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THE ETHICS OF THE NEIGHBOR: UNIVERSALISM, PARTICULARISM, EXCEPTIONALISM

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The modern claim that the central character and essential originality of Judaism lies in its universalist, humanistic ethics often cites the following piece of Talmud as evidence:

> It happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, "make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, "what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it." (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a)

Whereas the notoriously impatient Rabbi Shammai dismisses the presumptuous heathen with a beating, the ever-gentle Hillel, the founder of what emerged as the dominant tradition of rabbinic interpretation, takes the challenge seriously, condensing the essence of Jewish law into an injunction that is commonly understood as a negative formulation of the commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18).[1] Despite the foolishness and perhaps mockery that underlies the request, Hillel responds to the potential convert with a law that seems simple, reasonable, easily fulfilled, and above all *moral,* especially when contrasted with the fierce intractability of the law represented by Shammai's impatient cudgelings.

The midrash's joke, of course, lies in the second part of Hillel's answer: "the rest is commentary; go and learn it." For while the essence of Judaism may indeed be represented by a signal allusion to Scripture, the oral "commentary" surrounding the piece of written law which the proselyte has been blithely told to "go and learn" involves the endlessly complex dilations of rabbinic commentary. This apparently innocent codicil to the law at once invites the proselyte into covenant and exposes the arrogance of the heathen's request, deflecting his desire to come before the law with the perpetual deferral of a "not yet." If Hillel's response is understood as itself an act of neighbor-love, it cannot imply an entirely unambivalent account of that love, since inclusion and rebuke are its intertwined modes of address. Hillel's reply complicates the notion of the covenant by suggesting that although conversion is simple, it is never complete; rather than simply stepping across a line and by accepting the simplest of moral principles (which, we might imagine, sounds easier to take on than the belief that the Messiah has come, died, and been resurrected demanded by the competing ethical monotheism of Christianity), the proselyte, and indeed all Jews, must take on a endless project of infinite approach. In this gesture, the Midrash implies that the rabbinic hermeneutics of infinite interpretation, of reading without closure, is not only an exegetical principle, but also a political-theological expression of the nature of membership.

Part of what is at stake in this passage is something like the deconstruction of the moral opposition between "inside" and "outside" the covenant. Although the proselyte may discover that he is already closer to the state of interiority than he imagined, merely a step away, the conditions of being an insider are not what he expected: there is another door behind the one he has just passed through, and it is uncertain how many lie beyond that one. That this qualification of the possibility of full and immediate presence to the law is not merely a comment on the arduous labor necessary to becoming an "insider" of any group, but is both specific to Judaism and universal within it, becomes clear when we look at the much less famous Midrash that immediately follows it. Here, another pagan comes to Shammai and Hillel to be converted, this time on the condition of being appointed High Priest, Kohen Gadol, a position, of course, restricted to the tribe of Aaron, and which could not be filled by anyone outside this lineage. After Shammai again trounces the presumptuous naif for his temerity, Hillel again advises him to study: "'Can any man be made a king but he who knows the arts of government? . . . Go and study the arts of government!'" Beginning his education in Torah, however, the proselyte comes to the line in Numbers, "And the stranger that cometh nigh [the Holy of Holies] shall be put to death" (Num. 1:51); when he asks Hillel, "To whom does this verse apply?" Hillel replies, "Even to King David." The proselyte realizes the mistake of his presumption by reasoning a fortiori that if the king of the Israelites is himself a "stranger" (zar) forbidden from directly approaching the central holy space of the Temple, "how much more a mere proselyte [ger]." The proselyte advances on his path of conversion and comes closer to the law precisely by recognizing himself as the "stranger" in the verse, as remote from the law, cut off from the holy of holies. Once again Hillel accepts the over-ambitious convert into the covenant while indirectly reproving him through the advice to "go and study," which this time leads not to the endlessness of education but precisely to its limits, since no amount of study can transform a proselyte, a Levite, or even a king into a Cohen.

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[1] I am grateful to Ishay Rosen-Zvi, Martin Kavka, Dana Hollander, and Julia Reinhard Lupton for their careful reading of this essay and helpful suggestions, additions, and subtractions.

Both *midrashim* deal with the difficulty of approaching the heart of the religion, "the Law" in the first and "the Holy of Holies" in the second. But whereas the earlier Midrash announced neighbor-love as the first principle of a law that can only be approached slowly and with much toil, here the proselytic neighbor is warned that to come too "nigh" [*qareb*] to that presence, the space where the secret name of God is uttered once a year, is to face certain death. Thus, in a sense, this Midrash continues to meditate on the nature of neighbor-love and the principle of *neighboring*, now refigured as the dangerous proximity to divine presence that holds for Jew and gentile alike.[2] The one who presumes to approach the Holy of Holies even if he is King David, the progenitor of the Messiah himself must remain a stranger to it. This second Midrash separates out neighboring as a relation of nearness-without-kinship within the genealogically organized social and religious structures of the community: the members of the covenant, however they have come there, are all "neighbors" of each other insofar as they are all neighbors of God, determined as such by an asymptotic proximity that can never become full presence. The "strangeness" isolated by the Midrash is not merely a characteristic of the outsider in relation to a closed group of insiders, but the condition of identity that defines the native community as well.

The Neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen takes up the first of these two midrashim as part of his project of discovering in Judaism a universal ethics, what he calls in the title of his last great work a "religion of reason out of the sources of Judaism." In an essay on neighbor-love, Cohen reads Hillel's answer as an exemplum of Jewish love for all peoples. For Cohen, as for a number of other liberal philosophers coming out of the German Reform tradition, Hillel's dictum extends the Levitical injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself" to gentiles, embracing the nations under an ethical umbrella of universal tolerance.[3] In this way,

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[2] Cf. Exod. 32:27 and Ps. 15:3; in both locations *karob* is translated as "neighbor" and appears in conjunction with *re'a*, the word in Lev. 19:18 frequently rendered as neighbor, but in these locations, where it is juxtaposed with *karob*, translated as "fellow" or "companion." In some traditional glosses of the first Midrash, the "neighbor" is taken to mean God, who, according to the Psalms, is most "nigh" those who call on Him (Ps. 145:18). Neudecker (511) cites *Exodus Rabbah*, where in the line from Proverbs, "better is a neighbor that is near than a brother far off" (27:10), the neighbor is understood to be God (321).

[3] See Hermann Cohen, *Der Nächste* 27n. Reinhard Neudecker, however, disagrees with this line of interpretation, arguing that the gentile was in the process of becoming a proselyte, hence not a figure of Everyman (512-13). Also see Cohen's *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism.*

Cohen hopes to distinguish modern Judaism from the narrow exclusivism that was often associated with the rabbinic tradition. Cohen's impulse to open the biblical category of the neighbor within the philosophical framework of humanism represents a crucial historical moment in the drama of modern Judaism. Yet Cohen's universalizing interpretation also has the effect of reinforcing a reading of the traditional rabbinic account of neighbor-love that would finally dismiss it as inadequate for modern sensibilities.

It is not my intention to claim that the dominant rabbinic understanding of Leviticus 19:18 really was that the injunction extended to all people, although I think it is difficult to argue on a textual basis that *re'a,* the term used there for "neighbor" applies only to Jews. The question of universalism becomes a more pressing problem in Judaism with the emergence of Christianity, which, because of Paul's successful mission to the gentiles, comes to define itself in terms of the most expansive principle of inclusion. Paul employs a well-established Jewish-Hellenistic concept that appears in many Second-Temple compositions that present love of the neighbor along with love of God as one of the paramount principles of ethical theology.[4] But for Paul neighbor-love is not merely symbolic of the totality of rabbinic law, but is in itself meant to discharge the law; in Romans he writes, "he who loves his neighbor [*plesion*] has fulfilled [*plerow*] the law" (Romans 13:8). In Paul's sublation of Jewish law into Christian love, to "fulfill" the law is both to satisfy it, to fulfill it, and to *complete* it, to bring it to a conclusion, hence to superannuate it, in the process transforming it into the "old" testament, and announcing the *post-legem* that characterizes the messianic era. Although my argument here is not historical but hermeneutical, I hope to suggest that the age-old accusation of Jewish exclusiveness coupled with the challenge presented in Christianity by its theory of universal inclusion leads the rabbinic tradition to develop its own mode of universalism, one that, we might say, counters the Pauline principle of *totality* with one of *infinity*.

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[4] See Hollander and de Jonge, 44.

Here I am depending on an opposition developed in detail by Emmanuel Levinas in his great work, *Totality and Infinity* (1961); but whereas Levinas' project in that text is primarily oriented around phenomenological and broadly philosophical issues, I hope here to find the trace of such infinitism in the rabbinic tradition. If, for Levinas, totality, the principle of Western civilization *par excellence*, implies a relationship of the same with itself, "infinity is produced in the relationship of the same with the other" (*TI* 26), the other that will be figured most consistently in Levinas as *the neighbor*. Unlike the ultimately specular and closed function of totality, infinity implies an encounter with alterity that both decompletes and exceeds closure. If the voyages of Ulysses, coming full circle, returning the hero to Ithaca and restoring him to his originary status, exemplify the principle of totality, it is Abraham, responding to God's call to "go out," leaving his home and paternal heritage forever, who represents Levinas' notion of the infinite. Abraham's tent is famously open on all sides, and the ethical correlate of his journey without return is *hospitality*, welcoming the other as Other rather than reducing him to the Same.

1. Who Is My Neighbor?

The rabbinic and philosophical disputes on the meaning of neighbor-love begin with the semantic and contextual ambiguities presented by the commandment's original enunciation in Leviticus 19:18. The book of Leviticus deals primarily with ritual laws of sacrifice and cleanliness; only Chapter 19 discusses what might be called "morality," rules for conduct in the family and civil society, and even here these appear alongside ritual commandments.[5] The injunction to love the neighbor falls between laws against hate and vengeance and laws prohibiting the mixing of seeds, animals, or fabrics:

> … and not bear sin because of him. 18. Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people but thou shalt love

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[5] Chapter 19 is part of "the Holiness Code" which appear in Lev. 17-26, and, unlike the Priestly Code, is characterized by mixing ritual law and morality. See Knohl.

> thy neighbor as thyself: I am the LORD [*v'ahavtah le're'akha kimokha ani Adonai*] 19. Ye shall keep My statutes [*hukkotai*]. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind; thou shalt not sow thy field with two kinds of seed; neither shall there come upon thee a garment of two kinds of stuff mingled together. (Lev. 19:17- 19)[6]

Although one of the critical elements of the Christian revaluation of Jewish revelation involved the attempt to enlarge the category of the neighbor, disagreement as to the reference of *re'a,* the "neighbor" in Leviticus 19:18, was also a key point in some of the major ideological and interpretive splits within the rabbinic tradition. The dominant strand of Jewish interpretation of the commandment, from Onkelos (second century C.E.) and Maimonides (twelfth century) at least until the Emancipation in the eighteenth century, has argued that *re'a* in Leviticus 19:18 refers exclusively to a fellow-Jew, a brother-in-covenant.[7] And indeed at many other points in the Bible there can be no doubt that *re'a* is strictly limited to the children of Israel. Commentators in this tradition often impose further limitations within the realm of the "fellow-Jew." Maimonides, for example, seems to confine the category of neighbor solely to *observant* Jews, to "him who is your brother in the Law and in the performance of the commandments."[8] Rashbam (twelfth century) similarly restricts the obligation to love the neighbor by adding the proviso, "if he [really] is 'your neighbor,' [i.e.] if he is good, but not if he is wicked, as it is written, 'To fear the Lord is to hate evil' (Prov. 8:13)."[9] Readers who limit the meaning of *re'a* to fellow-Jews often point out that verse 18 falls into two halves, in which the thought of the first part, "Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people" continues in the second, "and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." These interpreters claim that "neighbor" merely reiterates "children of thy people," and that the verse specifies two types of duties, negative and positive, owed to other Jews.

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[6] All citations to the Pentateuch, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Soncino Chumash*.

[7] Excellent summaries of the history of many of the exegetical issues surrounding Leviticus 19:18 can be found in Neudecker and Simon.

[8] Quoted by Simon (p. 38), from *Laws of Mourning* Ch. XIV; *Mishneh Torah,* Hilkhot Evel 14:1. See Ernst Simon's discussion of the *re'a* in Onkelos's *Targum* and Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (34-38). As Neudecker points out, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* requires neighbor-love only "if he acts as thy people do" (86).

[9] Quoted in Neudecker, 501.

The particle *ve* that links the two halves of the verse, however, can indicate equally a relationship of conjunction or conclusion ("and" or "therefore") and one of distinction or exception ("yet" or "but"). Hence we can just as easily understand the second clause as *qualifying* the first, and the entire verse as distinguishing between the two groups, fellow-Jews and neighbors; although this reading does not determine who precisely the *re'a* is, it has the effect of extending the category of the neighbor at least beyond the limits of the covenant. Indeed, elsewhere in the Bible the meaning of *re'a* is just as clearly not confined to fellow-Jews, usages that activate the ambivalent and even antithetical connotations of the word.

In Exodus 11:2, *re'a* refers to the Egyptians from whom the fleeing Israelites request "jewels of silver, and jewels of gold," an image that became the model (via Augustine) in Christian humanism for the borrowing of cultural material from one's classical "neighbors." This appropriation of the passage from Exodus transforms the metonymic relation of the neighbor into a metaphor of typological reading, a figure of exegetical transmission in which cultural riches apparently may be "borrowed" from the past without incurring untoward debt or influence, purified of their pagan (or Jewish) trappings by being, literally, melted down to ornament the ark of the (new) covenant (Exod. 35:22).[10] The ambivalent senses of gathering and scattering converge in this use of *re'a*, however, insofar as the Egyptian jewelry will be forged into the golden calf, and the tablets of the law will be shattered before this redemptive transfiguration can take place. The danger of these figurative borrowings becomes manifest in the Prophetic books, where *re'a* is used to signify that most false and inanimate of things, an idol, with whom Jeremiah accuses the Jews of being adulterous (Jer. 12:14).[11] Here *re'a* comes to represent the threat of idolatry, the meretricious although fascinating props of neighboring religions.[12]

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[10] See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II, Section 40.

Increasingly in modernity, interpreters have traced a tradition of commentary, dating at least from the ninth century (and probably much older), which implicates the "neighbor" in Leviticus 19:18 in a group larger than fellow-Jews, allowing the recovery of a universal ethics latent or even already active in rabbinic Judaism. Much of this argumentation depends not on the semantics or etymology of *re'a*, however, but on reading Leviticus 19:18 in the context of Leviticus 19:34, where the call to love another "as yourself" reappears, now applied to the stranger:

> 33. And if a stranger [*ger*] sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not do him wrong. 34. The stranger [*ger*] that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born [*ezrach*] among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself [*v'ahavta lo kimokha*]; for ye were strangers [*gerim*] in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 19: 33-34)[13]

As was pointed out by Nahmanides already in the thirteenth century, insofar as verse 34 echoes the formula of verse 18 ("love x as yourself"), the word *ger* retroactively informs the meaning of *re'a*. For several post-Emancipation German-Jewish thinkers, including Hermann Cohen, Ernst Simon, and Martin Buber, the syntactical echo between *re'a* and *ger* indicates that the commandment to neighbor-love must surely extend (or be extended) to cover *alle Menschen*, gentile as well as Jew. Ernst Simon's influential essay, "The Neighbor (*Re'a*) Whom We Shall Love" (1972; 1975), summarizes much of the traditional debate about the commandment and presents the liberal perspective on that critical history, and thus represents what we can call the Jewish universalist reading.[14] Simon rebukes the rabbinic exegetical tradition for the narrowness of its textual reading and its lack of a synthetic category such as "common humanity" that could encompass all peoples (45). The original intention of the Bible, Simon argues, was to enjoin universal love, and the Levitical injunction must now be reappropriated as a central part of a new "universalistic humanism" (46), a neo-Kantian ethics in which Reform Judaism would have the key role of articulating "a morality that is above the law" (52). Simon traces a counter-history of "Jewish apologetics" for the commandment, epitomized by the medieval French sage Rabbi Menahem Ha-Meiri (1249-1306), who formulated "a new juridical term and with it a new legal-social status for the gentiles who were his contemporaries . . . He speaks of *ummot ha-gedurot be-darkhe hadatot*, 'nations restricted by the ways of religion'." This category of favored non-Jews, according to Simon, includes "the Christians among whom [Ha-Meiri] lived, and similarly civilized peoples"; in teaching that "Christians are not idolaters," Simon argues, Ha-Meiri began to reform a parochial legal system that discriminated between Jews and gentiles, even if he himself remained emotionally a strict separatist, unable to take the step into universalism (47-49).[15]

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[11] Simon uses both Exodus 11:2 and Jeremiah 3:1 to argue that *re'a* could indicate a non-Jewish neighbor (30-31).

[12] This use of the word suggests that the homogeneity limiting the neighbor to brother-in-covenant depends upon an act of self-representation which is always in danger of deteriorating into pure semblance, the sheer image or mere decoration that constitutes the factitiousness of idolatry.

[13] Verse 34 literally translates "like a native-born among you will be to you the stranger, the stranger with you [*ki ezrach m'khem yihiye lachem ha ger / ha ger itkhem*]; and you will love (to) him as yourself, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

In praising Ha-Meiri as the first major proponent of Jewish humanism, however, Simon ignores the fact that Ha-Meiri's extension of equal rights to Christians can hardly be considered "universal"; moreover, there is little evidence that Ha-Meiri intended to fashion an ethical meta-category such as "the human." Ha-Meiri's class of "nations restricted by the ways of religion" does not include non-monotheistic religions, and it is by no means clear that it accommodates Muslims (of whom Simon makes no mention).[16] Despite the liberal and even feminist motivations of Simon's critique, he misses the ethical radicalism of the biblical injunction by making universalism the condition and horizon of the ethical, which echoes in an apologetic mode the early Christian cancellation of Jewish particularism in the name of a supposedly neutral conception of Mankind. For while the signification of the "neighbor" (*re'a*) in verse 18 is no doubt reinflected by its nearness to the "stranger" (*ger*) in verse 34, I would argue that the effect of this proximity is not to construct a category of universality so much as to bring out a certain strangeness, both in the figure of the neighbor and in the condition of the Jew who is so enjoined. In trying to redeem Leviticus 19:18 by demonstrating its true "universalism," Simon and the Jewish Reform tradition invest in an ethics that asks to be judged on the basis of an inclusiveness of which it must inevitably fall short. Nor is the opposition between "universalism" and "particularism" the most useful way to understand either the ethics of Leviticus or ethics as such.

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[14] See Hermann Cohen's book *Der Nächste* and his chapter on neighbor-love in *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. See Buber's *I and Thou* as well as *Hasidism and Modern Man* (225-56). Also see Moshe Greenberg (101-12, 120-25) and Jacob Katz's *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 114-28.

[15] On Ha-Meiri's attitude toward Gentiles see Halbertal, Moshe, and Avishai Margalit. Also see Halbertal's "Coexisting with the Enemy: Jews and Pagans in the Mishna."

In the ethical space that opens in the nearness of Leviticus 19:18 to 19:34, the *ger* dwelling among Jews is "like" the Jews only insofar as they were themselves *unlike* someone else, "strangers in the land of Egypt." The parallelism of the two commandments does not imply that the injunction to love the neighbor is based on a common positive feature, practice, or ideal that all humanity shares, but rather that neighbor-love involves an element of essential *difference*, the fact that both the self and the neighbor are "strange," internally alienated from the larger group, whether that be Egypt or Israel, and that this structural parallel is the only absolute basis for their solidarity. The syntactical rhyme between the injunctions to love the *re'a* and the *ger* alters the meaning of each term; the dominant rabbinic and medieval understanding of the neighbor as exclusively a fellow-Jew within the interiority of the covenant is exteriorized by the textual resonance of the neighbor with the stranger, a resonance reactivated by modern readings. The re-transcription of the neighbor by the stranger, however, need not insert the neighbor into a mythical collectivity of self-identical subjects; I would argue, contra Simon, that this repetition does not dissolve the specificity of each into some third, totalizing category of Humanity. The text of Leviticus retains a certain uncanniness born of the literal and figurative proximity implicit in "neighboring" that cannot be gathered up or cancelled in a higher level of dialectical reason. Moreover, the stranger of Leviticus 19:34 not only expands the meaning of the neighbor, the object of love in Leviticus 19:18, but also alters the position of the *subject* addressed by that commandment, who is reminded of the history of estrangement which has determined his or her identity. The textual proximity of the *re'a* and the *ger* brings out what is strange in the neighbor, both linguistically and culturally, and transforms the neighbor into the *exception* to its own universalization; the neighbor emerges from this resonance as a singular figure, an excluded element, the aggregation of which can never equal a totality. To be a neighbor in this sense is not only to be a minority or subaltern in relation to a surrounding hegemonic majority, but to become a "neighbor to oneself":[17] alienated within exile, divided from the very possibility of self-sameness, configured not only as different but, in the vertiginous space of proximity, as self-different.[18]

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[16] Simon's source for his comments on Ha-Meiri is Jacob Katz's *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*. Katz makes it is clear that Ha-Meiri's attempt to separate modern gentiles from ancient idolaters directly addresses only the role and rights of Christians; both Christians and Muslims, moreover, are included in Ha-Meiri's list of nations to be punished at the end of days for their mistreatment of the Jews (123; 128 and *passim*).

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[17] See Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*. In Kristeva's reading of neighbor-love through Saints Paul and Augustine, however, the strangeness of the foreigner is absorbed into a new universality through identification in Christ: the "alienation of the foreigner ceases within the universality of the love for the other" (84).

[18] Perhaps the most complicated rabbinic account of "neighboring" is presented in the Babylonian Talmud in *Baba Kamma* 37b-38a, in response to Exodus 21:35, which states, "if one man's ox hurt another's [his neighbor's; *re'ahu*], so that it dieth; then they shall sell the live ox, and divide the price of it; and the dead also they shall divide." The Mishna comments that this sort of "no-fault" policy only holds between "neighbors," not when a private person's ox gores that of the Temple, or vice versa. Moreover, while there is no liability whatsoever if the ox of an Israelite gore that of a Canaanite, the Canaanite is fully liable for the damages his ox does to that of an Israelite. Simon cites this passage as more evidence of the exclusion of non-Jews from the category of the neighbor (35-36). But the discussion in the Gemara is much more non-committal than Simon allows, divided, as the text itself

2. What is love?

In the rabbinic controversies over Leviticus 19:18, the meaning of the command "to love" has been no less contested than the proper parameters of "the neighbor."[19] One tendency has been to codify neighbor-love as a list of specific duties, ranging from major gifts and acts of kindness to small favors and tender mercies. Several commentators put an upper limit on the obligations, however, by referring to Rabbi Akiva's ruling on this famous hypothetical question: when two people on a journey have between them only enough water to sustain the life of one, who should drink it? Against the opinion that it is better that they both drink and die than that one should see the other perish, Rabbi Akiva argued that one's own life takes precedence over the life of one's fellow; hence, it is said, the injunction to neighbor-love does not require the sacrifice of life.[20] Short of dying, however, the duties that fulfill the commandment according to traditional sources are legion, including acts intended to alleviate the suffering of other people (e.g. healing and protecting others, visiting the sick, and comforting the mourner); acts meant to increase other people's enjoyment (e.g., dowering a bride, offering hospitality); and acts designed to minimize the friction of everyday social relations (e.g., not keeping people waiting, giving change for a larger coin, returning books to their

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comments, on the "horns of a dilemma": "If the implication of '*his neighbor*' has to be insisted upon, then in the case of an ox of a Canaanite goring an ox of an Israelite, should there also not be exemption? If [on the other hand] the implication of '*his neighbor*' has not to be insisted upon, why then even in the case of an ox of an Israelite goring an ox of a Canaanite, should there not be liability?" This objection is raised again in a scene that echoes those in tractate *Shabbat* on the education of a pagan: two Roman commissioners request that the Sages teach them the Torah. They listen to it three times through (certainly not while standing on one foot), and find that it is "correct," with the exception of the asymmetrical liability between Jew and gentile recorded in the Mishna. According to the Talmud, they decide, however, "not [to] report this matter to our Government," perhaps proving that, as Rabbi Meir argues here, "if a gentile occupies himself with the study of the Torah he equals [in status] the High Priest."

[19] On love in the Bible see Muffs.

[20] See tractate *Bava Metzia* 62a, and the editor's footnote to Nahmanides (293).

proper place in a library, and refraining from smoking when it annoys someone).[21] Whereas in Christianity, the Scriptural exempla of neighbor-love begin with the good Samaritan's gifts of food, clothing, and shelter (Luke 10:25-37) and culminate in Jesus' sublime self-sacrifice on the cross, in the rabbinic tradition the list of deeds which fulfill the Levitical injunction expands downwards from the upper limit drawn by death, multiplying in the direction of increasingly minuscule, and often negative, acts of everyday courtesy and concern. This juridico-interpretive process, I would argue, defines love as the *infinitization of the universal*: not only the extension of love to strangers, but also the materialization of love in a precisely specified yet never perfected list of quotidian acts and affects, a legal hermeneutics of love that derives, I would suggest, from the uncertain situation of the injunction between the jurisdictions of ethical and ritual law.[22]

Nahmanides offers a key gloss on the rhetoric and grammar of Leviticus 19:18 that theorizes this Jewish infinitization of love. Under the dominion of the opposition between the universal and particular, modern interpretations have taken his commentary as an example of a restrictive reading of love; such readings of Nahmanides, however, miss the infinitesimal calculus opened up by the logical and practical limits he marks. Nahmanides points out that the particle *le*, generally used as a preposition, appears in both Leviticus 19:18 and 19:34 where the accusative *et* might be expected (293)[23]; hence, strictly speaking, verse 18 enjoins love not "of" but "to" or "for" the neighbor—a love not aimed directly at an object, but deflected by the indirection of a prepositional phrase.[24] He writes,

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[21] All examples here are taken from Zelig Pliskin's nearly 500 pages of duties owed to the neighbor according to traditional sources and keyed to the Torah; see especially pp. 330-412 on Leviticus 19:18.

[22] The translations of biblical "emotional" commandments into practical mitzvot is characteristic of halakhic exegesis generally, not only in the context of love. (For example, in regard to the verse "*Ve-samachta bechagecha*" [you shall be joyful on your holy day] the rabbis specify particular ways to be "joyful" by eating meat and drinking wine.)

[23] See Neudecker, who points out that the Hebrew letter *lamed* acts as a *dativus commodi* (503-4).

> *And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*. This is an expression by way of overstatement, for a human heart is not able to accept a command to love one's neighbor as oneself. Moreover, Rabbi Akiva has already come and taught, "Your life takes precedence over the life of your fellow-being." Rather, the commandment of the Torah means that one is to love one's fellow-being [*chaver*] in all matters, as one loves all good for oneself. It is possible that since it does not say "and thou shalt love '*eth rei'acha*' as thyself," but instead it likened them in the word *'l'rei'acha*,' and similarly it states with reference to the proselyte [in verse 34], *and thou shalt love 'lo ' (him) as thyself*, that the meaning thereof is to equate the love of both in his mind. For sometimes a person will love his neighbor in certain matters, such as doing good to him in material wealth but not with wisdom and similar matters. But if he loves him completely, he will want his beloved friend to gain riches, properties, honor, knowledge and wisdom. However [because of human nature] he will still not want him to be his equal, for there will always be a desire in his heart that he should have more of these good things than his neighbor. Therefore Scripture commanded that this degrading jealousy should not exist in his heart, but instead a person should love to do abundance of good for his fellow-being as he does for himself, and he should place no limitations upon his love for him. (292-293)

With an ethical honesty heroic in its realism, Nahmanides confronts the hyperbole of the commandment: although the "human heart is not able to accept a command to love one's neighbor as oneself", hence there is something exaggerated or absurd in the formulation. Nahmanides insists that we take the commandment's rhetorical excessiveness, the extremity of its "overstatement," seriously and unconditionally. Instead of replacing or modifying "love" with a more moderate emotion, Nahmanides argues that the commandment requires not that we love the neighbor as such, but his or her good, what is beneficial for the neighbor. Following Nahmanides, Samson Raphael Hirsch translates Leviticus 19:18 as "love your neighbor's welfare as [if it were] your own" (456-57). Hirsch comments that in such a reading, the commandment no longer requires something impossible, but imposes a duty that can be fulfilled "even toward an individual who is downright repugnant to us" (455). According to several modern readers, Nahmanides' comments attenuate the duties required by Leviticus 19:18 (e.g. Simon 32; Nehama Leibowitz 195), yet such a judgment needs to be reconciled with Nahmanides' claim that there must be "no limitations" on our understanding of the love required by the commandment.

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[24] Also cf. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (457).

By distinguishing between the *being* of the neighbor and his or her *well-being*, Nahmanides does indeed limit the love of the neighbor's person, but in order to infinitize the love for the neighbor's good. For Nahmanides, the love of the neighbor's person tends to lapse into a "degrading jealousy" based on narcissistic identification, on seeing the other as "like yourself." Because "desire in your heart" is competitive and rancorous, Nahmanides urges in its place the "love to do abundance of good," implying an endless list of small and large acts which the law enjoins but can never completely specify, an unlimited series of duties that proliferate within the space demarcated by the prohibition of self-sacrifice. Loving the other's good *in a way like the way that you love your own good* implies not only a structural commonality of interests but also the fundamental incompatibility between them. In Leviticus 19:18, the particle *kimokha*, "as yourself," may also suggest a certain *incommensurability* that marks the limit of any act of comparison as in the rhetorical question that is a central part of the liturgy, "Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the mighty? [*Mi kimokha baalim Adonai*]" (Exod. 15:11). Through the double limit drawn by the profligacy of self-sacrifice and the constitutive unlovability of the neighbor, Nahmanides' reading of the commandment expands rather than closes down the field of social responsibility.[25]

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[25] In several points in the Babylonian Talmud, Leviticus 19:18 is cited not in order to gloss the commandment, but as a prooftext for other discussions of legal issues concerning death and women. In *Kiddushin*, it is argued that a man may not betroth a woman before seeing her, "lest he [subsequently] see something repulsive in her, and she become loathsome to him, whereas the All Merciful said, *but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself* (41a). In *Niddah*, the laws of purity, it is said, "A man is forbidden to perform his marital duty in the day-time,

Once again, the philosophical opposition between universalism and particularism is inadequate to the rabbinic tradition, since it is only by an act of circumscription that the universe of Jewish ethics blossoms into the infinite. In the history of theology, universalism and particularism have been dangerously mapped onto the philosophical ethics of Christianity on the one hand and the restrictive legalism of Judaism on the other; neighbor- love, selected by Jesus as one of the two principles that sum up the whole of the Torah, is in this tradition the essence of a morality beyond the law.[26] Ernst Simon's recuperation of "a Jewish ethic that is external to the Halakha [law], one by which the Halakha itself must be judged and to which it must be made responsive," repeats this distinction between law and morality (51).[27] By ignoring those parts of the law it finds retrograde, Simon's reading abandons the interpretive protocols of the rabbinic tradition itself, in which the history of the law's interpretations must be considered as an intrinsic aspect of the law, no element of which may be

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for it is said, *But thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*. But what is the proof? Abaye replied: He might observe something repulsive in her and she would thereby become loathsome to him" (17a). In several places in *Sanhedrin*, the rabbis use the injunction to argue that the condemned criminal must be given an "easy death," one without excessive pain or disfigurement (52a, 52b). When the question is raised as to whether an adulteress should be stoned to death naked (which would be less painful, but humiliating and possibly arousing for young priests) or clothed (which would preserve her dignity but extend her suffering), the prooftext if not the solution is found again in Leviticus: "And should you say, Let us wreak both upon her, behold . . . Scripture says, *Love thy neighbor as thyself*: choose an easy death for him" (45a). Whereas in general the laws of ritual purity are intended to maintain the separation of life and death, in these citations of Leviticus 19:18 they converge in the figure of the feminine neighbor. Rather than explaining the Levitical injunction, these passages allow the citation to remain opaque and strangely non-signifying, a rebus-like signifier for an uncanniness projected onto women, criminals, and women criminals.

[26] For a critique of Protestant modes of reading rabbinic literature see Sanders, chap. 1.

[27] See Gillian Rose's critique of the opposition between ethics and law in the debates of which Simon's essay forms a part. Rose strategically displaces the question of whether Judaism recognizes a morality beyond that of *Halakha* by suggesting that "what determines the meaning of law and ethics is not what is posited . . . by its jurisconsults, Rabbinic or philosophical, but how it is configured within the modern separation of state and civil society" (32). Also see Fisch, Lichtenstein, and Rabinovitch.

discounted on the grounds of higher moral reason or enlightened historical criticism.

3. How can love be commanded?

Recall that the Levitical injunction to neighbor-love falls between the ethical commandments of verse 17,

> Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart; thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.

and the ritual commandments of verse 19:

> Ye shall keep My statutes [*hukkotai*]. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind; thou shalt not sow thy field with two kinds of seed; neither shall there come upon thee a garment of two kinds of stuff mingled together.

Jewish law is traditionally divided between *hukkim* ("statutes") and *mishpatim* ("ordinances").[28] A *mishpat* is a judicial decree or verdict, a law that serves the moral or civil order, whereas a *Huk* is a ritual law that has no obvious purpose and needs no rational justification. Rashi argues that *hukkim* in this passage refers to "enactments of the King [or God] for which no reason is given" (Lev. 87b). Derived from the root *hakak*, meaning to "hack" or engrave, a *huk* is a commandment that is literally written in stone: fixed, given, and virtually unchangeable. Hence the question arises, is neighbor-love affiliated with the moral and social ordinances of verse 17, ranging from the prohibition against the purely internal crime of "hatred in the heart" to the positive responsibility to "rebuke thy neighbor" [*amitah*]; or does it introduce the list of ritual laws in verse 19, including the (arguably) practical prohibitions against mixing kinds of animals and plants and the (apparently) arbitrary interdiction against mingling different fabrics?[29]

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[28] Levinas writes of the difference and relation between *mishpatim* and *hukkim* in his essay "The Pact": "Judaism has always been aware . . . of the presence within it . . . of elements which cannot be immediately internalized. Alongside the *mishpatim*, the laws we all recognize as just, there are the *hukkim*, those unjustifiable laws in which Satan delights when he mocks the Torah. He claims the ritual of the "red heifer" in Numbers 19 is tyrannical and demented. And what are we to make of circumcision? Can we explain it away with a little psychoanalysis? . . . It can be seen that there are points in the law of Israel which demand, over and above the acceptance of the general or "underlying" spirit of the Torah, a special consent to particular details which are too easily dismissed as having lost their relevance" (*Levinas Reader* 219-20; *L'au-delà du verset* 97-98).

If grouped with the *mishpatim* that precede it, the injunction to neighbor-love can be understood as a kind of "golden rule," an ethical precept potentially valid for all human beings.[30] On the other hand, the injunction to love the neighbor could also be grouped with the *hukkim* that directly follow it in Leviticus, given the sense of commentators such as Nahmanides that there is something excessive, absurd, and even counter-ethical about it. If so, it would begin to resemble laws such as the dietary rules of *kashrut*, ritual statutes that apply only to members of the covenant, and whose value lies in the fact that they are commanded rather than in the practical benefits or moral motives that could be attributed to them. Although the injunction to neighbor-love is often taken as the social principle correlative to the very essence of monotheism (hence as *mishpat*), it also points towards the *hukkim* that succeed it, as an unreasonable and even impossible demand, a specific but not fully readable utterance, without which the moral ideal "behind" it would lose its material ground. The commandment to love the neighbor as yourself lies literally *in between* the orders of moral code and ritual obligation, a proximity that establishes the *mishpatim* and *hukkim* as both theoretical and practical neighbors, as contiguous yet heterogeneous kinds of law whose existence side by side yet unmixed defines the moral fabric of Judaism.

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[29] Indeed, the distinction between *mishpat* and *huk* in any particular case may not always be self-evident; it is not clear either that the prohibition against mixing linen and wool is purely ritual, devoid of reasonable explanation, or, on the other hand, that the prohibition against allowing different kinds of animals to breed is at bottom what we might call "practical." See the editor's comments in the *Soncino Chumash*; Nahmanides, following Maimonides, suggests that pagan priests wore garments of mixed fabric, hence the prohibition against mixing fibers was indeed a *mishpat*, intended to distinguish the Jews from the Gentiles (726).

[30] The sixteenth-century commentator Obediah Sforno suggested that insofar as the *mishpatim* introduced in Exodus 21:1 come almost immediately after the last of the Ten Commandments (against coveting the neighbor's goods), the *mishpatim* as such are laws regulating duties to the neighbor (*Soncino Chumash* 471n).

Yeshayahu Leibowitz uses the Levitical commandment to express the specificity of the Jewish concept of law:

> "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is the great rule in the Torah not because it is a precept transcending the formalism of law and above the Mitzvoth but precisely because it appears as one of the 613 Mitzvoth. As a guide rule, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is not specific to Judaism. Similar precepts were laid down in writing by thinkers who were not influenced by Judaism and were not even acquainted with it, by the wise men of China, India, and Greece. Moreover, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" does not, as such, occur in the Torah. The reading is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am God."
>
> The duty of love toward one's neighbor is not a corollary of man's position as such but of his position before God. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" without the continuation "I am God" is the great rule of the atheist Kant. The novelty and grandeur of this rule in the Torah consists in the framework within which the Torah places it. That context includes Mitzvoth as various as those occurring in the Ten Commandments, laws concerned with sacrificial rites, others regarding property rights or rights of a worker to prompt payment of his wages, prohibition of interbreeding species of animals and plants, and so on, all within the span of twenty verses (Lev 15). "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ceases thereby to be mere good counsel, a noble aspiration or sublime ideal. It becomes clothed in the reality of law, something one is compelled to take seriously as one must take police ordinances seriously. There is nothing deprecatory about this simile. (19)

For Leibowitz, Judaism is not defined by any set of beliefs, any historical continuity, or any geopolitical identity, but solely by the observance of the commandments in their entirety.[31] In this analysis, the originality of Judaism lies in the articulation of 613 precise commandments and their elaboration as a set of laws for daily practice, laws that must be obeyed

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[31] See David Hartman's discussions and critique of Leibowitz in *Conflicting Visions* (especially Part 2) and *A Living Covenant*.

lishmah, "for their own sake."[32] For Leibowitz, the injunction to love the neighbor is not unique or valuable for its universalist ethics; rather, the injunction exemplifies what I have called after Levinas the "infinitization" of the universal. The injunction is simply one of a series of commands, none of which takes priority over the others, and each of which receives its value from its contiguity with the rest; within the finite set of 613 commandments unfold infinite possibilities for realizing holiness in daily life. This infinitization does not entail radiating the particular with the glow of the universal according to the incarnational aesthetics of the symbol, since the Hebrew word for "holiness," *kadosh*, derived from a root meaning to "separate" or "distinguish," involves an act not of synthesis but of endless articulation and differentiation, a marking that is both interpretive and legal, involving the acts of finding distinctions and making them. The infinitization of the universal in the observance of the law involves not the spiritualization of the material, nor even its converse, the materialization of the spiritual, but rather the real-ization of holiness as pure difference.

Indeed, *kedoshim*, taken from Leviticus 19:2, "Ye shall be holy [*kedoshim*]; for I the Lord your God am holy [*kadosh*]," is the name given to the weekly Torah portion in which the commandment to love the neighbor falls in the liturgical cycle. The rubric of *kedoshim* makes the interpretive problem of determining the scope and character of the commandment into one of the ritual acts of differentiation performed for the sake of holiness. For all factions of the rabbinic tradition, obeying the injunction to love the neighbor must begin with the act of posing the question of what the commandment means. To love the neighbor requires making a distinction between "neighbor" and "not-neighbor" (however that exclusion be defined), a distinction that is made at least initially for the sake of holiness (*kodesh*), that is, for its own sake rather than for any rational or instrumental morality. The acts of interpreting and obeying a commandment are not distinct moments in the dramatic performance of an ethical act, but rather imply each other, an intimacy emblematized by the idea of "observing" the law, a doing that is also a watching, preserving, or guarding.[33]

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[32] See Yeshayahu Leibowitz, 19, and chapter 6, "*Lishmah* and Not-*Lishmah*," 61-78.

This process of sanctification as infinite differentiation determines the very protocols of rabbinic reasoning, which always takes place as a dialogue, whether between two current interlocutors, between later scholars and earlier ones, or between the Written Law and the Oral Law. A key rabbinic text in the modern project of recovering a universal ethics from Judaism is the famous interchange between Akiva and Ben Azzai, which appears to juxtapose exclusivist and universalist maxims. A careful reading of their debate, however, demonstrates how Jewish ethics in its content and methods eludes such an opposition. In the *Sifra*, an early compilation of *midrashim* on Leviticus, Rabbi Akiva (second century C.E.) proclaims that neighbor-love is "the encompassing principle of the Torah." His student, Ben Azzai, counters: "'This is the book of the generations of Adam' (Gen. 5:1) is a still more encompassing principle [or "more important": *Kelal Gadol Mimeno*]" (*Sifra* III 109). Since the verse that Ben Azzai cites continues, "In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made He him," his comment has been understood as a critique of Akiva's exclusivism in favor of a universalism predicated on the creation of all human beings in the image of God.[34] Indeed, just prior to this exchange, *Sifra* glosses the prohibition against taking vengeance or bearing a grudge against "the sons of your own people" (*b'nai amekha*) in the first half of Leviticus 19:18 as permitting its unspoken correlate: "You may take vengeance and bear a grudge against others." Since Akiva's comment directly follows this licensing of retribution against non-Jews, his account of neighbor-love would seem to serve the narrowest of tribalisms. The modern use of Ben Azzai's remark to exemplify Jewish universalism is complicated, however, by the fact that *Sifra* 's apparent endorsement of vindictiveness against gentiles is not spoken in the name of either speaker but in the anonymous voice of the text itself, serving more as a point of departure for the discussion than as a located position within it. The reader is left to attempt to reconcile the apparent conflict between one commandment that, according to *Sifra*, prefers the neighbor and condones holding grudges against gentiles, and another that appears to forbid such parochialism by urging us to recall that we are all created in the image of God, all *b'nai Adonai*.

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[33] See Levinas, "The Pact" in *Beyond the Verse*, 80. To observe, *lishmor*, derives from a root meaning "to hedge about" and refers to the acts of marking, keeping, observing, and preserving.

[34] Simon argues that Ben-Azzai is attempting to avoid the ambiguities that arise in interpreting the Levitical injunction, and that interfere with its extension to "humanity as such" (39). Simon, however, also cites Lewis Finkelstein, who argues that Ben-Azzai's precept does not imply that all human beings must be loved, but merely that they be respected, and indeed, that love should be limited. Also see Neudecker's summary of the dispute concerning this reading (512-13) and David Hartman's chapter "Fundamentals of a Covenantal Anthropology" in *A Living Covenant* (21-41).

The two positions do not, however, simply present more and less general principles of inclusiveness, but rather different principles *per se*, one of genealogy established by the God of the revealed covenant (Lev. 19:18), and the other of creation *ex nihilo* that gives birth to human being as such (Gen. 5:11). Moreover, the opposition between genealogy and creation is itself already posed and traversed in Ben Azzai's particular citation. The sentence "This is the book of the generations of Adam," unlike the motif of God's image which it metonymically signifies, establishes the creation of a common humanity within the parameters of genealogy and revelation. So too, the injunction to love the neighbor, linked in the larger logic of the interchange to the exclusivist principle of genealogy, always institutes an element of proximity without relation, a feature *ex nihilo*, that comes into focus in opposition to family obligation and resemblance like the *ger* and the king who can never attain the position of *Kohen gadol*. The disagreement between Akiva and Ben Azzai does not resolve into a choice between genealogical particularism and creationist universalism, since the mode of association imagined by each Biblical prooftext is already inhabited by the possibility of its alternative.

Consider another level of the incommensurability of the two propositions: whereas Akiva's principle enjoins "love," implying the singular, sometimes unreciprocated, response of one individual to another, Ben Azzai endorses a biblical principle of symbolic "equality";

one person is like another only insofar as they are both like a third term, God. Hence the requirement that Jew and Gentile be treated as equals within a system of justice is not in conflict with the injunction to love the neighbor as a member of one's own people, but merely articulates a different level of social organization. By calling Genesis 5:1 a "more important" principle, Ben Azzai may not be criticizing the injunction to love the neighbor so much as insisting on the distinction and relationship between the symbolic structure of social equality and the non-symbolic function of religious and interpersonal love. According to Ben Azzai, the injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself" establishes an economy of self-love in which the neighbor is no more than an imaginary projection by definition a member of one's own tribe whereas the principle of Genesis 5:1 proposes an ethics of symbolic equality and representative justice.[35]

Genesis Rabbah, an Amoraic (5th-century) midrash on the book of Genesis, reverses the order and hierarchy of the Rabbis' comments in its retelling of the exchange in *Sifra*:

> Ben Azzai said: *This is the book of the descendants of Adam* is a great principle of the Torah. R. Akiva said: *But thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself* is even a greater principle. Hence you must not say, Since I have been put to shame, let my neighbor be put to shame. R. Tanhuma said: If you do so, know whom you put to shame, [for] *In the likeness of God made He him*. (204)

Because the text is a commentary on Genesis, Ben Azzai's judgment necessarily comes first, yet the compiler has retained the logical and dramatic structure from *Sifra* of a "great" principle being followed by a still "greater" one, a reordering that here gives Akiva's principle priority over Ben Azzai's. Some critics have explained this puzzling reversal by suggesting that the text inserts Akiva's comments as a parenthesis, a nod to the well-known position of a venerable martyr, but still favors Ben Azzai's "universalist" argument, which it continues to gloss in the following lines.[36] In this reading, the Midrash criticizes the potential use of the commandment to neighbor-love to justify ongoing enmity and recrimination: "Hence you must not say, Since I have been put to shame, let my neighbor be put to shame." Such misappropriation of the law could result from understanding "as yourself" to mean either "as we love ourselves" or "as we have been loved by others," raising the specter of reciprocal violence, at once masochistic and sadistic, in which I hate the neighbor as myself.[37]

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[35] Other readers have argued from external evidence that, on the contrary, it is Ben Azzai who is trying to limit the injunction by substituting the more modest goal of equality or mutual respect between fellow-Jews for the difficult but sublime requirement of universal love. See Simon, who supports the argument that Ben Azzai represents the more universalist position, while quoting Louis Finkelstein's position that Akiva is the true universalist (38-39).

Nonetheless, there remains the strange discrepancy between the two sources as to which principle is the "greater" or "more encompassing." Another editorial tradition groups the sentence about shaming the neighbor with Akiva's position, not Ben Azzai's.[38] In this minority reading, the internecine violence and humiliation warned against by *Genesis Rabbah* would not be immanent in neighbor-love, but *prevented* by it, since reflexive aggression is a danger that lies in an ethics based solely on the symbolic equality enunciated in Genesis 5:1. The biblical ideal of a common humanity, insofar as it depends on the mediation of God's image, embeds an imaginary tendency within the triangulated symbolic structure it sets up, rendering symmetry intolerable and promoting the institution of hierarchy through competition and war. So too, if the syntax of neighbor-love charts a reflexive scheme, the commandment also introduces a disequilibrium that interferes with the apparent interchangeability of self and neighbor, a structural imbalance named by the word *ahavah*, love, in Leviticus 19:18. Harold Fisch, one of the most extreme right-wing intellectuals in post-1967 Israel, distinguishes between

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[36] See the editor's comments to this passage in the Soncino edition of *Genesis Rabbah* (204) and Neudecker (512-14).

[37] Other readers, however, insist that these lines apply to the "greater principle" of neighbor-love, which will prevent social equality from deteriorating into mutual animosity.

[38] Neudecker cites Mirkin, Neusner et al. (514).

chesed, or loving-kindness, which Fisch argues that the Torah extends to non-Jews, and *ahavah*, a love reserved for fellow-Jews. *Chesed* involves an economics of exchange which unifies the nations in the totality of creation; "*hesed* is debt to be paid . . . *hesed* applies to acts that bind society together in a relation of mutuality" (Fisch 59). *Ahavah*, on the other hand, exists independently of the possibility of its reciprocation, belying the apparent symmetry of the commandment's grammar; based on the incommensurable and often unreciprocated love of God for human beings, *ahavah* for the Jewish neighbor is required "whether or not he loves us in return" (58).

Fisch's distinction between *chesed* and *ahavah* can be usefully mapped onto the ethics proposed by Ben Azzai and Rabbi Akiva respectively, but I would disagree with Fisch's segregation of two groups of people, Jews and non-Jews, in terms of these two types of love. Rather, I would argue that they name distinguished yet interlocking principles of social organization, which the discrepancies between the two retellings of the dialogue bring forth. Here, as in Nachmanides, neighbor-love functions as both the source of an aggressivity born of identification, *and* as its antidote. In *Sifra*, the creationist motif serves to limit the potential specularity of neighbor-love, whereas in *Genesis Rabbah*, Akiva's Levitical impulse is associated not with specularity but with its rupture. If each version taken independently seems to move toward asserting a universal principle, the juxtaposition of these incommensurable retellings infinitizes the universal as the very essence of a constitutionally unrequited love. In the intersecting economies of the neighborhood and the universe, the asymmetrical singularity of *ahavah* requires the symbolic shelter of human loving-kindness, which structures the civic space that allows the intensities of divine love to spark between human neighbors. At the same time, by canceling the inequity born of equality with a responsibility beyond reciprocation, neighbor-love becomes its brother's keeper, striving to heal the wounds inflicted by the struggles among the sons of Adam.

In his 1957 essay "A Religion for Adults," Emmanuel Levinas attributes to Jewish moral thought a universalism that is not opposed to particularism, but rather is promoted by it:

> A truth is universal when it applies to every reasonable being. A religion is universal when it is open to all. In this sense, the Judaism that links the Divine to the moral has always aspired to be universal. But the revelation of morality, which discovers a human society, also discovers the place of election, which, in this universal society, returns to the person who receives this revelation. This election is made up not of privileges but of responsibilities. It is a nobility based not on royalties [*droit d'auteur*] or a birthright [*droit d'ainesse*] conferred by divine caprice, but on the position of each human I [*moi*]. Each one, as an "I," is separate from all the others to whom the moral duty is due. The basic intuition of morality perhaps consists in perceiving that I am not *the equal* of the Other [*autrui*]. This applies in a very strict sense: I see myself *obligated* with respect to the Other; consequently I am infinitely more demanding of myself than of others...Reciprocity is a structure founded on an original inequality. For equality to make its entry into the world, beings must be able to demand more of themselves than of the Other, feel responsibilities on which the fate of humanity hangs, and in this sense pose themselves problems outside humanity. (*Difficult Freedom* 38-39/21-22; translation corrected)

For Levinas, Judaism, like Christianity, can lay claim to a certain universalist ethics, in at least two distinct senses, each in a key that differs from the humanism of Simon and Cohen. Although the revelation at Sinai was addressed specifically to the generations of the children of Israel, this genealogical model operates in the future perfect tense, in which anyone who decides to enter into the covenant retroactively "will have been" at Mount Sinai. In this sense, Judaism is universal insofar as it is in principle "open to all": the set of "all Jews" can expand infinitely, and all the *gerim* so included have equal claim to an originary membership. In this initial paradox of Jewish universalism, although the revelation was an absolutely singular event whose laws are binding only for those to whom it was addressed, anyone can, so to speak, choose to have been chosen. This Jewish notion of universality, moreover, does not depend on the possibility of becoming a totality: the fact that anyone can enter the covenant and rightfully claim to have been present at Sinai does not mean that everyone should or someday will, or that those who do not will suffer on that account.

On the contrary, a further paradox of this universalism is that it depends on its own *exception*, something in excess of the whole that reconfigures the field of its inclusiveness. In this second sense, "the universal" does not designate the members of the covenant, but the possibility of a morality that, although enabled by the covenant, extends beyond its limits, constituting an ever-expanding moral sphere that, by definition, *must not* be exclusively Jewish. The subject who responds to the call of covenantal election exceeds the very moral universe that he or she helps to build, by the fact of *being held responsible for its infinite expansion*, for the rigorous generosity that should be extended to all people. The covenant establishes a link between the world of symbolic values and something that remains exterior or unassimilated to that world, a connection between the "moral" and the "divine" that is predicated on the disjunction between the two that they cannot be brought together in a totality. According to the Kabbalistic concept of *tsimtsum*, God withdrew into or negated part of Godself in order to make room for creation, hence the divine and the human are radically heterogeneous realms.[39] In marking the gap left by this self-contraction, the revelation at Sinai not only sets the laws and conditions of the human moral universe, but also prevents it from achieving closure, insofar as the subject who hears its call feels, in Levinas' reading, excessively obligated, *more* responsible than anyone else for the reparation of the world. In this second paradox, the universality constellated by the covenant requires that there always be at least one person whose participation in it is unduly burdened: the subject who responds to the call from outside, and thus may not claim the right of an equality based on reciprocity.

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[39] This Lurianic myth consists in three stages of the world: *tsimtsum*, God's contraction; *Shekinah*, the divine light scattered by the breaking of the world conceived as a vessel; and *tikkun olam*, or the mending of the world- vessels. See Scholem.

Levinas, like Nahmanides and Akiva, finds the danger of "inequality" hidden behind the lure of moral "reciprocity," but true equality, or *justice,* depends upon a responsibility that is not reciprocal, an *ahavah* that expresses an obligation in excess of mutuality. Levinas writes, "the basic intuition of morality perhaps consists in perceiving that I am not *the equal* of the Other"; it is this incommensurability between the worldly and the divine, the subject and the neighbor, that makes morality possible in the human universe. To insist upon reciprocal obligation as the basis of morality would be to transform ethics into ideology; the only way out of ideological bad faith lies in an element or a figure at once interior and exterior to the symbolic universe, an exception that proves the moral rule.

In the spirit of Hermann Cohen, Ernst Simon, and the Jewish universalists, I have argued that neighbor-love does and indeed must apply to non-Jews, but by following a different logic. The reading of the commandment to love the neighbor retrieved here does not require that the subject recognize any similarity to the neighbor through an act of empathy with a generalized image of humanity. Instead, the originality and moral power of the Levitical injunction lies in its principle of solidarity in self-difference. This is not to say that we simply need to celebrate an ethics of cultural differences emblematized by the unique traits of both the Jew and the gentile neighbor, since the force field of universalism is not only broken by the inevitable discovery of exceptions to it but also infinitized, pointing to the possibility of a new universalism beyond cultural relativity. The imperative to love the neighbor-as-stranger that emerges from the rabbinic tradition as it encounters modernity insists upon the countless singular subjects who make up the infinity of the ethical neighborhood, dialecticizing the dispute between the medieval/Orthodox understanding of the neighbor as fellow-Jew and the modern/Reform reading of the neighbor as *Mensch.* By entering into a relationship of responsibility for the neighbor, the subject precludes his or her full inclusion into the moral universe of equals the generations of Adam created in the image of God, which that relationship configures and preserves. To love the neighbor as oneself is to find what is both strange and common in the commandment, to approach the Levitical injunction not only as a universal "golden rule," but as a principle of universal difference, an inscrutable utterance in need of endless interpretation and a logical exception to the categorical imperative that it engenders.

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