it deliberately over and over, as the man who is less securely rooted in the depths of nature is compelled to do.[42]

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[41] For an excellent discussion of this topic see the work of both Julia Kristeva and Catherine Clément. In particular see their joint work, *The Feminine and the Sacred* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Both of these French feminists think of the mother-child relationship as sacred, as the unique bond *par excellence*.

[42] *The Star of Redemption*, 326. See Catherine Chalier ["Exteriority and the Feminine," *Faces of the Feminine*, translated by Bettina Bergo in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001)] for a similar claim. Chalier argues that it is the feminine that gives meaning the male ethical and spiritual life. She tells us that without the feminine, woman [Chalier's equivocation], "without her weakness [*défaillance*] and the intimacy of her home, man would know 'nothing of what transforms his natural life into ethics'" (DF 34/DL 50–translation altered by Bergo). See also the poem "Sarah's Choice" by Eleanor Wilner [*Sarah's Choice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

We might say then that Abraham had to be an exemplar. There was a lesson he needed to learn and this lesson needed to be public. And we might say that this lesson was one that women already knew. We could ask if this lesson was one Sarah already saw—the face of Isaac as the trace of God; responsibility to Isaac is responsibility to God. But to do so would be to elide the two kinds of seeing, the two kinds of visions. Sarah's vision is different from Abraham's. If Abraham is to receive and yet also participate in the Torah, then what the Torah means—i.e., the ethical teachings it contains, for the those who follow it are transmitted through Abraham, the first Jew. This is why we might also say that Sarah's lesson is one she did not need to learn? Could Levinas see something unique in the feminine and its relationship to the ethical via the relationship to a child?[43] The pregnant mother has no choice but to feed her child, but the child, once born, offers a variety of possibilities, conflicts, and tensions in the midst of competing needs with others. The bond Isaiah so eloquently describes, a bond that appears immune from the disruption of the third, is still subject to that violence and thus underscores the fragility of the ethical.

1991)]. In this poem Wilner inverts to the story to read God asking Sarah rather than Abraham. Sarah immediately decides against this action and in fact gathers Hagar and the two children and leaves.

[43] There is a saying in Judaism that women do not need to study Torah because they are already closer to God, that is, closer to the ethical. We might, then, say that Abraham's trial was a trial for him, as a man, a coming to the ethical.