

The Trace of the Face of God: Emmanuel Levinas and Depth Psychology

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In a Yom Kippur sermon on repentance, entitled “Service of the Heart,” Joseph Solevetchik, who (since the death of the Gaon of Vilna) is the undisputed theologian of orthodox Jewry of the twentieth century, said that sometimes a person feels quietly, subtly, that something has not felt exactly right, perhaps for the entirety of his or her life. Then one day the lifelong deficit becomes apparent, and finally, with this understanding, the person can at last confess (Solevetchik 1984, 71ff).

When I was nine-years-old I wrote in my diary, “When I grow up, I want to be a psychiatrist.” The dynamics underlying my childhood wish are not of importance here, but they were coupled with strong feelings of affection and wanting to give that have been central to my life and to my forty years as a psychotherapist. I am committed to living and working with my heart open.

Nevertheless, something was missing in my life and work that became clear to me only recently: a friend, taking in the scattershot of my feelings one day, honored my desire to be close by offering a kind of engagement that is best described by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. “Oh,” said my friend. “I understand, you want a friendship built on the highest ethical grounds; namely, our granting to one another a sanctity and respect that one would bring to God.” In that moment, I realized that the wherewithal to do this had long been present in me but that I had never known how to articulate my approach to my life and work. It had been outside the letter, outside of language. The realization that who I am at heart had a name and a philosophy, a way to deepen and to dialogue, came as an epiphany for me, as a manifestation of God. I have not been the same since.

I am humbled to have discovered Levinas late in life. He teaches us what it means to be human, defends humanity in the twentieth century, the human in its depth (bodily

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nature) and its height (the divine). He is, according to James Hillman, the “most radical, soulful and profoundly positive French thinker of the last 50 years” (1999, 141). As a phenomenologist, Levinas is concerned with conscious experience and subjectivity in all its varieties. A phenomenologist “seeks to pick out and analyze the common, shared features that underlie our everyday experience, to make explicit what is implicit in our ordinary social know-how” (Critchley 2002, 7). Levinas has helped me rethink basic assumptions about humanity and my work, and this stirring of the pot in my seventh decade is both welcome and unsettling.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Kovno, Lithuania, on January 12, 1906, into a religious Jewish community where “to be Jewish was as natural as having eyes and ears” (Levinas 1994, xi). His childhood was blessed with spiritual and intellectual enrichment and community. As an Orthodox Jew, he studied the Old Testament deeply. He also enjoyed the companionship of reading great Russian novelists, such as Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, in addition to Goethe, all of whom he credits with his early interest in philosophy. From ages seventeen to twenty-four, Levinas studied philosophy in Strausberg, Germany. Later, while studying with Edmond Husserl in Freiberg, he became immersed with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. At twenty-four, Levinas moved to Paris and published his doctoral dissertation. Written completely in French, it ushered German philosophical thought, including existentialism, into France. Jean-Paul Sartre read it and later maintained he was introduced to existentialism by Levinas, even though French existentialism is generally attributed to Sartre.

In 1939, at age thirty-three, Levinas was drafted into the French army to fight Hitler’s invading troops and worked as an interpreter of Russian and German. He was captured at Rennes. As an officer in the French army, he wasn’t sent to a concentration camp but rather sent to a compulsory labor camp in Germany, where he was able to spend some borrowed time in the prison library. A memory that stood out for him from this period was of the daily walk through a German village on the way back from the work camp. The villagers watched Levinas’ group of Jews, treating them as germ-infested and contaminated. There was, however, a friendly dog named Bobby who would jump up and down as they passed through the town, barking happily, welcoming them as human beings (Robbins 2000, 41). (It strikes me that this is often our work with patients—to find the human in them when others have trouble doing so.)

Levinas dedicated his second big book to the victims of the Holocaust, victims that included his parents, his maternal grandparents, his paternal grandparents, his two younger brothers, and almost everyone he knew as a child. Fortunately, his wife Rachel and their daughter escaped persecution. A son, Michael, was born in Paris after the war in 1947 and is a composer and concert pianist.

Levinas’ best-known work, *Totality and Infinity*, was published in French in 1961. A humble man, he spent most of his life in social work and education. He found great

prominence late in life, when at the age of fifty-eight, was appointed Professor of Philosophy at Poitiers. At age sixty-two, he won the Albert Schweitzer philosophy prize. He published more than 900 books and essays (Peperzak 1993, 7) and sold more than 200,000 copies of his books. Sadly, he died on the night of December 25, 1995, after suffering from Alzheimer's for a lengthy time. On December 28, Jacques Derrida gave him a funeral oration titled "Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas" (1999.)

As a beginner reading Levinas, I learned that the face of the Other is the trace of God's face. We, of course, cannot see God, but in the Other we see a glimpse, a moment of knowing. Levinas' work has reminded me that Freud and Jung are the tip of the iceberg in the huge history of the movement of the soul. Through philosophy, the Torah, and the Talmud, Levinas opens us to the texture and richness of the centuries of decades *before* the study of psychology, the psyche, and the unconscious.

For Levinas, in the face-to-face encounter, in the ethical call of the Other, the divine in our patients comes unbidden to us. One *must* be receptive to its presence. Sometimes, I will bracket my thoughts or associations and intentionally pay attention to the extraordinary in the one before me. Sometimes, mercifully, it appears with grace. Sometimes I use the image I remember when I was a mother with a newborn or a child of any age. I look at what is special, unique, vulnerable about that face, that person at that moment, and I try to go beyond words into her being, into her vulnerability, into why she's there, into us.

My therapeutic work with a woman I'll call Anabelle illustrates the ways in which Levinas' philosophy entered my analytic practice. In our first session, six years ago, we were both nervous. She had just received news that her mammogram looked "suspicious." Whatever her fate, I had already accepted her. I would be there for her regardless of what was to come. She didn't seem frightened: she was depressed that life didn't feel precious to her. I intuited that our therapy would concern the maternal, the breast, and that I would try to offer her mine symbolically. My first image of her was of fragility and fear of being in life. There were hints of a divine child, of a young flower that had been stepped upon, that could not bloom forth. There was a hidden, embarrassed spark in her smile, a hesitancy amid expectation, and a sense of humor pushed underground. I so wanted an attachment to unfold but I knew I could not will it. I imagined my heart opening to her and that she would slowly breathe in the warmth I offered.

In retrospect, I think I saw in her my bedridden mother whom I could never rouse. I wonder, how far back in my psyche does Anabelle's suffering resonate—to my mother, my mother's mother, whom my mother could not rouse out of bed either? Anabelle's face stared at me and seemed to call me to see her bedridden lifeless self, as well as the potentially creative, strongly emotional woman within her.

Egoistic thoughts: I asked myself if I would be able to help her: thirty years of Jungian analysis hadn't helped that much. The last analyst allowed her to have therapy

on the telephone because of her depression. I asked if she felt very important to her last analyst, did she feel she mattered? I questioned my motives for asking these questions: did I want to feel I was better than her previous analyst? I needed to pay attention to her. I also noted my associations, which informed our inter-subjective field. I remembered that my reverie has meaning, in this case, a reaction to her feelings of being one-down, less than, not mattering—and perhaps a hidden impulse to superiority that is also part of the field. But then I remembered our work together and paid attention to Anabelle, her face, her being, her expression, her voice, her Otherness. My solitude was interrupted and intruded on by her demands, my obligation to her. She was in me, and I responded to her. I wanted to do well by her.

Anabelle had several family members in analysis. I felt their analysts were looking over my shoulder. I did feel watched, potentially judged, as if these analysts were wondering if I could help Anabelle more than her previous analysts had. Every time I veered from a traditional analytic approach, I would imagine their scowls, but I veered nevertheless.

Anabelle's presenting issues were feelings of severe depression, inability to make decisions, difficulty sustaining interests in the daytime, and sleeping at night. She lived in a home in which she was not comfortable, a home overstuffed with things, messes, clutter beyond clutter, so much clutter that she had trouble comfortably walking through the rooms.

I note the “mundane” aspects that surround our four sessions a week. For example, one minute before our time begins, I rush around the office preparing. I always leave out a blanket for her. I also prepare myself—my notepad, pen, water, pillows, and footstool. Then I rush to the bathroom. Ready, I greet her in the waiting room, where she's usually reading *People* magazine, always wearing a hat and carrying a satchel filled with her water bottle, Palm Pilot, and other necessities. We make eye contact, as I have joked with her about connecting when we greet each other. We tease about the eye-contact ritual. I sit in the chair across from her and pay full attention to her as she lies down. I try to take her into me. I am usually the only person she will see that day. Anabelle is seventy-one and very isolated.

In the first dream Anabelle reported,

Her father was standing behind a make-up counter at a department store. She and her sister were on the other side of the stark white counter. Her father was giving her sister cosmetics and giving none to Anabelle.

Anabelle saw this as a metaphor for her life, feeling deprived, unable to take care of her needs well, mainly there to serve the Other, unable to find her own pleasures. Later in the therapy, her wish to serve others would become a pleasure for her, and as Levinas proffers, help her out of self-absorption.

Within the first few weeks of therapy, it became clear that Anabelle's self-neglect was enormous. Other than the mammogram, she had put off doctors' visits and necessary lab

tests. She came from a lineage of depressed women who had cold, rejecting mothers. To put it simply, Anabelle could not access her inner Good Mother, and I knew it would be my job to teach her how to tap into her own potential to be kind to herself. I would do this by being true about the love for her I slowly felt developing. I would show it more than talk about it.

I searched for areas of commonality, and we found many: fascination with her rich dream life, Jung, Bob Dylan, humor, novels, politics, and celebrities. She began to come alive in the warmth of our bond. I beamed at her in reverie amidst the sheer pleasure of two people hanging out and enjoying one another.

I was again reminded of Levinas when my dear friend Randolph Charlton spoke at our San Francisco Jung Institute monthly membership meeting. He invited us to consider that “enactments,” action, doing instead of talking, can be very meaningful communication and not necessarily defensive or the “acting out” of unresolved issues in the analyst. He believes that “the enactment is part and parcel of the process, that what is being said by the two participants is what is being shown behaviorally” (2006). Actions create a whole world of symbolic meaning. They are affect and image and a voice from the unconscious. I reflect upon the ways Anabelle and I bring our enactments into consciousness. We talk about her feelings, experiences, and responses to our making the analytic frame more flexible.

Here are several examples of our enactments. She showed a sweet curiosity about some of my self-care tendencies. “Where did you get those shoes?” was one of her first questions about my appearance. We slowly moved into a compendium of ways to nurture oneself from the outside in. (I smile as I write this because it reminds me that when I began my first Jungian analysis, and the analyst told me when she had an available timeslot, I responded, “That is when I have my monthly facial.” “Oh no,” she countered. “In Jungian analysis, we heal from the inside out, not the outside in.” I changed the time of my facial).

As time went on, Anabelle would ask, “Where did you get those pants? What material are they?” She also learned about Nicole Kidman’s favorite lip balm while reading *People* magazine in the waiting room. The jar was \$60. She searched for it on Google and discovered she could buy a tube for \$20. She then discovered she could buy tiny samples of different organic skin products for \$1.00. She would tell me about each step of this development of purchasing something to make herself feel good.

As our relationship deepened, about the time of our second Mother’s Day together, she brought me face cream, hand cream, neck cream, eye cream, and a light perfume spray. She told me recently, “I chose Mother’s Day to bring the gifts because I thought it was a good time to treat ourselves.” When I queried about her presenting dream, she realized that by giving the cosmetics to me, she was helping herself. Anabelle and I focused on the superficial as symbolic, not trivial or irrelevant. We worked at the most

basic level, the skin level, touching without physical touching, but truly touching. The caress.

A few years into the therapy, Anabelle told me the first thing she noticed about me was that my hair moved as I walked. Later, she asked where I had my hair done and now goes to the same salon, but our appointments are on different days. The negotiation about who would go when was difficult because I clearly needed that space to myself yet I loathed the idea of rejecting her or hurting her feelings. Keenly sensitive to the needs of others, she did not hesitate to change the day of her appointment.

Anabelle currently has dreams of being in touch with her femininity. For example, she dreamt she saw and touched the soft leaves of her vulva, “which look like a pansy” and told me, “I am acknowledging, exploring, enjoying, being with, connecting to these leaves.” She allowed herself to be generous to herself. The day she related that dream she brought me a pansy in a small jar of water.

Her burgeoning relatedness via sexuality reminds me of a small child who expresses love in very physical ways. I also have a thought about her bringing me the pansy . . . pansies are for thoughts. They also wilt in the “heat” and prefer brisk, cooler climates, but if you put a pansy in a small vase on a windowsill, its face will move and follow the sun. The image may also be a reaction to someone who hasn’t had our kind of relatedness before. I try to be keenly sensitive to how young the inner Anabelle is, to remember that as the earliest experiences of being held by another come alive, when that layer of psyche is awakened, of course there will be a sensual/sexual/erotic component.

I try to imagine how my work with Anabelle might have gone if I had been guided only by the professional “rules” of contemporary therapy, focused on keeping the “frame” tight, making interpretations, and declining to disclose information about myself. Self-disclosure and expressions of warmth, giving advice, concrete expressions of care (such as preparing the consulting room) might all be met with disapproval by many therapists, yet in some instances, they may be crucial to therapeutic progress with certain patients. What Levinas has offered me is a radical new conception of the self and the Other, which creates an ethical obligation to self and the Other and a movement out of self-absorption with my “role” as a therapist. Levinas’ stand toward the Other as ethical and as the conduit to God deepens and enriches the possibilities of the analytic encounter, an encounter I see as a microcosm of life as we know it.

Despite Levinas’ hyperbolic and elliptical writing style, I am gripped by his ideas and believe his work can make a significant and radical contribution to modern psychology. On the other hand, part of what pulls me into his writing is how beautifully he expresses himself and how vast the possibilities are if the intuitive reader will allow herself or himself to read freely and openly rather than attempt a logical understanding. His cadences hold echoes from my childhood: both my grandparents, like Levinas, were born in Lithuania, and in reading him, I feel a familiar familial connection. His

writing reminds me of something a third grader said on a day when I was driving for my son's school carpool. I had written a book on women and envy (B. Cohen 1987), and my son reviewed it for an oral report in third grade. As I drove him home that day, his friend said, "I didn't understand a word, but it sure sounds like a good book, and what your son said was beautiful."

Levinas bridges the two worlds of theology and philosophy. He couples phenomenology with the Torah and Talmud, although he has little to say about psychology. Even so, his thinking has been incorporated by many followers of Carl Rogers because Levinas is "other-centered" and hence "client-centered" (Schmid 2001; Robbins 1999). Levinas' work has shaken my previously uncritical acceptance of the status-quo approach to the self as dominant, of autonomy as the therapeutic goal, the goal of maturity. In deeply questioning the egoism of modern society and culture, what is called "ego-ology," the self is instead ethically called to transcend its own obsessions, compulsions, addictions, and to respect and serve others.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes a basic ethical principle: our responsibility to the Other is an obligation and a divine command (2004). *Totalizing* is our relation, in action and in judgment, to the Other as "nothing more than . . ."—he is nothing more than my friend, she is nothing more than my patient, he is nothing more than my teacher. When we categorize, diagnose, box, limit, narrow the Other, we are *totalizing* that person. When we totalize, we reduce the Other to the same, to someone like me. We don't honor difference. Levinas begs us to honor our profound difference from one another.

For Levinas, the *infinite* cannot be reduced. It is more than we can know. The infinite is found in the face-to-face encounter with the Other.¹ There are endless possibilities of knowing the Other. "Dostoyevsky's Underground Man complains that he is not ' . . . some general concept of the human being such as an ego, self-conscious, or thinking thing'" (Critchley 2002, 22). For example, I made the mistake of telling a friend that she is my "thinking buddy," and she reminded me that I was "totalizing" her, for, after all, she is much more than my thinking buddy. Levinas says that when I, the subject, am related to the infinite, I cannot comprehend or encompass it. It is the experience of the ineffable. "The infinite surprises, shocks, overwhelms and blinds by confronting me with another human face" (Peperzak 1993, 129). Relationships have infinite potential. I keep this in mind when I feel bogged down with Anabelle.

The "self as for-the-other" is the foundation of our developing subjectivity. The ethical requirement that we are responsible for the Other is unsettling. For example, Heidegger thought of death in terms of "my death." For Levinas, our consciousness is determined by the way in which we are haunted by the Other's death and the possibility of that death. The Other intimately reveals her death to us; her dying is part of the aging process; we see the face aging, wrinkles, the Other's bodily reality. For Levinas, I must pay attention as I am my brother's keeper.

According to Levinas, the Other is more important than the self. This is not simplistic. We are unable to completely fathom, accept, do this, but we must never forget the basic responsibility to the Other, *never* forget to be hospitable to the stranger, the widow, the orphan. As do we, our patients generally begin analysis as strangers unknown to themselves—widowed, lost from connection, and orphaned, without a solid connection to the maternal.

For Levinas, the face is both literal and symbolic. The archetype of the Other's face represents absolute vulnerability, a sacred force without defenses. We often don't look at a face we don't want to see. My patients in wheelchairs frequently tell me how they attempt eye contact, but no one looks.

Face can also mean expression, speech, what surprises me, disrupts my world, accuses and refuses my self-centeredness. The face speaks to me. The face is a shock to my complacency and should be met with generosity. After reading Levinas, I am more mindful to be generous with cab drivers, food servers, those whose faces in their vulnerability have confronted me, "The only adequate response to the revelation of the absolute in the face is generosity, donation" (Peperzak 1993, 142).

Careful attention to the face of the Other is a way out of our egoism. "The face is . . . the initiation of a meaning" (Peperzak 1993, 165). Early one morning at the airport, I asked the woman at the Starbucks counter for a "latte, please." She responded, "Good morning!" My God, I felt terrible. I had forgotten to see her, pay attention to her presence, note she was there, present to serve me. I now try to make an effort to look people in the eye, to connect for a moment, knowing that they matter. She knocked at my door, and her face disrupted my egocentric airport anxiety.

The face is a vision of the infinite, the astonishing realization of Otherness that cannot be reduced or totalized to something similar about me and yet it opens up our awareness that we are connected. Each face and the accompanying obligation is personal and unique, as well as universal and unconditional. Just as we never see the face of God, we never fully see the Other's face, only a trace of God's presence.

Levinas focuses not so much on understanding the Other, because truly knowing the Other is impossible, but in relating to the Other. We emerge and take on meaning as we relate with and respond to the Other. Hence, Levinas is a true inter-subjectivist. I now try to pay attention to my self-absorption, asking internal questions such as, "What is my focus, me or the Other?" I have been paying attention in relation to a particular valued friend. I try not to inundate her, not so much because it will push her away from me, but because of her sensitivity about being inundated. I try to give love to her because of the sheer fact of her existence. I strive to notice a lack of egoism in others. My friend loves her animals, and she loves giving to them with no expectation for what she might receive. That is joy.

For Levinas, the deepest desire is transcendence, a way out, an escape from the self, "the desire for the truly other—an escape from self-enclosure . . . Really getting out [of

the self], contrary to common sense and the wisdom of nations, is neither by indulging pleasure, nor theorizing concepts, nor accumulating stuff, nor gaining power with calculated practicality” (R. Cohen 2005, 5).

We must know that the human being isn't condemned to the oppression and depression of self-absorption. We work toward the glory of getting out of ourselves. Levinas helps us understand that the human being is not condemned to such a fate.

To extend Levinas to a psychotherapy model, the goal for a patient who cannot seem to escape self-absorption would be the moral experience of a life with obligations to others, a “genuine inter-subjective life” (R. Cohen 2005, 5). Anabelle's life is becoming very much for the Other, giving to those who have less than she has. We try to remember that even though the self is for the Other, Levinas says the self *must* first be nurtured in order to then nurture the Other.

There are many Others; this fact demands justice because it forces us to think about who will get what, when. Our obligations must also be balanced, weighed, carefully thought out. It is often our job to help our patients carefully consider their obligations to self and Other. We take on meaning as we relate and respond to the Other. This is why Levinas is a true inter-subjectivist: “The soul is the Other in me” (Levinas 1981, 191). Levinas believes being-for-the-other is not heroic. He uses examples such as everyday gestures of goodwill and generosity, of saying, “after you” as we let someone go before us.

Where does the Other-in-me begin? Where is it that we first witness the divine? Levinas equates the maternal with the Other-before-itself. For Levinas, everything that I am writing has to do with the maternal, the vulnerability, the Other-in-me, the maternal body being the welcoming place in me, giving, nursing, flesh of her flesh, the Other; the Other gets under our skin. The mother is a hostage in a full Levinasian sense. When we talk about the patient as being under my skin, in me, with me, about carrying the patient, this is good. Contrary to what I was taught, I believe that we naturally think of patients outside the session, wanting to give, and are moved by them. When we are connected to a patient, our hearts and minds do not live by the artificial boundaries imposed by the frame.

I am currently treating two patients with terminal illnesses. I had worked with them for more than a decade before their diagnoses. Both are almost always with me, in me. I am moved by them, their conditions, their dying. I do not forget them. It is like being pregnant. Can the mother forget the child she carries in the womb? We experience our responsibility, our bond, our maternal psyche. The baby's responsibility is to be irresponsible, to receive the nourishment, the dwelling and protection.

The maternal is a good example of what Levinas means by *psychism*. He chooses the word *psychism* for emphasis, to use a different word than *psyche*. By *psychism*, he means the inner life, the spirit of the psyche, what animates us. The maternal psyche, our

maternal part, the limbic experience, the heart experience, unique and special, begins in the mother/child holding bond. The maternal psyche is “the inspired self, deeper and higher than egoism, concerned for others in its very being” (B. Cohen 1986, 61).

The maternal is not just woman. It is not gender-based. The father, too, can be maternal. For Bion, the biological unit is a “couple.” (1980, 25). The first couple, Adam and Eve, was one flesh, as the child is the mother’s flesh. My brother, a psychoanalyst, studies the experience of the fetus, the gestation period. He believes the fetus knows the ineffable, as it knows the experience of unity and timelessness, unity with the mother, a going-on-being. One way of understanding Levinas is that the gestation phase is where the mother first knows the first other, the Other-in-me, completely dependent on me.

The *caress*, according to Levinas, is connected to the maternal psychism. Levinas finds many ways to connect to the Other, through the face, expression, voice, the caress. His is not a literal caress. “The caress, like contact, is sensibility. . . . **the caress consists in seizing upon nothing . . . it searches, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement toward the invisible**” (Levinas 2004, 257). Levinas’ caress is about tenderness—not the image of the hand as grasping, mastering, powerful.

As analysts we create a field, a presence, an ambience of a caress. We show the caress through our face, eyes, expression, voice, without imposing it on the Other, as in a *grasp*. We touch, yet we don’t touch. We are moved, touching, being touched. The touch is the gentle hand, the mother/child. To caress the client in this sense is to affirm her or his radical alterity. To grasp, to be right, is to hold firm our version of the truth, be wedded to a theory, force an interpretation on the patient, or push a historical correlative onto the present.

Many times I have grasped when a patient talks of quitting. I feel a shortness of breath, separation anxiety, abandonment, fear of the loss of the connection, intimacy, income, sending them out when we have “more work to do.” A grasp is trying to hold the patient in our therapy. If someone talks of stopping and I think “caress” rather than “grasp,” I have a chance to better know what’s going on for that person. When I think of the caress, quiet, silent, listening, rather than grasping, I am more able to know the patient with less of my own narcissistic agenda.

As mentioned earlier, my friend had told me that according to Levinas the pinnacle of interpersonal ethical behavior is the relationship to the Other . . . **For Levinas, even** though ethics is instinctual and archetypal, the Torah, the rules by which we live, is where we start to understand the first ethical relation. Levinas’ philosophy/theology is clear that ethics is a greater subject than morals or logic. When we reduce ethics to a code of rules or behavior, we don’t allow room for the small voice of God. Ethics is primary, the beginning, the end, the essence of our being, the first philosophy, the guide and sustenance of who we are as humans. Ethics is holy and holiness, the highest human

destiny, a life fully for the Other. Ethics is the Torah. Ethics is our relationship with God. Ethics is the *sine qua non* of existence.

Ethics is a *Hineni* moment. *Hineni* is Hebrew for “Here I am. I am Here.” I could do no other. In French, it is *Me voici*. *Me voici* is the Other before me; I am called to account (which is also what Levinas means by maternal psyche). Much of Levinas’ understanding of ethics comes from stories and commentaries about the Torah in the Midrash and Talmud. In the Torah, Abraham, a manifestation of an inspired self, is about to be tested by God and is asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham’s response is an immediate, *Hineni* (Gen. 22:1). And when Moses is called by the voice from within a burning bush, Moses’ answer is also an immediate *Hineni* (Ex. 3:4). *Hineni* occurs in relationship and means being fully present, expectant, and willing to engage. We don’t ask why we are commanded to the Other, we just intrinsically are. “To be a human being, to be a mensch . . . involves recognizing that I am commanded to say *Hineni*” (Critchley 2002, 39). The therapist needs to be a mensch. For Levinas, our calling as a *person* is to become a mensch, and here we have the eminent meaning, the core, of what it is to be human.

Hineni is a witness to the Infinite in the Other, to our primary, fundamental obligation to the Other. *Hineni*, responding to the call of the Other, suspends our theories and allows the Other, as teacher and master, to teach us, through the epiphany of the face-to-face encounter, to let us open to the Others’ light.

The Torah, the birth and home of Judeo-Christian ethics in the Western World, changed the Israelites and all the generations to follow. The wisdom in the Torah altered history for eternity, just as I was forever transformed when my friend said to me, “I offer to find the trace of the face of God in you”—though I received the message via the Internet in an email and not at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

At the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses read the old laws, laws that the people had already heard, to the assembled Israelites. The people responded, “We shall do and we shall hear.” They were then ready to receive the new: the new laws, the Covenant. God gave Moses the new laws. Moses wrote them down. He then read the Torah, the Book of the Covenant. Again, the people responded, “We shall do and we shall hear.”

The response of the people to hearing the Covenant was not legalistic, not a ratification of a treaty. It was a response beyond a rules-bound form of obedience. The Israelites had already met God in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and at Mount Sinai. These encounters had left them hungry for transformation, and in this hunger, they surrendered in trust and faith. Their response was immediate and spontaneous, what Levinas calls a “lucidity without tentativeness” (2004, 48). They expressed to Moses, and through him to God, an intimate protestation of gratitude for having heard wisdom. As Levinas asks us to accept an ethical commitment to the Other as greater than oneself, the Israelites knew they would serve God and the Torah first from a deep place

of trust and faith. Levinas writes, “The Torah is given in the Light of a face” (1994, 47). Knowing they were in the presence of the Other, there was a renewed vitality, an openness to the future (Zornberg 2002, 307). Their receiving the Torah without prior examination was a reflection of their new relationship with God, and every time we read the Torah, the words and the experience are read as new.

For Levinas, this story points out the fundamental truth that the revelation of God can be discovered *only* in relationship with another person. “The epiphany of the other person is ipso facto my responsibility toward him: seeing the other is already an obligation toward him. A direct optics—without the mediation of any idea—Revelation (the receiving of the Torah) is ethical behavior” (1994, 47–48). Not only is the *face* of the Other important to Levinas, but also the *voice* of the Other. He wants us to move past the particularity and plasticity of the image of a face. “To hear a voice speaking to you is ipso facto to accept obligation to the one speaking.” (48). “Hearing” in the Mishpatim verses (Ex. 24:1–24:18) is about what is hidden, things that one cannot grasp . . . for hearing is a function of the heart. “The heart has its reason which reason does not know” or “It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason” (Pascal 1660, 277).

But there was a downside to the Israelites’ acceptance of the Torah. They had work to do to find an intimate place for God in their hearts. As soon as they received this gift from God, Moses, in order to be closer to God, ascended into a cloud of the “glory of God . . . like a consuming fire at the top of the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights” (Ex. 24:17–24:18). The Israelites felt abandoned. Moses’s brother, Aaron, encouraged the creation of a Golden Calf, which they worshipped, a serious infraction of the first commandment. Moses returned, shocked, and punished those who, in their distrust and insecurity, had disobeyed, but God reassured the people, “Make me a sanctuary [and] I will dwell in their midst” (Ex. 25:7). They were to build a Tabernacle, a movable tent containing the Ark that housed the Torah. We each create a hollow, holy space, a potential space where we hold the potential for God (Zornberg 2002, 337).

This is how it went with Anabelle. I committed after our first phone call and awaited her arrival with anticipation and acceptance for what would follow. The whole constitution of my being created a space for, welcomed Anabelle, her face, her voice, her expression, before I knew where we were going to go together. As analysts, we have an ethical commitment to seeing through what we don’t know will come. Absence is the beginning of desire, and we are alone and pregnant with what will be before the patient joins us. This is our infinite responsibility to the Other, to our patient who enters with desire and expectancy.

As I review Anabelle’s and my years together, I realize I didn’t look for the divine in her. I actually wouldn’t have articulated it that way. I was passive, receptive, and open to her in many ways. As I began to cherish her, I was, in fact, relating to the divine. It is

interesting to me that perhaps the process by which our own projections flow toward the patient, our own psychic energy begins to find a place within the patient . . . **finds** the hollow tabernacle there. . . . **that is how we fall in love with the patient, and that is** how the divine is found in the face of the Other. As Anabelle came forward, her sacredness and holiness came to me, I received it, and, in retrospect, especially after learning about Levinas, came to recognize and honor it.

The analytic frame I followed was not organized according to concrete “boundary” rules or traditions. For me, the frame is the providing of a consistent, reliable holding environment, an affective emotional connection, and through that, the many experiences we have together can be processed. It’s the relational context as frame rather than the rules as frame, and it encompasses what Levinas means by generosity and hospitality. We do not follow the strict behavioral code, and yet we maintain an ethical relationship. She tells me she feels held by me and that she feels more resilient and abundant. She senses that the love is mutual. Her assertiveness and her receptiveness are both blossoming. She plans on our being together for years and years, God willing. She gleefully told me recently, “Anabelle, the push-over, doesn’t live here anymore. The new me does.”

Emmanuel Levinas is a philosopher, not a psychologist. Philosophy informs psychology but neither vies with it nor replaces it. It edifies at the metapsychological level, shaping attitude and the nature of the holding environment. Levinas’ thought cannot be turned with facility into any psychotherapeutic theory or technique. His contribution to our work is about humanity, the therapist as a person, a human being who has an ethical responsibility to the Other who is always higher than oneself. The Other speaks to me, and teaches me, commands me from his naked vulnerability never to hurt him intentionally but to nourish, maintain, and sustain him in his suffering.

We have an obligation to honor the Other, regardless of how the patient treats us. It might seem to the reader that Anabelle’s presence alone evoked the maternal in me. But to be open to her suffering has been hard work, full of inadvertent empathic failures and disappointments (absences, my forgetting what had felt important to her, my trouble finding an hour she wanted, my interrupting her, my not being who she wanted at any given moment, etc.). I am quick to own and apologize for my failures, for any hurt I cause her, and she finds the wherewithal for forgiveness.

If we follow the ethical stance of Levinas as a baseline for being in the world, we return and return to the calling of the face of the Other. If our attunement is to the deepest level of encounter, we become closer to being a *mensch*, which I believe is the highest gift a therapist can give a patient as he or she overlaps with being a stranger, a loved one, a friend. Levinas’ vision sounds perfectionistic and idealistic, yet it is a vision of reality. I thank Levinas for encouraging me to question assumptions that I had taken for granted. If I truly encounter the face, the infinite in the Other, I will know that God

has been revealed in a certain way, and that an angel has been here, right in front of me, right here in the patient, in my office, a most welcome and surprising visitor.

ENDNOTE

1. Martin Buber (1878–1965) also focuses on our relationship with the other, Thou, God, the I-Thou relationship. But for Buber, I and Thou, Me and You, meet in a full reciprocity; we come together in a mutual equal meeting and connection. For Levinas, the relation between self and other remains asymmetrical, involving the self's ethical responsibility and concern toward the other's well-being and suffering. Two articles Levinas wrote on Martin Buber, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge" and "Dialogue with Martin Buber," are both found in *Proper Names*. For further exploration, read *Levinas and Buber: Dialogue and Difference* by Peter Atterton, Matthew Calarco, and Maurice Friedman.

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ABSTRACT

Betsy Cohen, “The Trace in the Face of God: Emmanuel Levinas and Depth Psychology,” *Jung Journal* 2:2, [30–45]. The author looks at her analytic work through the lens of the philosophy of French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas, particularly his concepts of totality, infinity, the face, the caress, and our ethical call to the Other. She examines the possibility and importance of being open to the divine in the patient, particularly through the metaphor of Levinas’ maternal psyche. The author offers a story from the Torah, Mispatim, to describe the ethical commitment to the patient and focuses on *Hineni* as a guiding concept for her work. She uses Levinas’ philosophy not as a theory or technique but to inform the holding environment of the analytic work.

KEY WORDS

caress, Emmanuel Levinas, ethics, God, *Hineni*, infinity, Other, philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychology, relatedness, self, Torah, totality.