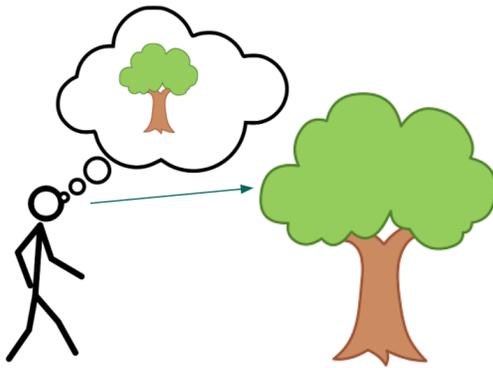


**Caring for Others, the Torah, and Ourselves: Jewish Perspectives on the Ethics of Care**  
**Session 2: Ethics of Care as a Tool for Understanding *Hiyuv***

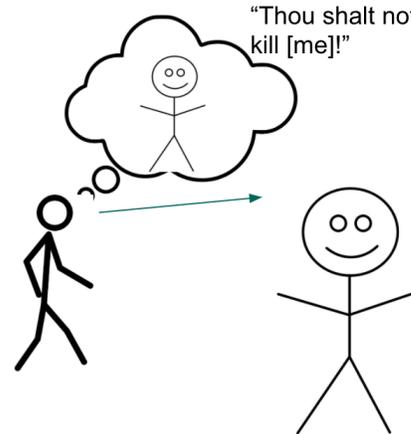
**I Levinas on Obligation:**

## Levinas's Ethical Phenomenology

Classical Phenomenology: First Person Experience as Fundamental



Levinas's Phenomenology: Ethics as "First Philosophy"



The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This mutation can only occur only by the opening of a new dimension. For the resistance to the grasp is not produced as an insurmountable resistance, like the hardness of the rock against which the effort of the hand comes to naught, like the remoteness of a start in the immensity of space. The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power. The face, still a thing among things, breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it. This means concretely: the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge.

To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over that escapes power. It is still a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible, but already impotency, because the face rends the sensible. The alterity that is expressed in the face provides the unique 'matter' possible for total negation. I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power. The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.

The Other who can sovereignly say no to me is exposed to the point of the sword of the revolver's bullet, and the whole unshakeable firmness of his 'for itself' with that intransigent no

he opposes its obliterated because the word or the bullet has touched the ventricles or auricles of his heart. In the contexture of the world he is a quasi-nothing. But he can oppose to me a struggle that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very unforeseeableness of his reaction. He thus opposes to me not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder.'

## **II Mara Benjamin's Critique of Levinas in *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity in Jewish Thought*:**

### **Levinas's The Abstract Obligation**

The face of the other, Levinas writes, "imposes itself . . . precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity— its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to that appeal."The other solicits me, yet also stands "above" me, as it were, with an extreme and irreducible moral authority (what Levinas calls "infinity"): "This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder.'" This primordial "command," as Levinas suggests, issues from the face of the other, who will always remain utterly other to me; the command not to murder is a command not to obliterate the ethical demand the Other makes by his presence.

Yet if the alterity of my child cannot be apprehended without the backdrop of the familiar and vice versa, so too might we say that the command my child issues and the responsibility I have toward her can only be comprehended through intimacy. My child's "first word," in Levinas's existential-ethical sense, may indeed be "you shall not commit murder;" yet this single existential commandment emerges as a multiple-times-daily "command" to locate difference (the mysterious that always remains beyond my grasp) within the familiar, and familiarity (what I recognize as having a claim on me) within difference. Children's needs and abilities can be plotted in the abstract, but the distinctive needs of any given child determines the command she issues. The specific command can only be heard in the immediacy of one's particular child at a particular moment.

In other words, a child does not merely issue a single abstract existential command, contra Levinas's portrayal of the paradigmatic encounter, but issues embodied and variable commands that are just as existentially significant as "do not murder." Discernment and error are constant companions in the effort to enact my responsibility to this particular other. Responding to the command requires deliberative work and not merely the adoption of a posture of service. Responsibility need not derive only from radical alterity, but can emerge as the inevitable result of my participation—and thus my implication—in the embedded experience of the world of my child and of the world we share together (86-87).

### **Concrete Obligation**

Maternal experience of caregiving as love illuminates God's love for Israel and Israel's response in the performance of mitzvot. Maternity offers, in this way, a corrective in a culture that defines love strictly as an involuntary emotion, as irrational and therefore radically uncontrollable. While Jewish sources recognize that love includes this mysterious, uncontrollable, and unwilled dimension, they also suggest that rigorous, active practice can cultivate love.

...

Parental caregiving manifests this performative aspect of love. Most of the time, affect state is not the key factor that drives parents to attend to their children prevents them from doing so. Primal, visceral love of one's child as powerful as it can be, does not always (or perhaps even usually) tell a parent what to do vis-a-vis one's child any more than does one's equally primal frustration or rage. As in Sara Ruddick's discussion of one's perservative love characteristic of maternal thinking, the right question is not 'What did you feel?' but rather 'What did you do?'...Proper human action in daily life cannot rest or fall on enthusiasm, zeal, or intensity of feeling; certainly one cannot rely on these feelings to keep a dependent creature alive. Parents execute their daily acts of diaper-changing, cleaning, and feeding their young children as an expression of their love, but child-rearing demands that acts of service continue even when parents don't want to attend their children and when they don't feel affectionate toward them.

Likewise, the people of Israel are to perform mitzvot out of, and as the expression of, their love of God. The validity of the performance does not depend on whether an individual is gripped, moment to moment, by a sense of gratitude or love of God. Instead, performance becomes a means by which action can be regulated (26-7).

...To be an obligated self was to be subject to the law of another: the Law of the Baby. The law could not be fulfilled in abstract but only in active, embodied material actions: soothing feeding, cleaning, comforting, distracting, smiling, and wiping. It became the law of the crying toddler who sought out not just any, but specifically *our* (or *my*), comfort: the law of her seeking out our, or my, face for approval or interest.

The Law of the Baby was not the Law of Any Baby but rather the Law of This Baby. This Baby had to be woken up throughout the night to eat because she was born small. This Baby responded with great interest to one particular plush toy. This Baby's imperative was to hold her at a certain angle so she would fall asleep for a nap. The next day, the next week, This Baby no longer responded to that position or that toy (9).

### **Coda: A Levinasian Response?**

"The Pact" *Beyond the Verse*

Can the adherence to the Law as a whole, to its general tenor, be distinguished from the 'yes' which is said to the particular laws it spells out? Naturally there has to be a general commitment. The spirit in which a piece of legislation is made has to be understood. And we must deepen this understanding of the spirit of the Law. Philosophy is not forbidden here—the

participation of the faculty of reason is not unwelcome! For there to be true inner adherence, this process of generalization is indispensable. But why is it necessary to distinguish between this knowledge of the general spirit, and knowledge of its particular forms of expression? Because we cannot understand the spirit of any legislation without acknowledging the laws it contains. These are two distinct procedures, and the distinction is justified from several particular points of view.... There is a constant struggle within us between our two adherences; to the spirit and to what is known as the letter. Both are equally indispensable, which is why two separate acts are discerned in the acceptance of the Torah....

There is a further reason why the particular should be seen within the Law as a principle which is independent of the universality that every particular law reflects. It is precisely the concrete and particular aspect of the Law and the circumstances of its application which give rise to the Talmudic dialectic: the oral law is a system of casuistry. It is concerned with the passage from the general principle embodied in the Law to its possible execution, its concrete effects. If this passage were simply deducible, the Law, in its particular form, would not have demanded a separate adherence. But the fact is that general, principles and generous principles can be inverted in the course of their application. All generous thought is threatened by its own Stalinism. The great strength of the Talmud's casuistry is that it is the specific discipline which studies the particular case in order to identify the precise moment within it when the general principle is at risk of turning into its opposite; it surveys the general from the standpoint of the particular. This preserves us from ideology. Ideology arises out of the generosity and clarity of a principle, qualities which do not take into account the betrayal which lies in wait for this general principle at the moment of its application.