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Over Shabbat

Terumah

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THE VAZ-2101 WAS ONLY CALLED A LADA WHEN IT WAS EXPORTED

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Elkie always came to tea with something unexpected. When they were in Komsomol, it was pins and medals for activities Yitta hadn't even known Elkie was involved in, or boys who got dropped before the drinks cooled, or flowers "just to brighten up your apartment." After that, it had been a strange moment of hesitation before the request to be a witness for her wedding, and then fresh-baked pies, outrageous ideas for kids' names, a little locket with pictures of them both when *they* had been kids, and a phone call from her husband after she didn't turn up one day in August 1968, explaining that she'd been arrested. After that, she had brought a succession of musical instruments, an enthusiasm for headscarves that may or may not have hid a scar, and handmade papercut cards for almost satirically mundane events ("Congratulations on your oil change!").

After more than thirty years of gifts, it surprises no one when a ray of sun, deflected off the lipstick-kissed edge of a glass at a nearby table, strikes a hastily-wrapped parcel under Elkie's arm as she sits, flags a server, and orders coffee. "This is for you," she says.

Yitta takes it with one hand, holds it with two. "Should I open it here?"

"Probably not." Elkie shakes her head. "It's my favourite album, but it's *magnitizdat*. I'm going to

buy a real copy when I get where I'm going." She grins, and Yitta's face tilts with suspicion. Elkie shrugs. "Besides, you're the only person I know who understands English."

Yitta lowers her glass like it might shatter. "What do you mean, '*where I'm going*'?"

Elkie grins wider, and the lines at the corners of her eyes cast in every direction as she checks to make sure the server isn't coming. "Israel," she whispers.

"Oh my God!" Yitta's eyes fly open so wide that the whites of them might serve for the clouds the sky is missing. "Kuzmir got the exit visas! Congratulations!"

"Don't congratulate us yet," Elkie cautions. "We haven't been approved."

"Then how…" Yitta's question trails off as the server arrives with coffee, leaving a silence filled only by the clinking of dishware at surrounding tables. Whatever words she's looking for, she realizes, must be coming off the top of her head like steam from the cup.

Elkie's grin, which could not get any wider, instead grows more wicked. She waits until the server is six paces away before announcing in a hush, "I'm going to drive!"

A perfect spring hangs over the patio while Yitta chokes on a sip of tea, and she wishes she could laugh because she knows this is exactly what Elkie hoped for—this sputtering, muted moment for the wind to swish strangers' conversations with the chatter of the Bira and a shot of applause from newly sprouted leaves in the birches along the sidewalk; a moment for the drama of her declaration to float like a soap bubble they never caught as kids—one that, for just a moment more, Yitta won't be able to burst with any of her grown-up worries. And then the tea is down, and the moment's over.

"You're going to *drive*…. to *Israel*. What is that, ten thousand kilometres? Not that it matters; you'll be stopped at the border in a hundred."

"They can only stop you at the border," Elkie explains, "if you cross at the crossings." Something in her voice recalls that Saturday when the kids were young and they took them downtown, and Alyosha licked the horse in the Monument to the First Settlers on a dare, and Yitta had to pour warm water over his tongue while Elkie explained cause and effect.

Yitta takes another sip of tea, feels its warmth on her tongue. Her words unfurl with pedantic slowness. "I.e., everywhere you can cross."

"Not everywhere you *can*," Elkie contradicts. "Everywhere you're *supposed to*. Do you remember our trip to Baikal?"

Yitta's face changes. "How could I forget? Kuzmir and Eizik rented that boat… and you accidentally kicked the line off as you climbed in… we were so busy talking, we didn't even realize we'd drifted off without them until they paddled that canoe out

after us!" She laughs, and Elkie's eyes lead her laugh the same way her fingers lead Larry Carlton's guitar when the tape turns, taking pleasure as much in the fulfillment of expectation as in the novelty of the sound.

"Well," Elkie continues, "it's not even *that* far to the Mongolian border—thirty-five hundred kilometres of steppe and scrub and desert without a soul standing on it. Cross away from the highway—say, somewhere just south of Nizhnii Tsasuchei—" she tosses the name on the table as though everyone has heard of it, "and no one'll even notice."

Yitta takes a bemused sip. "Then what?"

"Rinse and repeat," Elkie shrugs. "The border between Mongolia and East Turkestan is pretty much the same. Stick to rural highways in-country, leave them and cross open desert at the border. Change some rubles if I can, or just trade for gas and food. Eventually, I hit the Wakhan Corridor. The Afghan border is notoriously porous on both sides; I get into Iran for a song. I haven't decided which combination of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or Jordan is best afterward, but at that point, I'm already almost ninety-two percent there!"

"Why not just drive through Georgia?" asks Yitta, with the air of the physics professor at their old polytechnic, humouring some undergraduate's delusional thought experiment.

Elkie ticks two reasons off on her fingers. "A) There are fewer natural crossing points by car in the Caucuses and more of them are controlled, and B) it would keep me in Union territory past the point where I'll be reported missing."

"How long is the drive? Kuzmir could just take the time off work and call it vacation. That's assuming, of course, that he wants to leave the country more than he wants to keep the paint job intact on that Zhiguli. You know you're turning around the first time it chips in the Gobi, right?" Yitta laughs, obviously expecting it to catch—Elkie has never passed up a laugh at Kuzmir's fastidious husbandry—but when the little *shamash* of Yitta's chuckle sputters and goes out, the menorah is still dark.

"I'm not bringing him," says Elkie. "He's the one who will report me missing."

"Damn it, Elkie!" exclaims Yitta, and all her wry teasing is gone in a flash of exasperation. "Why do you hate that man so much? I get that he's not the most exciting, but he's a *good husband*. Eizik and I wouldn't have set you up with him if we didn't know he would be. He's given you two lovely children and a good home and presents on time for your birthday *and* your anniversary every year – that's more than I can say for Eizik! You wouldn't just… *leave* him?"

Elkie's eyes hang low and level over the edge of her cup, like sister suns going down on the river. Her sip is long and slow, and when the tide of the coffee goes out, it leaves her mouth—for a

moment—as the opening of some Aegean cave where sirens might shelter. And then she says, "You have an application in for an exit visa, too."

"Of course."

"Why do you hate this city so much, Yitta?" There is no hint of sugar in Elkie's sarcasm. "Birobidzhan isn't the most exciting, but it's a *good city*. Your parents wouldn't have moved here if they didn't know it would be. It's where you've brought up three beautiful kids and marked so many special moments. You wouldn't just … *leave* it?"

Yitta sighs. "That's not the same and you know it. This city is a joke—street signs filled with Yiddish and we're counting people's cats to make a minyan. Nobody sees us. Nobody cares. In Israel, they *want* us."

"Why do you think I'm going?"

"Of course you're going!" For a second time, Yitta feels the words escaping her like steam. "But there's a *process*, Elkie. You think you can do anything! I've always admired that about you. But you can't off-road a *VAZ* across all of Asia. Not even you. You just have to be patient."

"Why?" Elkie falls back into her chair. "Did Moses just *wait* for Pharaoh to say it was *okay* to leave Egypt?"

"YES! He *did*, actually!"

"But he *didn't* take his wife."

"Only because she wasn't in Egypt! They reunited at Sinai."

"And if Kuzmir ever gets his visa, maybe I'll see him in Beer Sheva." Elkie's next sip of coffee is dramatically composed.

Yitta slumps. It would be Beer Sheva. The Negev. That's exactly where Elkie would go, stubborn and defiant as she is now, holding the coffee on her tongue and letting that perfect spring moment sink in as winter flees the Amur, rays of sun clattering on the sidewalks and rooftops like the arrows of an army giving chase. It all seems so long ago—the German advance, the evacuations, but somehow, when Elkie's lips press red against the cup's edge, Yitta can still see her friend's beaming face, unlined and unpainted, above the kerchief of a Young Pioneer completely in her element at the end of the earth. That was why they'd become friends, wasn't it? Their fathers working in the same factory was the occasion, but the *reason* was that they were both scared little girls. But being scared made Elkie *go* and *do*, and Yitta—who had followed her onto the platform to get a red kerchief herself—would have followed her anywhere.

"You can't," says Yitta, and the words plunk down like sugar cubes.

"Watch me," says Elkie.

Watch me. They're twelve years old. Elkie's gotten a bike for *Noviy God* and changed the front tire for an old ski she's sawed in half so she won't have to

wait for spring. She's dragged it up onto the snowbank, with Yitta trailing her the whole way telling her it won't work. She mounts the bicycle, cranks the pedals—all at once the crust under the tire gives way, the rear of the bike plunges into the drift, and Elkie's body falls backward into Yitta's outstretched arms. Then they are face-to-face under sky billowed like a grey blanket, red-cheeked and panting, upside down to one another, and Elkie smiles. *I meant to do that*.

Watch me. They're twenty years old. Elkie's gotten herself onto the blasting crew working the Angara's left bank and has pulled Yitta behind the barricade to witness her first detonation in the rockface. Her eyes are wild and her hard hat wobbling as she switches rapidly between giving confirmations to her crew and telling Yitta how glad she is that she finally signed up for shock construction with her, how the Fifty Years of Great October Dam will be the largest single power producer in the world, how they will be able to tell people what they did—really *did*, with their *hands*—to build socialism. Then, with a final fuse check, eager glint becomes wicked grin, and Yitta knows it's time, yet somehow it still takes her by surprise—the leap of the trees like wild dancers, the spray of the rock like hailstones, the sudden trebling of the river's roar—and she throws herself into Elkie's side. Elkie says nothing—just holds her and beams.

The patio sun strafes Yitta's face like debris. She feels the lines deepen. "It's only a season, Elkie. You have to be patient."

You have to be patient. They're twenty-eight years old. Elkie has braced her hands on Yitta's shoulders, and Yitta is trying to set her feet more firmly. Elkie's voice has always leveled the horizon, and now, when it cracks, the world hurtles around Yitta like some off-centre gyroscope. Elkie is still muttering something about not being able to do this when Yitta's hands clap to her friend's cheeks. She's trying to make it all stop spinning, trying to remind Elkie that she's aged out of *Komsomol* and that congress meetings can't replace family reunions anymore—trying to tell her that married life will take getting used to, but that she needs to think of her future—but Elkie's head is shaking and pressing against her grip. For a moment, Yitta thinks she might lose her—thinks Elkie might slip from her fingers and disappear down Birskii Street—and then, all at once, like the breaking of a crust of snow, Yitta knows what she has to say to make the shaking stop. *I'm right here. I won't leave your side.*

You have to be patient. They're thirty-six years old. Elkie is shivering, her legs splattered in the slush of the street corner, her eyes locked to the yellow police cruiser that's just passed them. She's been out of jail for six months, and they only kept her for a couple of days, but she still gets like this every time she sees the cars, or the blue of an officer's coat. Yitta guides her to a bench, lowers her onto it. When she moves to brush some ice from the hem of Elkie's jacket, Elkie just shakes her head, eyes still down the street, and pats the spot beside her. Yitta sits, and Elkie tips gently into her side, spills her head onto her shoulder. A miserable

winter hangs over the bench while Yitta's mouth goes dry, and even the steam of her breath disappears from around her *formovka*. She says nothing—just holds Elkie, and doesn't know what to say.

"You haven't told me not to go," Elkie observes.

"Do I have to?!" Customers at nearby tables turn to look, and Yitta settles sheepishly back into her chair, recovers her whisper. "You can't *possibly* be serious. If you're not shot at the border, you'll bust an axle in the Tarim Basin and starve."

"I'll still be out of this sham city."

"You'll be dead. And not just you."

Elkie's fingers are on the table edge, but they wait.

"You may not think much of Kuzmir, but he loves you," Yitta says. "This will kill him."

"Just him?"

"No, you too! We've already established that."

"Well, as long as *you'll* live, then."

Yitta's pupils widen like they're trying to mirror the cups. "What do you want me to say? What the devil do you think I could possibly do without you? After thirty-five years? I love you, Elkie—" for a perfect spring moment, Yitta can see in Elkie's face

the expression she must have worn herself when the dynamite went off, but her lips are already in motion, and it all comes down: the flyrock, the cash hitting the floor of the reception hall, the fists of the cops. "I'm your *friend*. But think of your *family*."

And just like that, everything is covered in soap film and rainbows.

The clouds in Elkie's eyes are dark. Her chair scoots back. "I can't wait anymore." She tosses some coins on the table as she stands.

Yitta rises after her and the words fly. "I'll hold onto the record for you, just… take some time. Figure out those last few countries. And then we'll talk again, yeah?" Yitta's fingers meet Elkie's wrist just in time to feel it slip up and out of her grasp, and then her cheeks are in Elkie's hands, and her lips are under Elkie's lips, and the clouds are back in her eyes—desperately, hopelessly white—while the whole patio of gawking diners freezes around them, as though spring could run in reverse and thirty-five years vanish as quickly as Elkie, who is already gone.

When Yitta gets home, she sets the reels of the tape and starts it playing. The beat is low and strange, the voice high and distant, the words difficult to catch.

While the music played, you worked by candlelight, / those San Francisco nights, / you were the best in town . . .

Yitta is trying to recall the English she took at the polytechnic. The dorm was a fraction the size of this cramped living room. Elkie is there. She's twenty. She's gotten her hands on an on-bones bootleg of some American jazz band, God-knows-how.

. . . You must have had it all. / You'd go to LA on a dare and you'd go it alone . . .

Eizik is yelling from the kitchen, telling her to turn this racket down while he's on the phone.

. . . Could you see the day? / Could you feel your whole world fall apart and fade away? . . .

Eizik is standing in the doorway, glaring until Yitta turns the knob. "It's Kuzmir," he says. "He woke up this morning and the car was gone, and he can't find Elkie anywhere. Did she say anything to you?"

. . . All those Day-Glo freaks who used to paint the face, / they've joined the human race. / Some things will never change . . .

Yitta shifts closer to an empty spot on the divan, shakes her head, doesn't know what to say. Donald Fagen's voice has left her to sit alone with Eizik and with Larry Carlton's guitar. Eizik huffs and returns to the kitchen. Yitta turns the music back up.

. . . Is there gas in the car? / Yes, there's gas in the car. / I think the people down the hall know who you are . . .

The guitar hits the outro. The floorboards warp. The walls melt. The horizon crinkles like a car hood in a bad collision or a map at the end of a good trip. The outro fades and, through the doorway, Yitta hears the receiver fall into its cradle.

"Eizik?" she calls.

His voice rings back from the kitchen. "Yes?"

"We're still on the list for exit visas, right?"

"Yes, dear," he sighs. "Yes, we're still on the list."

Has Bob Dylan Been Reading Emmanuel Levinas?

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On Bob Dylan's[1] Rough and Rowdy Ways tour, he wanted us to be present to what he had to say. So we had to lock up our phones in these neat gray pouches, only to be released when he was done saying what he wanted to say.[2]

So we were thinking, sitting, waiting for him to

[1] This piece is a response to Bob Dylan's performance at the Royal Albert Hall on 12th November 2024.

[2] I explain the difference between saying, le dire, and said, dit, below.

come on to play, and, without anything to scroll through, I decided to pull out a volume of Levinas' writings from the book compartment of my bag (it contains multitudes). Making headway without the usual distractions, I wondered to myself if any other person in the room was reading the same. Then, a few minutes into Bob's set, I realized he is in fact, himself, reading Levinas. Perhaps.

What I want to play with in what follows is a few fundamental ideas which recur both in Dylan's later songs and in the writings of Levinas: the Other (and their face), the ease with which objectification/totalization occurs, and how this relates to the notions of Saying and Said. Putting these two figures in conversation broadens the reading of each.

Discursion

Emmanuel Levinas remains a touchstone in the Jewish philosophy of the twentieth century, though paradoxically his most important idea: Ethics precedes philosophy. Our first responsibility is for the Other; when we see their face, we are obligated to respond. But this is harder than it first seems, because he warns us not to, in doing so, objectify the Other. The Other must remain irreducible, or we risk making them into the Same (the term Levinas uses to refer to our own subjectivity).

Like Bob Dylan's, Levinas's relationship with his Jewishness is not straightforward. He was born in Lithuania, and studied philosophy with the likes of Martin Heidegger, but spent most of the second world war interned in a prisoner of war camp. After being freed, he left behind Jewish ritual for a time, and only later did he become immersed in Jewish texts. Similarly, Bob Dylan, while born Jewish as Robert Zimmerman (his maternal family were from Lithuania), has spent much of his life in an ambivalent relationship with his Judaism, even converting to Christianity in the 1970s. But, like Franz Rosenzweig, another of the great Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century who had a brief flirtation with Christianity, Dylan has also had moments of connection with his Judaism. Notably, he has been involved with the Chabad movement, and his sons celebrated bar mitzvahs.

These two figures are by no means an obvious pairing. But Dylan's literary genius, and interaction with both history and philosophy, make him an intriguing figure to put in conversation with Levinas. Could it be that Dylan at this late stage is embracing Levinas's notion of alterity, his notion of Otherness?

Drash, or Exegesis

Once I was attuned to noticing Levinas in Dylan, it became difficult to unhear. Here is where I noticed it first:

> It looks at nothing here or there, looks at nothing near or far

> No one ever told me, it's just something I knew
>
> I've made up my mind to give myself to you[3]

Like Levinas, Dylan comes to this Ethics prior to philosophy. No one ever told him. It's not in the books. But he sees the face of the Other and he gives himself up. His subtle shift from second person to third person and back to second person (and referring to multiple genders), suggests that this is not merely a demonstration of love. Importantly, this is not some abstract universal principle; the responsibility is to the face of the Other ('you') in front of me.

> "We started from responsibility for the Other as substitution for him…this is an awakening irreducible to knowledge [savoir] and Reason."[4]

I would be remiss not to point out that Bob Dylan starts with the I, and Levinas insists on beginning with the Other. Dylan is channelling his inner Martin Buber here, while Levinas modifies it. While Buber and Levinas both analyze relationships, they fundamentally differ on whether it begins with Oneself or not. For Buber, the *I* fundamentally remains the same, but dialogues with the Other. Levinas considers this form of dialogue in which the self is fundamentally the priority (as opposed to the Other), summarizing it as follows:

> "This is a worth attached to man coming out of the value of the You, or of the man who is the other…Is not the very opening of the dialogue already a way for the I to uncover itself, to deliver itself, a way for the *I* to place itself at the disposition of the *You*?"[5]

Later in the same section, Levinas modifies Buber's thought, arguing against the symmetry of the relationship articulated above. In Buber, I can meet the other "eye to eye," an encounter of equals. But in Levinas, the duty to the Other, and the Other's claim on me, will always come first: "There would be an inequality, a dissymmetry, in the Relation, contrary to the 'reciprocity' upon which Buber insists." Equality, as per Buber, expects something of the Other in return, but for Levinas the ethical relationship exists regardless of what the Other does or says. That responsibility for the Other precedes any events. The Other is unique, and completely inequal. Levinas goes beyond dialogue, "a thinking of the *unequal*, a thought thinking *beyond* the given." [6] The disagreement between Buber and Levinas's

[3] Bob Dylan, "I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself To You" (2020).

[4] Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics, 1998), 30.

[5] Ibid, 150.

[6] Ibid, 151.

relationship is defined by how the *I* is oriented to

the Other. Levinas is critical of the subjective I who ossifies or thematizes the Other, defining them as an object (as opposed to allowing the subjective to define the Other).

Dylan is also bothered by lazy generalities. In "I Contain Multitudes," Dylan castigates critics who want to define him by trite Universalisms. Like Anne Frank, who has been emptied of her particularism, he fears being objectified too, and ironically mocks the idea that everything can be made good in that realm of Universalism:

> Tell me, what's next? What shall we do?
>
> Half my soul, baby, belongs to you
>
> I relic and I frolic with all the young dudes
>
> I contain multitudes
>
> I'm just like Anne Frank, like Indiana Jones
>
> And them British bad boys, The Rolling Stones
> I go right to the edge, I go right to the end
>
> I go right where all things lost are made good again[7]

The Other's Face

But wait. Lest you claim—as you're already doing, cynical you—that there's nothing Jewish in Dylan, nothing for Levinas to speak with, halfway through his set, he channels his inner Moshe. In Exodus 33, God says to Moshe:

> I shall place you in a crevice in the rock and I shall cover you with My hand until I have passed by… you shall see Me from behind; but My face shall not be seen.[8]

Levinas comments "The face glows in the trace of the Other… it *is* disturbance itself, imprinting itself (one is tempted to say *engraving*) with irrefutable gravity…. The God who passed by is not the model of which the face would be the image. To be in the image of God does not signify being the icon of

[7] Dylan, "I Contain Multitudes" (2020). At the end of this stanza he says "I have no apologies to make / Everything's flowing all at the same time," according to the recorded lyrics, which I suggest might allude to Vasily Grossman's *Everything Flows*. Levinas has himself commented on Grossman's work extensively, as a literary manifestation of alterity. However, when I heard Dylan perform live, I heard "Everything's *thrown* all at the same time," an evocation which can allude to Martin Heidegger's idea of thrownness, in which our existence isn't chosen, but leads to a form of alienation.

[8] Translation from Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life*. (Yale University Press, 2016), 79.

God, but finding oneself in his trace…". [9] Put differently, our human relations require an opening up to the Other's face because the inability to see the face of God is not our model for interpersonal relationships. The use of 'engraving' (in French "se *gravant"*) in Levinas, and 'carved' in Dylan, seems more than coincidence:

> I can see the history of the whole human race
>
> It's all right there, it's carved into your face
>
> Should I break it all down? Should I fall on my knees?
>
> Is there light at the end of the tunnel?
>
> Can you tell me, please?[10]

I would argue that Dylan's evocation of the 'face' imagery here is in direct conversation with Levinas's concern for the face of the other, leading to responsibility for the other. Later in that song, Dylan returns to the language of 'face,' á la Levinas:

> Can you look at my face with your sightless eyes?
>
> Can you cross your heart and hope to die?
>
> I'll bring someone to life, someone for real[11]

This notion of sightlessness is foreshadowed by Levinas. Imagery runs the risk of objectifying the other, turning them into something they are not. A photograph, for example, can petrify a person into a single moment, as perceived by someone else, but Ethics requires allowing the Other to not be totalized.

> "Ethics is an optics. But it is a "vision" without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision; a relation or an intentionality of a wholly different type." [12]

And as if to confirm that he is engaging with his heritage, Dylan later on in "My Own Version of You" places himself firmly within a long history of Jews (of which Freud and Marx represent two in a

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[9] Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, (University of Illinois Press, 2006), 44.

[10] Dylan, "My Own Version of You" (2020). On Dylan's line 'Can you tell me, please,' see also R' Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *Lessons on Likkutei Moharan* volume 1 (Centre for the Writings of Rav Shagar, 2012, 220 [Hebrew]). There, Rosenberg puts Levinas in conversation with Rebbe Nahman of Breslov and with Jacques Lacan. He suggests that for Rebbe Nahman, transcendence is mediated through the face of the tzaddik. "Seeing my face in the face of the Tzaddik arouses me to Teshuva… the Tzaddik asserts the absoluteness that Levinas sees in every person's face."

[11] Ibid.

[12] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*. (Duquesne University Press, 1969), 23.

long chain), both persecuted and ironically triumphant in their contribution to humanity:

> Stand over there by the cypress tree
>
> Where the Trojan women and children were sold into slavery
>
> Long before the first Crusade
>
> Way back before England or America were made
>
> Step right into the burning hell
>
> Where some of the best-known enemies of mankind dwell
>
> Mr. Freud with his dreams, Mr. Marx with his ax
>
> See the rawhide lash rip the skin from their backs
>
> Got the right spirit, you can feel it, you can hear it[13]

So much pathos, such empathy. In the passage above, he has left the first person and moved into the third person. He is exhorting us. In fact, in another of his songs, he reads with the exuberance of a prophet:

> I'm the enemy of the unlived meaningless life
>
> I ain't no false prophet
>
> I just know what I know
>
> I go where only the lonely can go[14]

It is lonely to be Ethical, to be aware of the Trace of the Other. There is that inner voice calling, the אהיה אשר אהיה. "To be in the image of God does not signify being the icon of God, but finding oneself in His trace."[15] We can never see God's face, never know God, but it is in the Trace that we find the Other. The Trace is that imprint that is left by God when we see Him from behind (see Exodus 33, quoted above).

Dylan's Methodology

Hearing Bob Dylan in concert, in a rather ephemeral way, it seems hard to pin down exactly what he said. Instead, there's more a sense of what he was trying to *say* that you can get from his lyricism, his musicality. The way he performed live was both different from his studio album, and also from previous live shows. He re-arranges, he

[13] Dylan, "My Own Version of You" (2020).

[14] Dylan, "False Prophet" (2020). It is no accident that in False Prophet he mentions "the city of God is there on the hill." City of God is of course a reference to one of Levinas's Talmud interpretations on Makkot 9b, where he refers to the Cities of Refuge and the City of God i.e. Jerusalem.

[15] Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 44.

says things anew. Christopher Ricks, in his exegesis of Dylan, points out that he often alters the lyrics of his songs.

> What follows… has been differently put by him over the forty years, finding itself crediting the words and the music variously at various times… catching different emphases in all this, undulating and diverse."[16]

Again, Levinas, on the difference between Saying and Said, encapsulates this. Language is fundamentally limited, so that there is always a gap between what a person attempts to communicate and that which is heard. The meaning behind our words—the Saying [dire]—necessarily requires translation, into that which is Said [dit], for the receiver of the words will always receive the meaning incompletely. The Saying is therefore the ethical event, that which is inexpressible (or nonthematizable):

> "The unutterable or incommunicable of interiority that cannot hold in a Said is a responsibility prior to freedom."[17]

Prior to my engagement in dialogue, the Saying is my incommunicable responsibility for the Other.

Once I communicate with the other (the Said), my ethical act becomes one that can be represented, or categorised.

Midrashic License?

I don't physically carry him around with me, but ever since reading it, I have been amazed at how Elliot Wolfson dedicates his book on the thought of Chabad to Dylan. Wolfson's writing is filled with Derrida, Levinas, and Benjamin… but where does Dylan fit in to all that? Is he right at the beginning, prior to it all?

> "FOR BOB DYLAN
> *the man in the long black coat*"[18]

Who knows if Bob Dylan has read Levinas? But when we read them together, their conversation is fruitful. I would be remiss not to caveat it all; perhaps my reading is too loose. So I turn to a *meikil posek* who licenses my reading:

> "Beyond any possible restitution, there would be need for my gesture to operate without debt, in

[16] Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. (London: Canongate, 2003).

[17] Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 52.

[18] Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson*. (Columbia, 2009).

absolute ingratitude."[19]

Derrida opines that, if all representation is always a betrayal of the original intention (a Said, not a

Saying), I should go beyond the words. Even if the author has written the words, in their absence, I can read without the presence of the Other. I must go beyond the original, not merely representing Levinas or Dylan, but pushing through to a new Saying. And in doing so, by reading Dylan next to Levinas, it allows for a new interpretation of what it means to be a Jew when we are only left with the Trace of God.

HOLD ON TIGHT

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How attached I am
To the woof and warp
Of daily patterns
The sun is rising over oak trees
I wash my hands.

But in the in-between moments of the day
And the quiet of night
I touch other parts of the fabric.

Feeding my cooing grandson
The young Bibas brothers - in a tunnel? Alone?
Pushing a cart through the grocery store
I think of the soldiers with amputated legs
Cooking for Shabbat
Thousands have no home,
No kitchen, and empty place settings for loved ones

The war is woven in.

Taking a walk by the forested lake
In northern Israel, the sky was choked with ashes falling on abandoned cities
Intimate dinner conversations with my husband
Crying inside for the young widows with beheaded dreams

Separating the laundry, the whites are spinning;
The dark clothes in a heap in the basket
The sweet young man from the Nova Festival conveys to our kehillah
One moment in a wave of dancing joy
Then lobbing grenades and lying for hours with the stench of bloodied bodies

I am bearing witness.

Saying the familiar words in my Tehillim,
"Hashem is righteous, He cut the ropes of the wicked.
Ashamed and turned back will be all who hate Zion."

[19] Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," 12.

Hashem, I hold on tight to the promise of your salvation
For dear life