

Article

Sumud Freedom Camp: Levinas' Face-to-Face in Praxis

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Abstract: In Levinas's thought, the subject emerges and is founded in relationship with the other, in the face-to-face. In response to other's summons, the call to respond with discourse, not violence to the vulnerable face of another person, the subject is constituted, and all human society, hence all justice, becomes possible. This relationship, in which the other is always higher than oneself, is complicated by questions of justice and politics. The subject is obliged to respond unreservedly to her neighbor, but what happens when neighbors disagree and the necessity to adjudicate claims arises? This paper describes, based on the author's direct experience and study, the nonviolent practice of relationship-building initiated at Sumud Freedom camp by diaspora Jews, Palestinians and Israelis who came together in the south Hebron desert hills to form a nonviolent community in which to encounter one another. Initiatives such as Sumud Camp do not represent retreats from the political. They do prioritize the interhuman face-to-face, relationship-building, and they seek to evolve political program based on personal investments in other people's well-being. Thus, they represent an instance of Levinasian praxis from which a grass new roots politics might emerge.

Keywords: Levinas; Sumud; face-to-face; nonviolence; occupation; politics

*"The presence of the face coming from beyond the world, but committing me to human fraternity, does not overwhelm me as a numinous essence arousing fear and trembling. To be in relationship while absolving oneself from this relation is to speak."*¹

Many readers experience Emmanuel Levinas' writing as series of transformational calls to change our lives. Levinas' project includes the development of an ethical apparatus that, by definition, ought to inform the ways in which one behaves. How would one apply this summons to that part our lives we live as members of communities and polities? Beyond sensitivity to each individual encounter, what would a Levinasian social praxis look like? As Jason Caro observes, "Levinas' refusal to develop a systematic political theory is well known and he produced no treatise on the topic."²

This paper means to demonstrate that in a small collection of spaces called Sumud Camp, created in 2017 by a collection of nonviolent activists in the Hebron hills, was built a kind of Levinasian space. The activists created a community that was generative—deliberately so—of interhuman face-to-face encounters, those meetings which, Emmanuel Levinas teaches, are foundational to the individual subject and to all politics and justice. Throughout my sojourn at Sumud Camp, I was reminded irresistibly of Levinas' thought and considered the camp an instance of Levinasian praxis even though: (1) it is probably the case that many if not most Sumud Campers had not heard of Levinas or been influenced by his work; and (2) Levinas himself might have been disturbed (to say the least) by some

¹ (Levinas 1969, p. 215).

² (Caro 2009, p. 672).

of the premises with which the camp community identified. In fact, Levinas' refusal to articulate a clear programmatic response to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and his ambiguous remarks on the subject (which this paper attempts to address in Section 3, at least in part) leave his thought open to appropriation by those who would attempt to defend the practices that Sumud Camp was meant to oppose. Nevertheless, in this case, I believe it is possible to read Levinas' thought as supportive of a project to which it is impossible to say how Levinas would have responded.

1. Face to Face at Sumud

In June 2017, Sumud (Steadfastness) Freedom Camp was founded near the Palestinian village of Sarura located in the South Hebron Hills. Sarura lies within Area C—the part of the occupied territories³ that is entirely under Israeli military control. Sumud Camp was the creation of an unprecedented politically heterogeneous coalition of activists committed to nonviolence and united by opposition to the occupation.

The camp was created for two purposes. First, Sumud Campers worked to rehabilitate housing from which Palestinians had been evicted when the village was declared a Military Zone by the Israeli government. Second, Sumud Camp was created to be a “safe, nonviolent, unarmed space where all those who believe in a future founded on justice, freedom, and equality can come together to build a foundation that will sustain a just peace,”⁴ a space where Palestinian, Israeli, and Diaspora Jewish activists of different backgrounds and ideological perspectives could interact and build relationships. The camp, composed of tents and other temporary structures, was built by the community from the ground up.

The coalition that created Sumud Camp includes people who support a two-state solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict and others who support the creation of a single democratic state. It includes religious Muslims, Christians and Jews from several sects, denominations and varying levels of observance, along with atheists.

The Jewish contingent was organized by the Center for Jewish Nonviolence (CJNV),⁵ a group that defines itself as active-pluralist and includes people who take “a variety of positions on the Right of Return, BDS⁶, solutions, Zionism, etc.”⁷ CJNV's mission statement includes the following:

We strive for a future that honors the full equality and shared humanity of both Palestinians and Israelis.

We seek to bring a just and equitable end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza and a dismantling of the connected systems of oppression that harm communities on both sides of the Green Line: Palestinian and Israeli; Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Druze.

We are committed to the use of nonviolent civil resistance in all forms. This includes the use of proactive or disruptive nonviolence and non-cooperation, existence is resistance efforts, and critical education.

Within the larger Jewish contingent itself were such divergent organizations as J Street, a self-defined “pro-Israel, pro-peace” organization which supports a two-state solution; Jewish Voice for Peace which supports the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement; and If Not Now, a grouping primarily of millennials who, according to their website, “seek to transform the American Jewish community's support for occupation into a call for freedom and dignity for all”⁸ and which

³ For this paper, “the occupation” refers to the military occupation by the State of Israel of land seized during the 1967 war.

⁴ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-BJwNf4Oeg4MWPtt7xLyHZ5GHknGPshqjiHS3vANxM/edit>.

⁵ <https://cjnv.org/about/guiding-principles/>.

⁶ Boycott, divestment and sanctions against the State of Israel.

⁷ <https://cjnv.org/about/guiding-principles/>.

⁸ <http://ifnotnowmovement.org/>.

takes no position on BDS or two states. The oldest member of the Jewish delegation was in his 80s, and the youngest was 18. This contingent included Jews who observe Mizrahi, Ashkenazi and Sephardic customs and Jews from several ethnic backgrounds.

The Palestinian contingent was organized primarily by The Holy Land Trust (HLT)⁹ and Youth Against Settlements. HLT's membership includes Palestinian Christians and Muslims and people who are not affiliated religiously. Its mission statement includes the following:

"Through a commitment to the principles of nonviolence, Holy Land Trust aspires to strengthen and empower the peoples of the Holy Land to engage in spiritual, pragmatic and strategic paths that will end all forms of oppression. We create the space for the healing of the historic wounds in order to transform communities and build a future that makes the Holy Land a global model for understanding, respect, justice, equality and peace.

"While Holy Land Trust is not a religious organization, we aspire to learn from the spiritual teachings of all faiths that bring unity to the human family and closeness to the Creator of all things. We believe that, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, Jesus Christ in his teachings, compassion and interactions "was an extremist for love, truth and goodness". We seek and practice this extremism in our work and mission."

Youth Against Settlements is a Hebron-based group dedicated to opposing the occupation through non-violent methods. Its principles include equality between women and men and religious pluralism.¹⁰

The Palestinian delegation included academics and engineering students from the University of Hebron along with farmers, shepherds and goatherders from the Hebron hills, as well as Palestinians from the far North and from the cities of Ramallah and Jerusalem. Some are devoutly religious Muslims or Christians, and some are secular.

What united this group was a threefold commitment: opposition to the occupation, a commitment to nonviolence, and a recognition of the equal humanity and human rights of Palestinians and Israelis alike. The understanding of nonviolence that drives Sumud, most particularly as articulated by the leaders of the Holy Land Trust and the Center for Jewish Nonviolence, goes beyond a commitment to refrain from destructive acts. It extends to an ethic of solidarity and friendship. The camp not only organized to refurbish homes that had been destroyed, but also became a place in which people prayed together, studied together, danced together and ate together.

Despite concerns that it might prove "triggering" for Palestinians to hear Jews praying in Hebrew, several Palestinians joined Jewish Shabbat (Sabbath) celebrations, among them representatives from Roots/Shoreshim¹¹, a group founded by a self-defined "settler rabbi" and a Palestinian activist who had spent time in Israeli prison. Actual neighbors, they began their association by acknowledging that they had never previously spent time face-to-face with each other. They started to build friendships simply by introducing their children to one another and sharing personal histories. Now, Shoreshim builds long-term dialogue groups for Palestinian and Israeli neighbors, hosts a children's camp and operates a speakers' bureau. During Kabbalat Shabbat, Shoreshim representatives shared their group's vision of "a social and political reality that is founded on dignity, trust, and a mutual recognition and respect for both peoples' historic belonging to the entire Land."

Groupings such as Shoreshim and Sumud Freedom Camp do not represent a retreat from the political. Rather, they are experiments in building a political program from the grass roots up, based on profound interpersonal relationships and investments in one another's well-being that cross national and religious divides. Their praxis begins with the face-to-face.

⁹ <https://holylandtrust.org/about-holy-land-trust-a504ffaf141c>.

¹⁰ <https://hyas.ps/about-us/>.

¹¹ <https://www.friendsofroots.net/about/>.

2. What Does This Have to Do with Levinas?

In Levinas' thought, the human subject is continually re-constituted through face-to-face relationships with other people—through speech. The naked face of the other person, as vulnerable to contingency as that of the subject herself, draws the subject forth and founds her humanity through discourse. In Levinas' thought, one only extrudes a talking self, a subject, in response to the other; only differentiation through the face-to-face creates a person, constituted as we are in a web of relationship, with families, languages, stories and names. As the subject gives her word to the other, she accounts for herself.

"The face of the neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every consent, every pact, every contract. It escapes representation, it is the very collapse of phenomenality . . . "12

The other reminds me of a command to which I have always already acceded, a command anterior to conscious memory; for Levinas, the pull toward the Other is a response to the command "you will not commit murder."13

"The first word of the face is the "Thou shalt not kill." It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all.14

As Levinas writes in the essay *Freedom and Command*,

"The absolute nakedness of a face, the absolutely defenseless face, without covering, clothing or mask, is what opposes my power over it, my violence, and opposes it in an absolute way, with an opposition which is opposition itself . . . This *no* is not merely formal, but it is not the *no* of a hostile force or threat, it is the impossibility of killing him who presents that face; it is the possibility of encountering a being through an interdiction."15

Levinas knows that humans do murder one another all the time. However, for him, murder is always an act of futile bad faith. We can, of course, destroy the Other physically. However, what we can never murder successfully is her ineluctable difference from us, that which incited our violence in the first place. As he continues:

"The metaphysical relationship, the relationship with an exterior, is only possible as an ethical relationship. If the impossibility of killing were a real impossibility, if the alterity of the other were only the resistance of a force, his alterity would be no more exterior to me than that of nature which resists my energies, but which I come to account for by means of reason, it would be no more exterior than the world of perception which, in the final analysis, is constituted by me. The ethical impossibility of killing is a resistance made to me, but a resistance which is not violent, an intelligible resistance."16

¹² (Levinas 1998b, p. 89).

¹³ This recalls the Jewish commentary to the Torah, Mishnah Rabbah 28:6 which teaches that every Jew who comes into the world has already heard and accepted—and is responsible to interpret—the commandments at Sinai: "And God spoke all these words, saying" (Exod. 20:1). Rabbi Isaac said: At Mount Sinai, the prophets of each and every generation received what they were to prophesy (in the future). For Moses told Israel, "But with him that stands here with us this day before Adonai our God, and also with him that is not here this day" (Deut. 29:14). He did not say, "That is not standing here with us this day," but, "That is not here with us this day," as a way of referring to the souls that are still destined to be created. Moses did not use the word "standing" for them, because as yet these had no substance. Still, even though they did not as yet exist, each one received his share of the Torah. Nor were the future prophets the only ones who received at Sinai the prophecy they were to utter. The sages who were to rise in each and every generation—each and every one of them also received at Sinai the wisdom he was to share later."

¹⁴ (Levinas 1985, pp. 85–86).

¹⁵ (Levinas 1998a, p. 21).

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 21–22.

In other words, for Levinas, the face-to-face encounter is the site of the eruption of the metaphysical into the material world. The face, which commands with its very vulnerability is, for Levinas, a confounding of the “world of perception,” because it stands for a universe of meaning behind the eyes of the other, a universe that could never be contained within my knowledge and which I can never, through murder, render as never-having-existed. The naked face invites me toward the Infinite, the uncontainable. This turning-toward, this impulse, is that which discloses, as an always-receding summons, the Source of that command. One’s obligation to the other person, in Levinas, is one’s obligation to God.

God, for Levinas, is the Other par excellence, the One beyond being. He reminds us that he is not the first to bring God into philosophy. In the essay *God and Philosophy*, Levinas cites Descartes’ Third Meditation: “in some way I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite—to wit, the notion of God before that of myself.”¹⁷

In this context, Levinas links the confounding effect of God on the subject to that of the other person:

“... there is no idea of God, or God is his own idea. We are outside the order in which one passes from an idea to a being. The idea of God is God in me, but God already breaking up the consciousness which aims at ideas and unlike any content.”¹⁸

Levinas is concerned here with the issue of the Infinite which is put into me (a formulation he repeats several times—highlighting the intimacy of it, the penetrability of the subject). In the human apprehension of God (per Descartes), a finite being is possessed by a thought that overflows her capacity to think it. God, the ultimate Other, overwhelms the capacity of the subject to domesticate the other into the same—into her nicely arranged internal world of knowledge. God and the other person remain refractory to categorization or thematization. In other words,

“The difference between the Infinite and finite is a non-indifference of the Infinite to the finite and is the secret of subjectivity. The figure of the Infinite put in me, and according to Descartes, contemporaneous with my creation, would mean that the not being able to comprehend the Infinite by thought is somehow a positive relationship with this thought – but with this thought as passive, as a *cogitatio* as though dumbfounded and no longer, or not yet, commanding the *cogitatum*, not yet hastening toward adequation between the term of the spontaneous teleology of consciousness and this term given in being.”¹⁹

For Levinas, this encounter goes beyond philosophical or theological cogitation. “It is a dazzling where the eye takes more than it can hold, an igniting of the skin which touches and does not touch what is beyond the graspable, and burns.”²⁰ This fire that burns but does not consume characterizes, for Levinas, the subject’s meeting with the other person as well as her encounter with God.

The subject encounters God in the world through God’s trace in the face of the Other. The Other recalls the subject not only to her humanity but also to her status as a creature, one who arrives into a world that she did not make; into a web of relationship and obligation. Discourse with the Other is like revelation in that it comes upon the subject from outside—in conversation, the subject does not generate or anticipate fully the Other’s response, nor can she ever appropriate the entirety of the other person as an object of knowledge. The Other’s very alterity—her proximity and her strangeness—confronts the subject with her own contingency and limitations in a world that she did not create.

In her alterity, in every speech act which brings something new into the world, the Other interrupts what Levinas calls Totality: the Master Narrative:

¹⁷ (Levinas 1998a, p. 160).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 162.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 163.

“The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy. Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to bring forth its objective being.”²¹

The antidote to war consciousness, Totality, the epic delirium of national myth, is an encounter with another person, during which the subject is brought to awareness of the utter uniqueness, the irreplaceability of the Other. The Other is not the generic “man” of history, nor is she a category of person of whom the subject must be either master or victim, at war or at peace. Through conversation, every utterance of which is a disruption, a rent in time—the subject is thrust, from the synchrony of the internal monologue, into diachrony.

Levinas asserts that the Other, by virtue of her very finitude and exposure to destitution and need, not only reminds the subject of her own human vulnerability, but also comes upon the subject from a position of height.

“The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But is to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as You (vous) in a dimension of height.”²²

We recognize a hunger in the other, says Levinas, because we share with her the condition of embodiedness—unfed, we hunger, unsheltered, we are cold. She is mistress and lord, higher than oneself, just *because* of her very vulnerability, her destitution, which constitutes a claim on our hospitality. As Levinas writes,

... subjectivity is sensibility—an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the one-for-the-other, that is signification—and because matter is the very locus of the one-for-the-other, the way that signification signifies before showing itself as a said in the system of synchronism, the linguistic system, that a subject of flesh and blood, a man that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth or giving his skin.²³

One responds to the other through speech. Speech is a giving of one’s word, an answering for oneself. Speech assumes, and acts to compose, society, sociability; it enacts the choice to communicate rather than strike out.²⁴

For Levinas, the constitution of the subject through speech/relationship rather than through violence, means that ethics is first philosophy, anterior to ontology and epistemology. Only because we are called upon to answer to the other, to give our word, do we become concerned with the veracity of our speech and, thus, with what really is true and with how we know (ontology and epistemology).

However, what happens when multiple others call upon us at once? The lived world is not limited to you and me, but includes he and she and they. The subject is obliged to respond unreservedly to her neighbor, but what happens when neighbors disagree and the necessity to adjudicate claims arises?

The asymmetrical relationship, in which the other is always higher than oneself, is complicated for Levinas with the problem of the third person, that is, with questions of justice and politics. He engages with this problem directly in his last great book, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Levinas accepts that this is where we are forced to engage in ontological and epistemological inquiries to sort out what

²¹ (Levinas 1969, p. 22).

²² *ibid.*, p. 75.

²³ (Levinas 1998b, p. 77).

²⁴ Of course, speech can wound brutally, can be an instrument of war. However, speech can only be directed at a human being, not at an object. Objectifying speech in Levinasian terms, therefore, necessarily gives the lie to its own intention.

must be done. For Levinas, it is critical that, at every point, the people who comprise social institutions interrogate themselves and their work to ensure that they are doing justice, working to respect and call forth the story of particular human beings and to ensure their rights (not to perpetuate the power of the institutions themselves).

Justice for Levinas emerges from the social, the choice for discourse and for law over war. Justice requires the possibility of violence (police, courts, the power to enforce legal rulings), but it is not born out of violence, rather from interhuman expression, the voice of the Good.²⁵

Levinas knows full well that this violence, born out of non-violence, can become very brutal very quickly. The potential violence of the law ought to protect society from the self-interested violence of the merely strong. However, laws, of course, do violence to the incommensurability of the other by creating categories based on acts and other data; laws assign consequences and enforce them in ways that are not always contoured to the individual story behind transgression. In addition, laws can be corrupted and, in practice, are often crafted and then bent to serve groups and individuals who have social power. Levinas cautions that,

“Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges, and work are [only] comprehensible out of proximity . . . It is important to recover all these forms . . . at every moment on the point of having their center of gravity in themselves . . . ”²⁶

Sumud Camp, a deliberately constituted community committed to nonviolence, represents a deliberate enactment of “intelligible resistance,” a small polity founded on a praxis of the face-to-face; resisting occupation through building relationships across national and religious lines. It was a conscious sensitization to proximity, to the interhuman exchange that Levinas teaches us to regard as the foundation for all society.

3. Israel and Palestine

Students of Levinas have often been frustrated by attempts to find clear guidance in his work for making political analyses and taking positions. He offers an approach, not a program, although throughout his works are sprinkled references to social security, emergency food and other aspects of the social democratic safety net.

Regarding the subject’s political obligations and the Other, one point is critical: Levinas’ other is precisely the actual person before oneself. She is not an example of a genus. The Other, for Levinas, is simply, “the first one on the scene.”²⁷

“The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say “you” or “we” is not a plural of the “I”. I, you—these are not individuals of a common concept . . . He is not wholly in my site. But I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other.”

The same and the other, because both human. Incommensurable because both singular.

Lisa Guenther observes that the obligation of the subject to the other, for Levinas, does not depend on social position—does not, therefore, follow from any particular set of allegiances:

“For Levinas, I am not responsible for the widow, the orphan and the stranger as people of a certain kind or members of a certain social group; rather, I am responsible for the impoverished, abandoned and naked face of anyone, no matter who they are or what they

²⁵ This is, of course, the lesson of Sinai. The law comes to protect the widow, orphan and stranger, to save the people from enslavement to the whims of brute force.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ (Levinas 1998b, pp. 11, 86).

have done. For this reason, I am no less responsible for the persecuted than for the persecutor, the murderer, the one who denies his or her own responsibility for Others..."²⁸

This insistence that the Other is refractory to categorization would seem to place limits on any sort of mythologized or reflexive allegiance based on nationality, religion or any other category. But, in the context of the problem of the third, what does the Levinasian thinker owe to members of her own "certain social group" or polity or to members of a social group who are persecuted or exploited on a categorial basis?

Specifically: is Levinas a Zionist? If so, what kind? Is his Zionism consistent with the rest of his apparatus? Is it of a sort that would endorse Sumud Camp?

First, Levinas clearly, and in several places, warns severely against allowing any essentialist romance to pollute categorical allegiances such as nationality or ethnic identity. Regarding political violence, toward the end of *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas warns even those who fight wars of liberation or feel compelled to engage other conflicts based on identities and interests to reject the temptation to incentivize a conflict with totalizing mythologies—with essentialisms:

"... for the little humanity that adorns the earth, a relaxation of essence to the second degree is needed, in the just war waged against war to tremble or shudder at every instant because of this very justice. This weakness is needed."²⁹

Even those fighting for a just cause ought to risk the pain of introspection at all times, even when military training seems to demand absolute focus on the bloody task at hand. One must always aware of the costs of moral injury.

Identifying himself as a Westerner, Levinas reminds us of the cost of triumphalism:

"The true problem for us Westerners is not so much to refuse violence as to question ourselves about a struggle against violence ... Does not the war perpetuate that which is called to make it disappear, and consecrate war and its virile virtues in good conscience?...One has to find for man another kinship than that which ties him to being, one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression."³⁰

Levinas demands of those who engage in violent conflict, even when they are convinced that their cause is just, that they remain awake to the full consequences of their deeds, that they accept the pain of *mauvaise conscience*, refusing to defend against the knowledge of the destruction they are wreaking. Further, he polemicizes directly against valorization or making a virtue of martial virilism—including, we may assume, that which inflects a great deal of Israeli popular culture and national mythos. As Levinas writes in the essay *Ethics as First Philosophy*,

"The human is the return to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness, to *mauvaise conscience*, to its capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it."³¹

In the essay, *Heidegger, Gagarin and Us*, Levinas observes that Yuri Gagarin, the first person to orbit the earth, could see no borders from space. Borders—and the national allegiances they concretize—are, for Levinas, dispensable contingent artifacts, as are all romances of Place:

"But what perhaps counts most of all is that he left the Place. For one hour, man existed beyond any horizon—everything around him was sky or, more exactly, everything was geometrical space. A man existed in the absolute of homogenous space."³²

²⁸ (Guenther 2009, p. 169).

²⁹ (Levinas 1998b, p. 178).

³⁰ (Levinas 1998b, p. 177).

³¹ (Levinas 1989, p. 85).

³² Heidegger, Gagarin and Us, (Levinas 1990).

Did Levinas arrive at a Zionism which could include his refusal of essentialism of place? At a late stage in his development, Levinas responded when interviewed about his relationship to Zionism:

“I have personally never leaned toward an active Zionism. However, for me, this is not merely a political doctrine. Nor is it a state like the others, rife with conflict and subject to the requirements of the moment. Is not the ultimate finality of Zionism to create upon Israeli soil the concrete conditions for political invention and to make or remake a state in which prophetic morality shall be incarnate, along with its message of peace? At present, the subsistence of the Jews depends heavily on the continuation of this task, and under a particular form. I do not wish to infer that this sums up for me the essence of Judaism, but Israel represents security in a world where politics count, and where the cultural depends on the political. On this point, they have enough problems without our adding to them.”³³

Here, it appears that, for Levinas, Zionism is not simply an ideology, it is a political praxis requiring residence in the State, a praxis that, Levinas acknowledges, he has never adopted for himself. Levinas never left France to reside in Israel and never, at least in print, urged others to do so. At this late stage, he is distancing himself, referring to Israelis as “they;” regarding their project as worthy and important but, apparently, not mandatory for every Jew.

But what is he saying here about the nature of the state of Israel? Prophetic morality, for Levinas, is applied ethics as first philosophy, a concrete demand in favor of the widow, orphan and stranger, of their actual needs which obligate individuals, communities, and states and must infuse political program as well as personal conduct. At the climax of his first great book, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas deprecates the man of the state in favor of the awakened subject, the person who moves toward the Other: “Peace must be my peace in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other in desire and goodness . . . ” Peace, argues Levinas, cannot be reduced to, “the defeat of some and the victory of others, that is, (with) cemeteries and universal empires.”³⁴ He contrasts the subject who seeks peace proactively³⁵ with the “isolated and heroic being that the State produces by its virile virtues,” condemned to sink into “tedium, fruit of the mournful incuriosity that takes on the proportions of immortality.”³⁶

Otherwise Than Being, as discussed above, is Levinas’ answer to questions of how the people who constitute a state might handle practical issues arising from state power while remaining accountable to the Other. He clearly believes it is possible that the State of Israel can produce some other kind of being than the “isolated and heroic.” Levinas does appear to allow for a kind of Messianic Zionism by suggesting that this state has a destiny unique in human history. However, he is not necessarily suggesting a qualitatively singular character to this uniqueness. In the essay *From the Rise of Nihilism to the Carnal Jew*, found in *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas writes, “To be conscious of being a nation is to be conscious of an exceptional destiny. Every nation worthy of the name is chosen.”³⁷ This allows for a kind of universalism in realizing particularity. Israel is not “a state like the others,” because Israel arises from its own center of gravity, its accountability to its own particular set of revelations found in living Torah—to prophetic morality.

Returning to Heidegger, Gagarin and Us, Levinas writes, “The Bible knows only a Holy Land, a fabulous land that spews forth the unjust, a land in which one does not put down roots without certain conditions.”³⁸ Levinas address the “certain conditions” in the essay *Cities of Refuge*, a reading of Talmud Bavli Makkot 10a, found also in *Beyond the Verse*. He writes of, “the impossibility for Israel—or, according to Israel—of religious salvation without justice in the earthly city.” Here, Levinas

³³ (Levinas 2001, pp. 197–98).

³⁴ (Levinas 1969, p. 306).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ (Levinas 1969, p. 307).

³⁷ (Levinas 1990, p. 224).

³⁸ (Levinas 1990, p. 233).

expressly offers an alternative to what he calls a “rigorously Zionist reading,”³⁹ of Talmud Bavli Taanit 5a wherein is discussed the concept of Jerusalem *shel m’aleh* (the heavenly Jerusalem), counterpart to the Jerusalem here below. Here is quoted Rabbi Yochanan’s teaching that Hosea 11:9—“among you the Holy One will not come in anger”—means, “I will not enter the Jerusalem above until I can enter the Jerusalem below.” For many Jewish Messianists, this means simply, “when the Holy Temple is restored.” However, Levinas ties this vision of a restored Jerusalem to a praxis of justice based on living Torah. For Levinas, the scripture does not refer simply to a physical occupation of land. He writes,

“What is promised in Jerusalem, on the other hand, is a humanity of the Torah. It will have been able to surmount the deep contractions of the cities of refuge:⁴⁰ a new humanity that is *better than a Temple* (emphasis mine). Our text, which began with the cities of refuge, reminds us or teaches us that the longing for Zion, that Zionism, is not one more nationalism or particularism; nor is it a simple search for a place of refuge. It is the hope of a science of society, and of a society, which are wholly human. And this hope is to be found in Jerusalem, in the earthly Jerusalem, and not outside of all places, in pious thoughts.”⁴¹

Levinas makes clear here that his brand of Zionism goes beyond the political program of establishing a nation-state in which Jews constitute a demographic majority. He posits the state of Israel as a kind of laboratory for what he understands to be prophetic values in action in the context of state power. For instance, I do not believe that Levinas would be complacent about the valorization of martial strength that now permeates Israeli politics and popular culture.

There is a great debate now roiling the Jewish world, reflected in the diversity of opinion within Sumud Camp, about whether such an elevation of Israeli state politics as Levinas advocated was ever possible in the state of Israeli as it was constituted or could be possible in the Israel of today. A key question within this debate is that of how to guarantee the equality of Israeli citizens who are not Jews. How could such equality be actualized if the nation-state of Israel, as distinct from the people Israel, is committed to Torah-based practice? Levinas never gives us final answers to those crucial questions. This is no small problem. However, I do argue here that something comparable to Levinas’ “science of society” is, in its content, what Israelis, Palestinians, and Diaspora Jews who participated in Sumud Camp were working to realize in practice. A humanity awakened to its exposure of the Other, to her story and to her very concrete needs.

Levinas himself never made a conclusive diagnosis of how well any of the Israeli governments of his lifetime realized the commitments he advocated. For that matter, he never articulated a strong critique of his own French government’s actions in Algeria or any of its former colonies or joined those voices that opposed the United States’ incursions into another of those former colonies, Vietnam. For many students of his work, these silences are problematic in the extreme. It is reasonable to ask why a thinker who invoked the prophetic with regard to statecraft would keep silent in the face of extreme violent conflict that raises inescapable moral questions.

For some of us, this silence represents a breach, a lacuna in Levinas’ thought. Even so, for some of us who do articulate and act on such critiques, his work remains indispensable, because his apparatus does offer a way to proceed by demanding that the political submit to the ethical.

In a relatively early essay, never repudiated, *The State of Caesar and the State of David*, found in the collection *Beyond the Verse*, Levinas writes that, “At the heart of daily conflicts, the living experience of the government—and even the painful necessities of the occupation—allow lessons as yet untaught to be detected in the ancient revelation.”⁴² We cannot claim that what Levinas meant by “painful

³⁹ (Levinas 1994, p. 37).

⁴⁰ Biblically mandated sanctuary cities to which people who have committed inadvertent manslaughter may go to be safe from blood vengeance by the families of the dead. (Levinas compares our great Western metropoli with such cities, reminding us that, inadvertently or not, we enjoy our relatively high standard of living at the expense of much of the world.)

⁴¹ (Levinas 1994, p. 52).

⁴² (Levinas 1994, p. 187).

necessities” is what we would like him to mean. However, we can draw on his thought for guidance in the current situation. At this juncture, the only necessities arising from the occupation, for many Levinasians and for others, are those associated with ending it.

4. Conclusions

In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, in an affectionate *hesbed* (eulogy-ish) of sorts, Jacques Derrida insists that Levinas “always wanted to protect the thematic of [Jewish] election...from every nationalist seduction.”⁴³ Further, that while “ethics enjoins a politics and a law...the *content* is still to be determined...and on the basis of an analysis that is each time unique...”⁴⁴ Based on this approach, it is fair to say that the work represented by Sumud Camp and Roots/Shoreshim qualifies as Levinasian praxis.

Initiatives such as Sumud Camp and Roots/Shoreshim represent a new and risky kind of politics. The unity statement for Sumud Camp is minimal, although it does make political claims; for instance, that the Israeli military domination of West Bank territories ought to be called occupation. However, Sumud campers aimed to prioritize the interhuman face-to-face, to place people with heterogeneous stories and allegiances in encounters where they will be summoned by one another, as unique events in being, to respond as subjects. This summons will continually give way to the problem of the third, to concrete claims from which justice and politics must surely flow. Which claims will give way to new encounters with the next person to come along. From which will arise a community of people who have a personal stake in one another’s well-being upon which to base their programmatic agenda. Fairly, then, such formations can be called instances of Levinasian praxis from which a new grassroots politics might emerge.

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⁴³ (Derrida 1997, p. 118).

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 115.