



Reflections on the Religious Other from Modern Jewish Philosophy

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Abstract

This essay reviews research gathered by Alon Goshen-Gottstein on Judaism and World Religions. The essay examines the notion of the Other as both feared and loved in Judaism. It assesses the work of Goshen-Gottstein positively and adds portraits of the Other from modern Jewish philosophers, Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas, that attempt to show how others from different religions and cultures can help to open new perspectives on life and even open a way to God. The paper ends with an argument for both universalistic perspectives from theologies of creation and particularistic perspective from theologies of revelation in interfaith dialogue.

Keywords Judaism and the other · Other religions · Hermann Cohen on the stranger · Martin Buber on the other · Levinas on the other · Universalism-creation · Particularism-revelation

In the wonderful collection of essays on *The Religious Other: Hostility, Hospitality and the Hope of Human Flourishing* edited by Alon Goshen-Gottstein (2014), the issue of the “Other”—other persons, the stranger, other religions—in five world religions is examined by leading scholars. Thus, we have essays about particular religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The world is unfortunately plagued with violence, some of which is motivated by religion, and thus it is crucially important to have this volume of essays by scholars of religious traditions from the East and West display the resources in religion for hospitality instead of hostility. Indeed, it is worth pausing to reflect on the importance of the contemporary moment where leaders of the religions of the world meet together peacefully to discuss their commonalities and differences in an atmosphere of friendship and respect. Interfaith dialogue itself is then a sign of hope even as religious conflict and violence exists in our world.

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What makes these essays particularly helpful is their honest assessment of the elements in the traditions that fuel conflict and demonize the outsider or “Other” as they also address elements in the traditions that offer hospitality, friendship, and even love to the other. Thus, as Goshen-Gottstein shows in his conclusion to the essays, we have a good map of both the weaknesses and strengths of the religious traditions of the world in relation to the Other. It is important to say, however, that the essays show that these strengths reveal that we need not always look outside religious traditions to secular models of conflict resolution, which are often seen as foreign and clumsy and as somewhat arrogant impositions that undermine religious traditions that people hold so dear (Appleby 2000; Gopin 2002; Albright 2006). Rather, long-standing indigenous forms of peacemaking exist within the traditions themselves and turning to them offers resources that very well may be more successful than those offered by secular modalities. Here I would note the movement of “Scriptural Reasoning” (www.scripturalreasoning.org), with Peter Ochs, David Ford, Aref Nayad, Basit Koshul, Laurie Zoloth, and myself as leading voices in using religious scriptures as resources for peacemaking. I would also mention Goshen-Gottstein and his Elijah Interfaith Institute as another important venue for interreligious peacebuilding.

Goshen-Gottstein stands out for his attempt to get leading scholars of the religions of the world with deep knowledge of the traditions, texts, central figures, and histories, who are often also religious practitioners and “insiders,” to speak and write about the relation of their religion to the other religions of the world. The figures that Goshen-Gottstein brings together in his many Elijah Interfaith Institute conferences are often world leaders of their traditions, like the Dalai Lama, and therefore carry considerable weight in dialogue situations. From his many conferences, Goshen-Gottstein has gathered and published a series of books, among which are *The Religious Other* and *Jewish Theology and World Religions* (Goshen-Gottstein and Korn 2012), upon which I will focus. (See also Goshen-Gottstein 2015.) Where much of twentieth-century religious dialogue followed Christian predilections to focus almost solely on philosophical theology and abstract philosophical aspects of religions (Hick 1980; Race 1983; Knitter 2002), an important element of Goshen-Gottstein’s books is his attempt to get scholars to speak out of the texts, rituals, liturgies, and central practices of the religions instead of their philosophies. This gives the essays in his books greater depth and religious authenticity.

In this essay, I will first review some of the salient themes that emerge in Goshen-Gottstein’s book *The Religious Other* and then attempt to make my own contribution to a philosophy of the Other from the writings of modern Jewish philosophers Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas. I will also make use of the essays in the book that Goshen-Gottstein edited with Eugene Korn, *Jewish Theology and World Religions* (2012). In my reflections on the issue of the other in world religions, I will locate the commonalities among the religions in their notions of Creation and the differences in their notions of Revelation. I highlight the importance of notions of Creation in the religions of the world since I believe that a strong focus on difference and otherness that we sometimes see in the followers of Levinas cuts off all avenues to interreligious dialogue. In other words, a stress on difference can lead to

an inability to converse with the Other. My goal, then, is to preserve difference as I seek commonalities.

The Other in Religious Traditions

There are a number of interesting common themes that emerge in *The Religious Other*. First, all religions seem to share the issue of defining, fearing, and, at times, demonizing the other. This is not hard to understand since all religions attempt both to define an ideology that explains reality and to provide some kind of path to negotiate the difficulties of human life. These paths to redemption, salvation, or enlightenment usually attempt to unite people into special or separate communities—the people Israel, the church, *sangha*, caste, *ummah*, etc. Like all societies, religious societies define their communities using an us/them dichotomy. This is the basic rule of human communal identity formation, and it is used no less in religious communities than in national groups, political parties, honor societies, or sports teams. Since religions speak in terms of fundamental realities and overarching metaphysics, the social divisions they make between peoples can be phrased in ultimate terms of good and evil, or even saved and damned. Thus, the problem of the other for religion is both significant and unavoidable. The essays in *The Religious Other* provide ample evidence of this problem.

In Judaism we see the problem of “othering” in the notions of the “chosen people” and the pagan idolaters and the Jews versus the *goyim* (the other nations). There is also the long history of suffering and persecution of Jews throughout the generations, particularly in Christian Europe but also in Muslim lands, where Jews were identified as the quintessential Other. Stephen Sykes (2014) notes the Christian definitions of non-Christians as Jews, pagans, or savages and makes us aware of the history of Christian missionizing that attempted to wipe out the Other in crusades or convert them to Christianity by force. Vincent Cornell shows how Islam’s relation to the non-believer, like Christians, included killing and conversion and was fueled by a theology that could not accept non-monotheistic theologies of dualism, polytheism, or non-theistic belief (Cornell 2014, 73).

In Hinduism, Ashok Vohra and Deepak Sarma (2014) refer to the notion of the *mleccha*, the barbarian or outsider, identified in the Upanishads. And, of course, we all are aware of the social divisions in Hinduism of *varnas*, or classes, and *jatis*, or castes, including the “outcastes.” These divisions receive sacred and even cosmic legitimations in the texts and theologies of the Vedas and great Hindu epics.

Finally, Buddhism, too, as Richard Hayes and Hsin Tao (2014) show, has notions of *puttujjana*, or outsiders. And Buddhism also includes an ideology that sees the attachment to God or Gods as illusion and ignorance and presents the Buddha as the only true religious authority and his *dharma*, or path, as the true road to *nirvana*, or enlightenment. These preferences present those who do not embrace Buddhist assumptions as ignorant outsiders who, like children, are in need of true knowledge.

At the same time, however, the great religions of the world—precisely in their pretensions to metaphysical ultimacy and worldwide relevancy—seek to address human beings in toto. Thus, they have universal concerns, and these are articulated

in their descriptions of reality, diagnoses of the problem with humanity, and prescriptions for a cure. Here, prophets, religious leaders, and texts in world religions often attempt to address all of humanity and speak in general and universal terms about the human predicament. Religious leaders are also sensitive readers and critics of human societies who see the problem of “othering” and express compassion for the outsider, stranger, or foreigner in their midst. This means that on two levels—at the level of general concern for all of humanity and at the level of particular concern for the powerless outsider—world religions include messages of hope for the Other.

Thus, Vohra and Deepak (2014) suggest that for Hinduism the process of othering is a problem of *avidya*, or ignorance, which afflicts those within and without Hindu societies. In addition, “Hinduism believes that, underneath the diversity of class, caste, creed, skin color, and language lies an essential metaphysical unity. Each of us is divine in character; each has the same indwelling divine *atman* (self, soul)” (2014, 100). The authors assert, then, that “logically [Hinduism] cannot maintain a place for hostility toward anyone” (2014, 100).

Hayes and Hsin -Tao (2014, 147) tell us that Buddhism “ask[s] us to give the whole of ourselves for the happiness of all sentient beings”. They note that the Buddha himself was seen as an “outsider” to Hindu society, and they seek to show that, for Buddhism, the attitude toward the other is neither tolerance nor hospitality, but beyond these Buddhism seeks “universal friendship” (2014, 123).

In Judaism, notions of the one God, the one world, and one humanity in Creation underscore a common humanity with a common ancestor, Adam (and Eve). These notions are shared in Christianity, which regards Genesis as part of its scripture. The universal concern for all of humanity in Christianity is well documented throughout history, and missionizing work did not always lead to conversion but also brought hospitals, schools, economic assistance, and respect for indigenous people and native religions. Traditions of saints and monks, female and male, who sacrifice themselves for the welfare of others, be they Christian or not, are legion throughout the history of Christianity. Sykes (2014) argues that the Christian notions of a universal Creation coupled with theologies of “rescue and restoration of humanity through Christ” should allow “no room for hostility to the other.” He reminds us that in the Letter to the Hebrews, a late first century CE author explicitly and closely associates [Christian] love with hospitality to strangers: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ([Heb.] 13:1–2)” (61).

In the Qur’an, there are multiple *suras* that speak in universal terms of all of humanity and also address a God-given warrant for religious pluralism. This we see in Sura 5:48: “To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together” (Sura 10:99).

In the next part of this essay, I will attempt my own perspective on the process of “othering” and on one way to address the problem by focusing on the religion I know best, Judaism, and on the figures in Judaism I know best, the modern Jewish philosophers. I will begin with a brief review of Goshen-Gottstein’s contribution to the issue of the Other in his essay on Judaism in *The Religious Other* and then turn

to modern philosophers Cohen and Levinas, who devoted a great deal of thought to the issue of the other both in Judaism and in modern Western societies.

Judaism and the Religious Other

Goshen-Gottstein analyzes the problem of the Jewish relation to the Other by introducing a tension in Judaism between particularity in Jewish ethnicity, nationalism, law, and universalism in the one God who creates Adam as the first and original human, the root (with Eve) of all humans. Goshen-Gottstein insightfully suggests that the problem of the Other in Judaism is original and deep since “[a]wareness of self and otherness is fundamental to Israel’s identity” (Goshen-Gottstein 2014, 1). Here, we could point to all the “Others” in the Bible beginning with Cain, Ishmael, Hagar, and Esau, to the foundational experience of enslavement, to the Egyptian other, and then to the series of conquests by others like the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans, followed by life under Christians and Muslims.

What this suggests is that Israel, from its beginnings, defined itself in relation to others. And although many of its historical experiences with others was negative, Judaism did try to use these experiences as a moral touchstone to say that Israel should not treat others as she was treated. Thus, as Goshen-Gottstein says, “[T]his surprising command to love the Other is grounded in the transformed memory of our exile in Egypt” (2014, 3).

Goshen-Gottstein then suggests that the deeper root and true source of the commandment to love the Other is theological. Here, using the Hasidic thought of Rav Nachman of Bratslav, he suggests that it is God’s *rachamim*, or compassion, that supports all Jewish attempts to turn to the Other in love. So that finally, “[i]t is only by bringing God to the center of the institutions and life of the people that Judaism can retrieve a lost sense of purpose and the hallmark of its identity and particularity” (2014,4).

Goshen-Gottstein’s analysis of the problem of the Other in Judaism is astute, and his theological solution of compassion is deep and rich. I also agree with his turn to theology at this moment of spiritual crisis in Judaism. Here, I should say that Goshen-Gottstein joins a small group of thinkers in contemporary Judaism, in Israel and the United States, who are also calling for a return to theology in Judaism (Kepnes 2020). I therefore will not challenge anything of the substance of what Goshen-Gottstein has said. I note, however, that Goshen-Gottstein remains mainly within the orbit of Orthodox rabbinic thought taken from the Talmud, medieval thinkers, and extending into the Hasidic thought of Nachman of Bratslav and the neo-Kabbalistic theology of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook. I will seek to buttress and augment his analysis with a focus on modern Jewish philosophy, specifically the thought of Cohen and Levinas. Here, I highlight the ways in which modern Jewish philosophers seek to develop notions of humanism based on the Other rather than the self (like most Western Enlightenment philosophers did). The Jewish philosophical notion of humanism was intended to value human particularity and difference—national, social, familial—instead of seeing humans as abstract rational selves alone. In Cohen’s case, he sought to develop a notion of humanism on the

basis of biblical concepts. Here, love for the *ger*, or “stranger,” is highlighted. And so the Jewish experience of being the stranger in Europe becomes a touchstone for a notion of general humanity. In Levinas, we have a focus on the Other as opposed to the self as the focus of all ethics and religion. In interfaith dialogue, Otherness and not sameness, then, can be used to think about the particularities of each of the world religions.

However, I will argue toward the end of my essay that particularism, otherness, and difference in interfaith dialogue can be taken so far that understanding between humans and among religions can be undermined. Here, like Goshen-Gottstein, I seek to find some ways to talk about what the religions have in common. Thus, I will suggest a dual approach to the religious Other. The first level seeks to recognize some commonalities in world religions based on shared notions of the goodness of the natural world, God, and common ethical themes. Here, we might think of doctrines of Creation of humans and the world. At the second level, however, I highlight difference and particularity based on doctrines of Revelation. Revelation, which refers to scriptures, religious practices, and ways to relate to God, is often quite particular to each religion. Thus, I argue that interreligious dialogue should be carried out on two levels. At one level we are warranted in speaking about what we hold in common given our common humanity and shared natural world. On another level, however, at the level of Revelation, we must respect the differences that each religion embodies and celebrates.

The Concept of the Other as Jewish Alternative to an Abstract Humanism

In his discussion of the universal element in Judaism, Goshen-Gottstein (2014, 4) mentions that the Jewish notion of “God and His knowledge is Israel’s ultimate contribution to humanity.” Here, Goshen-Gottstein is arguing, I think, that the notion of the One God in Judaism was taken up in both Christianity and Islam and now constitutes the center of the religious beliefs of almost half of all of humanity. In making a universal statement of this sort, Goshen-Gottstein is abstracting a concept from the Jewish tradition and its theology, and, as he says, attempting to see it in a “broader perspective” (Goshen-Gottstein 2014, 3). This is a typical move of the philosopher who wants to speak in the terms of universals.

Although Goshen-Gottstein does not mention them, a group of Jewish philosophers in early twentieth-century Germany tried to do a similar thing with the notion of the *ger*, the “stranger” or Other in Judaism. Stanisław Krajewski says that when philosophers speak of the Other using the capital “O,” they mean to express an “important idea.” Krajewski continues, “The Other is so fundamentally important, so basic an ingredient of the world, so unique,...it opens a specific dimension of being” (2012, 137). What this suggests is that Jewish philosophers saw in the Bible’s notion of the *ger* not only a special ethical message for Jews and Judaism but also a universal message for all of humankind. As Cohen puts it, the *ger* or stranger represents “a great step with which humanitarianism begins” (Cohen 1972, 121). And as we will see, the “Jewish” notion of humanitarianism or humanism is different

from the more abstract notion of a universal humanity based on the rational self that the Enlightenment, and specifically Kant, envisioned. This is the case since Cohen's notion of the *ger* looks to what is different in every person and not only to what is the same.

Cohen's notion of the *ger* is specifically tied to biblical formulations. However, those who came after Cohen, like Martin Buber and then Levinas, took the concept out of its biblical context and developed it into a universal philosophical concept with immense ethical power for both human relations and interfaith dialogue. In what follows, I will review the genealogy of the notion of the *ger* in the Bible that Cohen supplies us with and then discuss the development of the concept in Buber and then Levinas.

Hermann Cohen's Humanism

When modern Jewish philosophers considered issues of intergroup relations in Europe, they were acutely aware of their own status as minorities, as really the Other in Christian Europe. Cohen (1842–1918) was one of the first Jews who was allowed to teach in a German University, and he contributed significantly to German philosophy as a leader of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantian thought. As a Kantian, he was very concerned with ethical issues. However, he felt that Kant's universal ethics, which focused on the autonomous rational self, suffered from lack of attention to the particularity of the other person who was to be the recipient of the self's ethical action.

The book in which Cohen's Jewish ethics is found is called *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (first published in 1919). Here, Cohen presents Kant's notion of "universal humanity" as a flawed ethical concept from the beginning since it fails to take into consideration the problem of ethnic, religious, and national realities in ethical relations. Cohen seeks to replace the Kantian notion of universal humanity with a notion of the *Mitmensch*, the "fellow-creature," or in Simon Kaplan's translation, the "fellowman." This fellowman is preferable to universal humanity because the latter notion is too abstract. The Kantian notion presents the other as the "next man," the *Nebenmensch*, who is only a man by virtue of his reason. This notion reduces the neighbor as a whole person into a non-individuated everyman (Cohen 1972, 114). The everyman is then "leveled down" (Cohen 1972, 115) from his status as a person embedded in a culture and correlated with God. In denying this correlation, the relationship is robbed of its proper moral character. The Hebrew Bible, on the other hand, re-embodies the abstracted rational subject of Kantian ethics in the concrete human situation of the family, nation, and land in a direct personal relation with God. Thus, the Bible adds God to create a triangle of relations: the I, God, and the other person.

The biblical person is the culturally embedded person that most fervently feels the primary allegiance to the family, nation, and land. And this is the person who is most in need of the moral pedagogy of an ethics of the other. This person is both closer to and farther from the modern citizen than Kant's disembodied rational subject. The biblical person is closer in her human passions and predicaments, yet farther away

in her temporal distance. The distance, however, has distinct pedagogical advantages since the distance allows Cohen to set up a model that mirrors the contemporary ethical problem of how the foreigner or stranger is to be treated morally.

The first biblical figure that Cohen turns to then is Adam.

Adam

In the biblical book of Genesis we read: “So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:27). Genesis establishes the essential brotherhood and sisterhood of all humans when God starts the entire human race from one common man, Adam. Adam, then, is the father of all peoples and Eve, the mother of all peoples. The fact that God creates Adam and Eve “in His own image” means that all persons are of infinite value. Therefore, the true origin of the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity comes from Adam and Eve, and this common human origin means that there can be no true stranger, no true foreigner, no real other. This underlying biblical truth is the basis, then, of any Jewish or Christian or Muslim attempt to speak of a universal ethic in which all humans are treated equally, whatever their religion or national origin. Here, then, we must say that with Adam the Bible does start with a generalized vision of man both part of a common humanity and of elevated dignity. However, this dignity is given in relation to God, who creates humans His image.

Abraham

Abraham, whose name means “father of many,” is another origin point for the common heritage of humanity. For it is Abraham “through whom all the nations of the world are blessed.” (Gen. 12:3). With Abraham, the dignity of the fellowman is increased because we see that Abraham not only represents the believers in the one God but also stands up for the non-believers. A crucially important precedent is set when Abraham argues with God to act justly not in relation to his own family but to those who are “outside” his family. We see this when God says that He will destroy the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even though the residents are non-Israelites and not worshipers of the God of Israel, Abraham says to God, “Perhaps there are fifty righteous ones in the city. Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” (Gen. 18:24). “Shall not the God of the universe act justly?” (Gen. 18:25). This shows that Abraham assumes that the people in Sodom and Gomorrah know what righteousness is and can act upon it. Abraham also provides a precedent for Israel and for Jews to not only assume the humanity of others but to fight for their justice. It also provides a precedent to the righteous person to “speak truth to power” even when that power is ultimate, like God.

The Mediation of the “Stranger”

The problem of the relation of Israel to the other is neither overcome in Adam nor Abraham. The theme of the distinction between Israel and the other peoples

continues to be underscored as monotheism develops and the identity of Israel as people of God becomes clearer. Thus, the monotheistic Israel is distinguished by Moses from the polytheists and the idol worshipers, the Canaanites, the Egyptians, and other Near Eastern neighbors. When the people Israel forms out of slavery in the Exodus, she constantly faces the *nochri*, the *Ausländer*, the “foreigner.” This figure, who is both idolater and enemy, threatens Israel both physically and spiritually—physically through war, and spiritually by leading Israel away from the one God. So Israel is commanded not only to fear and loathe the idolaters but also to destroy them.

Thus, as Israel develops in her relationship to God, and as that relationship is embedded in the primal narrative of the Exodus and the laws that are given at Sinai, she becomes more distinct and different from the other nations.

The Creation of the *Ger* as Fellowman

Cohen’s creative response to the problem in ancient Israel of the elect monotheistic “us” and the idolatrous Canaanite “them,” the foreigner or *nochri*, is to search for some third term of “mediation” (*Schlichtung*) that would preserve the humanity of the non-Israelite. Through this search, Cohen forges one of the most creative and important exegetical events in all of modern Jewish philosophy. This is the development of the notion of the *ger*, or stranger. Cohen’s rhetoric in describing this notion is jubilant; and perhaps this jubilation is a sign of the hermeneutical power of the biblical figure that he has discovered. Cohen tells us that the power of this notion can be clearly seen in two biblical texts: “One law shall be unto him that is home-born and unto the *ger* [the stranger] that lives among you.” (Ex. 12:49) (cf. Num. 15:15, Lev. 24:22, Deut. 1:16). “Thou shall love him [the stranger] as thyself.” (Lev. 19:34).

Cohen tells us that what is remarkable about the notion of the *ger* is that it achieves its development as monotheism is codified in law and given political expression in the nation. Thus, the notion of the *ger* is not developed as an afterthought, but it comes immediately with the formation of Israel and its law.

Cohen does not ignore the biblical injunction to fight and destroy the Canaanite idolater, and he is obviously aware of the abuses in relation to the stranger that this can cause. One strategy he employs to address idolatry is to present it as a problem that all humans, including Israel, faces. Therefore, “the worshipers of idols have to be fought no less in one’s own people than in the alien peoples” (Cohen 1972, 120). This recognition of the universal human tendency to idolatry forges a connection between the idolater and Israel that issues in a series of commandments prohibiting hatred of particular idolatrous nations: “Thou shall not hate an Edomite, for he is thy brother; thou shall not hate an Egyptian.” (Deut. 23:8).

Love the *Ger*

In the book of Leviticus (chs. 17–27), the principle of the *ger* as fellowman is intensified to the commandment of love: “You shall love him as yourself; for you were

strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Lev. 19:34). Where Kantian ethics develops the responsibility of the self for others on the basis of a universal rational law, the categorical imperative, and the recognition a fundamental moral duty, Cohen recognizes that humans are not motivated by reason and duty alone. In turning to Leviticus, Cohen follows the lead of the Hebrew Bible to add the emotions of love and compassion to philosophical ethics: “Religion achieves what morality fails to achieve. Love for man is brought forth” (Cohen 1972, 146). The Bible accomplishes this achievement on the basis of Israel’s own experience of slavery. Israel should be able to identify with the stranger and love him or her because Israel too went through the experience of being a stranger when she was in Egypt.

We see, then, how Cohen seeks to extend the ethical requirement to do good to others from one’s family, clan, and religious group to the stranger or other outside that group. This he does on the basis of a common humanity guaranteed by God in the Creation of the human being as one family, one brotherhood and sisterhood, and in the development of Israelite law in which the principle of the *ger*, or stranger, assures just treatment for the non-Israelite.

Martin Buber

After Cohen, many other Jewish philosophers follow him to develop ethical theories that include respect for the Other. For the German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965), the Other must be seen as a “Thou,” a whole person in his/her own right that can never be treated as a means to a selfish end. Buber develops an entire philosophy based on the I-Thou relationship in which he suggests that one’s good relations with another human being allow a glimpse to the eternal Thou, to God (Buber 1958). Buber speaks of the need for mutuality in human relationships whereby each partner in the relationship needs to regard the Other as a Thou. For Buber, this mutuality allows both partners to grow into fuller personhood so that the I-Thou relationship fosters not only moral development but human development and fulfillment in all aspects of selfhood.

Emmanuel Levinas

When we move to discuss Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), we move from Germany at the end of the nineteenth century to France in the period before and after World War II. In speaking of a Jew in France during this period, we cannot ignore the Holocaust in which six million Jews, more than half of Europe’s Jews, were killed by the Nazis. Levinas survived the Holocaust but lost many family members, friends, and colleagues and, like all European Jews, was scarred by his experience. This experience is reflected in his ethical thinking about the Other.

For Levinas one meaning of not only World War II but also World War I, is that philosophy could not go on as it had been—thinking thoughts without regard to human history and, in particular, the ever-present reality of human suffering. Abstract thinking about thinking or thinking about the basis of knowledge

(epistemology), or the basis of reality (ontology), or the underlying principles of reality (metaphysics) needed to be replaced by thinking about real ethical issues. Philosophers are required to use their significant cognitive powers to think about human immoral and moral behavior. In Levinas's terms, this means that the philosophy must see "Ethics as First Philosophy" (Levinas 1989). All else is secondary, tertiary, or, in Levinas's view, irrelevant. Since first philosophy is ethics and not the study of knowledge and how we know, much of modern philosophy and also much of religion, to the extent that it speaks of a God of the heavens, eternal ideas, and moral laws, is also false, even idolatrous. Levinas, then, attempts to challenge all systems of Western philosophy and religion as detours and roadblocks to the consideration of the ethical issue of human suffering in the world.

For Levinas, all attempts to sum up the whole of reality in metaphysical systems and all attempts to build complete philosophical, ethical, or scientific systems, are misguided. For Levinas, all systems of philosophy and religion, society and economics, are "totalities" that "dominate Western philosophy" (Levinas 1969, 21) and impose a reign of "the same" (1969, 289). All of these systems impose roles on people based on a kind of social violence. Levinas juxtaposes most systems of thought and science, which he calls "totalities," with the notion of "infinity" (1969, 48). By infinity, he means that which resists systematization, that which remains after the attempt of system making and undermines any attempt at summary. By infinity Levinas means that which "overflows the capacity of thought" (49). For Levinas, the great systems of thought and science are promethean human attempts to declare that one has understood and explained reality, ethics, humanity, society, economics, God, etc. Thus, systems of thought, by nature, distort what is different for the sake of the same in an attempt to give humans a false sense of security that they know what they ultimately cannot know. Real thinking, then, is first the attempt to undo the attempt to build "totalities" and then the attempt to open us to what is truly different, what cannot be systematized, the "absolutely Other" (49).

Levinas seeks to focus our attention on an infinity which explodes all attempts to understand and explain the other human person, and particularly "the face" (1969, 198) of the Other. Levinas attempts to radicalize both Cohen's and Buber's notions of the Other as stranger or Thou with the face of the Other. In the face of the other person, Levinas finds his ethical focus for philosophy. For the face of the other is always unique, infinitely complex, embodied and particular to a specific person. The face of the other expresses the other's utter 'vulnerability' since, unlike the eyes, it cannot be closed and protected. Unlike other body parts, the face is usually not covered by clothes. The face of another 'speaks' of its unique non-universalizable humanity, neediness, and silent suffering without speaking. The face of the other represents the other's embodied, working, suffering, loving, killing humanness. Thus, as Levinas says, "the true essence of the man is presented in his [her] face" (1969, 290). The face of the other places me, who stands across, face to face, in the primal ethical position of "obligation" (1969, 201) to answer to the needs of the other. Levinas suggests, then, that when faced with the other, we need no Kantian categorical imperative, we need no biblical law, we need no ethical system. For Levinas, the face in itself commands, "Thou shall not murder" (1969, 199). Levinas follows this with the suggestion that the "other's voice comes from above, like

God's voice at Sinai." Here, Levinas emphasizes that the demand of the face on the self that sees him has what he calls a "dimension of height" (1969, 86). The demand stands above me with an infinite ethical demand to meet the infinite needs of the other.

Thus, unlike Buber, Levinas says that the relation of the I to the Other, given in the face of the Other, is not mutual but "asymmetrical." In the presence of the face, I have no demands, I have no lack, I have no personal needs beyond the need to serve the Other. Indeed, in the face of the needs of the Other, I disappear as self and find myself only to the extent that the Other's needs are met.

Such is the radical nature of Levinas's ethics of the Other—uncompromising, extreme, and endless in its ethical requirement. With Levinas, we find a whole new level of ethical strictness that describes an infinite need to serve the Other with no regard whatsoever for the needs of the self.

It is important also to see that for Kant and Cohen ethics is built upon reason, social obligation, and obedience to moral law. This law, be it philosophical or Biblical, stands outside the I and the other to provide a guideline. Levinas's face of the Other, however, is meant as an interruption to any system of rational ethics or divine law. The infinity and uniqueness of the face is meant to shatter any system, any totality. The face is the ethical demand in itself. The face imposes an infinite and asymmetrical demand to serve the Other. It thereby destroys the equilibrium and totality of the self and the stability of a society ruled by laws and communal norms. For Levinas, the Other opens up a different ethical and epistemological dimension in which infinity enters. Levinas, it is important to note, displays an allergic reaction to institutions and systems of thought, which he often presents as forms of domination and even tyranny, since they reduce the Other to the same and thereby deprive the Other of uniqueness or "alterity."

Otherness and Interfaith Dialogue

In their collection *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, Goshen-Gottstein and Korn (2012) include a section on "Judaism and the Other" in which Stanisław Krajewski and Meir Sendor attempt to apply the notion of the Other to interfaith dialogue. Here, both Krajewski and Sendor suggest that the central error of interfaith dialogue is to explore commonalities among the religions and thereby commit the Levinasian sin of reducing the Other to the same. Certainly, there is a long history of this type of interfaith work, beginning with the missionizing of one religion by another. Here, we have the aim of converting members of the "false" religion to the "true" one. Christianity has been particularly guilty of this sin, and many have noted that even when Christians renounce missionary activities and merely want to dialogue with other religions, subtle forms of conversion persist in the language, theories, and schemas employed to carry out interfaith dialogue (Sykes 2014; Sendor 2012).

First of all, Christianity, which relies heavily on beliefs for its religious expression, may prejudice conversations by forcing Jews and others to speak solely of beliefs instead of laws, rituals, and texts, through which Judaism and other highly

ritualized or text-based religions function. Secondly, Christians may skew the dialogue by asking others about their concepts of grace, sin, atonement, etc.—terms, again, which are particularly important to Christians but which other religions focus less on. Other Christian prejudices surface when Christians declare that theirs is a “universal” religion for all since Paul has the famous line in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor gentile, . . . neither male nor female.” But if we read this line in context, it is clear that Paul determines his universality on the basis of universal conversion viz. “for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28).

An additional issue in Jewish-Christian dialogue is that Christians see the Jewish Bible as their “Old Testament,” which is at once their scripture but also the precedent to the New Testament. This places a particular interpretation on the meaning and purpose of the Jewish Bible. This does violence to Jewish understandings and interpretations of the Bible which decidedly do not follow Christian lines. When the above strategies and agendas are set forth for dialogue between the religions, it is true that great violence is done to the religious Other by Christianity.

One could therefore use Levinas, as Sendor does (2012), to argue that in the long course of Jewish-Christian relations, Christianity has attempted to dominate Judaism in ways that have been highly destructive and disrespectful. And one could also use Levinas to say that in its very attempts to understand Judaism in Christian terms, Christianity has attempted to translate the Jewish Other into the Christian same.

Of course, one only has to read the Jewish essays in both *Jewish Theology and World Religions* and *The Religious Other* to see that Judaism and Jews have also done violence to Christianity and other religions by portraying them as forms of idolatry and paganism, and also by suggesting that it is only Judaism that is the true religion. Indeed, Islam, Buddhism, forms of Hinduism, and most religions tend to see other religions as false or less than true, so the problem is not limited to Christians and Jews. Chauvinistic, imperialistic, and universalistic tendencies are seen in most of the world’s religions, and what Levinas says about the tyranny of the same in relation to the Other in philosophy could equally be said of most religions.

One could therefore suggest, as Krajewski and Sendor do, that all interfaith dialogue could benefit from a heavy dose of attention to particularity and Otherness, and Krajewski expresses this notion when he says “there is an irreducibility to every religion” and “there is no common denominator for religions” (2012, 145).

Yet here I think that these thinkers are going too far. We need to take a critical look at the Levinasian notion of radical Otherness and the inability of thought and theory, general philosophical and theological categories, to express important ideas and concepts that go beyond just one particular philosophical system. The same could be said on behalf of the world religions. Certainly, not every utterance of the prophets and interpreters of the religions is crafted to deprive other religions of their validity or reduce them to the one true religion. After all, what Levinas is suggesting when he insists that all of philosophy and all categories of thought necessarily do violence to difference and reduce it to the same is that conceptual thought, be it philosophical or theological, is incapable of carrying out the simple act of understanding not only any Other but, indeed, anything that is different at all!

Let us say this clearly: Levinas, and indeed a host of other postmodern or cultural theorists, like Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Julia Kristeva, to name

only a few, are declaring the virtual end of philosophy and conceptual theory as we have known it from Aristotle to Hegel. This leaves us humans incapable of understanding each other in our own societies, to say nothing of others in societies beyond us. Krajewski has used Levinas to say that there is no common denominator in religions, but before him postmodernism has declared that there is no common denominator in human societies and cultures. Thus, in the name of a better humanism that is more open to difference and particularity we have been forced into a corner in which we are told that persons and cultures share little in common and attempts at cross cultural and interfaith dialogue are futile since as Krajewski puts it “the very act of knowledge [of the Other] is destructive (2012, 143).

Returning from the Edge

Although there is a logic to Levinas’s notion of the Other that begins in the notion of the *ger*, or stranger, in the Bible, one need not follow Levinas to his radical conclusion. Indeed, we see in Cohen’s development of the concept of the *ger* a sense that one can both love the other for her particular differences and understand something of her suffering and plight. This understanding leads to compassionate action for the sake of the Other without requiring that the self give up all it has for the Other.

Indeed, Cohen respects biblical and Jewish halachic ethics that set limits upon what is required for one to help another. Certainly, Jewish law does not require that one destroy oneself in order to save another life. The Jewish laws of charity, or *tzedakah*, in the Bible and Talmud regulate giving so that the self and the structures of society are preserved even as the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the *ger* are cared for. Hillel has summarized this issue succinctly in his aphorism: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?” (Pirkei Avot, 1:14).

If we want a model of interfaith dialogue that respects difference as it leads to understanding, we might also look to Buber, who specifically developed a notion of dialogue which highlights mutuality. Here, Buber suggests that in knowing the Other I come to know myself. Knowledge of the Other, then, deprives neither the Other nor the self of understanding but enriches both.

Philosophies of Creation and Philosophies of Revelation

Before I close this essay, I would like to suggest one constructive path for interfaith dialogue, specifically for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim dialogue, that both preserves difference as it seeks commonalities. I think that Cohen and also Goshen-Gottstein make it clear that the book of Genesis, in its doctrine of Creation, supplies a number of concepts that help to articulate a common humanity under God before and beyond religious and cultural differences. That God creates the world and humans as good, that God creates one man Adam and one woman Eve from whom issues all human beings remains an extremely strong statement of basic human equality and common potential that underscores our common

humanity. That Adam and Eve are created in the image of God is also a fundamental statement of human dignity and value that still stands as a testament to common human rights and responsibilities. Also, as Goshen-Gottstein has said, the very notion of one God has enormous conceptual power to underscore that there is something that is shared throughout the various religions of the world. Indeed, if we believe that there is one living God who created a good world and all humans in it, it is difficult to think that this God would only reveal Godself to one people, at one time, in one place, in one way. Here I am summarizing what was said by Moses Mendelssohn, perhaps the father of all of modern Judaism, in his wonderful book *Jerusalem* (1983, 94) [1838]. And the prophet Malachi makes this same point with his famous words: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10).

So notions of the one God, the one world, and one humanity in Creation underscore a common humanity and something—however abstract, general, and difficult to express—common to all religions. These notions are shared in Christianity, which regards Genesis as part of its scripture, and similar understandings can be found in the Qur’an and Islam as well, as Vincent Cornell (2014) shows in his essay in *The Religious Other*. It is interesting, I think, that both Cornell and Goshen-Gottstein try to link God’s compassion with God’s desire to create the world and humans. Thus, these thinkers point to a wellspring of compassion out of which issue the created world and humans, who then are directed to turn to each other in compassion. Indeed, as most of the authors in *The Religious Other* suggest, there is a source of compassion in all religions that can serve as the basis of interreligious dialogue and hospitality.

Beyond the three Western monotheisms, it is also not hard to find in religions of the East (in Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, etc.) similar statements of a generalized humanity and an underlying or overarching series of Gods, principles, or forms of energy that provide guidance to the world. Admittedly, these common elements between the religions are not the same, but they do bear family resemblances that many in the history of interfaith dialogue, and recently in the conferences of the Elijah Interfaith Institute, have spoken about.

But to suggest from these commonalities in the world religions that all religions are the same is really to blind oneself to the obvious variety in religions that exists. My way of speaking of religious difference in the Western religions would be to say that when God shows Himself not in Creation but in Revelation, we have an entirely different manner of expression displayed by God for the sake of humans.

In Revelation, we speak of specific and particular modes of speech, forms of divine disclosure, texts, laws, symbols, concepts, etc., through which God communicates to specific communities at specific times and specific places. Thus, the Torah is unique, and Christ is unique, and Mohammed and the Qur’an are unique. They are all unique expressions of God with unique paths given to different communities for different purposes. What these purposes are remains in the knowledge of God. But that religious diversity is the desire of God seems to be a given, if only because we see so many different religions in the world.

Given religious diversity, I think that a fair amount of respect for difference and Otherness is necessary in religious dialogue. Here, we must be careful about which

theories and categories of comparison we use, and we must be careful to hold back our own predilections to attempt to understand the other in our terms and not theirs.

The Jewish philosopher and theologian David Hartman liked to say that in the Revelation at Sinai, God sent a love letter to the Jewish people.¹ The Torah, then, is written in the language of intimate love. As with all intimate communication, there are secrets and ways of speech known only to the two lovers. I would suggest that all religions include a language of intimate love between believers and that which is believed. This suggests that perhaps there are some elements of the religious experience in a particular religion that cannot be communicated.

At the same time there are many aspects of our religions, beginning with general notions Creation of the world, of humanity and a sense of transcendence of materiality to a spiritual realm or Being, which can be shared. To see glimpses of this commonality, one only has to read the collection of essays and many books that Alon Goshen-Gottstein has carefully and lovingly assembled devoted to issues on dialogue among the religions and religious people of the world.

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¹ This was something Rabbi Hartman said often in his many meetings on interreligious dialogue that he held with religious leaders from around the world in the 1990s at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

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